



ARTIST HISTORY

ARTIST HISTORY

MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET is a true history lesson, all wrapped up in a captivating 90-minute performance that's an insider look at each artist's career on that memorable night. By educating your market and audience with a broader scope of each artist's journey from start-up to stardom, the story that comes to life on stage will become a richer, more monumental experience. An educated audience is a captive audience! Please review the following supplemental information and incorporate it into your press and publicity efforts wherever possible.

- December 4, 1956: The 'Million Dollar Quartet' is Born
- Johnny Cash, The Origins of "The Man In Black"
- Elvis Presley's Formidable Sun Years
- Jerry Lee Lewis Brings Piano to Sun Studios
- Carl Perkins becomes the King of Rockabilly
- Sam Phillips, Father of Rockabilly

December 4, 1956: The 'Million Dollar Quartet' is Born

It all began the night Sam Phillips booked a recording session for Carl Perkins on December 4, 1956. Perkins was there to try out some new tunes with the hopes of recreating the recipe for success he'd found earlier that year. Thinking that Perkins' sound needed a slight update, Phillips had brought in one of his newest artists, the young pianist Jerry Lee Lewis. Perkins and his band, along with Lewis, laid down some songs, including what would become one of the best-known Perkins songs, "Matchbox." (The song was only a minor hit when Perkins recorded it, but when the Beatles released a version in 1964, it reached the top 20 of the Billboard charts.)

While many of the details of the rest of the day's events are still in dispute, this much is known: Perkins and Lewis were later joined by Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash, and they held an impromptu jam session. It was a reunion for Cash, Perkins and Presley, who had toured the South together in 1955. Lewis was still a star on the rise, but he quickly bonded with Presley over their shared knowledge of spirituals.

The recordings of the session -- later released in a series of albums beginning in 1981 -- show all of the men, particularly Presley, at ease with the music and generally just having a good time jamming.

Phillips, ever the savvy marketer, knew the growing importance of the music -- and mainstream -- press, and he helped turn the impromptu jam into a media event, calling a local reporter and photographer to document the scene. The writer, Bob Johnson, dubbed the four the "Million Dollar Quartet" in his piece in the Memphis daily paper the next day, where he called the session "an old fashioned barrel-house session with barber shop harmonies resulting."

While the Million Dollar Quartet session was indeed turned into a media event, it was clearly still an organic and real get-together. In that way, it is of historical significance not only as a landmark event in the age of rock 'n' roll's genesis, but as a significant milestone in the ever-changing.

From Farmhand to Chart-Topper - Origins of "The Man in Black," Johnny Cash

Long before he became known as "The Man in Black," and before he was even known as Johnny, J.R. Cash was born in a rural area of Arkansas in 1932. He grew up in a New Deal-era colony, Dyess, that aimed to give poor families the opportunity to build wealth working on land they could eventually own.

But life in Dyess was dull for Cash, who mainly worked the fields and listened to plenty of hillbilly music. Cash shot out of town before he turned 20 year old, first in a short-lived stint working in Michigan's auto factories, and later in a four-year tour with the U.S. Air Force. After leaving the service in 1954, Cash settled down with a wife in Memphis, taking a job selling appliances.

"I heard a lot of blues," he said. "I became friends with some of the musicians."

He was enthralled with the new sound, spending a sizable chunk of time and money at Downtown Memphis' Home of the Blues record store. And it wasn't long before he started a band. Finally, Cash decided they were ready, and after consulting with Elvis Presley's guitarist, decided to take a similar approach Elvis had taken -- just showing up at Sun Records and asking for an audition. Despite frequent visits that yielded no audition, one day Cash was in the right place in the right time, catching Sun's Sam Phillips just as he came to work.

Phillips was impressed with Cash's voice, and with the band's stripped-down sound. But there was a problem: most of the material was religious. Phillips didn't think he could market Cash as a religious artist, and asked him to come back with other songs if he really wanted to be on Sun Records. Cash came back with secular material, including what would later become one of his best-known songs, "Folsom Prison Blues."

In April 1956, Cash took a song he'd penned during his Air Force years into Sun; it was a song of devotion, of love and of faithfulness, and it would become his biggest hit. "I Walk the Line," paired with "Get Rhythm," was released in May, and it shot up the charts, climbing as high as number two on the country charts and number 19 on the pop charts. Finally, Cash had crossed over.

SNAPSHOT: Johnny Cash on December 4th, 1956

Of the four icons, Johnny is the artist furthest into his career when we meet him in MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET. Although he is still on the Sun Records label, he has been deliberately avoiding Sam Phillips because he has decided to not renew his contract with Sun. He is passionate about recording a Gospel album, which Phillips insists won't sell, so Johnny is planning to sign a new contract with Columbia Records.

Elvis Presley: “The King” in the Making - Elvis Presley's Formidable Sun Years

Elvis Presley was born in Mississippi in 1935 and ended up in Memphis in the early 40's. He had a passion for music, and would practice guitar -- and singing -- at every opportunity. The young musician was exposed to a wide variety of musical styles, from blues to gospel to hillbilly to country. As a teenager in August of 1953, he ended up at Sun Records, where he paid to cut a record entitled "My Happiness and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin." Sam Phillips did not sign him at the time, although Philips did take down Presley's name for future sessions. The next summer, Phillips called Presley back to Sun to try to make something of a ballad he'd acquired the rights to, but as the session was winding down, Presley started into an impromptu version of "That's All Right," which had been recorded seven years earlier by delta bluesman Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup.

Phillips had found a sound he'd been searching for -- a white man who could embody the spirit and soul of black music. He knew that in order to find mainstream success with this type of music, he needed, as music historian Colin Escott memorably put it, "a white artist who could bring the feel of black music to white kids who were too hidebound by racial intolerance to accept the real thing." Elvis was his newest prodigy.

Presley laid down another song, "Blue Moon of Kentucky," as a B-side to "That's All Right," and in July 1954, Sun Records made history, releasing the first-ever Elvis Presley record. For the next year, Presley worked hard touring the South. In November 1955, Presley's career took a major turn: Phillips, facing cash flow issues, sold Presley's contract to RCA for \$35,000. RCA also paid \$5,000 directly to Presley, who was just 20 years old. As for whether Philips later regretted this business maneuver, he stands firm: "Did I regret it? No. I did not, I do not, and I never will." Ultimately, Philips saved his business and Presley skyrocketed to success.

Over the next year and beyond, Presley's career took off. He cut new songs, made a number of network TV appearances including the groundbreaking September 1956 *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance, and began to star in movies. His first movie, *Love Me Tender*, premiered in November 1956. His monumental contributions to Rock 'n' Roll earned him the iconic title, "The King."

SNAPSHOT: Elvis Presley on December 4th, 1956

When we meet Elvis in MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET, he is home in Memphis visiting his mother for the holidays and stops by Sun Records at the request of Sam Philips. Not long before this evening, Philips had sold Elvis's contract to the big-time label RCA as an effort to save his own label from financial distress. This is the first time he sees Carl Perkins since he recorded "Blue Suede Shoes" and enjoyed top-chart success. MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET shows an early and uncertain phase in Elvis's life, which is certainly a point of interest for avid fans familiar with the entire trajectory of his career.

Goodness Gracious - "The Killer" Jerry Lee Lewis Brings Piano to Sun Studios

Jerry Lee Lewis was born to a poor family in the rural, swampy eastern Louisiana town of Ferriday in 1935. It wasn't long before he began tinkering around with the piano, first playing when he was young with his cousins. When Lewis was eight, his parents scraped together money and bought a piano. After a short stint in Texas' Southwestern Assemblies of God University, where Lewis was sent by his mother and was expelled after playing a boogie-woogie version of "My God is Real," Lewis cut a demo on his own and headed to the country music capital, Nashville.

He played clubs and made the rounds to the record labels there, but didn't have much luck, and headed back to Ferriday and continued to play locally. Lewis had become a fan of Elvis Presley's early work, and after reading about Elvis' Memphis roots in a magazine article, he thought his music might be more welcomed there than it had been in Nashville.

In November 1956, he and his father drove to Memphis, staying in a hotel and heading to Sun headquarters. Although Phillips was on vacation, Lewis was able to audition for engineer Jack Clement. He called in some supporting musicians and rolled the tape.

Clement remembers that he "finally made a tape with him because he was different. ... I took his name and told him I'd let Sam hear the tape when he got back."

The timing couldn't have been better; Phillips had been looking to expand the instrumentation in the Rock 'n' Roll sound he'd been cultivating. As he listened to the tape, he realized he had found the right person to do just that in Lewis. Soon enough, Lewis would cut his first single for Sun, which included a song from that very first demo session, "Crazy Arms." Phillips paired it with a boogie version of the traditional jug band song "End of the Road," and released it in early December 1956.

SNAPSHOT: Jerry Lee Lewis on December 4th, 1956

Jerry is a newcomer to Memphis and Sun Records when we meet him in MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET. Sam has hired him for the day to accompany Carl Perkins on the piano during a recording session. He is virtually unknown to the other three icons at the time of their meeting and is a shockingly confident musician, to the annoyance of Carl Perkins, whose recording session is continually interrupted with Jerry Lee's impromptu solos and "jam sessions" on the piano. Outreach for Jerry Lee fans can be focused on Oldie's radio stations and piano bars.

Finding the Blue Suede Shoes - Carl Perkins Becomes the “King of Rockabilly”

Carl Perkins was born in rural northwestern Tennessee in April 1932 to a poor sharecropping family. Before he turned 10, Perkins began working the fields himself. Perkins befriended another sharecropper, a black man named John Westbrook. The man, who the young Perkins called "Uncle John," would sit on his front porch playing blues and gospel tunes on a beaten-up guitar. Perkins remembered that it “was his inspiration that made me know what it was I wanted to do the rest of my life. I could never get away from what was buried in my mind of the sound he made on that simple little guitar. I just sat and constantly worked on that.”

As a teenager, Perkins formed a band with his brothers, the Perkins Brothers, and began playing gigs in area honky-tonks and dive bars. One night in 1954, Perkins and his wife were home listening to the radio when "Blue Moon of Kentucky" by Elvis Presley came on the radio. His wife commented, "Carl, that sounds just like y'all!"

Carl was not entirely thrilled. When he realized that Presley had a contract with Sun Records, Perkins and his brothers set out to Memphis to confront Philips. Philips explained that he “knew that Carl could rock and in fact he told me right from the start that he had been playing that music before Elvis came out on record,” Phillips said. He was "so impressed with the pain and feeling in his country singing, though, that I wanted to see whether this was someone who could revolutionize the country end of the business."

Perkins' first tracks recorded at Sun weren't released on Sun Records, but instead came out in early 1955 on the new subsidiary Phillips had just launched, Flip. The B-side, "Turn Around," found moderate regional success, and Perkins began playing live performances with Elvis Presley, and later, Johnny Cash. It was Cash who reportedly first put the idea of blue suede shoes in Perkins' head, based on something Cash had heard during his time in the Air Force. A few days later, Perkins was playing a show in Tennessee when he noticed a man dancing in the crowd who was trying to keep his date from stepping on his suede shoes. Perkins connected the two, woke up at 3 am the next morning with the song in his head, and wrote out the lyrics on an empty potato bag, and "Blue Suede Shoes" was born. The song was recorded at Sun in December 1955, and released in January 1956. For the next few months, "Blue Suede Shoes" climbed the country, pop and R&B charts, becoming Perkins' breakout hit, eventually selling a million copies -- a first for both Perkins and Sun Records. Perkins spent the rest of his career trying to attain the success of his initial hit, without much luck.

SNAPSHOT: Carl Perkins on December 4th, 1956

Carl had come to Sun Records on that night in 1956 for a recording session to jump start his career back into motion after a slow year. He is not aware that Elvis and Johnny plan to visit Sun Studios and also meets Jerry Lee for the first time that evening. His song “Blue Suede Shoes” has just been re-recorded by Elvis and, to Carl’s dismay, has become a sensation without his name attached. Carl also informs Sam Phillips he will be leaving Sun Records for the Columbia at the end of his contract. To reach the Carl Perkins fan-base, consider partnering with music stores and concerts with a Rockabilly vibe, as Perkins is remembered as the King of Rockabilly.

Sun Records: Sam Philips Pioneers a New Kind of Studio and Label

Sam Phillips, born in Alabama in 1923, came to know hard times at an early age, after the stock market crash of 1929. After the death of his father in 1941, Phillips dropped out of high school to help make ends meet for his family. He worked a variety of odd jobs, and eventually began studying radio. After four years in radio, he decided to open a recording studio as a moonlighting gig. He rented a space at 706 Union Ave. in Downtown Memphis and opened the Memphis Recording Service in January 1950. The company's slogan was "We Record Anything - Anywhere - Anytime," and that's just what Phillips did. But his passion from the beginning was recording musicians in his studio.

"My aim was to try and record the blues and other music I liked and to prove whether I was right or wrong about this music," Phillips said. "I knew, or I felt I knew, that there was a bigger audience for blues than just the black man of the mid-South." Soon after, he decided to open Sun Records.

"I chose the name Sun right at the beginning of 1952, when I had determined to try to start issuing my own recordings," he said. "It was a frightening experience for me. I had a heavy workload already, and now here I was with lack of time, lack of know-how, and lack of liquidity."

He said that jukebox operators and record store owners would tell him that blacks were "ruining our children," and that led him to a profound understanding of ingrained racial attitudes.

"Now these were basically good people, but conceptually they did not understand the kinship between the black and white people in the South," Phillips said. "So I knew what I had to do to broaden the base of acceptance."

It wouldn't be long before he did just that.

SNAPSHOT: Sam Philips on December 4th, 1956

Sam has business on his mind when he invites these four artists to visit Sun Records on December 4, 1956. Not only is he planning to add Jerry Lee Lewis's Rock 'n' Roll piano sound to Carl Perkin's next album, he plans to renew Johnny Cash's Sun Record contract. Philips encourages "the boys" to indulge in this impromptu jam session and plans to record every minute. Engage ticket-buyers in the historical component of the show by educating them about Sam Philip's pivotal role in each artist's career.