

# NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

## SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

### 1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Sun Record Company, Memphis Recording Service

Other Name/Site Number: Sun Records, Sun Studio

### 2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 706 Union Avenue

Not for publication:\_\_\_

City/Town: Memphis

Vicinity:\_\_\_

State: Tennessee

County: Shelby

Code: 157

Zip Code: 38103

### 3. CLASSIFICATION

#### Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local:\_\_\_

Public-State:\_\_\_

Public-Federal:\_\_\_

#### Category of Property

Building(s): X

District:\_\_\_

Site:\_\_\_

Structure:\_\_\_

Object:\_\_\_

#### Number of Resources within Property

##### Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

##### Noncontributing

\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_ objects

\_\_\_ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register:\_\_\_

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 2**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official\_\_\_\_\_  
Date\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official\_\_\_\_\_  
Date\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

\_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register

\_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register

\_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register

\_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register

\_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 3**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Commerce/Trade Sub: Professional

Current: Recreation and Culture Sub: Museum  
Music Facility

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification: No Style

Materials:

Foundation: Concrete  
Walls: Brick, Stone  
Roof: Synthetics  
Other:

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 4**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The building at 706 Union Avenue, constructed in 1908, is a one-story brick row building. (Although the building has a Union Avenue address, it actually fronts on Marshall about 20 feet west of the intersection with Union). In 1949, the interior was renovated and the building reopened as a studio for music recording in January 1950. The building is narrow and relatively small in size, approximately 18 feet wide by 57 feet long. The front façade is brick in variegated shades of brown, ranging in color from cream to terra cotta to dark brown. A decorative band of stone blocks defines the top section of the front wall like an architrave. There is another row of these blocks at the top of the wall, which is a shallow parapet with stepped ends. Most of the brick was laid in stretcher bond. Brickwork details include a vertical row like a lintel over the storefront bay and a row of headers below the architrave band.

The storefront is the building's primary fenestration, with a central door, large glass windows on both sides of the door, and a transom above. The transom windows have been covered over on the exterior side, but are visible on the interior. There are three neon signs on the front façade for the main businesses that operated here in the 1950s. SUN, in yellow and orange, is affixed to the brick over the door. Each storefront window has signs for the Memphis Recording Service. "Memphis" and "Service" are written in red neon, "Recording" is written in blue. The Memphis Recording Service signs are reproductions of the one original sign. When Sun Records was at this location, the building did not display a sign for that company.

This small row building at 706 Union Avenue is adjacent to and shares a party wall with a similar two-story building, 710 Union Avenue, on the corner of Union and Marshall Avenues. During the 1950s, the two-story building housed a restaurant on the first floor and a rooming house on the second floor; the music recording business did not operate at this location. The two-story corner building currently serves as a "visitor center" for the historic recording studio, which is open daily to the public for tours.

The interior of the building is divided into three sections. The front door opens into a small reception area/office of about 200 square feet. This room has an irregular shape because the front wall follows Marshall Avenue, which runs into Union Avenue at an angle. The office area has a pressed metal entablature and ceiling with a repeated pattern of squares with textured surfaces. The recording studio is in the middle of the building. A wall with a single door and a long, horizontal window separates the front room from the studio in the middle. The studio is approximately 18 feet wide by 30 feet long.

The control room for the recording studio is at the rear of the building. Another wall with a single door and a long, horizontal window separates it from the studio. The control room is 17 feet 10 inches wide by 13 feet 7 inches long, and the floor in this room is elevated about two feet above the studio floor. The window in the wall between the studio and the control room is further elevated on the wall than the window in the reception area because of the raised floor height in the control room. Sam Phillips, owner of the recording studio, built the window at this height "so that his eyes would be level with the performer's when he was sitting at the control

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 5**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

room console.”<sup>1</sup> There is a single door in the control room’s rear wall, which is also the rear wall of the building. It opens onto a parking lot behind the building. During the 1950s, there was a small addition at the rear of the building that adjoined the control room, but is no longer extant.

The studio walls and ceiling are covered in acoustical tiles installed for soundproofing in 1949. Phillips custom-designed the tile installation for this room based on his research on acoustical design, and built “the latest and finest sonocoustic studios.” It was one of the first music recording studios that took acoustics into consideration in its design. The acoustical tiles on the ceiling and on the front and rear walls were installed in patterns so that the room does not have any parallel surfaces. Beginning at the front wall of the studio, there are rows of tiles that angle down from the ceiling, then sharply back up for four rows to a section that is two rows deep and lays flat on the ceiling. Four more rows angle down and sharply back up to another section laid flat. This pattern repeats down the length of the ceiling and gives the ceiling a kind of undulating appearance. In section it is similar to the design of a jerkin-head roof, and in appearance somewhat like short, adjacent barrel vaults spanned between the building’s side walls. Tiles on the front and rear walls also project out at intervals rather than lay flat on the surface. The tile was installed in this way to prevent standing waves of sound in the studio.

The neighborhood around 706 Union Avenue contains a number of automobile-related businesses that have been located in the area for many years. This building also housed an auto-related business circa 1940, the Magic Throttle Company, before Sam Phillips remodeled it for his recording studio. Marion Keisker was Phillips’s only assistant and employee when he started his business here. She provided this account of the Memphis Recording Service’s first days at 706 Union Avenue:

*[Phillips] would talk about this idea he had, this dream, I suppose, to have a facility where black people could come and play their own music, a place where they would feel free and relaxed to do it. One day we were riding along, and he saw that spot on Union, and he said, ‘That’s the spot I want.’ With many difficulties we got the place, and we raised the money, and between us we did everything. We laid all the tile, we painted the acoustic boards, I put in the bathroom, Sam put in the control room what little equipment he had always had to be the best.”<sup>2</sup>*

This building has a very high degree of integrity with minimal changes since the 1950s when the recording studio was located here. It is especially remarkable that the acoustical tiles on the ceiling and walls still exist because of their critical importance in the sound of the music recorded at this location. The building has been operated as a historic site under private ownership since 1987, and tours are conducted daily. The studio is still used occasionally for recording and contains a number of musical instruments and related equipment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company: 1994), 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 6**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide:    Locally:   

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A X B X C    D   

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A    B    C    D    E    F    G X

NHL Criteria: 1 and 2

NHL Exception: 8

NHL Theme(s): II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements  
2 Reform MovementsIII. Expressing Cultural Values  
2. Visual and Performing Arts  
4. Mass Media  
6. Popular and Traditional Culture

Areas of Significance: Performing Arts, Social History

Period(s) of Significance: 1949-1960

Significant Dates: 1950, 1952, 1954, 1955, 1956

Significant Person(s): Sam Phillips

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder:

Historic Contexts: XXII. Music  
D. Popular  
K. Performers  
O. Recording  
  
XXXI. Social and Humanitarian Movements  
M. Civil Rights Movement

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 7**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.****Summary**

In a small studio in a small brick building at 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, Sam C. Phillips recorded music in the 1950s that is “one of the true touchstones of American culture.”<sup>3</sup> Phillips fostered an atmosphere in his studio that inspired creativity in the musicians he recorded, and he had an exceptional ear for a new kind of artist and a new kind of music.

*The evidence of Phillips’ intuitive feel for talent is astonishing. During an eight-year period he discovered and recorded B.B. King, Howlin’ Wolf, Ike Turner, Rufus Thomas, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Charlie Rich, Roy Orbison, and many others. Some of the artists Phillips recorded would redefine the musical genres in which they worked. Many of them made for Phillips not only their first recordings but also their best.*<sup>4</sup>

In 1952, two years after he opened the Memphis Recording Service, Phillips started his own record company. Sun Records was “the first great rock ‘n’ roll record label.”<sup>5</sup>

*... the Sun label was as much a statement of social philosophy, a declaration of independence and freedom, as it was a commercial enterprise. For seldom in the history of the so-called “record business” has greater faith in the possibilities of the human spirit been expressed. . . . The motivation behind the music was self-expression, that and an implicit belief in both the richness of the African-American tradition and the possibilities of cultural integration.*<sup>6</sup>

These musical ventures made Sam Phillips a legend in his own time. They “ensured that not even the most cursory history of American popular music could be written without reference to Memphis or Sam C. Phillips.”<sup>7</sup>

**Historical and Geographical Context**

Memphis sits high on a bluff on the east bank of the Mississippi River at the southwest edge of Tennessee. It is the gateway to the Mississippi Delta, which stretches more than two hundred miles down to Vicksburg where the Yazoo River runs into the Mississippi.<sup>8</sup> The land between the Mississippi and the Yazoo, about sixty miles across at the widest point, was “the greatest cotton country on earth . . . It produced higher cotton yields than anywhere else in America . . . By 1859, the South produced two-thirds of the world total, and raw cotton had become the

---

<sup>3</sup> Colin Escott with Martin Hawkins, *Good Rockin’ Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), Preface.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., front cover, quoting *Rolling Stone*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Foreword by Peter Guralnick.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>8</sup> This is not the geographical (or physical) delta of the Mississippi River, which is hundreds of miles down river in south Louisiana.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 8**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

principal export commodity of the United States.”<sup>9</sup> The 1860 census documents that Mississippi produced 1,202,507 bales of cotton that year. Each bale weighed four hundred pounds.<sup>10</sup>

After the Civil War, most former slaves became sharecroppers. In Mississippi, “the result was an appalling paradox: grinding agrarian poverty, on some of the richest soil in the world.”<sup>11</sup> Mississippi was notorious for being the worst state for African Americans to live because black people there were at rock bottom. The experiences of poor blacks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were raw material for a new kind of music, and Mississippi became the “birthplace of the blues.” Although Nashville has been the capital of Tennessee since 1826, Memphis has long been the unofficial capital city of this region—the capital of the Mississippi Delta—and long known as the “home of the blues.”

### **Musical Context**

The neighborhood around Beale Street in Memphis, south of the central business district, became a business and entertainment center that drew African Americans from throughout the South after the Civil War. Later it became a regional gathering place for Delta blues musicians.<sup>12</sup> W.C. Handy, “Father of the Blues,” wrote the “Memphis Blues” at Pee Wee’s Saloon on Beale Street in 1909. Handy himself, however, said that most of his blues were adaptations of songs he learned as a child.<sup>13</sup> Before World War II most black music was blues, and a lot of those were country blues of the Mississippi Delta, the raw, gut-wrenching folk music of rural African Americans.

Black migration out of the rural South accelerated during the First World War and exploded after World War II when manual cotton picking came to an end. Synthetic materials took over the market after the discovery of nylon in 1939, and the mechanical cotton picker, able to do the work of fifty people, arrived soon after. “The main musical result of the great migration was the blues came to town, and not to any old town: to Memphis, which acted as the local focus for migration from the Delta.”<sup>14</sup>

West Tennessee’s African American musical traditions are quite different from the country music at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville and the music of the Appalachian Mountains in East Tennessee, with roots in the British Isles. Memphis was the place where there was “a meeting of the musics,” according to Sam Phillips, where all kinds of southern music could be heard in

---

<sup>9</sup> Sir Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (New York: Fromm International, 1998), 554.

<sup>10</sup> John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest, Mississippi, 1790-1860* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), xii.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, 555.

<sup>12</sup> The Beale Street Historic District was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, 565.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 574.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 9**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

the 1940s: country, country and western, bluegrass, blues, gospel music, and rhythm and blues. In the South:

*There was not one underclass but two, one black, one white, living lives that were almost equally basic, rigidly segregated, [and] hostile . . . They created different kinds of music, each reflecting a long folk tradition: one out of Africa, developed through the experience of slavery and sharecropping; the other out of northern England and southern Scotland and northern Ireland, evolving through centuries of life on remote Appalachian hill farms . . . The Memphis story is thus the quintessence of a recurring theme . . . the outsiders, coming into the city and creating something strangely new and different.<sup>15</sup>*

Before World War II, music on American radio stations was basically controlled by ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Producers, which licensed songs for network radio. American popular music at that time originated at New York City's Tin Pan Alley, then located at Twenty-eighth Street.

*The major record labels, the Tin Pan Alley songwriters, the major radio stations, and trade publications such as Variety and Billboard all made their money from the old kind of white music . . . Tin Pan Alley manufactured songs, almost by mass production, in the same way that Detroit mass-manufactured cars; it was big business . . . it specialized in sentimental ballads . . . concentrated on 'show tunes' . . . and nonsense novelties . . . Throughout, the target of Tin Pan Alley was the adult white family audience: 'White popular music was one hundred percent whitebread, unenriched.'<sup>16</sup>*

An alternative organization for publishing music started in 1940, Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI). In general, it represented independent radio broadcasters and helped to open up the market for other kinds of music. After World War II, growth in the number of radio stations programming something besides American popular music also led to growth in the number of independent record companies. The new "indy" labels targeted markets for music that was not mainstream, primarily country, country and western (hillbilly), and black "race" music.

Some of the top hits in the early 1950s, the best that American popular music had to offer, included "Lavender Blue" by Dinah Shore; "Yellow Rose of Texas" by Mitch Miller; Patty Page's "Doggie in the Window;" and "Three Coins in the Fountain" by the 4 Aces. Songs like these were not music to the ears of the new postwar teenage generation. "Refugees from the popular music stations"<sup>17</sup> began to turn their radio dials in search of music that was different and more exciting—country and western C&W) and rhythm and blues R&B). By 1951, word began to spread that white kids were buying "race" records.

In Memphis, WDIA started out in 1947 as a popular and country music radio station. The station switched formats in 1948 and began programming for a black audience after the success of a show called "Black America Speaks," hosted by Memphis's first black on-air personality, Nat

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 553.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 587.

<sup>17</sup> Mike Jahn, *Rock, From Elvis Presley to the Rolling Stones* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1973), 6.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 10**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Williams. Blues artists got exposure on WDIA and WLOK, as well as KWEM across the river in West Memphis, Arkansas. These stations sponsored 15-minute live shows daily featuring Riley King (B.B. King), Sonny Boy Williamson, Chester Burnett (Howlin' Wolf), and others. Also in 1948, Dewey Phillips, a white radio announcer from rural Tennessee, began to host a show on WHBQ. "Red Hot and Blue" expanded from fifteen minutes to three hours daily during its first year on the air. Phillips played "an eclectic mix of blues, hillbilly, and pop that would become an institution in Memphis, and his importance to the cross-cultural miscegenation that became Rock 'n' Roll is incalculable."<sup>18</sup>

**Sam Phillips, the Memphis Recording Service, and Sun Record Company**

Sam Phillips was born on January 5, 1923 in the northwest corner of Alabama near Florence, about 150 miles east of Memphis. He got his first radio job in 1940 at WLAY in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and later took correspondence courses in radio engineering. He worked at WMSL in Decatur, Alabama, and at WLAC in Nashville before moving to Memphis in 1945.

At WREC, Phillips was primarily a radio announcer (the term "disc jockey" was coined in the early 1950s), with a daily show at 4 P.M. called "Songs of the West." In those days, radio engineers had multiple duties. Phillips was also a recording engineer, in charge of the station's sound effects, and buyer for the station's record library. In addition, he was part of the technical staff for WREC's nightly broadcast on the CBS network of touring big bands at the Skyway, the Peabody Hotel's rooftop ballroom. Sam Phillips started a show on WREC in Memphis in the late 1940s that was similar to Dewey Phillips's "Red Hot and Blue." He played blues, pop, and jazz on the "Saturday Afternoon Tea Dance."

In January 1950, Phillips started his own recording business in addition to his regular jobs. The Memphis Recording Service opened at 706 Union Avenue, about a mile east of the downtown area. The small one-story brick building had a reception area/office at the front of the building, a recording studio in the middle section, and a small control room in the rear. The entire building is only about 18 feet wide and 57 feet long. Phillips's business card read "We Record Anything—Anywhere—Anytime." Initially that included weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs, advertisements for radio, etc., in addition to musicians in his studio.

In the last two decades, music historians have sought out Sam Phillips to document his account of the first years of rock 'n' roll. He was out of the public eye for some time, but Phillips has been more available in recent years:

*I opened the Memphis Recording Service with the intention of recording singers and musicians from Memphis and the locality who I felt had something that people should be able to hear. I'm talking about blues both the country style and the rhythm style and also about gospel or spiritual music and about white country music. I always felt that people who played this type of music had not been given the opportunity to reach an audience . . . My aim was to try and record the blues and other music I liked and to prove whether I was right or wrong about this music. I knew, or I felt I knew, that there was a bigger audience for blues than just the black*

---

<sup>18</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 5.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 11**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

*man of the mid-South. There were city markets to be reached, and I knew that whites listened to blues surreptitiously.*<sup>19</sup>

Phillips also functioned as a folklorist, documenting music that was fading into the past. “With the jet age coming on, with cotton-picking machines as big as a building going down the road, with society changing, I knew that this music wasn’t going to be available in a pure sense forever.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Recording the Blues*

Initially, Sam Phillips recorded artists and sold or leased his masters to various record companies. His first deal, with 4 Star/Gilt Edge Records, was a song by a blind pianist from south Memphis. Lost John Hunter’s “Boogie for Me Baby” was “a crude boogie blues that could pick up some southern juke coin,” according to the review in *Billboard*, a record business trade publication.<sup>21</sup> In late summer 1950, Phillips launched his own record company with partner Dewey Phillips (the hot Memphis radio announcer, no relation) in order to issue and promote his own products. They called their label Phillips, but it only lasted a few weeks, issuing three hundred copies of Joe Hill Louis’s “Boogie in the Park” in August 1950.

Phillips soon began working with Modern Records of Los Angeles, owned and operated by the Bihari brothers. Their new subsidiary, RPM Records, was looking for “new music with a down-home feel.”<sup>22</sup> Jules Bihari sent a guitar player from Indianola, Mississippi, to Sam Phillips to record. Riley King was already popular locally and known as B.B. King (for Blues Boy, or more likely, Black Boy). Phillips recorded King, one of the first artists on the new RPM label, from mid-1950 until mid-1951.

Even at this early stage in his career, Sam Phillips used recording techniques that were soon recognized as hallmarks of his records. He put up-tempo boogies on the front sides of records, slow numbers on back sides, and overamplified on faster songs to get a primitive fuzzy sound. One of King’s songs had the guitar, piano, and bass playing a boogie riff in unison, creating a bottom-heavy sound that challenged “established precepts of how recordings should be balanced.”<sup>23</sup> These early recording sessions with King also document Phillips’s skill as a record producer. King’s version of a Tampa Red song had an explosiveness missing from the original record, and “it was that blistering energy and willingness to experiment that pointed unerringly into the future.”<sup>24</sup> Sam Phillips did not record King after June 1951 because of a dispute over a song that Phillips recorded and leased to Chess Records in Chicago, rather than the Biharis’s RPM label.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 12**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

“Rocket ‘88,” a song about a hot Oldsmobile, is one of the contenders for the title “first rock ‘n’ roll record.” It featured Jackie Brenston, the singer, and Ike Turner, the bandleader, on piano. “Rocket ‘88” was released in April 1951. It hit number 1 on *Billboard’s* R&B chart in June and eventually became the second biggest R&B hit of the year. According to Sam Phillips, “Rocket ‘88” was the record that really kicked it off for me as far as broadening the base of music and opening up wider markets for our local music.”<sup>25</sup> Phillips resigned from WREC in June 1951 after “Rocket ‘88” became a hit. The combination of his regular jobs and work for the Memphis Recording Service had required 18-20 hour work days, and Phillips was exhausted.

The following excerpt is from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, which ran its first story on Sam Phillips after the success of “Rocket ‘88’:

*He has agreements with two recording companies to locate and record hillbilly and race music. Race numbers are those tailored for the Negro trade. Sam auditions musicians with original songs. When he finds something he’s sure will sell, he gets it on acetate and sends it to one of the companies. He doesn’t charge the musicians anything . . . Sam may branch out one day, so he says if anyone wants to bring him a pop song, he’ll be glad to look it over.”<sup>26</sup>*

Sam Phillips first recorded Chester Burnett (The Howlin’ Wolf) in the spring of 1951. Born near Aberdeen, Mississippi, Howlin’ Wolf was a singer who gave the traditional Delta blues another dimension. They recorded “Moanin’ at Midnight” and “How Many More Years” in August 1951, and Phillips leased these recordings to Chess Records. “Moanin’” went to number 10 on the national R&B chart and “How Many More Years” reached number 4. “The bizarre, haunting images that populated Wolf’s songs, the quality of his voice, and his frightening energy were marks of a true original. His music ran the gamut, from purest evil to heartbreaking tenderness. There was an emotional greatness to Howlin’ Wolf, a greatness that Phillips was the first to capture.”<sup>27</sup> Phillips did not record the Wolf after October 1952 because he left Memphis for Chicago where he eventually became “one of the seminal figures in postwar blues.”<sup>28</sup> In Phillips’s estimation, the Wolf was his greatest discovery.

Even though he preferred the creative side of the business, Phillips started his own record company early in 1952 because new record companies had come to town, and also because many local artists were leaving Memphis. With his own label, Phillips could run the business like he wanted and release records that other labels rejected.

*When I was leasing to other labels, they wanted me to compromise. They wanted a fuller blues sound than I did. They were selling excitement. I was recording the feel I found in the blues. I wanted to get that gut feel onto record. I realized that it was going to be much more difficult to*

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 31.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 13**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

*merchandise than what Atlantic or Specialty, for example, were doing, but I was willing to go with it.*<sup>29</sup>

He named his new company Sun Records and selected an eye-catching record label of primary yellow, highlighted in brown. At the center of the label stood a crowing rooster in profile before a rising sun motif, with stylized sun rays fanned from one horizon to the other. SUN was written in large block letters over the rooster, and musical notes on a staff ringed the outside edge of the label. Phillips thoughtfully chose the name Sun and its distinctive label design: “The sun to me—even as a kid back on the farm—was a universal kind of thing. A new day, a new opportunity.”<sup>30</sup>

The first record issued on the new Sun label (March 27, 1952), Sun number 175, was an original instrumental, “Drivin’ Slow,” by alto saxophonist Johnny London.

*Even on this first release, all the hallmarks of a Sam Phillips Sun record were in place: the raw sound, the experimental origin, the dark texture, even the trademark echo. Phillips and London created the illusion of a sax heard down a long hallway on a humid night by rigging something like a telephone booth over London’s head while he played. The record’s appeal had more to do with feeling than virtuosity in short, it offered everything music buyers could expect from Sun for the remainder of the decade.*<sup>31</sup>

The first recording on the Sun label considered to be a classic was “Easy,” an instrumental released in March 1953 by Walter Horton (Little Walter, and later, Big Walter).

*... Horton played the same theme five times, with mounting intensity. By the fourth chorus, he was playing with such intensity that his harmonica sounded like a tenor saxophone. Phillips’ virtuosity with tape delay echo was rarely used to better advantage: he made three instruments [harmonica, guitar, drums] sound as full as an orchestra. Any other instrument would have been redundant.*<sup>32</sup>

Sun Records had its first national hit in the spring of 1953 with “Bear Cat,” which went to number 3 on the national R&B chart. It was an “answer song” to “Hound Dog” by Big Mama Thornton (Willie Mae Thornton), sung by local radio announcer Rufus Thomas. “Bear Cat” was the first record to make money for Sun Records and it put the company on the map. “Feelin’ Good,” by Little Junior’s Blue Flames (released in July 1953), was also commercially successful, reaching number 5 on the national R&B chart. Sun’s next hit was “Just Walkin’ in the Rain” by The Prisonaires, a black vocal group of five inmates from the Tennessee State Penitentiary in Nashville. They sang close-harmony gospel style and came under armed guard to record at 706 Union on June 1, 1953. As part of the warden’s rehabilitation program, they were allowed to perform on radio, in concerts, and at the Governor’s mansion, but “Just Walkin’ in the Rain” was their only hit.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 14**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Phillips recorded a number of important blues artists in the early 1950s, including “Sleepy” John Estes, Little Milton Campbell, Rosco Gordon, Dr. Ross, Harmonica Frank Floyd, Willie Nix, Billy “The Kid” Emerson, and Bobby “Blue” Bland.

*... It's safe to say that the blues has never sounded as mean, raw, or intense as it did on countless days and nights at 706 Union Avenue. Amplifiers were cranked way past the point of distortion, guitars slashed like straight razors, rickety drum kits were pounded with fury and abandon, and the stories both sung and shouted spanned the gamut of the black Southern experience . . .*<sup>33</sup>

*Even if he'd never issued a record on the shining yellow Sun label, even if Elvis Presley had never entered his small recording studio . . . , Phillips would rank as one of the most visionary record producers of our time on the basis of his early fifties blues work.*<sup>34</sup>

In February 1954, Phillips and his brother Jud started a music publishing company, Hi Lo Music, to avoid placing their copyrights with other companies. In May 1954, Phillips recorded “Cotton Crop Blues” with James Cotton on vocals and Auburn “Pat” Hare on guitar. This was “one of the truly great blues recordings,”<sup>35</sup> but recording of traditional blues at 706 Union fell off in 1954 with the growing popularity of R&B music. Sun Records soon became synonymous with rock ‘n’ roll, overshadowing Phillips’s role in blues recording “and the insight that [he] brought to recording the blues. He worked hard to get the best from his artists . . . Phillips would sit behind his tape deck until sunup if he thought the musicians on the studio floor might capture the sound that he heard in his head.”<sup>36</sup>

Phillips struggled to make money in the record business for almost six years. Eventually he saw that the market at that time was too small for the kind of music he was recording.

*The base wasn't broad enough because of racial prejudice. It wasn't broad enough to get the amount of commercial play and general acceptance overall not just in the South . . . Now these were basically good people, but conceptually they did not understand the kinship between black and white people in the South. So I knew what I had to do to broaden the base of acceptance.*<sup>37</sup>

### *Elvis Presley*

Elvis Presley graduated from Humes High School in north Memphis on June 3, 1953 and went to work at M.B. Parker Machinists on July 1. Later that summer, he recorded a personal record at the Memphis Recording Service. Presley paid \$3.98 for an acetate with two sides, both ballads. While he was there, Presley talked with Marion Keisker, a long-time Memphis radio personality who helped Sam Phillips run his businesses at 706 Union, and asked if she knew of a band that needed a singer. He made an impression on Keisker which she later remembered well, especially his answer to her question about which hillbilly singer he sounded like: “I don’t sound like

---

<sup>33</sup> John Floyd, *Sun Records: An Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 15**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

nobody.”<sup>38</sup> At that time, Presley had a child’s guitar that he played in the park, on his porch steps, and in a band with his buddies around their housing project. He soon aspired to be a member of the Songfellows, an amateur church quartet.

Presley dropped by 706 Union a number of times after that initial meeting to see if Ms. Keisker had any leads for him. In January 1954, Presley paid for a second personal record, and tried out for a professional band that spring. Eddie Bond, the band leader, told him to keep driving a truck because he would never make it as a singer. Presley later revealed that Bond’s rejection “broke my heart.”<sup>39</sup>

*... There is little question that he stepped through the doorway [at 706 Union] with the idea, if not of stardom ... at the very least of being discovered. In later years he would always say that he wanted to make a personal record “to surprise my mother.” Or “I just wanted to hear what I sounded like.” But, of course, if he had simply wanted to record his voice, he could have paid twenty-five cents at W. T. Grant’s on Main Street. ... Instead, Elvis went to a professional facility, where a man who had been written up in the papers would hear him sing.<sup>40</sup>*

Marion Keisker finally called Presley on Saturday, June 26 to set up an appointment, almost a year after he recorded his first personal disc. On a recent trip to Nashville, Phillips had gotten an acetate of a song that reminded him of Presley’s voice. They worked on “Without You” for a long time that afternoon, and Phillips had Presley sing a number of other songs after his unsuccessful attempts with “Without You.” A week later, Phillips set Presley up with two members of the Starlite Wranglers, Scotty Moore (guitar) and Bill Black (bass), and the three of them went to the studio on Monday, July 5 so Phillips could hear them on tape. Nothing special happened at the session until they took a break and Presley began fooling around and playing an old blues song by Arthur Crudup, “That’s All Right [Mama].”

*Sam recognized it right away. He was amazed that the boy even knew Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup—nothing in any of the songs he had tried so far gave any indication that he was drawn to this kind of music at all. But this was the sort of music that Sam had long ago wholeheartedly embraced ... And the way the boy performed it, it came across with a freshness and an exuberance, it came across with the kind of clear-eyed, unabashed originality that Sam sought in all the music that he recorded—it was “different,” it was itself.<sup>41</sup>*

Phillips got his friend and kindred spirit, disc jockey Dewey Phillips, to play “That’s All Right” on his radio show “Red Hot and Blue,” then near the height of its popularity. The response was immediate—hundreds of phone calls and telegrams. Dewey played the song a number of times that night and also interviewed Presley during the show. By the time the record was pressed and ready for release, there were 6,000 orders for it locally.<sup>42</sup> Sun record number 209 was released

---

<sup>38</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train*, 63.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 16**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

on Monday, July 17, 1954. Phillips had been “looking for something that nobody could categorize,”<sup>43</sup> and this song did not sound exclusively black or white or country or pop. Initially, many people who heard the song thought that Presley was a black man.

Elvis Presley’s first big public appearance with Scotty and Bill, the Blue Moon Boys, was on Friday, July 30 at Memphis’s outdoor amphitheater in Overton Park. The show featured Slim Whitman, a star from the Louisiana Hayride, which some called the Grand Ole Opry’s “farm club.” He drew a hillbilly crowd, but they went wild when Elvis shook and wiggled his legs, his natural way of performing. The new record made *Billboard*’s regional charts by the end of August, but it was the B side that was more popular. Phillips backed “That’s All Right” with an unorthodox version of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” a waltz that was a hit in 1946 for Bill Monroe, country music’s elder statesman. By early September, “Blue Moon” was number 1 on the Memphis C&W chart and “That’s All Right” was number 7.<sup>44</sup>

Sun released Presley’s second record in late September. “It was . . . an even bolder declaration of intent than the first, especially the strident blues number ‘Good Rockin’ Tonight,’ which rocked more confidently than anything they could have imagined in those first, uncertain days in the studio.”<sup>45</sup> Presley’s growing popularity enabled Phillips to arrange a guest appearance on the Grand Ole Opry for October 2, even though the Opry had never before scheduled a performer at such an early stage in his career. The performance of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” by Elvis Presley, Scotty and Bill received a “polite, but somewhat tepid, reception,” and the Opry’s manager told Phillips that Presley “just did not fit the Opry mold.”<sup>46</sup> It was a big disappointment for Elvis. But soon they were off to Louisiana for Presley’s first appearance on the Louisiana Hayride, “the Opry’s more innovative rival in Shreveport”<sup>47</sup> that had a show every Saturday night. On the third Saturday of the month the show broadcast with a 50,000 watt signal that reached up to twenty-eight states.<sup>48</sup> After only one guest appearance, Presley signed a standard one year contract to be one of the Hayride’s regular members, and he and his band quit their day jobs.

For the next year, Elvis Presley and the Blue Moon Boys toured almost constantly. They started out at civic clubs and school functions in Mississippi and Arkansas, in addition to their weekly performances on the Louisiana Hayride. In November and December, they also played in Houston, adding spots in West Texas, East Texas, and Missouri in January. By the time Presley performed for the first time at Memphis’s Ellis Auditorium on February 6, he and the Blue Moon boys were working almost every night. In mid-February they were booked as part of a Hank

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 130-131.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 136.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 17**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Snow/Jamboree Attractions package tour that began in Roswell, New Mexico. Presley took his first airplane flight and first trip to New York City on March 23, 1955 to try out for Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts contest, but he did not pass the audition. Another tour with Hank Snow/Jamboree Attractions began on May 1 in New Orleans, visiting twenty cities in three weeks, including a number of stops in Florida. There was a "riot" backstage after the concert in Jacksonville. In July, Presley took a vacation and was back on the road again for the rest of the summer and fall.

The audiences had never heard music like Presley played before, and they had never seen anyone who performed like Presley either. The shy, polite, mumbling boy gained self-confidence with every appearance, which soon led to a transformation on stage. People watching the show were astounded and shocked, both by the "ferocity of his performance,"<sup>49</sup> and the crowd's reaction to it. Even in the early days, Elvis almost always stole the show from the headliners, and concert lineups had to be rearranged accordingly. Nobody followed Elvis. Roy Orbison saw Presley for the first time in Odessa, Texas: "His energy was incredible, his instinct was just amazing . . . I just didn't know what to make of it. There was just no reference point in the culture to compare it."<sup>50</sup> "He's the new rage," said a Louisiana radio executive . . . 'Sings hillbilly in R&B time. Can you figure that out? He wears pink pants and a black coat . . .'<sup>51</sup> Elvis caused a great commotion everywhere he went. Throughout the South, Presley had girls screaming and fainting and chasing after him.

Sam Phillips was also on the road constantly after the Overton Park performance in July 1954, promoting the new records to distributors, disc jockeys, record store owners, and jukebox operators. His experiences, however, were entirely different. Time and again, disc jockeys who were old friends and/or long-standing business associates told Phillips they could not play the Presley records. A country deejay said "Sam, they'll run me out of town." To an R&B deejay, "That's All Right" was a country song. A major pop station disc jockey told Phillips, "your music is just so ragged. I just can't handle it right now. Maybe later on."<sup>52</sup> WELO in Tupelo, Mississippi, Presley's hometown, would not even play the record, in spite of many requests from teenagers, because the deejay did not like the new music.<sup>53</sup> Sam Phillips persevered in spite of all the rejection he was getting, and kept trying to turn it around. "I *needed* the attention that I got from the people that hated what I was doing, that acted like: 'Here is somebody trying to thrust junk on us and classify it as our music.'"<sup>54</sup>

*He was a man swept up by a belief, in a sound and in an idea. And as discouraged as he might sometimes get, as harsh as the reality of selling this new music might be, he never strayed from his*

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 130.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 18**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

*belief, he never allowed himself to be distracted from his main goal. Which was to get them to listen.*<sup>55</sup>

Phillips could feel a revolution was on the way. There were already lots of country boys coming to his studio to play the new music, which initially got the name rockabilly. “Sam knew that a day was coming . . . when the music would prevail.”<sup>56</sup>

Presley was still a regional sensation and unknown to the national market when he got the record industry’s attention. By the summer of 1955, almost all the major and independent record labels were inquiring about him. Sam Phillips had mixed feelings about selling Presley’s contract, but his operations could not accommodate the Presley phenomenon, his finances were very tight, and he had other artists who needed his attention. Presley’s parents signed a contract in August which soon forced the issue. Col. Tom Parker became “special adviser to Elvis Presley.” He was the head of Jamboree Attractions, one of the major promoters and bookers of country and western talent, and had booked Presley on the Hank Snow package tours earlier that year. At that time, Parker was known as the best promoter in the business. In October Parker asked Phillips to name his price for Presley’s contract, and Parker made sure that it was met. The deal was signed at 706 Union Avenue on November 21, 1955. RCA-Victor bought Elvis Presley’s contract from Sun Records for \$35,000, plus \$5,000 in back royalties owed to Presley. The story ran in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* the next day:

*Elvis Presley, 20, Memphis recording star and entertainer who zoomed into big- time and the big money almost overnight, has been released from his contract with Sun Record Co. of Memphis . . . Phillips and RCA officials did not reveal terms but said the money involved is probably the highest ever paid for a contract release for a country-western recording artist. ‘I feel Elvis is one of the most talented youngsters today,’ Phillips said, ‘and by releasing his contract to RCA-Victor we will give him the opportunity of entering the largest organization of its kind in the world, so his talents can be given the fullest opportunity.’*<sup>57</sup>

Sam Phillips never regretted his decision to sell Elvis Presley’s contract. In many ways, Presley’s departure was like a new beginning for Sun Records. Many country musicians aspiring to play rockabilly began to make their way to 706 Union Avenue. As Johnny Cash said many years later, “Elvis was a beacon that brought us all there.”<sup>58</sup>

### *Johnny Cash*

Sun released “Cry, Cry, Cry” by Johnny Cash (J. R. Cash, John Cash) on June 21, 1955. Cash had a big voice but a limited vocal range, so Phillips made the most of the situation. With Cash, “Phillips challenged the conventions of recording balance, placing [his] vocals more assertively in the mix than had ever been the case in country music. Phillips fattened the sound of the vocals

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Guralnick, *Last Train*, 233.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Guralnick, “Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock ‘n’ Roll,” VHS (A&E *Biography*, 2000).

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 19**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

and the rhythm track with slapback echo.”<sup>59</sup> “Cry, Cry, Cry” hit number 1 on the local Memphis country chart in September, reached number 14 on the national country and western chart in November, and Johnny Cash became 1955’s “outstanding new act in Memphis.”<sup>60</sup>

After the release of “Folsom Prison Blues” in December 1955, which reached number 4 on the C&W chart, Cash got a regular spot on the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport. Sun released “I Walk the Line” in April 1956. Cash wrote the song as a slow, mournful ballad, but Phillips had the band record it at a faster tempo. Cash did not like the version Sun released and even asked Phillips to quit distributing it.<sup>61</sup> “I Walk the Line,” however, reached number 1 on the C&W chart, crossed over to the national pop chart, and climbed to number 17. It was one of Cash’s biggest hits. In July, Cash got a regular spot on the Grand Ole Opry. By the end of the year, he was the third best-selling country artist and one of the first young country artists on the national pop chart after the “barriers that separated pop and country music began to crumble in the wake of Elvis Presley.”<sup>62</sup>

By 1957 Johnny Cash’s stark originality was getting old. Phillips turned Cash’s recording sessions over to Jack Clement, a new producer at Sun, who gave Cash a more mainstream sound. In November 1957, Phillips released Sun Records’s and Johnny Cash’s first album, which was followed by the single “Ballad of a Teenage Queen.” It sold more than 460,000 copies, reached number 16 on the pop chart’s new Hot 100, and number 1 on C&W.<sup>63</sup> The next single, “Guess Things Happen That Way,” reached number 11 on the pop chart and stayed at number 1 on the C&W chart for weeks. It was Johnny Cash’s biggest hit on Sun Records. When his contract with Sun expired in the summer of 1958, Cash signed with Columbia Records.

*Although Columbia recorded Cash with the same instrumentation that Phillips used at Sun, he never sounded quite as good again . . . Phillips’ achievement was to keep Cash’s sound at its bare essentials, and then fatten it up with the use of slapback echo. Subsequent producers and engineers could never quite recapture that formula. Their echo lent distance rather than presence. Worse yet were the early stereo recordings at Columbia, whose primitive separation heightened the unfocused sound . . . Johnny Cash’s three years of recording for Sun are a wonderful demonstration of just how far a whole can outclass the sum of its parts. Cash’s limited vocals, Luther Perkins’ woefully limited picking, and Marshall Grant’s strictly functional bass playing jelled magically through Sam Phillips’ mixing board to produce perhaps the most original and innovative sound in country music since Hank Williams died.*<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin’ Tonight*, 101.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Perennial, 1971, 1989), 175.

<sup>62</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin’ Tonight*, 95.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 20**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

*Carl Perkins*

In December 1955, Sam Phillips recorded Carl Perkins playing “Blue Suede Shoes,” the record that has been called “the first true rock ‘n’ roll hit.”<sup>65</sup> It was the first record that borrowed from country, blues, and pop music, and the first record by a single artist that was a hit on all three charts. “Blue Suede Shoes” was released in January 1956 and had huge sales throughout the South by February. In March, Carl Perkins became the first country artist with a song on the national R&B chart, where it later peaked at number 2. “Blue Suede Shoes” went to number 1 on the C&W chart, number 2 on the pop chart, and stayed on these charts for almost five months. It became the first million-seller for Perkins and Sun Records. “Blue Suede Shoes” was the song that really got black radio stations to play songs by white artists and white stations to play black artists.

Sam Phillips was almost bankrupt shortly before he recorded “Blue Suede Shoes.” The sale of Elvis Presley’s contract allowed him not just to carry on, but to prevail. The “record business is a lottery, and Phillips hit the jackpot. More than that, he was a success on his own terms. He had recorded music that no one else believed in. He recorded it his way. He released it on his own label. And he reaped the colossal rewards.”<sup>66</sup> Phillips also owned the publishing rights to “Blue Suede Shoes;” the song’s popularity enabled him to put together deals that eventually distributed Sun recordings around the world.<sup>67</sup>

Carl Perkins’s own story was not so fortunate. In March 1956, he was traveling with his band to New York to tape the Perry Como television show when their car crashed. Almost everyone was seriously injured. Perkins never had a second big hit to follow up “Blue Suede Shoes.” He signed with Columbia Records when his contract with Sun expired in January 1958.

*It may be that Carl Perkins recorded more memorable music during his three years at Sun than he recorded during the balance of his career . . . No one but Sam Phillips could seem to draw the rough edges out of Perkins and capture the bite in his guitar playing. A comparison of Perkins’ Sun recordings with the remakes he cut for a variety of labels makes an eloquent case for the chemistry at 706 Union Avenue . . . The edge had gone.<sup>68</sup>*

Carl Perkins himself said: “There was a feeling there that I’ve never found since. We were trying one hundred per cent, and Sam Phillips captured it.”<sup>69</sup>

By the early 1960s, Perkins was discouraged and gave up the music business until a 1964 tour with Chuck Berry in England rejuvenated his career. “Dance Album of Carl Perkins” was one of just a few rockabilly records available in England before 1964. It made Perkins a huge influence on the rock ‘n’ roll bands that came out of England in the early 1960s, the so-called British

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 21**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

invasion. These groups idolized Perkins and “the Beatles recorded more songs by Perkins than they recorded by any composer other than themselves.”<sup>70</sup>

*Roy Orbison*

Sun released “Ooby Dooby,” a novelty song by Roy Orbison, in May 1956. It sold around 200,000 copies and reached number 59 on *Billboard*’s Hot 100. But Orbison was not happy at Sun, where he was one of many musicians playing rockabilly and rock ‘n’ roll. He wanted to be a ballad singer.

*Orbison was disillusioned with the way Phillips was handling his career as a recording artist. He was locked into recording rock ‘n’ roll novelties . . . In one of the least commercially astute moves of his career, Sam Phillips had kept Roy Orbison on a steady diet of rock ‘n’ roll. Phillips’ golden ear told him once again that he heard something unique; yet in Orbison’s case, he didn’t know what to do with it . . . over the best of these recordings hangs a feeling of missed opportunity, of perhaps the most singular chance Phillips failed to take.*<sup>71</sup>

When his Sun contract expired, Orbison recorded for RCA before signing with Monument Records. He soon became famous for dramatic ballads like “Crying” and “Only the Lonely,” his first million-seller.

*Rockabilly*

A number of important rockabilly artists recorded for Sun in the mid-1950s, including Sonny Burgess, Billy Lee Riley, Warren Smith, Charlie Feathers, Malcolm Yelvington, and Onie Wheeler. Bill Justis & His Orchestra were the only ones in this group to have a hit record. “Raunchy,” released in September 1957, went to number 1 on the R&B chart, number 2 on the pop chart, and number 6 on country and western.

In 1956, Phillips hired Jack Clement (songwriter, musician, engineer, producer) and Bill Justis (musician, music arranger, A and R [artist and repertoire] director) to help run the studio. They listened to audition tapes, recorded potential new artists, and gradually assumed greater responsibilities for running the business. They were experienced musicians who wanted a more elaborate, refined sound than the missed notes and rough quality that Phillips overlooked to capture the feeling in an artist’s music. As Clement stated, “At Sun, I took it in a whole new direction.”<sup>72</sup> Clement and Justis were primarily responsible for Sun recordings in 1957 and 1958 as Phillips got involved with other projects.

*Jerry Lee Lewis*

In November 1956, Jerry Lee Lewis of Ferriday, Louisiana, showed up at 706 Union Avenue. He had already made the rounds in Nashville in 1955, but record companies there were not interested in him. They told him to learn to play the guitar. Before he went to Memphis, the Louisiana Hayride also turned Lewis down for a package show featuring Slim Whitman.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 150-151, 153.

<sup>72</sup> Floyd, *Sun Records: An Oral History*, 80.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 22**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Sam Phillips was out of town and Jack Clement was in charge of Jerry Lee Lewis's audition. Lewis played a variety of songs for Clement, who told him to go home and learn some rock 'n' roll. Phillips was ready to sign Lewis as soon as he heard the tape, partly because he "had been wanting to get off this guitar scene and show it could be done with other instruments."<sup>73</sup> Lewis did not have a band, so Clement set him up with some local musicians. "In the combination of Jerry Lee Lewis, Roland Janes [guitar], and J.M. Van Eaton [drums], a magic formula had fallen into Sam Phillips' lap."<sup>74</sup> "Crazy Arms" was Lewis's first release in December 1956. It sold well in the region but did not make the national charts. "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" was recorded in February 1957. It made the national C&W chart in June and entered the pop chart's Hot 100 at number 70 by the end of the month.

Lewis's first tour was with Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins in April and May 1957. Initially he was shy on stage. Cash and Perkins encouraged him to put on more of a show, and immediately there was a radical change. On Sunday, July 28, 1957, Jerry Lee Lewis's appearance on the Steve Allen Show made television and music history.

*Like Elvis's television appearances, Jerry's spots on the Allen show are landmarks in the history of rock 'n' roll. He pounded the piano, eyes fixed above with messianic intensity. When it came time to sing, he glared at the camera with a wild-eyed fury . . . At the top of the last chorus, he kicked the piano stool back across the stage . . . Set in the context of the jugglers, ventriloquists, and singing-sister acts that were the staples of television variety in those days, Jerry's performance was nothing short of demonic.<sup>75</sup>*

After the Allen show, "Whole Lot of Shakin'" hit number 1 on the C&W and R&B charts, and number 3 on the pop chart. "Great Balls of Fire," released in November 1957 as the followup to "Whole Lot of Shakin'," reached number 1 on the country and western chart, number 2 on the pop chart, and number 3 on R&B. "Breathless" and "High School Confidential," released in 1958, also made all three national *Billboard* charts. "With Presley halfway into the Army, Lewis was just about the hottest phenomenon in pop music."<sup>76</sup>

*Lewis was extraordinarily prolific in the studio during 1957 and early 1958. With Roland Janes and J. M. Van Eaton trying to follow him as best they could, Lewis would plunder his subconscious for songs, hoping to find something that would catch Phillips's ear. The variety was enormous: sentimental hillbilly weepers in waltz time, such as "I'm Throwing Rice;" contemporary country hits like "Singing the Blues;" R&B songs like "Sixty Minute Man" and "Honey Hush;" old pop favorites such as "Love Letters in the Sand;" folk songs like "Crawdada Hole;" a little gospel in the form of "Old Time Religion;" and even one giantly egotistical original, "Lewis Boogie."*

*Surprisingly, it is the music left in the outtake boxes that provides the definitive proof of Lewis's genius. In his hands, an impossibly wide variety of material is recast into a uniform body of work. . . If Sam Phillips thought a song had merit and wanted to hear it another way, Lewis could*

---

<sup>73</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 192.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 23**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

*change the time signature, the tempo, the key, his phrasing even the lyrics at the drop of a hat.*<sup>77</sup>

Lewis's meteoric rise ended abruptly in May 1958 during a short tour to England. He was accompanied by his new wife, thirteen year-old Myra Gale Brown, who was also his second cousin. Their relationship outraged the British press. The scandal followed Lewis back to the United States, where he found that all of his big bookings had been canceled and that he was blacklisted from the new Top 40 pop format. For the next few years, Jerry Lee Lewis played dance halls in the South for \$250 a night. In 1961, he recorded Ray Charles's "What'd I Say" and finally made it back onto the national charts. Subsequent tours in England in 1962 and 1963 were very successful, but Lewis never had another big hit on Sun Records. He signed with Mercury Records when his contract expired in 1963.

*Lewis's musical reputation rests on the strength of his Sun recordings. The Top 20 hits were only four in number; few legends in popular music have been grounded in such low gross sales . . . In terms of capturing the sheer joy of recording, nothing can match Jerry Lee Lewis's recording at Sun.*<sup>78</sup>

*. . . [his records], especially those made between 1956 and 1960, stand as one of the most impressive bodies of recordings to emerge from that turbulent era maybe the most impressive.*

*The simple truth is that Lewis could never have made those recordings for a major label. Phillips's willingness to keep the tape running while Lewis plundered his memory was crucial to Jerry's development as an artist and performer. "Whole Lotta' Shakin'" was the product of one of those sessions . . . Other studios would schedule a standard three-hour session and have four songs ready to record, but Phillips knew his artist: "Jerry is an informal person . . . and the conditions had to be right. You had to have a good song, of course, but atmosphere is nearly everything else. Jerry had to know that the people around him, the people responsible for the session, understood him. He had such spontaneity. With great artists, almost 50 percent of something good they might do happens because of an almost instant reaction to what is taking place around them."*<sup>79</sup>

### *The Late 1950s and the 1960s*

By the late 1950s the music business was changing once again. Rockabilly, the initial and purest form of rock 'n' roll, exemplified by Elvis Presley's early music, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis, was short-lived. Sun's minimal, revolutionary sound was superseded by a bigger pop sound with more instruments, along with choruses and even strings. Every phase of the music business was becoming more technical, complicated, and expensive. In the early days, Sam Phillips could single-handedly cut, master, press, and promote a record, but those days were over. Major record companies began to record rock 'n' roll and lured artists away from the independent labels. Sun lost Elvis Presley to RCA in 1955, Perkins and Cash to Columbia Records in 1958, and Jerry Lee Lewis to Mercury Records in 1963.

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 194-195.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 189-207.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 24**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Sun Records had outgrown 706 Union Avenue by the late 1950s also. The studio itself was not big enough to accommodate larger groups of musicians, the control room was too small for the new multitrack recording equipment, and Phillips needed more space so he could hire more employees. In the summer of 1958, Phillips bought a building nearby at 639 Madison Avenue for his new headquarters. They occasionally used the studio at the new building beginning in January 1960, but it was not officially opened until September 17. Around that time, Phillips was quoted as follows: "Woodshed recordings have had it. You've got to have latitude today—all the electronic devices, built-in high and low frequency and attenuation, echoes, channel splitting and metering on everything."<sup>80</sup> The new studio on Madison Avenue, one of the most modern in the United States at that time, was "everything that 706 was not, spacious, state-of-the-art, and soulless."<sup>81</sup>

Phillips began to expand his business interests in the mid-1950s. He started a new label in 1957, Phillips International, to record pop and jazz as well as rock 'n' roll, and he began to let other people use his studio for custom recording. In 1961 he opened a studio in Nashville at 317 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue North. Phillips started his first radio station in 1955, something he had wanted to do for a long time. WHER, with "1,000 beautiful watts," was the country's first "all-girl" station at a time when women did not yet work in radio. Phillips's original idea for his first station was a 24-hour "all Negro" station, but the FCC turned down that application. Phillips went on to build a radio empire, including a number of stations around his hometown in Florence, Alabama. He was also an original shareholder in Holiday Inns, Inc. which originated in Memphis in 1952. All of these ventures contributed to Phillips's waning involvement in his record business.

Phillips hired managers, producers, and engineers to run his studios during this period, and they recorded all kinds of musical artists. Two songs recorded at 706 Union Avenue shortly before the move to the new studio on Madison Avenue became hits, but they were released on the Phillips International label. "Lonely Weekends" was Charlie Rich's first hit. He eventually became a big star in the early 1970s with the song "Behind Closed Doors." Carl Mann's unusual version of "Mona Lisa" also became a hit in 1959, reaching number 24 on *Billboard's* R&B chart and number 25 on the pop chart. In 1962, Frank Frost made "some of the last truly great blues recordings to emerge from Memphis,"<sup>82</sup> but the classic Sun sound had faded by then. The last time Phillips recorded an artist as president of Sun Records was a session for Dane Stinit in November 1966.<sup>83</sup> The last record on the Sun label was released in January 1968.

Phillips had received a number of offers for the Sun catalog over the years. In July 1969, he sold the entire catalog, approximately 7,000 master recordings, for \$1 million to Shelby S. Singleton, Jr., a former Mercury Records executive who had launched his own company in 1966. Singleton reorganized the company as the Sun International Corporation, which is now the Sun

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 224

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 230

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 25**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Entertainment Corporation. Phillips received an interest in the new corporation, retained his music publishing rights, and kept the studio on Madison Avenue.

“Sun Records ended in 1969; to musical purists, it ended a decade before that, when the old studio was closed.”<sup>84</sup> Some are of the opinion that Sam Phillips lost his vision for Sun Records in the later years. But Phillips’s vision was that music with southern roots had a special feeling and a universal appeal. Prejudice, both class and racial, had generally kept that music confined to its places of origin for decades, until Phillips figured out a way to let the people hear the music. Once they heard it, rock ‘n’ roll flew around the world and took the blues along for the ride. Sam Phillips did not lose his vision for Sun Records. By 1957, his vision was realized, it had changed the whole world, and Sam Phillips moved on to other challenges.

### *Sun Studio*

After Sam Phillips moved his companies to the new location on Madison Avenue, 706 Union Avenue housed a number of different businesses in the 1960s and 1970s, including a barber shop, an auto parts store, and a scuba shop. The building was vacant in 1985 when it became the site of a family reunion of sorts. An album entitled “Class of ‘55: Memphis Rock ‘n’ Roll Homecoming” was recorded here to celebrate and remember the “Class of ‘55” on their 30<sup>th</sup> “anniversary.” Record producer Chips Moman convened Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Roy Orbison to record together for the first time at the Sun studio in September 1985.

Not long after that event, 706 Union Avenue became a stop for visitors on tours to Graceland, the home of Elvis Presley, which opened to the public in 1982. The building opened as the Sun Studio for tours in 1987—the name Sun Records and the original Sun record label design still belong to Shelby Singleton, who bought the company in 1969. The current property owner also purchased the adjacent two-story brick building that housed a café and a boarding house in the 1950s. That building now serves as a soda shop, gallery, and gift shop for visitors to Sun Studio.

The Sun Studio also operates as a full service 24-track recording studio for professional musicians, as well as anyone who wants to make a personal record, just like Elvis. In 1987, the Irish rock band U2 recorded several songs here for their album “Rattle and Hum,” including “When Love Comes to Town” featuring B.B. King. Several hundred thousand visitors have made the pilgrimage to this extraordinary place.

### **Significance**

The building at 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, is nationally significant for its association with Sam Phillips, the man who established the Memphis Recording Service and Sun Records, and, because of his vision and work, the artists and the music recorded here played a unique and revolutionary role in American music history and popular culture. It meets National Historic Landmark Criteria 1 and 2.

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 241.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 26**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

The period of significance for this property is 1949-1960, which coincides exactly with the years that Sam Phillips operated his recording service and record company at this location. This is the only building associated with Phillips's productive life as a record producer during the years that he made exceptional contributions to American music. He continued to be a record producer after his studio relocated to Madison Avenue in 1960, but those efforts were occasional, not routine. Since the sale of Sun Records in 1969, Phillips has only produced a handful of artists, most notably John Prine in 1979 ("Pink Cadillac") and the "Class of '55: Memphis Rock 'n' Roll Homecoming" in 1985. Although some of the years included in the period of significance, the years 1953-1960, are less than 50 years ago, the extraordinary significance of this property during that period clearly satisfies National Historic Landmark Exception 8.

This property has a high degree of integrity. It opened to the public as a historic site in 1987 to promote and interpret the history of Sun Records, now known as Sun Studio, and careful attention has been given to retaining the building's historic character. The building's current owner also purchased the adjacent two-story brick building on the corner (710 Union Avenue) to accommodate services for visitors to Sun Studio (706 Union Avenue) in a separate location.

In recent years, Sam Phillips and Sun Records have been examined at length in books, magazine articles, television documentaries, music compilations, etc. Peter Guralnick is a prolific writer on American roots music and a preeminent authority on this subject. The dedication for his 1979 book, *Lost Highway-Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians*, reads, "For Sam Phillips and Chester Burnett, the real heroes of rock 'n' roll." Guralnick regards Phillips as "the man who started it all . . . the man who almost single-handedly authored one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of American popular music."<sup>85</sup> In the Foreword to *Good Rockin' Tonight - Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'N' Roll*, the definitive history of Sun Records to date, Guralnick wrote this assessment:

*It is a music of almost unparalleled richness and diversity. Sam Phillips, in scarcely a decade of full-scale involvement in the record business and for most of that decade functioning largely as a one-man operation created a legacy comparable to no other, really, provided the stylistic bedrock not just for rock 'n' roll but for much of modern blues as well. And . . . it was no accident of spontaneous generation but, rather, the culmination of a social and historical vision.<sup>86</sup>*

Sam Phillips was an original inductee into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in 1986 and the first person inducted in the Non-Performers category. In 1987, he received the Lifework Award for Non-Performing Achievement from the Alabama Music Hall of Fame. The Blues Hall of Fame recognized Phillips in the Non-Performers category in 1998, and most recently, Phillips was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2001. Sam Phillips is the only person ever elected to all three music Halls of Fame; Rock 'n' Roll, Blues, and Country. He also has a Grammy, the record industry's most prestigious award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

---

<sup>85</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians* (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1979, 1999), 325.

<sup>86</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, Foreword.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 27**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

The “Sun sound” is still a phrase commonly heard and understood in the music business to be a “raw, sparse production, long on feel and short on contrivance.”<sup>87</sup> Even though Phillips recorded on equipment long regarded as obsolete, the music still has great vitality and appeal, and the Sun catalog continues to be remarketed domestically and internationally. The best overview of the catalog is generally considered to be Rhino Records’s “The Sun Records Collection,” 74 songs on three compact discs issued as recently as 1994. This compilation was followed by “The Complete Sun Singles, Volumes 1 - 6.”

Sam Phillips never played an instrument in his studio, but the Sun sound was his music. He understood his artists, considered himself to be “a good conductor,”<sup>88</sup> and clearly directed and inspired his musicians to create a certain sound that he heard in his head. “I could always see the people that did have talent and get it out of them. And they would *know* that I was getting it out of them.”<sup>89</sup> “Much of what Phillips did others had done before, but he did it with a consistent artistic conception of the way music should sound. He recognized the primacy of the blues and looked for the raw blues feel in virtually all the artists he recorded.”<sup>90</sup>

*Many of the musicians to whom Sam Phillips responded would have been chased away from other studios or already had been. Today it is easy to take Phillips’ insight for granted; but was there another record producer with the ears to hear the promise behind the insecure nasal whine of an eighteen-year-old Elvis Presley? What was it that made Phillips want to sign Jerry Lee Lewis half a minute into his audition tape, after Lewis had been turned away by every record company in Nashville?*<sup>91</sup>

*It was no mere coincidence that Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and so many others gave their finest performances in the Sun studio. The excitement they generated, along with Phillips’ almost messianic ability to bring out the rawest emotion in their art, qualifies the man as probably the first modern record producer, and possibly the greatest. It also ensures that his legacy is among the most important in popular music.*<sup>92</sup>

Phillips used technical expertise from his radio engineering background to design and build a unique recording studio, and to develop recording techniques that augmented the music actually played on the studio floor. According to Roland Janes, whose many accomplishments include being Jerry Lee Lewis’s guitar player and a key member of Sun Records’s “house band,” “Sam was the only guy in the world to have the nerve enough to go in and cut hit records with a three-piece band.”<sup>93</sup> Phillips’s slapback echo, a technique that gave the music actually played a bigger

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Preface.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., Preface.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>93</sup> Floyd, *Sun Records*, 82.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 28**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

sound on the recording, was a character-defining feature of recordings made at 706 Union. He obtained the echo by sending the signal recorded on a console recorder to another recorder mounted on the wall behind his head, with a split-second lag in between. Phillips's primary goal was to record the music actually played in his studio, to capture the feeling in the music, because "if the feeling wasn't there on the floor *right then*, there wasn't any point in doctoring it up later."<sup>94</sup>

Finally, there was something special about 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, the place itself where the Sun sound was created. Many artists have used various terms to describe the studio's unique atmosphere: loose, creative, relaxed, comfortable, funky, natural, etc. Some have said that the place had magic, but others scoffed at the idea. Whatever it was, 706 Union Avenue was the only place where the Sun sound was created. Record companies that bought Sun artists were not able to capture the same sounds and feeling that Sam Phillips did, even though they used his recording techniques. The Sun sound did not even follow Phillips himself to his new studio on Madison Avenue. The Sun sound was a unique conjunction of people, time, and place that proved Sam Phillips to be a visionary. It made age-old walls between classes and races come tumbling down, and showed that music was a powerful art that could change the world.

*Sun Records in Memphis. The bright yellow label with its 11 sunbeams. Jerry Lee Lewis and his Pumping Piano. Carl Perkins the Rocking Guitar Man. Rufus "Bear Cat" Thomas. And, of course, Elvis Presley, the original Hillbilly Cat. That's the way the credits read, and it all sounds curiously old-fashioned now. But if the origin of a music can be traced to any one source, for rock 'n' roll that source would be Sun. And if there is one man without whom the revolution which took place in American popular music seems difficult to imagine, that man is Sam Phillips.*<sup>95</sup>

### Civil Rights Significance

Post World War II America was a land in transition, a time when music became a significant cultural force. New attitudes toward race relations accompanied the new form of music, rock 'n' roll, that burst forth in the mid 1950s. Some changes had already been noted by performers and followers of rhythm and blues music, but racial barriers really began to fall in the wake of rock 'n' roll. Younger people, particularly in the South, understood that the new music had roots in both black and white musical traditions. The new youth generation embraced the new music not only because it moved them and they loved it, but also because it symbolized freedom and defiance of the status quo. The role of music as an agent of social and political change was recognized long ago. "A change to a new type of music is something to be aware of as a hazard of all our fortunes. For the modes of music are never disturbed without [an] unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions."<sup>96</sup>

Rock 'n' roll opened important new lines of communication. It brought people together for a common purpose and in environments that promoted racial tolerance and understanding. "Rock

---

<sup>94</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 224.

<sup>95</sup> Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home*, 171.

<sup>96</sup> Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 17; Quoting Plato, *Republic*, in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, eds. *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), 8.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 29**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

'n' roll represented one of the South's more conspicuous failures regarding attempts to prevent black and white interaction . . . Rock 'n' roll mounted serious assaults upon the vulnerable yet still heavily fortified attitudes associated with Jim Crow segregation. It did so at venues and through media not usually acclaimed as sponsors for social change: concert halls, dance floors, phonograph records, jukeboxes, and the airwaves."<sup>97</sup>

"Blue Suede Shoes" has been called the "first true rock 'n' roll hit." Carl Perkins wrote the song, which he recorded for Sam Phillips and Sun Records in December 1955. It was the first record by a single artist that became a hit on all three music charts. In March 1956, Perkins became the first country artist with a song on the national rhythm and blues chart, where "Blue Suede Shoes" peaked at number 2. It went to number 1 on the country and western chart, number 2 on the pop chart, and was the first million-seller for Perkins and Sun Records. In the mid 1950s, American music charts clearly reflected the progress of integration. "Blue Suede Shoes" was the song that really got black radio stations to play songs by white artists and white stations to play black artists, and rock 'n' roll opened the door to the pop charts for many black musicians.<sup>98</sup>

Carl Perkins later recalled:

*There was an integration problem in this part of America, a pretty severe problem back then. But there was no [segregation] in music. When you walked up to an old '54 or '55 model Wurlitzer jukebox, it [didn't say] "Blue Suede Shoes," Carl Perkins, white, "Blueberry Hill," Fats Domino, black. No. There was no difference. Kids danced to Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Elvis . . . Chuck Berry said to me one time, he said, 'You know, Carl, we might be doing as much with our music as our leaders are in Washington to bring down the barriers.' He was right.<sup>99</sup>*

Rock 'n' roll was a new form of music, not a crusade for social change, but its influence was far-reaching.

*In many ways, the music was loudly (and, ironically, in a more subtle fashion), breaking down barriers that legislation, executive orders, and Supreme Court decisions were having difficulty achieving. Young southerners, through the active choice of popular music, were challenging existing rules and regulations about racial perceptions and relationships. They were also confronting rather than evading an imperfect past.<sup>100</sup>*

African Americans considered crossover music to be an important breakthrough:

*"Into the mainstream of American popular culture with much the same sort of symbolic significance which had accompanied Jackie Robinson's 1947 breakthrough into major league baseball...They viewed the success of black artists with white audiences as a portent of, maybe even a vehicle for, eagerly anticipated changes in the broader patterns of American race relations. They saw the world of entertainment as one*

---

<sup>97</sup> Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 39.

<sup>98</sup> Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, 131.

<sup>99</sup> Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 41; Quoted in "Rock 'n' Roll Explodes," *The History of Rock and Roll*, VHS, produced by Jeffrey Peisch (NY: Time-Life Video and Television, 1995).

<sup>100</sup> Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 123.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 30**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

*arena where the war against prejudice and discrimination might be waged effectively.*"<sup>101</sup>

In 1957, an article from the Associated Negro Press observed:

*While this article has not been written to defend or criticize rock 'n' roll music, it does contend that the music has done more good than it has harm in terms of race relations. It is perhaps refreshing to freedom-loving people everywhere to tune in on southern television broadcasts and see white teenagers dancing to the tunes of Little Richard, Fats Domino, LaVern Baker, and of course, Elvis Presley.*<sup>102</sup>

The 1950s was a time when popular culture, and especially music, "began to cross previously insurmountable barriers of race, class, and ethnicity—a time when young artists and audiences transformed the dissonance and noise of urban life into a chorus of many voices . . . they carved out a place in popular culture for a vision of America as a land of a thousand dances."<sup>103</sup>

### Conclusion

One of the most remarkable innovations of the twentieth century was the marriage of culture and technology. Music appreciation was no longer reserved for limited audiences after sound recording brought all kinds of music into the lives of millions of people. As the twentieth century progressed, a wide variety of artists and musical performances could be heard over the radio—in homes, and later, in cars—and on records—singles at first with one song on each side, and later on long-playing high-fidelity albums, "LPs" with at least five selections per side. The audience grew again with television's debut in 1948.

*Art had been commodified . . . and the mass production and mass consumption of art [was] made possible by technologies that allowed it to be replicated and broadcast. That truly constituted a revolution in human experience, with momentous social and economic consequences.*

*It was an American revolution . . . America pioneered the mass production of entertainment and culture, just as it pioneered the mass production of beefsteaks and guns and sewing machines and cars. And the basic reasons were the same: a mass market, an absence of social or cultural restraints, an entrepreneurial culture. Further, this was a revolution wrought in American cities: but not the older, established places on the eastern seaboard, but newer and rawer and wilder places far away in the interior or on the western shores of the continent.*<sup>104</sup>

*In the 1930s, contemporary social observers, even smart ones, could not make sense of it; they just could not understand the marriage of technology and culture, and they questioned whether the result could be art. But the new mass culture spread, and it formed a vital part of the*

---

<sup>101</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 127-128

<sup>102</sup> Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 244; Quoting from Greer, Melvin. "Elvis Presley Got 'Start' with Negroes, Says Youth." *Memphis World*, 6 July 1957, 3.

<sup>103</sup> Lary May, ed. *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 281-282.

<sup>104</sup> Hall, 503-504.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 31**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

*homogenization of America: it tied the country together, just as railroads and highways and the Roosevelt presidency did.<sup>105</sup>*

*Like the birth of motion pictures in Hollywood between 1910 and 1925, the birth of modern popular music in Memphis between 1947 and 1956 was the birth of a popular art. It was created bottom-up, by outsiders who took that art from folk traditions bred in poverty, the most abject poverty America had known. There is no previous parallel at all in the history of music . . . For this was a music created by a desperately poor and exploited underclass, which became transformed by degrees as it was exported to America's cities.*

*The change could have occurred in a number of cities . . . [but] it was most likely to happen in Memphis, because Memphis was the point of confluence of different traditions; because it was such a free-and-easy place; and because it contained a new group of entrepreneurs, who understood both traditions. Memphis innovated while the New York-Hollywood axis, established entertainment capital of America, resisted innovation . . . Memphis then became the first example of a real social revolution in art: not the imitation of primitive originals by sophisticated metropolitan artists, as in Paris at the turn of the century, but the victory of the art of the underclass and of its underclass performers, and eventually of its values.<sup>106</sup>*

*Such huge innovative capacity does not come easily. It can only happen in a society in extreme flux, where new socio-economic or ethnic groups are defining themselves and asserting themselves. New York in 1900, America's quintessential immigrant city, was one such; Memphis in 1950, the city where rural migration streams met on the eve of the cotton picking machine and of the civil rights era, was another.<sup>107</sup>*

*What the Memphis story finally shows is that the music of an underclass could literally become the music of the world. That represented the final breaching of the dam, which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century bourgeois society had erected, to try to exclude a form of expression that it regarded as menacing to mainstream values. It was part and parcel of a general breakdown of all such barriers, those of race and class and geography, that came with increasing mobility and increasing diffusion of different cultures; it was an important part of the creation of the multi-cultural society of the late twentieth century, in which America has played such a large part.<sup>108</sup>*

Music has long been one of the South's greatest resources, an invaluable export, and a powerful connection to the rest of the world. And even though southern literature is generally regarded as "the hallmark of southern culture, . . . it is music, rather than literature, that remains the South's most characteristic and enduring achievement."<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 517.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 605-606.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 607.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 602.

<sup>109</sup> Vernon Chadwick, ed., *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), xvii.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 32**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Bertrand, Michael T. *Race, Rock, and Elvis*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Chadwick, Vernon, ed. *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997.

Escott, Colin with Martin Hawkins. *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Floyd, John. *Sun Records: An Oral History*. For the Record Series. New York: Avon Books, 1998.

Guralnick, Peter. *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock 'n' Roll*. New York: Perennial, 1971, 1989.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians*. Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1979, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*. Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll." VHS. *A&E Biography*, 2000.

Hall, Sir Peter. *Cities in Civilization*. New York: Fromm International, 1998.

Hill, Randal C. *The Official Price Guide to Collectible Rock Records*. Orlando, Florida: House of Collectibles, Inc., 1979.

Jahn, Mike. *Rock, From Elvis Presley to the Rolling Stones*. New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1973.

Janes, Roland. Telephone Interview by Author. March 21, 2002.

Lewis, Jerry Lee and Charles White. *Killer! The Baddest Rock Memoir Ever*. London: Random House, 1995.

May, Lary, ed. *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Miller, Jim, ed. *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*. New York: A Random House/Rolling Stone Press Book, 1976, 1980.

Mississippi Department of Archives and History. *All Shook Up: Mississippi Roots of American Popular Music*. Catalog of An Exhibit of the State Historical Museum, February 18-August 31, 1990.

Moore, John Hebron. *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest, Mississippi, 1790-1860*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 33**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Rodman, Gilbert. *Elvis After Elvis, The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Tosches, Nick. *Hellfire*. New York: Grove Press, 1998. Originally published in New York: Delacorte Press, 1982.

Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ Previously Listed in the National Register.
- ☐ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- ☐ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State Agency
- ☒ Federal Agency: National Park Service, Southeast Regional Office, Atlanta, Georgia
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other (Specify Repository):

## **10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: Less than one acre

|                 |             |                |                 |
|-----------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|
| UTM References: | <b>Zone</b> | <b>Easting</b> | <b>Northing</b> |
|                 | 15          | 769910         | 3892300         |

Verbal Boundary Description:

Beginning at a point in the north line of Marshall Avenue (19.75 feet wide) 357.73 feet southeastwardly from the intersection of said north line with the east side of South Orleans Street; thence southeastwardly with said north line of Marshall Avenue 19.75 feet; thence northwardly 57.66 feet; thence westwardly 18.83 feet; thence southwardly with the west line of Lot 5, 52.33 feet to the point of beginning.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary follows the perimeter walls of the building at 706 Union Avenue. It encompasses the space historically associated with the Memphis Recording Service and the Sun Record Company.

**SUN RECORD COMPANY/MEMPHIS RECORDING SERVICE****Page 34**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Jody Cook, Historian

Address: National Park Service  
Southeast Regional Office  
100 Alabama Street, SW  
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Telephone: (404) 562-3117

Date: 2 April 2002

Edited by: Patty Henry  
National Park Service  
National Historic Landmarks Survey  
1849 C St., N.W.  
Room NC-400  
Washington, DC 20240

Telephone: (202) 354-2216

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK  
July 31, 2003