A DRAMATURGICAL CASEBOOK

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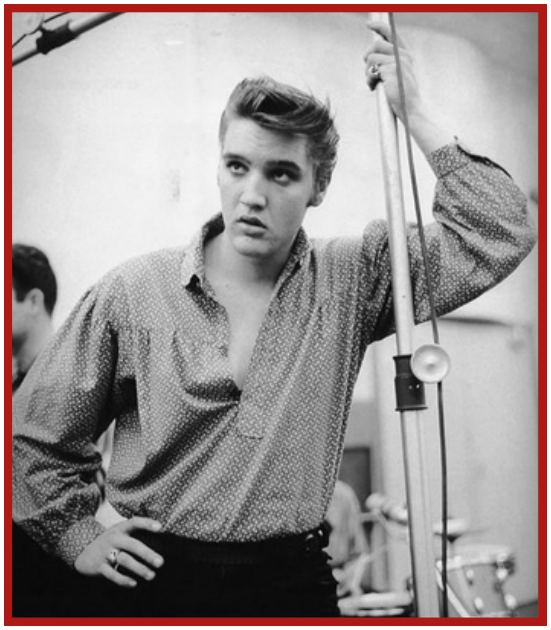
PLAYHOUSE ON PARK

ELVIS PRESLEY BIOGRAPHY

FROM GRACELAND.COM



The incredible Elvis Presley life story began when Elvis Aaron Presley was born to Vernon and Gladys Presley in a two-room house in Tupelo, Mississippi, on January 8, 1935. His twin brother, Jessie Garon, was stillborn, leaving Elvis to grow up as an only child. He and his parents moved to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1948, and Elvis graduated from Humes High School there in 1953.

Elvis' musical influences were the pop and country music of the time, the gospel music he heard in church and at the all-night gospel sings he frequently attended, and the black R&B he absorbed on historic Beale Street as a Memphis teenager.

In 1954, Elvis began his singing career with the legendary Sun Records label in Memphis. In late 1955, his recording contract was sold to RCA Victor. By 1956, he was an international sensation. With a sound and style that uniquely combined his diverse musical influences and blurred and challenged the social and racial barriers of the time, he ushered in a whole new era of American music and popular culture.

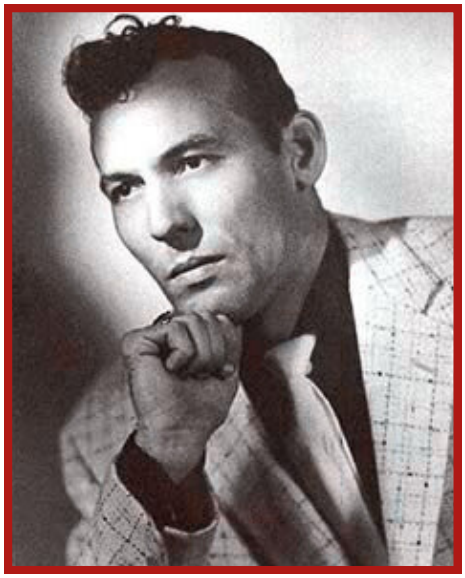
Here are a few Elvis Presley facts: he starred in 33 successful films, made history with his television appearances and specials, and knew great acclaim through his many, often record-breaking, live concert performances on tour and in Las Vegas. Globally, he has sold over one billion records, more than any other artist. His American sales have earned him gold, platinum or multi-platinum awards. Among his many achievements were 14 Grammy nominations (3 wins) from the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award which he received at age 36, and his being named One of the Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Nation for 1970 by the United States Jaycees. Without any of the special privileges, his celebrity status might have afforded him, Elvis honorably served his country in the U.S. Army.

His talent, good looks, sensuality, charisma, and good humor endeared him to millions, as did the humility and human kindness he demonstrated throughout his life. Known the world over by his first name, he is regarded as one of the most important figures of twentieth century popular culture. Elvis died at his Memphis home, Graceland, on August 16, 1977. He was 42.

This brief Elvis Presley biography doesn't begin to fully capture the personality of the king.

CARL PERKINS

FROM THE ROLLING STONE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ROCK & ROLL (SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2001)



One of the architects of rock & roll, Carl Perkins is best known as the writer and original singer of the rockabilly anthem "Blue Suede Shoes" (#2, 1956). Along with Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins was one of the seminal rockabilly artists on Sam Phillips' Sun label, but a series of bad breaks, followed by personal problems, undermined his solo career. Despite that, Perkins persevered, creating a body of work that has been both critically acclaimed and extremely influential on songwriters, guitar players, and singers alike.

Perkins grew up poor in a sharecropping family that picked cotton in various northwestern Tennessee fields around Tiptonville. Perkins was first put to work at age six, and it was in the fields that he first heard gospel songs. At night, he heard hillbilly country and Delta blues over the family radio. An older, black field hand befriended Perkins and taught him to play guitar; by age 10 Perkins was entertaining his classmates. He made his radio debut with his school band, singing "Home on the Range."

He kicked off his musical career in the mid-'40s, performing at local dances with his brothers Jay and Clayton as the Perkins Brothers Band. In 1953 drummer W.S. "Fluke" Holland joined. The next year, after hearing Presley's debut Sun single, "Blue Moon of Kentucky" (a Bill Monroe song Perkins and his group had been playing since 1949), Perkins and his brothers drove to Memphis to audition for Phillips. Shortly thereafter, they signed to the label and released Perkins' first single, "Movie Magg" (a song Perkins wrote at age 13) b/w "Turn Around." In early 1955 came "Let the Jukebox Keep On Playing" b/w "Gone Gone Gone." Perkins' biggest hit came in late 1956. "Blue Suede Shoes" was an instant smash and made Perkins the first white country artist to cross over to the R&B chart as well. A country, pop, and R&B hit, "Blue Suede Shoes" alternated with Elvis Presley's first post-Sun single, "Heartbreak Hotel," for the top spots on national and regional charts. (Shortly thereafter, Presley issued his "Blue Suede Shoes"; over time, Perkins' original sold more copies.)

Perkins was at the height of his career when tragedy struck. He and his group were driving to New York to appear on Perry Como's television program when their driver fell asleep at the wheel, causing the car to hit the back of a truck before plunging into water. The driver was killed, and Carl and his brother Jay were seriously injured. Although Perkins was back on the road in about a month, Jay never fully recovered and was later diagnosed with a brain tumor, from which he died in 1958. Years later, Perkins admitted that he used his brother's death as a reason to drink. A quiet, self-effacing man, Perkins later observed, "I felt out of place when 'Blue Suede Shoes' was Number One. I stood on the Steel Pier in 1956 in Atlantic City.... and the Goodyear blimp flew over with my name in big lights. And I stood there and shook and actually cried. That should have been something that would elevate a guy to say, 'Well, I've made it.' But it put fear in me."

JOHNNY CASH

FROM JOHNNYCASH.COM

Johnny Cash is one of the most important, influential and respected artists in the history of recorded music. From his monumental live prison albums, to his extraordinary series of commentaries on the American spirit and the human condition, to a mesmerizing canon of gospel recordings, to his remarkable and unprecedented late-life artistic triumphs of will and wisdom, his impact on our culture is profound and continuing.
John R. Cash was born into a family of Arkansas sharecroppers in the middle of the Great Depression, and that hardscrabble life instilled in him a reverence for family, the earth, God and truth that informed his incredible life and vision over a half-century career. After a stint in the United States Air Force, where he distinguished himself as a radio intercept operator, and less-successful efforts as an automobile factory worker and door-to-door home goods salesman, Johnny broke onto the music scene in 1955 on Memphis' fabled Sun Records. It was here, at the "birthplace of rock and roll," where the world was introduced to his singular voice and compelling songwriting, through such eternal classics as "I Walk the Line," "Big River" and "Folsom Prison Blues."

As Johnny matured as an artist, he took his disciples on soaring adventures of the mind and soul, including Ride This Train, a travelogue of the sights and sounds of his beloved country; Blood, Sweat and Tears, the Cash canon of working man blues; Bitter Tears, a searing examination of the treatment of Native Americans; The Holy Land, Hymns from the Heart and other deeply personal statements of faith and devotion; and, of course, the historic concerts at Folsom Prison and San Quentin, where he demonstrated that compassion and healing are more integral to humanity than retribution and disdain.

In 1969, The Johnny Cash Show was a groundbreaking fusion of musical styles, fresh voices and enduring legends that elevated him to the pinnacle of his craft, taking him to stages such as the White House, Carnegie Hall, behind the Iron Curtain and even Northern Ireland, where the combatants in the Troubles temporarily ceased the hostilities to gather together in a Belfast church to hear him sing—albeit from opposite sides of the aisle. When he became the biggest selling recording artist on earth, it was an affirmation of his universality.

In his later years, new audiences flocked to hear his consideration of what it means to be human. At the end of his life, Johnny Cash had become not only the champion and the conscience of the American Experience, but a portal through which mortals glimpse immortality, an exemplar of overcoming adversity through honesty, and a role model in the everlasting pursuit of Redemption and the promise of the unclouded day.

JERRY LEE LEWIS

FROM SUNRECORDS.COM

Jerry Lee Lewis (born September 29, 1935), also known by the nickname The Killer, is an American rock and roll and country music singer, songwriter, and pianist. An early pioneer of rock and roll music, Lewis was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986 and his pioneering contribution to the genre has been recognized by the Rockabilly Hall of Fame.

Lewis was born to the poor family of Elmo and Mamie Lewis in Ferriday, Louisiana, and began playing piano in his youth. Influenced by a piano-playing older cousin Carl McVoy, the radio, and the sounds from the black juke joint across the tracks, Haney's Big House, Lewis developed his own style mixing rhythm and blues, boogie woogie, gospel, and country music, as well as ideas from established "country boogie" pianists like recording artists Moon Mullican and Merrill Moore. Soon he was playing professionally.

Lewis, though not the first pianist in that style, was a pioneer of Piano rock, not only through his sound but also through his dynamic performance. He would often kick the piano bench out of the way to play standing, rake his hands up and down the keyboard for dramatic accent, and even sit down on the instrument. His frenetic performance style can be seen in films such as High School Confidential (he sang the title song from the back of a flatbed truck), and Jamboree. He has been called "rock & roll's first great wild man and also rock & roll's first great eclectic." These performance techniques have been adopted by later Piano rock artists, notably admirers Elton John, Billy Joel, and Ben Folds.

Lewis' turbulent personal life was hidden from the public until a 1958 British tour, when reporters learned about the twenty-three year old star's third wife Myra Gale Brown. She was thirteen years old, and Lewis's first cousin once removed. The publicity caused an uproar and the tour was cancelled after only three concerts.

Even though Jerry Lee Lewis was still under contract with Sun Records, he stopped recording. He had gone from $10,000 a night concerts to $100 a night spots in beer joints and small clubs. He had few friends at the time whom he felt he could trust. It was only through Kay Martin, the president of Lewis' fan club, T. L. Meade, (aka Franz Douskey) a sometime Memphis musician and friend of Sam Phillips, and Gary Sklar, that Lewis went back to record at Sun Records.

Lewis's Sun recording contract ended in 1963 and he joined Smash Records, where he made a number of rock recordings that did not further his career.

THE BIRTH OF ROCK 'N' ROLL IS FOUND AT SAM PHILLIPS'S SUN RECORDS

BY LAURA WOLFF SCANLAN

Sam Phillips opened Sun Records in a tiny rented storefront on Union Avenue in Memphis in 1952 with the slogan, "We Record Anything-Anywhere-Anytime." For a few dollars, anyone could walk in and make an acetate dub of their choice, usually a song or a special message for a loved one. The following year, a fresh-faced teenager just out of high school named Elvis Presley came in to record a ballad for his mother.

Before Presley's arrival, according to Peter Guralnick, the musical stage was set for something big to happen. "[Phillips] didn't believe in luck necessarily, but the moon had to be in the right place, the wind had to be blowing in the right direction. . . . He just hoped he would still be in business when that day finally arrived." Guralnick is the author of Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'N' Roll and cocurator of "Flyin' Saucers Rock & Roll: The Cosmic Genius of Sam Phillips" on display at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville.

Phillips opened his Memphis Recording Studio in 1950 with the goal of recording blues music made by black artists. With no record company, no deals lined up, and no outlets once records were made, it was slow going. To make ends meet, Phillips used portable equipment to record whatever a paying customer wanted as a keepsake. "I didn't open the studio to record funerals and weddings and school day revues," said Phillips. "I was looking for a higher ground, for what I knew existed in the soul of mankind. And especially, at that time, the black man's spirit and his soul."

Phillips grew up near the Muscle Shoals region of north Alabama, where, as a small child, he farmed fields with his family. He was surrounded by all kinds of music. His mother played folk songs on guitar. He listened to radio broadcasts from the Grand Ole Opry. White and black sharecroppers sang a cappella alongside him. Soulful gospel music reverberated from the local black church.

In 1939, when Phillips was sixteen, he stopped in Memphis on a road trip with his brother. He was immediately enamored by Beale Street, home to an energetic and diverse music scene where yet-to-be blues and jazz legends like Louis Armstrong and B. B. King could be heard. Visiting Memphis had a profound effect on Phillips. Guralnick writes, "For a boy who had never even been as far as Birmingham, Beale Street and the Mississippi River were nothing less than the spelling-out of his dreams and his destiny."

A couple years later, Phillips began his radio career spinning gospel records. After marrying radio personality Becky Burns, the couple moved a few times until Phillips could no longer resist the pull of Memphis. Phillips said, "My conviction was that the world was missing out on not

having heard what I had heard as a child. . . . I said, 'I've just got to open me a little recording studio, where I can at least experiment with [some of] this overlooked humanity.'"

After Phillips's first few unsuccessful attempts to get black music heard by the world, B. B. King urged him to call nineteen-year-old Ike Turner, a bandleader in nearby Clarksdale, Mississippi. As the group made its way to Memphis, someone dropped the guitar amplifier cracking the speaker cone. At the studio, Phillips put wadded paper in the speaker, creating a distorted sound he found appealing. The sound helped Phillips in 1951 produce "Rocket 88," considered the first rock 'n' roll single, which hit number 1 on Billboard's rhythm and blues chart and stayed there for weeks. Phillips would later say, "'Rocket 88' was the record that really kicked it off for me, as far as broadening the base of the music and opening up wider markets to our local music."

From 1950 to 1954, Phillips recorded black rhythm and blues artists such as King, Howlin' Wolf (whom he considered his greatest discovery), Rosco Gordon, James Cotton, and others. Although Sun became a respite for black artists in heavily segregated Memphis, Guralnick says Phillips realized that no matter how big an R&B hit he had, it was never going to sell to a wider audience. "It seemed that for all of the fervor of his belief, for all of the success he had enjoyed, with the Wolf, with "Rocket 88," and with Little Junior's Blue Flames, he just couldn't get himself situated on a solid foundation."

Then walked in Elvis Presley. After a few informal auditions and a session where he sang virtually every pop and country song he knew, Presley spontaneously broke into "That's All Right" by bluesman Arthur Crudup. Phillips recorded it. That night he told Becky that their lives were about to change. The next day, Phillips gave the record to his friend disc jockey Dewey Phillips (no relation), who played it over and over again and had Presley on his radio show as a guest. A cultural revolution was in the making.

Phillips released five Presley singles over the next year. But, needing capital, he sold Presley's contract to RCA for $35,000 in November 1955 (which he said he never regretted). At the time, it was the highest price ever paid for a pop artist.

After Presley's departure, Phillips moved Sun Records forward at breakneck speed. Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis all released big hits in 1956 and 1957. Perkins's "Blue Suede Shoes" had the rare distinction of climbing the national charts in three genres: pop, country, and R&B.

Presley stayed friends with Phillips. In late 1956, fresh off his performance on The Ed Sullivan Show, he stopped by the Sun studio where an impromptu jam session with Perkins, Cash, and Lewis took place. Dubbed the "Million Dollar Quartet," the recordings remained unreleased until 1981.

Visitors to the exhibition, funded in part by Humanities Tennessee, can hear early recordings by Presley (including "My Happiness" he recorded for his mother), Lewis's "Great Balls of Fire," King's "She's Dynamite," and many more. A video loop shows Howlin' Wolf growling out "How Many More Years," with a young Mick Jagger in the audience, Lewis's manic "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On," and an angelic-looking Johnny Cash donning a bedazzled white suit.

Phillips regretted bailing on black music. Sun artist Rufus Thomas recalled, “Me and Sam Phillips, we were tighter than the nuts on the Brooklyn Bridge, but when Elvis and Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash came along, no more blacks did he pick up at all.” An exhibition label says, “Phillips’s view was that this was the only way to broaden the base for the acceptance of black music, and, ultimately, he felt that it succeeded in doing so.”

Phillips sold the Sun label and all of its master recordings to Nashville’s Shelby Singleton in 1969. For his contributions to American music, Phillips was in the first class of inductees elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. In 2001, he was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame. Phillips died in 2003 in Memphis.

At the end of the exhibition, Phillips’s cultural contributions are noted: “Phillips looked for ‘perfect imperfection’—he encouraged his artists not to smooth out their sound, not to bend their identities to fit a show-business ideal. Thus, on his Sun label, he introduced the world to some of the most primal gut-bucket blues, some of the most frenzied rockabilly, some of the most propulsive rhythm & blues, some of the hardest of hardcore honky-tonk, and some of the most hummable pop music ever committed to tape. The Sun label has come to stand for excellence because Sam Phillips, in his cosmic genius, encouraged nothing less than pure, unmediated originality.”

SAM PHILLIPS

SAM PHILLIPS (RIGHT) WITH ELVIS PRESLEY (LEFT) AND OTHER MUSICIANS AT A RECORDING SESSION IN 1954. (AP)

SUN STUDIO

FOUR FOR THE SHOW: DIVIDING FACT FROM FICTION IN MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET

BY ROBERT SIMONSON, PLAYBILL, 2010

That the meeting, in the Sun Studios on Dec. 4, 1956, occurred is not in dispute. All the participants attested to being there. There's a picture to prove it, and the jam session that spontaneously sprung up that day was recorded and, years later, released. Plus, a reporter—quickly drafted by canny Sun producer Sam Phillips—was on the premises to witness the event.

That, however, does not mean that everything you see on stage at the Nederlander Theatre is gospel truth. "What we did in the show was take 18 months of history and kind of condense it into one night," said Colin Escott, who co-wrote the show's book with Floyd Mutrux. Escott knows the history of Sun Records as few others do. In 1992 Escott and Martin Hawkins published "Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'n' Roll," a detailed account of the small recording studio put together by the scrappily independent Sam Phillips. In the early years of rock, Phillips discovered and recorded Presley, Cash, Perkins and Lewis, not to mention Roy Orbinson and Charlie Rich, and therefore influenced the course of popular music for decades to come.

In a sidebar in the book, Escott wrote about the so-called "Million Dollar Quartet" session. (The name was coined by Bob Johnson, the Memphis Press-Scimitar reported in attendance.) "Floyd read that and thought it would be a good show," remembered Escott.

So how did those four towering talents manage to meet at Sun on that same December day? Well, according to Escott—and as depicted in the musical—the day began as a scheduled Carl Perkins studio session. History shows Perkins would indeed cut such future classics as "Matchbox" on Dec. 4, 1956. Jerry Lee Lewis—who, unlike Perkins, Presley and Cash, was not yet a star (1957 would prove to be his big year)—was on hand as a session musician. This is also depicted faithfully in the show. "Lewis had just arrived in Memphis just a few weeks earlier," said Escott. "I think his first record had been out just a few days."

Presley's visit seems to have been a matter of happenstance. Though discoverd by Phillips, the producer had sold his contract to RCA in late 1955. "He kind of returned there as a kind of touchstone," said Escott. "This is where he once was happy. He'd become such a lightening rod for all the antipathy directed toward rock and roll. He returned there just to reconnect with what was a happier place and time for him." As for Cash, who had also broken into the big time by then, "Sam Phillips had heard Johnny Cash was in town, called him and said, 'Come on over.' Cash and Perkins and Elvis, they knew each other. They all toured together back in less prosperous times." None of the three men knew Lewis at that time.

Once the quartet was together, a jam session ensued. "The songs that were sung that day were kind of like a primer on where rock and roll came from. A lot of gospel songs, bluegrass, blues, country." A few gospel tunes are indeed sung at the Nederlander. However, some

popular songs included in the show, like "Sixteen Tons," were not sung that day in 1956, and are featured in the show mainly because of the strong connection in the public consciousness between the tunes and the singers.

Escott guesses that the four were only together for about two hours.

There is one other major character in the musical beside the four musicians and Phillips—a woman named Dyanne, who arrives with Elvis and is introduced as his girlfriend. This is partially true to life. Presley did come with his girlfriend, but her name was Marilyn Evans, a chorus dancer Presley had met in Las Vegas. Their relationship was brief, ending a few weeks after the Sun session. And unlike Dyanne in the show, Marilyn did not join the jam session at all; Dyanne sings two solos, and joins in on a few others.

Some dramatic points involving Phillips, Cash and Perkins are fudged in the show as well. The primary piece of dramatic tension in Million Dollar Quartet surrounds Phillips' attempt to sign Cash to a new three-year-contract. Cash reveals, however, that he has signed with Columbia and is leaving Sun. This causes Perkins, too, to reveal that he has signed with Columbia. In reality, Cash and Perkins would remain with Sun for another year, not leaving for Columbia until the end of 1958.

"It was the informality of it that made it great," said Escott of why the serendipitous meeting has resonated so much throughout the years. "When you have the pre-arranged meetings of superstars, they are usually stilted. When you have something loose and informal, you really get a spontanaity and joy in making music that you don't get in something that's prearranged."

BEALE STREET'S COLORFUL HISTORY: ENTERTAINMENT, ENTREPRENEURS, MURDER & BLUES

BY MATT MARSHALL

This week, tens of thousands of blues musicians and fans will descend upon Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee for the Blues Foundation's International Blues Challenge — a competition where representatives from blues associations across the world compete for the top spot in a four day battle of the bands. The winner receives great accolades, as well as guaranteed headliner positions on numerous blues festivals across the country. The IBC's host, Beale Street, is one of the most famous musical streets in the world, and boasts a long and storied history.

For over 150 years, Beale has hosted Blues music, entertainment, drinking, gambling, and even murder. Beale played a pivotal role in branding Memphis as one of the most musically rich cities in the world, and was prominent in hosting some of the first Black business owners in the south. In between, the sometimes-infamous street was host to the birth of Blues music, the civil rights movement, Rock n' Roll, and countless beers, racks of ribs, and bands.

The Beginning of Beale

Beale Street was first created as a part of South Memphis by city planner Robertson Topp. Though the origins of how Beale was given it's name are murky, the official story is that it was named for a long-forgotten war hero. During the early days of Beale, the area became home to a great number of freed slaves and free African-Americans, many from the Mississippi Delta, as well as Irish and Italian immigrants, living peacefully among Memphis' residents, with reportedly few racial tensions.

Much of the lack of violence that was so destructive in the Jim Crow south was attributed to the occupation of Memphis by Union troops. During Union occupation, many black men were recruited and commissioned as soldiers. Once the war was over, however, the troops left and racial tensions quickly came to a boil, resulting in the Memphis Riots in 1866, where a number of black churches and homes were burned, and over forty African Americans lost their lives.

The horrors committed against the black community during the riots led to the rapid ratification of the 14th Amendment, stating that every person should have equal protection under the law. This would be the backbone of civil rights cases that, 100 long years later, would break longstanding Jim Crow policies, stir peaceful protests in the same neighborhood — and on Beale Street, and tragically end the life of one of the greatest American heroes, and the most powerful civil rights champion, just blocks away.

Beale continued for decades to act as a relatively safe haven for racial minorities in the city — a place where people could enjoy themselves free from fear of malice, where African Americans could own businesses, largely without the concern of oppression or terrorism from the government or racist sects. Politicians in the area were well aware of the power in numbers within the community, especially in the strong voting power of the black minority, and as a result, continued to ensure a largely peaceful co-existence of the neighborhood around Beale.

Gambling, Murder, Blues, and the Birth of Rock on Beale

By the turn of the 20th century, Beale Street had become something of a self-contained microcosm, with churches, a pharmacy, grocery, public housing, and entertainment. Beale had also become a place with a dark underbelly — where murder in it's rough-and-tumble gambling halls was a regular occurrence. Many men spoke about the infamous Monarch, on 340 Beale. In Paul Oliver's Conversation with the Blues, a number of former Beale residents spoke with candor about the building that was known as "The Castle of Missing Men", where many gamblers and drinkers went in but never came out. Behind the Monarch was a funeral home, and it was reported that men who were killed in the bar room for cheating, arguing, or some other perceived injustice, would be quickly and quietly carried to the crematorium through the alley.

The famous gangster Machine Gun Kelly sold bootleg liquor on Beale during the prohibition, as the area took on what has been described as a "carnival" atmosphere, where ambulances waited in rows for the next victim to stumble out of a gambling hall, bluesmen played on corners and in door frames, traveling shows pushed alcohol labeled as "medicines", and iconic figures like Bessie Smith played the Old Daisy, (which still stands and will be hosting a number of blues acts during IBC).

W.C. Handy was probably Beale's most famous resident prior to Elvis Presley, and his presence continues to be felt through his giant statue, a museum on Beale dedicated to his life in his original house, and numerous other accolades showered upon the man known as the "Father of the Blues". A mayoral candidate in the early 1900s, in an effort to win the black vote, hired Handy to create a theme song for his mayoral bid. The resulting tune was "Mr. Crump", which Handy reworked and released as "Memphis Blues", which quickly became one of his most famous numbers. W.C. went on to be a highly successful artist and band leader with numerous hits to his credit, earning his position as arguably the most celebrated of the decades-long list of musicians on Beale. Parks, bars, and streets bear the name of Handy, who's music is celebrated as an irreplaceable part of Americana music.

In 1946, a young man named Riley B. King trekked to Beale to seek out his Cousin, musician Bukka White. While King had cut his teeth playing on Church Street in his adopted hometown of Indianola, Beale was a much larger platform, and King "got his licks" busking the famous street. He landed a job as a disc jockey for WDIA radio station in Memphis by making an on-the-spot jingle. It was there that he picked up the handle of the Beale Street Blues Boy, which was later shortened to Blues Boy, and finally, B.B. 45 years later, the celebrated blues club bearing his name was opened with great fanfare on the corner of Second and Beale. Just a single block away, Gibson Guitar's famous factory produces B.B. King's signature ES-355 Semi-Hollow body, and boasts a two-story likeness of King's famous "Lucille" in the reception area.

At the same time as B.B. was earning what would become international widespread fame, another young man was daily found roaming the streets of Beale in search of the blues. A shy and wiry Elvis Presley couldn't stay away from the blues music that moved him.

"When I was in Memphis with my band, he used to stand in the wings and watch us perform," B.B King said to Sepia of the future fellow "King". Not long after, the young man wandered into Sun studio to make a single record "for his mother's birthday." Owner Sam Phillips called him back some months later, and on the weekend of July 4th, Presley cut "That's All Right Mama", a blues number by Arthur Crudup. Elvis was an instant hit, becoming a driving force in the creation of what Jerry Wexler would soon call Rock n' Roll. But through his international accolades and unprecedented worldwide fame, Presley always called Memphis home. Purchasing a tract of land and large house south of town, he called the estate Graceland.

Memphis fights for Civil Rights, and Beale Dies and is Revived

By the mid-1960s, The Civil Rights movement was in full swing. Brown v. Board of Education, using the 14th Amendment (created in the wake of the 1866 Memphis Riots), had finally cracked the "Separate but Equal" laws which were masquerading as equality, but ultimately, were used to continue to enable widespread segregation. Peaceful protest marches and demonstrations began across the south as African Americans struggled for equality.

Memphis became a hotbed of activity in the movement, home to many key civil rights events such as the 1968 sanitation strike. On April 3rd, Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. returned to Memphis, as he had a great number of times, to make a stirring, compelling, and ultimately prophetic speech, known by many as "I've Been to the Mountaintop". On April 4th, 1968, only 6 blocks from Beale, an assassin gunned Dr. King down as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, now known as the National Civil Rights Museum.

King's murder changed Memphis. Racial tensions again boiled as riots broke into the streets, most starting on Beale. As Beale Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America's Main Street stated, "The riots and looting rampages left shops with broken windows and ransacked counters. Stores closed, buildings emptied." For decades, the street had been something of a safe haven; where African Americans could own businesses and enjoy themselves, largely without fear of racism and persecution, but the area began to descend into ruin. The Memphis housing Authority bulldozed some of the landmarks that had fallen into disrepair as many businesses had closed up shop. By the 1970s, Beale had eroded into a virtual ghost town, despite an act of Congress officially declaring the iconic street the Home of the Blues in 1977. As one of the great epicenters of the Blues had all but died, a renaissance of blues music, the first of many, was brewing across the world. According to Beale Black & Blue,

"There was yet another irony to add to the contradictions that figured so prominently into the mile-long maelstrom. As Beale lay dying, the blues that had helped bring it fame sprang to life again. Elvis Presley's blue suede blues branched out into amplified hard rock, rock and soul, and progressive country rock; the Beatles acknowledged their debt to blues old timers like Lightnin Hopkins; the Rolling Stones took their name from a Muddy Waters song; and there was born a new interest of what Beale Streeter Willie Blackwell called the "true blues — the old time, natural blues."

Fueled by the interest in blues, rock & roll, B.B. King, and Elvis Presley, a strong investment was made into the street in the 1980s, fueling re-establishment of new businesses, and revitalization of old ones. Tourists made their way back to the Home of the Blues, slowly at first, then quickly, as the live music poured into the streets. By 2009, Beale Street alone was reporting nearly $32 Million in gross sales. With the revitalization and tourism that has come with the street in the past two decades, there has been some criticism that the street has become a sort of caricature of it's former self. Regardless, the music has a nearly unprecedented opportunity to bring new exposure to the millions that walk the streets of Beale during their trips and vacations — undoubtedly the first time many new visitors are even willing to hear the blues.

International Blues Challenge

As thousands of bands, fans, major blues players, entertainers, and reporters (including American Blues Scene) descend on Beale, the street once again takes a party atmosphere as only the blues can provide, colliding a searing helping of original Memphis soul with dozens of different styles, takes, and interpretations of hundreds of artist's blues music and dedication. Most of the buildings that exist on Beale are the same buildings that have been frequented by the great many music lovers and great musicians that came in the 100 years before, providing a proprietary sense of history to the legendary street.

In 1890, Beale Street underwent a classy renovation with the addition of the Grand Opera House, later known as the Orpheum. The Orpheum, originally built in the late 1800s and rebuilt in grand fashion in 1928 after a fire, was a place for vaudeville, nationally touring shows, and early movies. Sparing no expense, the theater was built to be larger than life — a Memphis jewel. During the International Blues Challenge, the best-of-the-best will adorn the stage at the Orpheum, and a 2012 winner will be crowned!

American Blues Scene will be covering the event, as we do every year, and will be bringing you up-to-the-minute happenings. Stay tuned to the American Blues Scene to be at the event without leaving your screen.

ONCE A REFUGE FROM SEGREGATION, JUKE JOINTS STILL INSPIRE BLACK JOY

BY KORSHA WILSON

I don't remember the first time I watched the 1985 version of The Color Purple, but I remember one scene that made me feel like I was sitting right by the characters. Singer Shug Avery croons a beautiful blues song to Celie, the story's main character, in a juke joint. Celie has her head down despite the lively atmosphere, sullen, thanks to a life of pain and loss. Shug sings about knowing Celie's troubles, about seeing her and wanting her to know that she's loved and worth singing about, even if the world outside of the juke joint walls doesn't make her think so. The hot and sweaty space, a shanty made of wood pieces and tin, holds a crowd of locals swaying drunkenly to the music, sipping strong drinks, and dancing despite the temperature. The whole scene illustrates a large part of what juke joints have always offered for many communities of Black folks in the American South.

At their heart, juke joints are more informal bars, where food and liquor are cheap, the hours are late, and the vibes are all about Black culture. The smell of cigarette smoke and fryer oil hang in the air and cling to weathered vinyl seats like raindrops on a window, evidence of years and years of clientele using the space. Here the sounds of Bobby Womack, B.B. King, or Chuck Berry play from a jukebox while a bartender pours liquor into a plastic cup or rocks glass with abandon. Speaking to a specific, rural, and Southern slice of Black American culture, the juke joint offers a world of escapism in a dark room.

Historically, they are often portrayed as dirty, dingy, and sometimes dangerous spaces: In the photographer Marion Post Wolcott's famous photos, Black folks are dancing and gambling in makeshift buildings; even in The Color Purple, the night at the juke joint ends when a fight breaks out between a woman and her husband's mistress. These images are part of a long narrative throughout American history that African American drinking culture is "derelict," according to author and editor in chief of Cook's Country magazine, Toni Tipton-Martin. In her new book Juke Joints, Jazz Clubs & Juice, which chronicles Black contributions to mixology throughout American history, she explains that the word juke, or jook, is believed to be rooted in the West African word juga, meaning "bad" or "wicked," or the Gullah word juk, which means "infamous and disorderly."

But buying into this narrative means you miss the full picture, Tipton-Martin tells me. "Is it possible that these places can be more than just a place where Black folks are out of control?" she asked when she started the book project. Her book's release is part of a renewed wave of attention on juke joints and their legacy. In a new musical film adaptation of The Color Purple, which was released last year, the juke joint scene is Broadway-esque and more grandiose than the original. For Tipton-Martin, these informal clubs are part of a long history of Black innovation for ourselves and our communities, from enslavement to present day. "My work is about reclamation, resistance that defines our creativity, and ingenuity," she says. "It always comes back to the way people of color have had to figure it out for ourselves."

Juke joints have roots in slavery, Tipton-Martin writes. Enslaved people would gather on Saturday nights to eat together and socialize, enjoying the bit of time they had at the end of a work day before religious gatherings on Sundays. Births, funerals, and the ends of harvests were festive occasions, she adds, with music, drinking, eating, and dancing, often called "frolics." Post-slavery, the tradition continued with sharecroppers getting together at liquor houses and cabins deep in the woods, where they'd enjoy music and food away from "places dominated by Christian values and moralities," as Tipton-Martin writes. Simple shacks or homes made with corrugated tin, plywood, or other easily accessible building materials allowed for places where pleasure in the form of imbibing and dancing could be experienced far from the watchful eyes of the law or the dehumanization of segregation. It was dangerous to patronize bars and clubs that may have been in the closest city, so Black people made their own spaces that you had to know about in order to get to.

Each juke joint was as distinctive as its owner, offering a different vibe and experience to those in the know. "Only the people in the community knew the different kinds of places and how to get to them," Tipton-Martin writes. Some had rowdier atmospheres while some were more lowkey, offering a spot to drink a cocktail and sit back to music. Chef Danni Rose's father owned a juke joint called Haywood's Place in Birmingham, Alabama, where she would occasionally work, and she notes that the clientele are part of what make up the vibe. "If you don't see a linen suit on an 80-year-old man, it ain't a juke joint," she says with a laugh.

The spaces were so musically distinct, in fact, that they birthed "juke joint blues," a style that makes you want to get up and dance. The author Zora Neale Hurston once wrote, "Musically speaking, the jook is the most important place in America." You'd get a strong pour of liquor or locally made moonshine, sit back, and relax. These spaces offered a space to listen to the blues and "get rid of the blues," according to Kathy Starr, a descendant of sharecroppers who is quoted in Tipton-Martin's book.

Like many parts of Black culture, it's hard to know just how many juke joints there have been in this country because their locations and stories have been passed down orally to protect these spaces and their visitors. Some places, like Po'Monkey's, owned by the late Willie "Po'Monkey" Seaberry, in Merigold, Mississippi, have been preserved because they're a part of musical and cultural history. Seaberry worked as a farmer and opened the juke joint in 1963, offering locals a place to listen to music and drink together on Thursday evenings, and hosting legendary Delta Blues artists like Big George Brock and T-Model Ford. It was also a way to enjoy himself and cut loose: Guests would notice him slip away to his bedroom (he lived in the same building) and return decked out in an all-red suit, floor-length red white and blue wig, or cowboy hat, ready to dance with patrons as the band played into the early morning hours.

The legacy of juke joints can be seen in a new generation of chefs and authors carrying on the tradition. In a section dedicated to stirred drinks, Tipton-Martin's book pays tribute to the simple, strong cocktails that the bartenders at juke joints past mixed in mason jars and glass bottles, like her Gin and Juice 3.0, which features vermouth and bitters; a mint julep muddled with fresh peaches and spiced with ginger syrup; and a classic Sazerac. While more intricate than the drinks served in juke joints, they speak to the tradition of drinks Tipton-Martin describes as "stirred with a basic long-handled spoon" and passed across the bar to patrons to sip while listening to music, momentarily lifting their spirits.

Rose doesn't own a juke joint, but she recently published a cookbook called Danni's Juke Joint Comfort Food that's inspired by her father. His juke joint served a simple menu of fried chicken wings, fried fish sandwiches, and strong drinks like whiskey sours, bourbon, and cognac on the rocks. In her book, Instagram, and YouTube, she explains how to make recipes for "ole-skool baked mac 'n cheese," a creamy take on the classic baked mac thanks to a half and half and egg mixture that's poured over the noodles, or "juke joint water," which is lemonade mixed in a large mason jar and served over ice. They are her takes on those same dishes from her father's juke joint growing up.

"We were always hosting people at our house, so a juke joint felt like an extension of that," she says. "Juke joints are entertaining. We go there to laugh and feel like you belong." In her book, Rose dreams of what a space of her own would look like. Dim lighting, a stage, strong drinks, and staples like fried chicken would be must-haves, she says, but the culture is more important. "I really want to open up spaces that are comfortable for us, where everybody is from a different walk of life and feel safe. There's always a demand for that in today's society, no matter where you're from."

In Charlotte, North Carolina, chef Greg Collier and his wife Subrina own and run Leah & Louise, a tribute to the rural bars popular during their childhoods in Memphis. "I was waiting to become of age so I could see what was going on in there," he remembers. In a space that features the same look of corrugated tin and repurposed window and antiques that gave classic juke joints their signature look, they serve deeply nostalgic Southern dishes such as pickled field peas with smoked catfish stew and roasted cabbage with pork necks. "Black folks in the American South rarely have places where they can be highlighted and celebrated at the

same time," Greg Collier says. For Subrina, the necessity of having a third space, specifically centered on Black folks enjoying themselves, has made the juke joint one of our most sacred spaces. "Black American folks just wanted somewhere to kick it, in a safe space," she says. "We're always on a journey to stay true to who we are as American Southern Black folks."

Thinking about my own ties to the South, I reached out to my dad to ask him if he remembered any juke joints in his neighborhood in Virginia Beach in the 1980s. "Yep, I remember 'selling houses' where you could get hot food and alcohol after hours," he responded, referring to another name for juke joints. I was amused and also a bit jealous. The image of my dad as a young man going to these places with his brothers was a fun visual exercise but also out of reach for me in New Jersey, where the closest thing to a juke joint is a house party with (maybe) a good speaker system and handles of liquor you have to pour yourself. But I felt happy for them. Happy that they had access to those spaces, could be with one another, could hold onto those memories. I may not have had the same ones, but I feel that same feeling of joy when I look at photos or read about these spaces.

The brilliance of the juke joint is that not only do the patrons feel pleasure, but the people behind the stove, behind the bar, and behind the instruments feel it too. One of the most famous depictions of juke joints, artist Ernie Barnes' 1976 painting The Sugar Shack is engraved in many Black folks' memories. Painted in swirls of brown hues, with bursts of color from clothing, Barnes shows the transcendent side of the juke joint: dancers with their hands raised in ecstasy while women lift the hems of their dresses for ventilation; on stage, musicians lost in the rhythm of the song play alongside a singer arching his neck toward the ceiling to properly project his voice throughout the space. In this painting and in its glory, the juke joint is worshipful, sweaty, intoxicating, and transcendent.

It all reminds me of the final moment of that scene in the juke joint in The Color Purple. The musicians are gone, and there are bottles and fists flying around her, but Celie, unphased, lifts her head and smiles—because she knows she's been seen.

71-YEAR-OLD FORMER FLAME OF ELVIS PRESLEY TRACKED DOWN IN CHICAGO

FROM THE GUARDIAN, NOVEMBER 2008

On December 4 1956, Marilyn Evans entered – and exited – rock 'n' roll history.
That was the day Elvis Presley stopped by Memphis's Sun Studio and recorded an impromptu session with Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. Historians have long believed Evans was there, too, because she was dating Presley then and a voice assumed to be hers appears on the recording. Also, a local newspaper photographer captured an image of the brunet alongside the famous foursome, which the paper dubbed the Million Dollar Quartet.

"That lovely creature sitting on top of the piano," the caption for the photo read in the next day's newspaper, is "Marilyn Evans, who dances at the New Frontier in Las Vegas. She is Elvis' house guest thru Friday".

Unlike some other Elvis exes, Evans didn't make a career out of her companionship with the King, and Elvis enthusiasts have long wondered what happened to her after her week in Memphis. Colin Escott, a music historian and co-author of the play Million Dollar Quartet, now playing at Chicago's Apollo Theatre, has called her the "the least known of Elvis's girlfriends", which was true.

Until now.

Two weeks ago, the Chicago Tribune ran a story about the missing-girlfriend mystery, explaining why the Million Dollar Quartet show features a fictitious Elvis girlfriend, "Dyanne". "Given that lawyers govern everything these days, they said, if you don't know where [Evans] is, [then] we had to create a fictitious character," Escott said at the time.
As it happens, Evans, now Marilyn Knowles-Riehl, 71, saw the article and contacted the Tribune. For 52 years she has hidden in plain sight, a living, missing link to one of America's most magical music moments.

When a promoter called Marilyn Evans in summer 1956 and asked her to join the chorus line at Las Vegas's New Frontier Casino, she could hardly contain herself – this teenager from Fresno, California, lived to dance. "I thought it was probably the most sophisticated thing that had ever happened in the whole world," she said last week with an easy laugh.
She came to a Las Vegas in its infancy, a relatively innocent place, where the dancers enjoyed good pay – $135 a week – sports cars and soirees with such headliners as Mickey Rooney and George Chakiris. "It was just very exciting: two shows a night, seven days a week," she said. "I was loving it."

Between shows, the dancers would gather in an employees-only coffee shop within the casino. It was there that Elvis walked in one night and sat at their table.
"Wow," Evans thought. "He's beautiful – really, truly."

Within an hour, Elvis had slipped Evans a scrawled note on the back of a napkin. It read: "Can I have a date with you tomorrow night or before I leave?"
Evans nodded in excitement and shock. "He called backstage that night, set a time," she remembered.

And so, for the next couple of weeks she and Elvis explored Las Vegas, driving around, hanging out and walking through the casinos. (Neither enjoyed gambling, she said.) Asked why he picked her, she giggles and shrugs.
"I think he probably liked that I wasn't 'out there'. I was respectable," she said. "I still am respectable, you know!"

And what did this respectable teenager's parents think about her dating Parental Enemy No 1?

Evans's father had died when she was in high school, but to head off any trouble she wrote her mother a letter that began: "Don't flip, mama, but I've become acquainted with Elvis Presley." Momma did flip, a little; that is, until Evans put the young star on the phone.
"He seems like a very nice person," her mom, LE Evans, informed the Fresno Bee in December 1956, after word of the relationship leaked. "Elvis told Marilyn he likes her because she doesn't act like a show girl, because she's real."

Like Evans, Elvis, too, was performing at the New Frontier – his first Vegas engagement – but when he left, the couple kept in touch by telephone. Then one day, he called Evans and asked her to come visit and stay at his Memphis home.

She said yes.

And so, 52 years later, what does she remember most about the house?

"I remember that phone just rang and nobody answered, which was odd."
In Memphis, Elvis and Evans spent their days riding motorcycles, going out to eat and watching rented movies at Elvis's house, a luxury the girl from Fresno could hardly believe.

"He was relaxed. He was comfortable there," Knowles-Riehl recalled.
And at night she slept ..."... not with him."

"He was extremely honourable. He was young; I was young."

On December 4 1956, the couple, along with some of Elvis's friends, cruised around Memphis, as usual. But on this day Elvis stopped at Sun, where he had made his first record only three years prior. It was there, over the next few hours, that fate (and a tape recorder) would allow a rare glimpse of the musical passions of these four future legends, as they jammed on gospel, country and blues. It was a seminal session of rock 'n' roll's origins ... and one that Knowles-Riehl barely recalls.

"I remember that outfit I was wearing was all wool," she said with a shrug of apology. "A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then."

The fact that the session meant so little to her might help explain why she said she felt fine when the relationship faded a few weeks later.

"I always preferred classical music," she explained. "We were just into different things, not that one's better than the other."

"It was great, I loved it, it was terrifically exciting and wonderful, but I had other things I wanted to do," said Knowles-Riehl who, the next year, began attending the University of Utah. Asked why she never broadcast her brush with stardom, Knowles-Riehl said she never thought it among her life's highlights. Instead she prefers to gush about her two husbands - her first died - her son and a dancing career that includes 13 years as the director of the Fresno Ballet.
"It's like people whose high point of their life is their senior prom," she explained. "My senior prom was good, but a lot of stuff has happened that's been great since then."
Such as ...

"When it's not driving me crazy, I enjoy genealogy," said Knowles-Riehl, who divides her time between Carmel, California, and Salt Lake City.

She also continues to dance - she's as physically fit as a 40-year-old - and she runs her own belly dancing troupe.

"It's pretty much the opposite of all my training, but I love it," she said. Until last week, Knowles-Riehl had never listened to the recording session from that day in Memphis. But when she did, she quickly nixed the popular theory that she's the one who requested the song Farther Along.

"That's not me," she said, as the female voice on the recording speaks with an obvious drawl.

"I wouldn't pick up a Southern accent that fast," she said, chuckling.

And yet, in listening to the rest of the album from that day's session Knowles-Riehl stumbled upon another female voice, this one requesting End of the Road.

"That's me," she said, as her wide brown eyes grew wider.

"It's like otherworldly," she said of hearing herself, "out of body".

With the headphones still on, Knowles-Riehl appeared in that moment as she does in the '56 photograph: Her face bright and blushing, wondering how could it possibly get any better than this.

Peter Guralnick, author of the definitive two-volume Elvis biography Last Train to Memphis and Careless Love, tried to locate Marilyn Evans but couldn't.

"And no one is more dogged than Peter Guralnick," said Colin Escott, co-author of Million Dollar Quartet, the play about the 1956 recording session. "If he couldn't find her, I assumed she was lost to history."

Thanks to a Tribune reader, though, we found Marilyn (formerly Evans) Knowles-Riehl. "It's amazing, truly. This means there's three survivors from that day: Jerry Lee Lewis, Jack Clemont [the session engineer] and now Marilyn," Escott said.

He said he'd love to have Knowles-Riehl see the show at Chicago's Apollo Theatre. The play features a fictitious Elvis girlfriend who sings and dances with the quartet.

Asked if she'd be up for it, Knowles-Riehl exclaimed: "It'd be fun to see!"

VIEWING LIST

Elvis (2022, Baz Luhrmann)
Walk the Line (2005, James Mangold)
Great Balls of Fire! (1989, Jim McBride)
Sinners (2025, Ryan Coogler)
The Color Purple (1985, Steven Spielberg or 2003, Blitz Bazawule)
Priscilla (2023, Sofia Coppola)
Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock'n'Roll (2000, Morgan Neville)
Honeydripper (2007, John Sayles)
Green Book (2018, Peter Farrelly)
Good Rockin' Tonight: The Legacy of Sun Records (2001, Bruce Sinofsky)
B.B. King: The Life of Riley (2012, Jon Brewer)
The Godmother of Rock & Roll: Sister Rosetta Tharpe (2011, Mick Csáky)
Jerry Lee Lewis: Trouble in Mind (2022, Ethan Coen)