

Carl Perkins Meets Elvis in a High School Parking Lot

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There's a good chance you already know who Carl Perkins is. It's hard to have even a passing familiarity with '50s music and not have come face-to-face with his record "Blue Suede Shoes." That's actually putting it mildly. It was among the most influential records, if not *the* most influential record, of the decade (see chapter 35). Millions of words have already been written about Carl Perkins in books and liner notes. Arguably, much of what has been written has shortchanged him. At the least, we could no more leave him out of this book than we could avoid reference to his old label mate at Sun Records, Elvis Aaron Presley. In many ways the two are inextricably linked.

Carl Perkins, one of the founding fathers of rock 'n' roll, began his legendary recording career for Sun in 1954. After two fairly undistinguished hillbilly releases, he wrote and recorded "Blue Suede Shoes," which changed the face of American popular music. Carl wrote down its words on a potato sack. That sounds like a Hollywood invention, but the actual sack is displayed, spelling mistakes and all, at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. The record became a hit almost overnight and was the first song to top all three charts at once: pop, hillbilly and R&B.

Carl missed a golden opportunity to promote his burgeoning hit when he had a near fatal car crash en route to a national TV appearance in New York. Those who remember the song today usually think of Elvis's cover version from his first album rather than Carl's superior original.

Carl Perkins had a limited career at Sun: eight singles and one LP. The LP contained five previously unissued tracks: so that's a total of twenty-one songs. More recordings have emerged since, but that's the extent of his originally released Sun legacy. It's a pretty slim basis for a reputation as impressive as Carl's. He was never a candidate for a greatest hits compilation. Carl Perkins did not have enough hits—"greatest" or otherwise—to sustain such a project. However, once you get past "Blue Suede Shoes," the recognition factor declines pretty rapidly.

A few years ago, we made a startling discovery that will rewrite rockabilly history: Carl Perkins recorded at least two years prior to Sun in a small studio in rural Tennessee. Those recordings make it clear that he had his rockin' act together well before anybody imagined. The unexpected discovery of these very early pre-Sun recordings forces us to reconsider some accepted music history. Certainly our understanding of Perkins himself has changed, but we should also take a second look at the bigger picture. And that picture, of course, involves a certain young truck driver from Lauderdale Courts in Memphis.

But for the moment let's keep our focus on Carl, who grew up dirt poor in the farming country around Jackson, Tennessee. Until now the con-



Figure 1.1. The Perkins Brothers Band in early 1955 with WS Holland (drums), Clayton Perkins (bass), and Jay Perkins (rhythm guitar). Carl (facing camera) plays lead guitar.

ventional story has gone like this: Carl grew up listening to Hank Williams and traditional hillbilly music that filled the airwaves in west Tennessee. He fancied himself a singer, and he could pick a little bit too. In fact, it wasn't long before he was the lead guitar player for the Perkins Brothers Band—consisting of brothers Clayton and Jay and drummer W. S. Holland. The boys, usually fronted by Jay's vocals, had a regular following among the hard-working, booze-fueled crowds in Jackson's honky-tonks. It's fair to say that a lot of weekend revelers grew up dancing, drinking, and fighting to the sound of Carl's voice and guitar.

But Carl wanted more than that. He wanted to hear his songs on the radio, preferably sung by him. When Hank Williams died on New Year's day in 1953, it opened a gap that Carl was ready and eager to fill. Hearing Elvis on the radio further fueled Carl's ambitions, especially when he learned that those yellow Sun Records came from Memphis. Those songs had been recorded barely eighty miles from where Carl lived and worked. If Elvis could do it, why couldn't he?

Both of Carl's first two records support the "another Hank Williams" scenario. "Turn Around" (Flip 501) and "Let the Jukebox Keep On Playing" (Sun 224) were certifiable hillbilly weepers. But they had flip sides. "Movie Magg" was—well it was damn near unclassifiable. Picture an old western movie set to music: a young Jimmy Stewart getting all slicked up for a Saturday night date with his best girl Maggie, and the two of them riding into town on his old horse, Becky. Just who was Carl's lyric aimed at and in what century? The flipside of "Jukebox," "Gone Gone Gone," was closer to the mark, but it didn't quite earn Carl his eventual "Rocking Guitar Man" label.

This is where we have to start revising music history. We can no longer accept the vision of Carl as a clueless hillbilly singer who had to be dragged into the rocking '50s by producer Sam Phillips or because he heard Elvis on the radio. Neither of those scenarios makes sense any more. Carl's early tracks, recorded around 1952 or '53, offer an unexpected window into his musical soul, years before he ever set foot into 706 Union Avenue in Memphis. What they reveal in no uncertain terms is that Carl didn't need anybody's help to become a pioneering rockabilly musician.

A Tiny Studio in the Middle of Nowhere

How do we know what Carl Perkins and his band were playing in 1952 and '53 before they got to Sun? We know because of the happiest of accidents.

In Eastview, Tennessee—barely a crossing on Highway 45 South, near the Mississippi state line—lived Stanton Littlejohn. It would be a stretch to call him a media pioneer. He was, in fact, a production worker at a shoe factory and a part-time farmer. Littlejohn was a good fiddler and avid tinkerer interested in new technologies, especially those related to music reproduction. Around the same time that Carl put his band together, Littlejohn acquired the ability to produce one-off acetate discs using a secondhand recording console in the front parlor of his home. He'd done so in the hopes of attracting musicians to the regular musical jams and house parties he held in Eastview. It worked like a charm.

Littlejohn began slowly and inauspiciously making recordings around 1947 with mostly family and friends doing everything from recitations, to sharing jokes, family stories, and, of course, playing a little music. But just as he hoped, it didn't take long for word to get out, and a steady stream of musicians found their way to his modest, clapboard-sided house. Littlejohn, already well known and loved by the local music community, never charged for his services, which didn't hurt. Littlejohn recorded acetates for roughly ten years, with 1949 to 1954 his most prolific period. During those years of peak activity, Littlejohn recorded a staggering variety of country vocalists, old-time string bands, emerging bluegrass artists, dance calls, Southern gospel quartets, several pianists, and even a pair of tap dancing sisters. What began as a local experiment in audio reproduction quickly grew as some of the region's best musicians learned of Littlejohn's capabilities and sought him out. The discovery of a stash of seventy-year-old acetates might barely have made the news had it not been for the inclusion of two of them by a singer named Carl Perkins.

Today, listening to Carl Perkins on these early recordings lets us walk into the Nick Nack Cafe, a hole-in-the-wall joint just south of downtown Jackson: one part greasy spoon and three parts beer-drenched, honky-tonk dancehall. We can order a beer and listen to the Perkins Brothers perform. The first of the Littlejohn discs contains Carl's instrumental take on an old-timey fiddle tune called "Devil's Dream." The flipside offers Carl's version of an up-and-coming hit called "There's Been a Change in Me" by "local boy makes good" Eddy Arnold. Both sides are competent stuff, but nothing to get particularly excited about.

However, the next coupling is a different story; it reveals quite clearly that, while Carl was in touch with local back-porch traditions and had an eye on the country charts, he was also deeply attuned to music from the other side of town. And there was nothing wrong with his taste. "Drinking



Figure 1.2. Carl Perkins and local singer Marie King, Chickasaw State Park in Chester County, TN, ca. 1954.

“Wine Spodie Odie” was a #2 R&B hit for Stick McGhee in 1949. The flip-side of Carl’s disc is “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” a title that will be familiar to Presley aficionados. It was his second record (Sun 210) or, more accurately, it would be. Elvis had yet to walk into Sun; that was at least a year in the future. “Good Rockin’ Tonight” had already been an R&B hit twice in the 1940s, most recently when Wynonie Harris took Roy Brown’s original to the top of the R&B charts in 1948.

The date and other players are tantalizingly absent from Littlejohn’s label notation, but it’s likely that Perkins recorded both songs between his first 1951 session at Littlejohn’s place and his cold-call audition at Sun in October 1954. That is, in fact, the period when Perkins began to focus his most intense efforts on bringing his band together, refining their sound in the crucible of West Tennessee honky-tonks, and getting the attention of

someone—anyone—in the music industry. It's a good guess that he planned to (or did) use Littlejohn recordings as demos while shopping for a label. There is a strong suggestion that Carl sent one of them to Columbia Records in New York. His eventual reply was not simply rejection, but a note saying that the listener had no idea just what kind of music Carl thought he was making. Undoubtedly, that would also have been their response to Elvis's early sessions had his records not already been selling like hotcakes all over the South.

That Carl had incorporated both of these R&B hits into his regular gig at a white working-class bar tells us, at the least, that things were not as simple as previously thought. Whites and Blacks didn't sit side by side in restaurants or dance together in clubs like the Nick Nack, but their records were played on the same jukeboxes and on the same barroom stages. And, of course, the radio, that great equalizer, made them available to anyone. This blending of white and Black music made Elvis and Sam Phillips seem like prophets several years later, but it was just as much a part of Carl Perkins's experience as it was theirs.

Carl and Elvis were contemporaries. It's true that Carl lacked the raw sexual energy that Elvis projected on stage, but Carl took a back seat to no one when it came to blending white and Black music. Who did what first hardly matters. At a strictly musical level, Carl and Elvis didn't learn from each other; they learned from a common source at the same time in the same place. The South was a musical crucible. The music of Carl and Elvis wasn't an unusual or particularly inspired fusion; it was a *natural* fusion. It was literally all around them. However, if you're going to give Elvis (and Sam) credit for that unprecedented hybrid, then save some of that credit for Carl. And maybe for a dozen other guys whose names few of us know anymore, who happened to grow up in the same time and place.

White and Black lives may have been kept separate in the mid-century South, but their music couldn't be. It leaked through the boundaries. Sure, most DJs made a choice; they were either hillbilly or R&B. But there was a growing demand for those daring few who mixed the cultures. Dewey Phillips on WHBQ was a now-famous tip of that iceberg. Within five years that kind of hybrid musical programming would be old hat. Nobody would lift an eyebrow if Marty Robbins was followed by Little Richard on the airwaves. And, of course, artists like Fats Domino sold records to middle-aged Black folks as well as white teenagers.

Musical boundaries were disappearing quickly. When "Blue Suede Shoes" topped the country, R&B, and pop charts at the same time, it was

clear that new rules were in play. But what we've seen here is that in the early 1950s, perhaps as early as 1951 or '52, Carl was performing this hybrid music without any help from Sam Phillips or Elvis Presley. It's helpful that Carl, like Elvis, chose to record "Good Rockin' Tonight." What's fortunate for us is that Carl's ancient single-copy acetate has survived. Although it permits a head-to-head comparison between Carl and Elvis, keep in mind that Carl's record was made probably in one take, under highly informal home conditions with no thought of commercial release. Elvis, on the other hand, recorded his version in a real studio using multiple takes and professional musicians; a commercial release was very much on everyone's mind.

That Carl recorded his version at least one year, and maybe two or three years, before Elvis, removes the possibility of anybody copying anybody. Unless, of course, you want to argue the absurdity that Elvis, Scotty, and Bill drove to Jackson to listen to the groundbreaking Perkins Brothers Band at the Nick Nack Café, and brought the results back to their next Sun session.

The Need for Change

In light of this new discovery, here's the piece of rock 'n' roll mythology that is in serious need of revision:

Sometime in 1954, a young truck driver named Elvis Presley pulled into Sun Records on Union Avenue in Memphis and he and Sam Phillips, who owned the company, proceeded to invent rock 'n' roll—or at least invent rockabilly. They did so by putting together elements of hillbilly music, blues, R&B, and gospel that, prior to this time, nobody had thought to combine. Once Presley and Phillips had the creative impulse to do this, thousands of musicians all over America saw the light and beat a path to Sam Phillips's door so they could catch a bit of the Presley magic. All these previously unexceptional musicians figured that, once shown the formula, they too could slay the girls, impress the guys, and sell millions of records.

The mythology says, in a nutshell, there was only one true pioneer and his moment came in a blinding flash of inspiration, ignited by Sam Phillips, whose primary contributions were (1) encouraging this truck driver to reach deeply into himself; and (2) keeping the tape rolling. Once

invented, rockabilly or “hillbilly bop” or whatever it was that Elvis did (the media weren’t sure yet) could not be taken back. Pop music had been changed forever. There were not enough guitars in Tennessee to supply the young men who wanted their share of hot licks, fame, and fortune. That’s a wonderful myth, but it bears little relation to the truth. Elvis was not “the first,” if there can even be such a thing when it comes to music (see chapter 31). Nor did it happen in a moment. The roots ran much deeper.

There were two reasons Sam Phillips was willing to part with Elvis. (Phillips sold Elvis’s contract to RCA in 1955.) One was the fact that he was seriously in debt and, second, he had someone else in his stable of artists who might be a worthy successor. Phillips knew that his next project—a balding, married guy with a couple of kids—was less likely to drive the young girls wild. In that sense Carl Perkins was more like Fats Domino than Elvis Presley. But Carl Perkins could play lead guitar, not just strum chords, and he could write songs with the best of them; Elvis could do neither. Sam had it right from the first time he met Perkins in Fall 1954. “I thought he was one of the world’s greatest plow hands,” Phillips recalled to me and Colin Escott some thirty years later. Phillips wasn’t being demeaning in any way. He simply saw how intractably country the young man standing before him was. It is easy to imagine why Sam Phillips thought of Perkins primarily as a country artist when he first arrived at Sun. “I knew Carl could rock,” Phillips once said, “and in fact, he told me from the start that he had been playing that music before Elvis came out on record. I was so impressed with the pain and feeling in his country singing, though, that I wanted to see if this was someone who could revolutionize the country end of the business.”

It was going to be a full-time job separating Carl from a life of sharecropping and singing in the rough-hewn honky-tonks of Jackson, Tennessee. It’s a long way from that life to the stage of the Brooklyn Paramount or *American Bandstand*. The question was whether Carl could make that journey and retain the feeling and originality that Phillips detected even before his first Sun recordings had been made.

An unstated part of this “birth of rockabilly” mythology is that it took place in 1954. That’s the year Elvis Presley started having his impromptu jam sessions with Scotty Moore and Bill Black, and eventually found his way into the Sun studio. That’s also the year Johnny Cash and his “band” found their way to 706 Union Avenue for their first audition with Sam Phillips, and the year the Perkins Brothers Band first turned up at Sun. That makes 1954 a convenient nexus for all these pioneering events. But it’s what happened *before* all those 1954 auditions that we should also look

at. Putting it simply, the Presley magic had to be catalyzed into existence, as we're about to see. Perkins came in ready to go; in fact, he had been ready for two years.

Here's a quick look at the Presley "magic moment" that took place during one of those early sessions in July 1954. Incredibly, it was captured on tape. Elvis is playing his acoustic guitar and singing the Bill Monroe classic "Blue Moon of Kentucky." He has already made a couple of changes from the iconic original record by Monroe. Elvis is singing in a deeper voice, far from Monroe's high nasal tenor. That alone is attention-grabbing. But he's also transformed the song from a waltz to regular 4/4 time. When Scotty Moore joins in on guitar and Bill Black kicks in on his string bass, the song takes on a new life. Something different has just been created. It still hasn't gone as far as the version that will appear on Sun 209, Elvis's first record, but it is far from Monroe's countrified original. Everyone in the studio is excited because they've created something completely different and



Figure 1.3. Elvis advertising for bookings in 1954; a high school gymnasium in rural Tennessee would do just fine.

they know it. With the tape still rolling, Sam bounds out of the control room and says “Hell, that’s different! That’s a pop song now, nearly ’bout.” That’s an exact quote, by the way. The tape picked up everything.

Certainly, Phillips was right about one thing; it was different. It’s not clear that anyone would call this a “pop song” in July 1954, but it was on its way to being something new. The final version issued on Sun 209 took the difference even further. Bill Black’s bass added a pulsing rhythm; Scotty Moore took a couple of hot guitar solos; and Elvis’s vocal was swathed in echo. No one knew what to do with this record when it appeared. Some loved it, others hated it. Because it took on Bill Monroe’s iconic original, many saw it as sacrilege in addition to whatever else they thought.

But here’s the thing. Elvis Presley’s magic moment, when all those elements came together, took place in a studio when the tape was rolling. We know the date and place. This is a perfect creation myth. Carl Perkins’s magic moment, on the other hand, is a lot harder to pin down. For sure, it took place a couple of years *before* Elvis’s. It took place in tiny, cumulative steps. Much of it probably happened at the Nick Nack Café, in front of a room full of drunks. There were no tape recorders in sight. It doesn’t make for such a great creation myth, but it was real nonetheless. The thing is, by the time Carl got to Sun, he had already spent the past couple of years playing the kind of music that Sam had struggled to pull out of Elvis.

Carl Meets Elvis

On August 7, 1954, “Blue Moon of Kentucky” was reviewed in *Billboard* magazine as a Spotlight Feature. The reviewer called Presley, among other things, “a potent new chanter who can sock over a tune for either the Country or R&B markets.” The impact of that review on Sam Phillips was incalculable. It offered validation to him and everyone involved in his risky venture. The review also sent a message to a national audience: “This guy is real. This sound is real. It isn’t just some tasteless Southern aberration that can be swept under the carpet. Take it seriously or ignore it at your own peril.” A week later Sun 209 appeared as #3 on *Billboard*’s regional C&W chart for Memphis. Ten days later it entered the charts for the entire Mid-South.

Not a month later, on Friday, September 17, Elvis played the high school gymnasium in Bethel Springs, near Jackson, Tennessee. Carl Perkins and his band were in the audience, intent on meeting the singer who might

hold a blueprint for their future. Presley's set included the two songs he had recorded for Sun, "That's All Right" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky," along with Hank Snow's "I'm Moving On" and Lead Belly's "Cotton Fields." It's notable that the performance included both white- and Black-identified music. If anyone in the audience noticed, it was certainly Carl Perkins; his repertoire in the honky-tonks was similarly blended. That's not all that got his attention. Perkins would later recall that he was impressed by the response of the crowd. Where he had mostly been playing old-time and commercial country music for family-friendly gatherings or a high-energy mashup of R&B and honky-tonk tunes for drunken rednecks in backwoods bars, this crowd was primarily sober white teenagers. And they went nuts.

When the concert was over, the Perkins brothers caught up to Presley and sidemen Scotty Moore and Bill Black as they were loading up their car to head back to Memphis. Presley's affinity for the same style of music and his electrifying onstage persona convinced Carl that they were kindred spirits. More importantly, the wild reception Presley's music received from the young audience made Carl think there might yet be a future for him in the business. But Presley himself was more retiring in person. The reserved young Presley offered few details beyond the name of his label and recording studio, but that was enough. A little over a month later, the Perkins Brothers Band, along with a new addition on drums, W. S. Holland, was standing on the sidewalk outside Sun Records waiting for their own rendezvous with music history.

The Rockabilly Highway

It is no coincidence then that both Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley (as well as numerous lesser lights) hailed from communities that lie directly on Highway 45, separated by less than 150 miles. Nor should it surprise anyone that the stretch of two-lane between Jackson, Tennessee, and Tupelo, Mississippi, would later be dubbed "Rockabilly Highway" in recognition of this rich musical heritage. In addition to the wholesome community music jams, county fairs, and house parties, an impressive number of not so family-friendly honky-tonks were scattered up and down the highway. These rough-and-tumble backwoods watering holes primarily served a working-class white clientele but offered the artists who played them incredible creative latitude. It was in places like the Nick Nack Café, the El Rancho, the Roadside Inn, and the Cotton Boll Club that Perkins tried out his bold amalgam of country,

blues, and old-time tunes. He wasn't the only one. The particular regional sound that would later be identified as rockabilly was the natural outgrowth of a surprisingly egalitarian approach to music making in an otherwise segregated Mid-South. There were countless artists from the region who were unapologetically playing a mishmash of white and Black musical styles to enthusiastic audiences. "Rockabilly music was very popular and had been for a long time in the cotton belt area of West Tennessee, East Arkansas, and North Mississippi," observed Carl in his autobiography. "Nobody was copying Elvis . . . It's just that . . . he recorded it first."

The discovery of Stanton Littlejohn's recordings lend veracity to Perkins's claim that rockabilly came as naturally to him as breathing. They irrefutably demonstrate that he was already a gifted practitioner of that music long before he arrived at Sun Records. But perhaps most importantly, they are evidence that postwar mid-southerners, Perkins among them, were heir to generations of cultural blending that finally culminated in "the rockabilly moment," capturing the imagination of a national audience and exerting a monumental influence on the course of popular music.

Until the recent discovery, that story was just hearsay. It was also heresy. It is no longer either one—the Littlejohn recordings see to that. Not to take anything away from Sam Phillips as a great innovator and catalyst for the birth of rock 'n' roll, but these recordings were made well before Carl Perkins ever set foot in Sun Records and wrote "Blue Suede Shoes." That changes things. So, were Sam Phillips and Elvis Presley frauds, taking credit for things they didn't truly invent? Was Carl Perkins the uncredited genius who invented rockabilly, if not rock 'n' roll?

Of course not. But what is fair to say is that the seeds of musical fusion were growing all over the American South. Listeners and musicians alike were harvesting them. It was just a matter of time before someone stood in front of a microphone, or in front of a tape recorder, and preserved and commercialized the music. There were dozens of guys like Carl Perkins who grew up surrounded by white and Black music. The music, itself, was often integrated. The musicians were not, and they wouldn't benefit from that integration for at least another decade. A lot longer than that if you lived in places like Dyess, Arkansas, or Ferriday, Louisiana. But for men like Carl Perkins or Elvis Presley and countless others, the hybridization of hillbilly, blues, R&B, and gospel music was just a matter of place. A matter of time.