

# THE ROCKABILLY MOMENT

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*Greil Marcus*

## *The Rockabilly Moment*

There are four of them in the little studio: Bill Black, the bass player; Scotty Moore, the guitarist; in the back, Sam Phillips, the producer; and the sexy young kid thumping his guitar as he sings, Elvis Presley, just nineteen, 1954.

Sam Phillips is doing all right for himself. He has been among the first to record men who will be giants in the world of postwar blues: B. B. King, Junior Parker, and the Howlin' Wolf himself. The names on Phillips' roster show his willingness to try anything: wonderful names like Big Memphis Ma Rainey, the Ripley Cotton Choppers, Dr. Ross, Hardrock Gunter, Rufus "Bear Cat" Thomas, Billy the Kid Emerson, the Prisonaires (a vocal group from the state pen), the immortal Hot Shot Love. There are plenty more knocking on the door, and with no more than this, Phillips' place in the history of American music would be assured—not that a place in history is quite what he is looking for.

In the records Phillips makes you can discern something more than taste, something like vision. He has cooked up a sound all his own: hot, fierce, overbearing, full of energy and desire, a sound to jump right out of the jukebox. But Phillips wants money, a lot of it, and he wants something new. Deep down in a place not even he sees clearly, he wants to set the world on its ear.

The kid with the guitar is ... unusual; but they've been trying to put something on the tape Sam keeps running back—a ballad, a hillbilly song, anything—and so far, well, it just doesn't get it.

The four men cool it for a moment, frustrated. They share a feeling they could pull something off if they hit it right, but it's been a while, and that feeling is slipping away, as it always does. They talk music, blues, Crudup, ever hear that, who you kiddin' man, dig this. The kid pulls his guitar up, clowns a bit. He throws himself at a song. *That's all right, mama, that's all right* ... eat shit. He doesn't say that, naturally, but that's what he's found in the tune; his voice slides over the lines as the two musicians come

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FROM:  
GREIL MARCUS, *MYSTERY TRAIN: IMAGES OF AMERICA IN  
ROCK 'N' ROLL MUSIC* (1975, 1982), 167-180.

in behind him, Scotty picking up the melody and the bassman slapping away at his axe. Phillips hears it, likes it, and makes up his mind.

All right, you got something. Do it again, I'll get it down. Just like that, don't mess with it. Keep it simple.

They cut the song fast, put down their instruments, vaguely embarrassed at how far they went into the music. Sam plays back the tape. Man, they'll run us outta town when they hear it, Scotty says; Elvis sings along with himself, joshing his performance. They all wonder, but not too much.

Get on home, now, Sam says. I gotta figure what to do with this.

They leave, but Sam Phillips is perplexed. Who is gonna play this crazy record? White jocks won't touch it 'cause it's nigger music and colored will pass 'cause it's hillbilly. It sounds good, it sounds sweet, but maybe it's just ... too weird? The hell with it.

Sam Phillips released the record; what followed was the heyday of Sun Records and rockabilly music, a moment when boys were men and men were boys, when full-blown legends emerged that still walk the land and the lesser folk simply went along for the ride.

Rockabilly was a fast, aggressive music: simple, snappy drumming, sharp guitar licks, wild country boogie piano, the music of kids who came from all over the South to make records for Sam Phillips and his imitators. Rockabilly came and it went; there was never that much of it, and even including Elvis's first Sun singles, all the rockabilly hits put together sold less than Fats Domino's. But rockabilly fixed the crucial image of rock 'n' roll: the sexy, half-crazed fool standing on stage singing his guts out.

Most important, the image was white. Rockabilly was the only style of early rock 'n' roll that proved white boys could do it all—that they could be as strange, as exciting, as scary, and as free as the black men who were suddenly walking America's airwaves as if they owned them. There were two kinds of white counterattack on the black invasion of white popular culture that was rock 'n' roll: the attempt to soften black music or freeze it out, and the rockabilly lust to beat the black man at his own game.

Sam Phillips had the imagination to take in a country folksinger like Johnny Cash and a Stan Kenton fan like Charlie Rich; he was commercial

enough to get rock 'n' roll out of both of them. Phillips gave a funny-looking kid named Roy Orbison the chance to growl that no girl had the style to match him, and the music to prove it. Sun tossed up Warren Smith, who claimed he had a girl who looked like a frog; Sonny Burgess, who dyed his hair red to match his red suit and his red Cadillac and told anyone who would listen he wanted to boogie with a red-headed woman; Sun offered us Billy Lee Riley, who blithely argued that rock 'n' roll was so strange it had to come from Mars. The little green men taught him how to do the bop, was the way he put it.

Carl Perkins found greatness here, and nowhere else; Jerry Lee Lewis simply took greatness as his due. ("I played on 'em," Jerry Lee told an interviewer who had asked the names of the musicians who had played on his records, "what else do you need to know?") Jerry Lee stormed his way through the whorehouse rock of "Deep Elem Blues" like Elmer Gantry moonlighting from the revival tent (celebrating the Dallas red light district that crawled with sin and blues piano); he tumbled into "Big Legged Woman," leering at an imaginary audience with the arrogance that would bring him down.

*Let me tell ya, tell ya, tell ya something*

*WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT*

*I bet my bottom dollar there ain't a cherry in this house<sup>1</sup>*

While it lasted, Sun was a space of freedom, a place to take chances. The music Sun produced was ominous, funny, kicking up rhythm and bursting with exuberance, determination, and urgency, full of self-conscious novelty and experiment. Most of the first rock 'n' roll styles were variations on black forms that had taken shape before the white audience moved in and forced those forms to turn its way; rockabilly was almost self-contained, a world of its own, and as authentically new as any music can be.

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Back in those days I knew some country kids who captured the spirit of the music as well as any 45: farm boys, long, lean, tough, and good-humored. They flashed me my first picture of Little Richard, kicked raccoons to death with their bare feet, rustled sheep, chased Indian girls into the bushes, and made it into town on Saturday night to watch the razor fights. They were easy to idolize; one night they got drunk, drove their car to the railroad tracks, and got themselves blown to pieces.

Rockabilly was squeaky Charlie Feathers, a country singer of no special talent or even much drive, trekking up to Cincinnati, after failures at Sun, for the chance to yell, "Aw, turn it loose!" and then disappear. He reached once, and he missed, but these lines have stayed with me ever since a scratchy tape of his one great song arrived in the mail:

*Well, I'm a tip-top daddy an' I'm gonna have my way  
Dontcha worry 'bout me baby, dont worry what they say  
I got one hand, baby, let it swing by my side  
Just gimme one hand loose, and I'll be satisfied  
Satisfied<sup>2</sup>*

"Maybe someday your name will be in lights," Chuck Berry promised the young rockers, and most of them never got past the "maybe." There was a price for all that unexpected vitality and flash. Carl Perkins, still billing himself "The King of Rock 'n' Roll" on the thin line of one hit and a score of failures, sunk into alcohol; Johnny Cash nearly killed himself on pills; Gene Vincent found himself exiled to England, where some still remembered, and died of a bleeding ulcer before he was forty. Johnny Burnette, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly, chasing after Elvis's pot of gold, died in accidents, in fast cars and chartered planes. Most simply vanished and were forgotten—if they were lucky enough to have been known at all. They fell back into the predictability of country music or the day-to-day sameness they had meant to escape. All they left behind was rock 'n' roll,

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2. Copyright © 1956 by Fort Knox Music Company.

and an audience that twenty years later was still acting out their fantasies and seeking novelty and amusement in their ghosts.

It was an explosion, and standing over it all was Elvis. In the single year he recorded for Sam Phillips—August 1954 through August 1955—ten sides were released (four more were used by RCA to fill up Elvis's first album); about half derived from country songs, the rest took off from blues. His music stands to the rest of rockabilly as genius does to talent.

The blues especially have not dated at all. Not a note is false; their excitement comes through the years intact, unburdened by cuteness, mannerism, or posturing.<sup>3</sup> Nothing is stylized. The music is clean, straight, open, and free.

That's what these sides are about: finding space in the crunch of the worn-out and overfamiliar; finding a way to feel free in that space and finding the voice to put that feeling across.

The best evidence of Sam Phillips' spirit is in the sound of the records. Each song is clear, direct, uncluttered, and blended into something coherent. There is that famous echo, slapping back at the listener, and a bubbling tension that is never quite resolved; no comforts of vocal accompaniment, but the risk of one young man on his own. The sound is all presence, as if Black and Moore each took a step straight off the record and Elvis was somehow squeezed right into the mike. "I went into the studio," Sam Phillips recalled years later, "to draw out a person's innate, possibly unknown talents, present them to the public, and let the public be

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3. For most of us, the songs are unburdened by any sort of nostalgia as well. In their time, they were little heard outside of the South, and they turned up on albums only when Elvis was off in the army and RCA had to scrape its vaults for something to release. None ever made the national pop charts. Today they are rarely played on the radio (though spinning the dial on Elvis's thirty-eighth birthday, I picked up "That's All Right"—on a country station). Until 1976, Colonel Parker, or Elvis himself, deemed it vital that the King be protected from his past, so the songs were not, as with most classic rock, reissued in a package that might attract an audience. Given the publicity that has come with Elvis, these sides remained almost invisible, the result of a prepop moment; but *their* result is as public as rock 'n' roll. From one point of view they are the basis of the whole show. So there is a lot of power packed into these records, and not all of it is musical.

the judge. I had to be a psychologist and know how to handle each artist and how to enable him to be at his best. I went with the idea that an artist should have something not just good, but totally unique. When I found someone like that, I did everything in my power to bring it out."<sup>4</sup>

The sides Phillips cut with Elvis might have worked in the twenties, and they might do for the eighties; not simply as listenable music—there is no doubt about that—but as music that still sounds new, that still breaks things open.<sup>5</sup>

Elvis can tell us what was new and distinctive about his time without being trapped by it, and without trapping us. He can do it because to a great degree ELVIS PRESLEY was the distinctive item. For all the writers who have found a neat logic to the development of the music Elvis made, and have lost his genius in a process, that is not what I hear; I hear a whole world of music that by no means had to crystallize as it did. "I heard the news," Elvis would sing in "Good Rockin' Tonight"—but he was the news.

Elvis's Memphis records—"Milkcow Blues Boogie," "You're a Heartbreaker," "Good Rockin' Tonight," "Baby Let's Play House"—might be his best; a choice between the Sun sides and "Hound Dog," "Don't Be Cruel," "All Shook Up," "Reconsider Baby," "Suspicious Minds" and "Long Black Limousine" is not one I ever want to make. Elvis's first music deserves a close and loving attention not simply because it represents all that Elvis and those he has sung for have lost—youthful exuberance, innocence, haven't we tired of that story?—but because this is unquestionably great music, fun to think about, and because this music foreshadows, and contains, the entire aesthetic Elvis has worked out over the twenty years of his career. This is emotionally complex music that can return something new each time you listen to it. What I hear, most of the time, is the affection and respect Elvis felt for the limits and conventions of his family life, of his community, and ultimately of American life, captured in his country sides; and his refusal of those limits, of any limits, played out in his blues. This is a rhythm of acceptance and rebellion, lust and quietude, triviality and distinction. It can dramatize the rhythm of our own lives well enough.

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4. From an interview with John Pugh, *Country Music*, November 1973

## *Elvis Moves Out*

Elvis first went into Sam Phillips's studio in early 1954, and though it took him months of work to get to the point where he could make his first record, it is impossible to imagine a more natural sound. There's more here than anyone could have guessed, he seems to be saying: more soul, more guts, and more life.

"That's All Right" was one of three Arthur Crudup tunes Elvis recorded. Crudup had cut many sides for RCA's Bluebird outlet in the forties and early fifties; he wrote good songs, pointed little messages of loss fitted to bright blues melodies, but he was a minimal guitarist and an

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5. Even the lyrics evade any possibility of camp—unlike so much of fifties rock 'n' roll, including Elvis's RCA material, which was made with a trendy commercial ear. The blues and country motifs of the Sun sides are as lively today as they were old in 1954; if it takes little effort to trace "That's All Right" and "Milkcow Blues Boogie" back to Son House's epic "My Black Mama," cut in 1930, it takes even less to follow the trail forward to the Rolling Stones or the Allman Brothers.

Not surprisingly, on the album that today features House's masterpiece (*Really! The Country Blues*), there is an ancient, quiet statement of the theme Elvis brought home with such force. Made in 1928, it comes deadpan, spoken over a pretty little guitar line by one William Moore—an old, old mood, there too in Harmonica Frank or the Allmans' "Pony Boy," but to modern ears, *about* what Elvis *was*. This is "Old Country Rock": "Come on, Bill, let's take them for an old country rock. Let's go back down the Rappahanock, down Tappahanock way. Look at Bill while everybody rocks. Get that old rock, Bill. Everybody rock. Old folks rock. Young folks rock. Boys rock. Girls rock. Trot back, man, and let me rock. Rock me, sis, rock me. Rock me till I sweat. Trot back, folks, let your pappy rock. Pappy knows how. Children rock. Sister Ernestine, show your pappy how you rock. Mighty fine, boys, rock it, rock it till the cows come home. Whip that box, Bill, whip it. Too sad, I mean too sad for the public. Now up the country, back down the country again on that old rock. Rappahanock. Tappahanock. Cross the river, boys, cross the river. Man, it's sporty. Play it, Bill, play it till the sergeant comes." No one could ask for a better statement than that.

erratic singer, a bit one-dimensional. Only on numbers that verged on country or pop styles (as with his lovely "So Glad You're Mine," which Elvis recorded in a disinterested manner soon after reaching RCA) does Crudup seem to hit his stride.

Elvis reduces the bluesman's original to a footnote. He takes over the music, changing words and tightening verses to suit himself, hanging onto the ends of lines as Scotty Moore chimes in with pretty high-note riffs. Elvis sounds very young, sure of himself, ready to win; he turns Crudup's lament for a lost love into a satisfied declaration of independence, the personal statement of a boy claiming his manhood. His girl may have left him, but nothing she can do can dent the pleasure that radiates from his heart. It's the blues, but free of all worry, all sin; a simple joy with no price to pay.

Phillips put out the record on August 6, 1954, and it soon earned its place on the Memphis R&B charts, along with new hits by Muddy Waters and Johnny Ace. *Cashbox*, oblivious to Presley's color, reviewed the side as a blues; *Billboard*, prophetically, saw potential in all markets. It was an event, to some a scary one, but if "That's All Right" brought home the racial fears of a lot of people, it touched the secret dreams of others; if it was a threat, it was also another ride on the raft. "It was like a giant wedding ceremony," said Marion Keisker, Sam Phillips's working partner, and the one who first heard in Elvis's voice everything Phillips was after. "It was like two feuding clans who had been brought together by marriage."

"That's All Right" was a tremendous hit with teenagers, and in Memphis, where the record broke first, the current greeting among the teenagers is still a rhythmical line from the song: "Ta dee dah dee dee dah."  
The Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, 1954

You can't get that kind of success in *Billboard*; "Sun's Newest Star," as the *Press-Scimitar* called Elvis, wasted no time taking advantage of it. He tried out his material in the local clubs, drew three thousand people to the opening of a shopping center, and busted up a big country review when he sang a song called "Good Rockin' Tonight." Phillips, for his part, wasted no time getting Elvis back into the studio and a new record into the stores.

"That's All Right" was an easy ride. "Good Rockin'" is a cataclysm; it reflects the new confidence of a young man who knows what it means to satisfy an audience, to take them beyond their expectations. The record is charged with an authority that no other country rocker ever approached.

Roy Brown, the most influential blues singer of the forties, wrote the tune, and Wynonie Harris made it a hit in 1949. Harris was a sophisticated uptown R&B vocalist; his "Good Rockin'" is a conventional jump blues, lacking real tension or drama. He seems unable to exploit the stomping promise of the lyrics in rhythm or phrasing; he bumps words into each other and sometimes trips on them. He's too removed from the country revel the song is all about, and too cool.

Elvis opens with a high, wild "WELLLLLLLLLL..." and pulls fast and hard into the first verse before the echo of his shout has had a chance to fade. His voice is raw, pleading and pushing, full of indescribably sexy asides, the throaty nuances that would flare up into "All Shook Up" and "Burning Love." Elvis slows for a second in the middle of a line, drawling softly, over his shoulder, as if he can't quite bring himself to say out loud how good the party's going to be; and then suddenly he is out of breath, as if he's run for miles to tell his story, but there's good rockin' tonight and everybody *has* to know—how could they live if they miss it? Tonight his girl will get everything *she's* been missing. "We're gonna rock—ALL OUR BLUES AWAY!" He can't tell it fast enough, he can barely keep up with himself. Near to bursting, the song slams home.

"Milkcow Blues Boogie" came out in January 1955, with writer's credit on the label going to Kokomo Arnold, a Georgia-born blues singer who recorded "Milk Cow Blues" in Chicago in 1934. One always reads that Elvis re-created Arnold's song, though apparently no one has bothered to listen to both men—Elvis takes all of one verse from the bluesman. Presley's style might well owe something to Arnold; they share a fast, nervous delivery, full of unpredictable swoops and moans, a flair for crazy-quilt tempo changes of tremendous excitement, and the ability to come down with a great force on a key line. But "Milkcow" was a song held in common long before Elvis was born, recorded by more blues and country singers than anyone has bothered to count. What Elvis did, in

fact, was to throw a bit of Arnold—who perhaps Phillips played for him—into Bob Wills' western swing hit, "Brain Cloudy Blues," which was cut in 1946. "Brain Cloudy," highlighted by Wills' fiddle and a tough guitar solo, featured the straight, insulated vocal of Tommy Duncan up against Wills' patented cornball asides, which worked very effectively to bleed the punch out of every line. Elvis started with Wills' second verse, dropping the "brain cloudy" motif; faded to Arnold; and then finished off with Wills' words, changing lyrics when Duncan's crisp, almost effete diction threw him off.

I go into the musicology of this song in some detail because of what it can tell us about how these first records came about. The book on Elvis's early music is that it was "spontaneous," "without any evident forethought," "unself-conscious." In other words, Elvis was the natural (and, the implicit assumption is, likely unthinking) expression of a folk culture. I've tried to present some hints of the culture Elvis came out of as a set of forces that could have held him back and worn him down as easily as they gave him life; to build a context that puts us in touch with will and desire, not just smug sociology. Researching his biography of Elvis, Jerry Hopkins dug back into the world Elvis left behind in Memphis, and he found that nearly every record Elvis made with Sam Phillips was carefully and laboriously constructed out of hits and misses, riffs and bits of phrasing held through dozens of bad takes. The songs grew slowly, over hours and hours, into a music that paradoxically sounded much fresher than all the poor tries that had come before; until Presley, Bill Black and Scotty Moore had the attack in their blood, and yes, didn't have to think about it. That's not exactly my idea of "spontaneity" or "unself-consciousness."

Elvis had the nuance of cool down pat—the pink pants-and-shirt outfit he wore to his audition, the carelessness of his swagger, or the sneer around the edges of his smile—because the will to create himself, to matter, was so intense and so clear. He strolled into the studio and didn't leave until every note was perfect. Even later at RCA, still on the way up and wavering between complete self-confidence and a lingering doubt, he would demand thirty takes on "Hound Dog," pleading for one more try long after everyone else was satisfied.

Try to wash the images of success from your mind and picture a twenty year old in a tacky studio on perhaps his fifteenth take of a song that is coming together out of fragments of memory, old 78's, and pure instinct. Everything was riding on each new release: whether Elvis could really take his career beyond the commonplace expectations of those around him; whether he could top that last record; whether he could find a sound that would give him room to breathe and yet hold the fans he had won and spread the word. The little success he had achieved was fragile; each new record risked it. He had to take that energy of desire and distance himself from it, throw it into the song so that it would be coherent and powerful *as a song*; so that when he sang, "Tonight she'll know I'm a mighty mighty man," it would sound like an obvious, thrilling statement of the facts. Whatever strain there might have been in his voice or his hopes—that unpleasant hint of the small time that you can hear so plainly in Bill Haley and so many of Elvis's imitators—it had to go. The talent was there, and it was extraordinary, but it was complex, and it needed a form. They were in the studio a long, tiresome time to catch the spirit of a boy who, on record, sounded as if he flew in, stopped long enough to blow the walls back, and exited through the unhinged back door with a grin.

With "Milkcow Blues Boogie" we are back to the image Cash chose as the essence of the soul of the back country South: hot heavy air bursting all over the sky in lightning and rain. No music of any kind captures it better than this record.

Wills and Arnold move right into the song; Elvis lingers over the first lines, and his voice drips an erotic tension that must have melted the mike. "Oh well, Ah woke up ... this moanin—An' Ah looked out ... the doah—." He has you; you're hungering for whatever comes next, but he cuts you off. "Hold it fellas!" he shouts. "That don't *move* me!" Soft and sultry again: "Let's get real ... *real* gone, for a change." It's too perfect; you think he must be reading lines, as if this is a scene from one of his movies; and it is, I guess, even if at this point the dreams were only in his head.

Elvis charges the song, shooting that boundless *Welllllllll* out ahead of himself, and the three of them are off. Elvis spurs the changes with his guitar, flying all over the story he is telling—his woman is gone and he wants her back but she's got about five minutes to make up her mind—singing

with the crazy shifts from high to low that with Buddy Holly sounded funny and with Elvis sound frightening. In two and a half minutes he carries his listener through anger, loss, bemusement, melancholy, violence, defiance, fatalism, menace, delight, freedom, and regret. The song is as sure and tough a tale of breaking loose as any there is.

Yodeling, roaring his anger, yelling out to Scotty Moore—"Let's milk it!"—he comes off the guitar solo in a new mood, almost reflective now, meditating, this is all moving very fast but his guitar has somehow settled the music, and if his girl is gone, if that milkcow is never coming home, he still has time to step back and bring us into the song with a little blues philosophy:

*Wellll, good evenin'*

*Don' that sun look good goin' down*

*Wee-eee-ell, good evenin'*

*Don' that sun look good goin' down*

*Well, dont that old moon look lonesome*

*When your bay-ay-ayby's not around?*

And then rage pours back over his acceptance. He calls back his woman and faces her down, the song picking up momentum, his voice shimmering and shaking through night air:

*Well I tried everything*

*To git along with you*

*Now I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do*

*I'm gonna quit my crying*

*I'm gonna leave you alone*

and suddenly driving even harder, cursing with two of the most perfect lines in blues:

*If you dont believe I'm leavin'*

*YOU CAN COUNT THE DAYS I'M GONE*

Again, it is his authority that is so astounding. Scores of singers, black and white, have sung those lines, but few if any have ever made them seem so real, so final. The fatalism that is written right into the song, in that lovely image of the setting sun and the rising moon, will not do for Elvis, and he sings those last hard lines with an intensity that wipes out everything that has come before. A blues singer would use this verse as balance, to dramatize the rise and fall of his spirit, translating the circle the natural world draws around him into a metaphor for his inability to master his life. For Elvis, young and on his way, feeling his growing power over audiences, the growing space between himself and everything he should have taken for granted, there comes a point where he cannot settle for what others have made of this song, and the balance tips to fury. Our boy will get what he deserves; everyone else can get out of the way.