



Elvis: Hillbilly Becomes Country, Rockabilly Becomes Rock and Roll

By Colin Escott

Steve Sholes was a company man. He joined RCA Victor Records in 1929 as a messenger boy, and died almost forty years later, still in the company's employment. In 1945 he was handed the least coveted A&R (artists and repertoire) job, Director of Specialty Singles. In that capacity, he was responsible for country music, R&B, kiddies songs, and gospel. "In sales meetings when it got to Steve's department, a lot of guys would say, 'Hey, I gotta go to the john,'" remembered his field rep, Brad McCuen. Sholes himself remembered the same thing. "I was never allowed to play more than six or eight revolutions of one of my records," he told journalist Tandy Rice shortly before his death. "The gospel records I wasn't permitted to play at all: just announce the titles. There was no attention paid to merchandising, special merchandising or *any* merchandising. There was no promotion or publicity to speak of."

Sholes wasn't a country boy; he was from Washington, D.C. His personal taste ran to classics and jazz, but he worked hard at his new job. Even on family vacations, he'd bring a portable record player to the beach to check out new songs. By the early 1950s, Sholes had deduced that country music was in trouble. "Your older listeners who want old country music sounds are wonderful people," he said in an address to country disc jockeys that was reprinted in David Dachs' book, *Anything Goes*. "They're the backbone of this country, loyal radio listeners (when the kids aren't around), but they don't buy records. Not enough to keep us in business. Not enough to keep the old fashioned country artist in guitar strings. It's the kids who want and buy the newer sounds." Sometime late in 1954 or early the following year, Sholes began hearing reports of a new kid on a new record label. Brad McCuen was Sholes' field rep in the southeast, and retailers around Knoxville were telling him that they couldn't keep records by the new kid in stock. Then, in February 1955, one of Sholes' top artists, Hank Snow, worked some shows with this new kid. "You can't follow the little shit on stage," reported Snow. Sholes became interested.

The new kid was Elvis Presley and he was on a tiny label, Sun Records, based in Memphis, Tennessee. Early in July 1954, Elvis had come to Sun with a two-piece band to record a country love song, but, during a break, he'd suddenly cut loose with an old blues hit, "That's All Right." Ironically, Sholes had produced the original version of "That's All Right" by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. It's a measure of Phillips' insight that he did not tell Elvis to go back to the ballad, but immediately saw the way forward. Nothing like Elvis Presley singing "That's All Right" was selling or had ever sold, but Phillips didn't care. It felt good to him, and that meant he would release it.

Several months later, Elvis made his first appearance on the *Louisiana Hayride* radio barndance. Asked about "That's All Right," he was so nervous he could hardly speak. He said only that he'd "stumped" on it. Like many innovations, it was an apparently random confluence of accidents that doesn't look so random in hindsight. Arthur Crudup made maverick blues music that often bypassed the standard 12-bar A-A-B form, and his records had a wildly propulsive swing that compensated for



his limited musicianship. Phillips liked Arthur Crudup, but could hardly believe that this kid would know him. Like Sholes, Phillips recorded blues and country, but, unlike Sholes, Phillips truly, madly, deeply loved blues because he'd grown up with it. Now he had a white kid who offered a unique and convincing take on the blues, and he could hardly contain his excitement. Sholes' reaction would have been more pragmatic. "Where do I sell this?" It was too country and too white for R&B. Pop circa 1954 meant forty-piece orchestras fronted by big-voiced singers in tuxedos or poodle skirts. And it was too spare, too edgy, and too weird for Country, but Country radio was Phillips' only hope. For all that he lived in the commercial here-and-now, he sometimes seemed to have an almost mystical belief that good music would find its way to good people. And so he released "That's All Right" to country radio in mid-July 1954.

The accident that allowed "That's All Right" to be recorded had almost much to do with the way independent labels, like Sun, did business. Major labels took chances on unproven acts, but Elvis wasn't just unproven, he hadn't even performed in public. That was too unproven for a major label. Recording sessions were structured according to rules laid down by the American Federation of Musicians. Every musician was to be a union member and four songs, usually agreed in advance, were to be recorded during a three-hour session. Sun and RCA had both signed that agreement, but Phillips didn't feel the same need to comply with it. He'd use non-union musicians and his sessions would go on all night if he believed that the musicians would capture the sound in his head. Later, he'd file fictitious reports with the union showing only union members and standard three-hour sessions. So at RCA, there probably wouldn't have been an opportunity for a completely unproven act to cut loose with "That's All Right" in the middle of an open-ended all-evening session.

By mid-1955, Phillips had three more Presley records on the street. They were selling briskly, but he was in trouble because his distributors weren't paying in time for him to pay his own bills. Banks, as Phillips was fond of saying, wouldn't lend you money 'til you didn't need it. He knew that Presley would leave when his deal was up in mid-1957, and he knew that he might well be forced into bankruptcy before then. Sholes was not the first major label representative to knock on Phillips' door, but he was the first to pay Phillips' ever escalating price. "I made a damn proposition I didn't think they'd take," said Phillips. "I didn't think they'd be fool enough to take it, and it was the eleventh hour before they *did* take it. The price [\$35,000] doesn't sound like anything today, but what I needed was the money just so I could get on the mound and throw to a batter." And so, as of November 16, 1955, Elvis Presley was on RCA. Phillips was ecstatic. He had already signed Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash, and had Perkins' recording of "Blue Suede Shoes" in the can waiting for some money to press it up. Within weeks, he would be spectacularly vindicated when "Blue Suede Shoes" became an all-market hit, and he would be vindicated again when Cash's "I Walk the Line" became a pop and country hit. Sholes too would be vindicated, but not without a moment of high anxiety.

"A great many people in and out of RCA figured that Steve Sholes had just aced himself out of the business," said his assistant, Brad McCuen. Instead, Sholes had inadvertently ushered in the greatest change ever to overtake popular music. Sholes called Elvis to RCA's Nashville studio on January 10, 1956 for a session that—for all the outward politeness and words of mutual respect—was an epic cultural collision. Elvis arrived with his three-piece band shortly before 2:00 PM. Instead of using musicians from the Nashville Musicians Union, he augmented his own band with a couple of Nashville guys, and instead of working a three-hour/four-song session, he worked from 2:00 PM until 10:00 PM, and clocked up another three hours the following day. Sholes left with just five songs. That



was the way Elvis had worked at Sun, and it says much about his strange solipsism that he never thought of accommodating RCA or the Nashville way of doing things. Everything about Elvis was different. His look, his sound, his way of recording. Sholes packed up the tapes and left for New York with some trepidation because his job was on the line.

“Heartbreak Hotel” was one of the songs that Sholes brought back to New York. RCA’s engineers had tried to re-create Sun’s trademark echo, but got it wrong. Phillips bounced the signal from one tape machine to another, and the delay between the two machines imparted a tightly focused reverberation called “slapback.” RCA’s engineers only knew how to create “chamber” echo. Sholes’ engineer, Bob Ferris, made the glass and tile studio lobby into a makeshift echo chamber. He put a speaker at one end, let the signal reverberate wildly around the lobby, and picked it up with a microphone at the other end. The result was an almost grotesque parody of Phillips’ sound. Phillips’ slapback imparted presence to a recording whereas RCA’s chamber echo imparted distance. By this point Sholes was deeply apprehensive. “I played ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ for the experts there [at RCA], and told them it was Elvis’ first release,” he told Tandy Rice. “They all told me it didn’t sound like anything and that it didn’t sound like his other records, and that I’d better not release it, better go back and record it again. Inasmuch as it had taken me two days to get this one song, I argued with them, which I rarely did, and they finally agreed to let me release it.”

But Sholes could do one thing that Phillips couldn’t: he could call on RCA’s marketing muscle. He saw Presley’s potential outside country music and leaned upon his sales manager, John Burgess. In turn, Burgess leaned upon his staff. “It’s imperative that you follow up this all-market approach to every station receiving Pop or Country service,” Burgess wrote to his reps. “Use the trade articles to sell your dealers and one-stops *across the board*.” “Heartbreak Hotel” was released on January 27, 1956, just as Elvis was making his first nationwide television appearances. RCA made sure that records were everywhere...something Sun could never do... and, on March 3, “Heartbreak Hotel” showed up on both the pop and country charts. Neither pop nor country would quite be the same again.

Elvis Presley’s second LP, titled simply *Elvis*, was released in October 1956. Of all the Presley LPs released during his lifetime, it was the only one to have substantive liner notes. The uncredited text was by Steve Sholes’ promotion manager, Chick Crumpacker. “Of commercial folk music,” Crumpacker wrote, “Presley is perhaps the most original singer since Jimmie Rodgers. His rhythmic style derives from exactly the same source of Deep South blues and jazz as that which inspired the late Blue Yodeler.” Crumpacker went on to mention white gospel quartets like Blackwood Brothers as well as R&B singers. It was a very surefooted essay on the origins of rock ‘n’ roll. If not the first such essay, it was certainly among the first.

When Crumpacker wrote about “folk music,” it carried a different meaning than the one we associate with the term today. At that time, “country music” was a phrase that hadn’t been coined, but the music that we now call “country” was believed to have originated with Appalachian folk songs, so “folk music” was the polite term for country. “Hillbilly music” was the impolite term, albeit one that has now has some inverted snob value. “Country” is a contraction of “Country & Western,” a phrase that the music industry coined in the mid-1950s to replace “Hillbilly.” In 1958, the line between “folk music” and “country & western” was drawn when the Kingston Trio topped the pop charts with their arrangement of a traditional Appalachian folk ballad, “Tom Dooley.” The Kingston Trio was folk in the



sense that we understand it today. By that criterion, Elvis Presley was most definitely not folk, and neither were the country & western recordings emanating from Nashville.

RCA was promoting Elvis as a pop and country artist, but the original base of his support was country and the industry viewed him as a mutant country artist. His Sun records had been played almost exclusively on country radio, he worked country package shows, and he'd been signed by RCA's country A&R department. But everyone knew that there was something different about his music, and many had figured out that it was the R&B influence. No one, least of all Elvis, denied this. Just twelve weeks into his career, he was given a guest spot on the *Louisiana Hayride* radio barn dance. The emcee that night, Frank Page, was a dee-jay, and his request lines lit up every time he played "That's All Right." Nearly everyone requesting the record was young. Now, with Presley standing beside him on stage, Page took the opportunity to ask him how he'd come up with "that rhythm 'n' blues style." That was the cue for Elvis to say that he'd "stumped" on it. Elvis could have said that he'd been listening compulsively to blues, bluegrass, honky tonk music, pop, black gospel, and white gospel, and he'd unselfconsciously blended them. But he didn't; he probably hadn't thought that deeply about it. Trying to find a phrase that would describe this R&B-influenced country music, someone (and it was never clear who) coined "rockabilly." The word itself acknowledged that Elvis and those who followed him had "hillbilly" roots that ran deep.

In the few paragraphs assigned to him on *Elvis*, Chick Crumpacker placed Elvis firmly within country music's lineage. As noted, he saw Elvis as a successor to Jimmie Rodgers, who'd recorded between 1927 and 1933. Like Elvis, Rodgers listened voraciously, and the 120 songs he recorded during his brief career were an original blend of hillbilly music, African American music, and sentimental parlor songs. He was the first recorded country artist to develop an entirely original style, a style that influenced a generation and earned him the posthumous title of "The Father of Country Music." But it's worth going back another few years to the dawn of the country record business in the early 1920s. From that vantage point, we can take a longer view of how country music changed, and how those changes led inexorably to Elvis Presley. Less than thirty-five years separated the first country recordings from the dawn of rockabilly.

In December 1877, Thomas Edison filed a patent for what became records and record playback equipment, and, the following January, he incorporated the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company. The late nineteenth century was the age of invention. Machines had revolutionized every aspect of life, but a machine had never talked. True, the telephone carried the human voice as it was speaking, but when Edison's phonograph was unveiled at society gatherings, fairs, and expositions, it was as if a machine had developed a soul. Its primary purpose, declared Edison, would be dictation, along with the teaching of elocution, recording the last words of dying persons, and books for the blind. The fact that music wasn't mentioned meant that Edison was a visionary who didn't see very far. It was only after the novelty value of the talking machine wore off and technical advances improved the sound quality that some began thinking of it as a means of recording music.

Evidence now seems to be accumulating that Edison wasn't the first to record sound. A just barely audible recording from 1860 by a French typesetter and inventor, Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, has surfaced; otherwise, the earliest surviving recordings date to 1888. But the record business couldn't develop until recordings could be mass-produced, and that happened around 1900. Until then, all recordings were "one-offs." Record companies began proliferating in the early 1900s (the



Victor Talking Machine Company, the precursor of RCA Victor, was incorporated in 1901) but another twenty years would pass before country music was recorded. Some say that recordings by two fiddle players, Eck Robertson and Henry Gilliland, in June 1922 mark the beginning of the country record business, while others point to a country gospel quartet record from the previous year. The issue, though, is that nearly every other form of music was represented on record before country music. The reason for the neglect was that Edison and those who came after him saw the phonograph as a toy for rich urbanites. In the early 1900s, top-of-the-line phonographs retailed for two hundred dollars (roughly equivalent to \$4900 today, according to standard indices of purchasing power) and records sold for around 50 cents (equivalent to \$11.50 today for just one song), so record catalogs were heavy on opera, parlor songs, and novelties. Mass production eventually brought the phonograph within reach of all, and cheaper wind-up models became ideal for homes without electricity. By then, the record industry had created its first star.

In 1902, Italian tenor Enrico Caruso made some recordings for the British Gramophone Company that were issued on its American parent label, Victor Records (General Electric's RCA subsidiary acquired Victor in March 1929 to create RCA Victor). Heinrich Conried of the New York Metropolitan Opera Company reportedly heard one of Caruso's recordings, and offered him an engagement. If true, it was the first known instance of an artist being hired on the basis of his recordings. Caruso's royalties before his death in 1921 were \$1,566,916, and his success had far-reaching effects. Caruso legitimized the recording business. After him, almost everyone who applied themselves seriously to music was cognizant of the recording industry and what it could do.

It was no coincidence that the record industry turned to country music around the time that radio stations began to proliferate. Radio gave the record business the first of many premonitions of impending doom. Radio disseminated music for free, whereas record companies charged for it. So who didn't receive radio? People in poor areas with no electricity or people in remote areas with no reception or electricity. Panicked, the record companies sent their talent scouts and recording directors in search of songs that would appeal to the sectors of the market that they had hitherto ignored: African-Americans and poor white Southerners. And so, more than forty years after Edison first demonstrated his phonograph, record companies finally turned their attention to "folk music" and African American music.

It was already apparent that records would not be like court reporters, unobtrusively and self-effacingly recording what they heard; rather, they would have the single biggest effect on the development of music since systems of notation and codification had been invented in the Middle Ages. When British folklorist Cecil Sharp visited the American South in 1914 and again in 1916 to research his book *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, it was impractical to bring portable recording equipment to the remote areas he visited, so he transcribed the melodies while his assistant jotted down the words in shorthand. When the first record company talent scouts came south in search of country music in 1923, they set up their equipment in central locations and told local newspapers of the purpose of their visit. The record companies' passive approach nevertheless captured Appalachian music for posterity before altering it irrevocably. The changes that records made to music were subtle, but far-reaching. For generations, country music had been passed down within families and communities. Records commodified that music and those who made it. Old songs became potential copyrights, and the bands at local barn dances became potential recording stars. Records began to draw a line between performers and audiences, a line that had rarely existed in folk



music to that point. If the experience of music had once been social, records made it more solitary. Also, if Cecil Sharp encountered a ballad that was ten minutes long, he transcribed it all. If a recording director encountered a ballad that was ten minutes long, he would order that it be reduced to three minutes to fit on a record.

It was on a field recording trip to Bristol, Tennessee in 1927 that Victor Records discovered Jimmie Rodgers, who not only became country music's first star, but the original star with a guitar. He had grown up in Meridian, Mississippi, roughly 140 miles from Elvis' birthplace in Tupelo. It was the South, but a world apart from Appalachia. Rodgers heard the work songs of African American section crews, parlor songs, jazz, blues, and vaudeville routines. Elvis is lauded for his imaginative fusion of black and white musical styles as if it had never been done before, but, several years before he was born, Rodgers was doing the same thing. Elvis blended the music he heard in the 1940s and early 1950s, whereas Rodgers blended the black and white musical styles of the 1920s. Rodgers sang with an insouciant, almost insolent, drawl. Even the sadly prophetic "T.B. Blues" (referring to tuberculosis, the disease that would kill him) was delivered without self-pity or regret. His music was populated by goodtime pals one step ahead of the law who could still shed a tear for mother and home. Just as Appalachian music later formed the cornerstone of bluegrass music, so Rodgers' songs, like "In the Jailhouse Now," "Waiting for a Train," "Travelin' Blues," "My Rough and Rowdy Ways," and "T for Texas," set the stage for honky-tonk music. And, like Caruso, Rodgers became a star because of records. His early hits sold in the vicinity of four or five hundred thousand copies, and were released in Canada, Europe, Australia/New Zealand, even India. Just ten years earlier, he would have lived and died in obscurity, known only to those in his immediate vicinity, but records disseminated his music just as records helped to shape it. The area in which Rodgers grew up was polarized along racial lines, but records crossed the barriers. Rodgers not only heard the recordings of African American artists but his own records appealed broadly to African American audiences.

Although Chick Crumpacker drew the comparison between Elvis Presley and Jimmie Rodgers, it's hard to know if Presley had a deep appreciation of Rodgers. Tuberculosis claimed Rodgers in 1933, two years before Elvis was born. Like many of his generation, Elvis probably absorbed Rodgers' music second-hand through artists like Gene Autry, Ernest Tubb, Webb Pierce, Lefty Frizzell, and Hank Snow, all of whom began as Rodgers acolytes. Jimmie Rodgers' legacy to rock 'n' roll was that he fused the music of the black and white rural poor with the pop music of the day to create a new style. He did it with a very surefooted grasp of what worked and with an intuitive musicality. Elvis would do the same. Rodgers also became a national star, largely due to recordings, as would Elvis.

Jimmie Rodgers lived just long enough to witness an event that he desperately hoped to see: the repeal of Prohibition. From January 16, 1920 until March 23, 1933 the sale of alcoholic beverages was illegal in the United States. Repeal ensured that the character of country music would change because it immediately led to a huge increase in the number of bars. Country music would flourish in bars, and the country music that flourished there wasn't grimly pious Appalachian music; it was Jimmie Rodgers' music. The bars became known as honky tonks or juke joints (the origin of both terms is unknown but "honky-tonk" has the reduplicative quality of African-American words, like "boogie-woogie," while "juke" is generally reckoned to come from middle English or Elizabethan English). The juke joint or honky tonk was usually just outside the city limits. Out of town, it wouldn't attract the attention of well-manned, well-equipped city police forces. Two country musicians, both of them Rodgers disciples, Al Dexter and Jimmie Davis, recorded different songs called "Honky Tonk



Blues” in 1936 and 1937 respectively. Neither Dexter nor Davis felt the need to explain what a honky-tonk was, although Dexter claimed ignorance of it. Talking to writer Nick Tosches, he said that his collaborator, James B. Paris, introduced him to the term. “I said, ‘What is a honky tonk?’ He said, ‘Those beer joints up and down the road where the girls jump in cars.’” In both Davis’ and Dexter’s recordings, there’s an audible transition from Rodgers’ restraint to a less mannered style. Dexter replaced Rodgers’ all acoustic instrumentation with an electric lead guitar. Davis employed a heavier backbeat with a piano to the fore. The guitar played chunky full chords, underscoring the beat. Rodgers had been dead less than five years, but change had come.

If the repeal of Prohibition changed the character of country music, migration was crucial to spreading it. There’s a tendency to see the migration of rural southerners as the result of the Dust Bowl. In fact, hard times had come to Appalachia in the late 1920s as the coal and timber reserves began to be depleted. In December 1929, Blind Alfred Reed, then living in the coalmining area of West Virginia, wrote a still-classic statement of rural disenfranchisement, “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live.” Ry Cooder and Bruce Springsteen later recorded it, but Reed recorded it just a few weeks after the 1929 stock market crash, reminding his listeners that the situation in Appalachia had been dire, if unreported, for many years before the crash and the Great Depression.

*There once was a time when everything was cheap,
But now prices nearly puts a man to sleep.
When we pay our grocery bill,
We just feel like making our will
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

*I remember when dry goods were cheap as dirt,
We could take two bits and buy a dandy shirt.
Now we pay three bucks or more,
Maybe get a shirt that another man wore --
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?*

Even in the 1930s, only a small percentage of the rural families leaving the Southwest were victims of the Dust Bowl. The others were driven out by the falling price of livestock and crops. At the same time, the mechanization of larger farms reduced the family farmer’s ability to compete. One of the few things that rural southerners and southwesterners were able to take with them was their music, and, as their environment changed, so did their music. Farm labor in California or oilfield and auto plant work was backbreaking and dehumanized. Honky tonk music became the sound of the Tennessean in the Detroit auto plants, the Mississippian in the Chicago stockyards, the Okie in the vast melting pot of southern California, or the Texas farm kid working the oil rigs in the Permian basin. Honky tonk music reeked of stale beer funk, sweat, and smoke. It was music that had to be played loud in order to be heard. The electric guitar and electric steel guitar (both 1930s’ innovations) came into the fore alongside the piano and drums. Mandolins, dulcimers, and banjos were rarely heard.

Ernest Tubb became the quintessential honky tonk star. He sang in a rough-hewn baritone and couldn’t hold a note, but his records oozed believability. “I don’t read music,” he once said, “and I’d fight the man who tried to teach me. I don’t care whether I hit the right note or not. I’m not looking for



perfection. Thousands of singers have tried that. I'm looking for individuality. I sing the way I feel like singing at the moment. I never sang for the dollar. I sing because I want to sing." His life became a little catechism in what it meant to be a country star in the post-Rodgers era. Traveling constantly, he took his music to isolated hamlets and would stand outside the dance hall in bone-chilling cold or stifling heat until every last autograph had been signed, every last hand shaken, every last photo snapped.

Growing up in awe of Jimmie Rodgers, Tubb earned the personal endorsement of Rodgers' widow together with the right to play Rodgers' guitar. His first records were even for Rodgers' label, RCA Victor, but by 1940, RCA had dropped him and his Rodgers tribute act. He moved to Decca Records, trying to write songs that owed a less obvious debt to his mentor. His new songs addressed the environment around him; among them were songs that became honky tonk anthems like "Walkin' the Floor over You," "I Ain't Goin' Honky Tonkin' Anymore," and "Drivin' Nails in My Coffin." He popularized the electric guitar in country music. One of the first in-depth articles about him, written by Ed Linn for *Saga* magazine in 1957, talked of those early days: "Ernest Tubb began singing in the oil-field honky tonks of Texas in the late 1930s. It was a poor Saturday night that didn't produce a couple of interesting brawls. Tubb had to meet the competition as best they could. 'The harder they fought,' he says, 'the louder we played.' One night, a friend took a five-minute break and came back to find a bullet-ridden body sprawled across the wreckage of his guitar. It was disconcerting. Good guitars were hard to come by in those days."

Just as Jimmie Rodgers had inspired Ernest Tubb, so Tubb inspired the next generation of country stars, chief among them Hank Williams. When Williams left Alabama to pursue an ill-advised rodeo career in Texas (ill-advised because he had a congenital spinal problem), he met Tubb, and Tubb later championed him. The owner of a Texas honky tonk, Charlie Walker, recalled Tubb telling him about meeting Williams in the late 1940s. "Ernest told me that Hank and him were traveling together somewhere and, and he told Ernest, 'You know, when I was a kid down there in Alabama I used to listen to the *Grand Ole Opry* and I heard Roy Acuff when he came on there and I thought he was the greatest singer in the world so I started copying him. And in '43 when you came on there with that electric guitar I thought you was the greatest thing I'd ever heard.' Ernest said Hank leaned over and said, 'You know what I finally done? I got me a style in between you two sons-of-bitches, and I kinda like it.'"

Hiram "Hank" Williams was born in the tiny settlement of Mount Olive in south-central Alabama on September 17, 1923. Just as Jimmie Rodgers' tuberculosis made him unfit for regular employment, so Williams' spinal condition, probably spina bifida occulta, gave him a sense of apartness that cast a shadow over his life and his music. He couldn't be a logger or a farmer, and would suffer from crippling back pain throughout his life. The gospel songs of both the black and white communities taught him that music, whether sacred or secular, should have a spiritual component. He learned traditional folk ballads and early country songs from neighbors and friends, and his melodies would never be more complicated than those early songs or hymns. An African-American street musician, Rufus Payne, taught him some chords and showed him how to play with a mellow, understated swing. Payne also taught the introverted young man to overcome his innate shyness and project himself into his music.

After Williams' mother moved the family to Montgomery in 1937, he began entering talent contests and quit school as soon as he could. The norm was for country singers to play "live" radio shows in



the morning to advertise their honky tonk gigs at night. The bars shaped Williams' music, just as they had shaped Tubb's. Williams' first MGM record, "Move It on Over," was a hit in 1947. He was twenty-three then, and twenty-five when "Lovesick Blues" (a minstrel era song he did *not* write) earned him an invitation to join the preeminent radio barn dance, Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry*. The *Opry* reached clear across the country. Ten million tuned in every Saturday night, and Williams' star rose rapidly. Very soon, he reduced his reliance upon old songs and other peoples' songs. One of the few non-originals that he recorded after he became famous was the wrist-slashingly bleak "Lost Highway." Written by a blind Texas honky tonk singer named Leon Payne (otherwise best known for the very different "I Love You Because"), "Lost Highway" has become identified with Williams although it was not a big hit for him, nor even a song that he performed very often. Under the tutelage of his music publisher Fred Rose, he minted an unbroken string of self-composed hits that included "Honky Tonkin'," "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," "Mansion on the Hill," "Cold, Cold Heart," "I Can't Help It (If I'm Still in Love with You)," "Hey, Good Lookin'," "Honky Tonk Blues," "Jambalaya," "Your Cheatin' Heart," and "You Win Again." All told, he was a recording artist for six years, and, during that time, recorded just 66 songs under his own name together with another seven singles released under the name of his moralistic *alter ego*, Luke the Drifter. Of the 66 songs recorded under his own name, an astonishing 37 were hits. More than once, he cut three songs that became standards in one afternoon.

Hank Williams' career took him to New York, Hollywood, Las Vegas, Canada, and overseas. The ceaseless travel made little impact upon his thinking or his music, although it took a terrible toll upon his body. Like Elvis Presley, he took the South with him in the form of musicians and hangers-on. He also found the South had preceded him wherever he went. When he went on-stage in California and sang "window" as "win-derr" and "poor" as "purr," it was like a postcard from home to the southern economic migrants in the audience.

It all fell apart remarkably quickly. Disillusioned with success, Williams died en route to a concert on January 1, 1953. He was twenty-nine years old, and his death became the prototypical "live fast, love hard, die young" rock 'n' roll demise. There was a clear premonition of rockabilly in some of his records, like "Move It on Over" and "Moanin' the Blues." After rock 'n' roll erupted, Williams' record company, MGM, tried to reimagine him as a rock 'n' roller by editing out the fiddle and steel guitar solos from his records and overdubbing electric guitar, electric bass, piano, and drums.

Cultural historians often point out that Elvis Presley's first record appeared nineteen months later, as if the baton had been passed after a brief intermission. But nine months *before* Hank Williams died, Bill Haley released "Rock the Joint." The Pennsylvania polka bars and union halls where Haley stumbled upon his music didn't have the eye candy appeal of Memphis after dark but if rock 'n' roll was a hybrid of early 1950s R&B, country, and pop, then Haley was there first. While Elvis' idea of R&B was the primitive back country swing of Arthur Crudup, Haley preferred the tightly marshaled showmanship of Louis Jordan and the Treniers. And while Elvis' idea of country music was the darkly impassioned Hank Williams or Bill Monroe, Haley preferred anodyne close harmony western groups like the Sons of the Pioneers. It came down to age and geography. Elvis was born in 1935 and grew up in Mississippi and west Tennessee, while Haley was born in 1925 (or 1924 by some accounts) and grew up on the east coast. But when RCA signed Elvis away from Sun Records, Steve Sholes was hoping he'd signed someone who could reach the market that Haley had opened up: a market that no one knew existed before Haley.



Bill Haley was born either in the Detroit suburb of Highland Park or in Fort Wayne, Indiana, but grew up in Pennsylvania. When he began performing, he wore a cowboy hat, sang of an idealized west, and yodeled. In fact, he told Canadian dee-jay Red Robinson that he was an Indiana state yodeling champion. In 1949, Haley named his group the Saddlemen, and they began recording for record producer Dave Miller. The practice of covering R&B songs for the country market was just beginning, and Miller had heard a record that Sam Phillips had produced before he started Sun Records, Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88." Haley's cover version was a pale imitation of the original, but he listened and learned. In 1952, He began experimenting with another R&B record, Jimmy Preston's "Rock the Joint." If Elvis Presley's "eureka" moment came when he began fooling around with "That's All Right" in the studio, Haley's came in a bar when he unanticipatedly launched into "Rock the Joint." "Out on the job one night, just kidding the band," Haley told *TV Radio Mirror* in 1957, "I went into 'Rock the Joint.' [The Saddlemen] started to laugh and joined in. We really got a kick out of it ourselves. Then I looked around -and, so help me- people were dancing. I turned to the guys and said, 'What on earth did I do?'" Haley recorded "Rock the Joint" and it reportedly sold 150,000 copies. For a time, he seemed reluctant to commit himself to this new music, preferring the economic certainties of the east coast country dancehalls, but he slowly began to realize that he'd seen the future. And it rocked.

At the suggestion of a local dee-jay, the Saddlemen became the Comets, and Haley's manager persuaded him to quit the beer joints in favour of high school gigs, even if meant a drop in earnings. "It proved the smartest thing we ever tried," wrote Haley's accordionist, Johnny Grande, in 1957. "The kids taught us. We tried our experiments on them. When their shoulders started moving and their feet started tapping and their hands clapping we knew that a certain tune was worth keeping in the act....Bill noticed that their favorite expression was 'Crazy!' He took their word and their football chant, 'Go! Go! Go!' and gave it back to them in a song." Haley's "Crazy, Man, Crazy" fit every definition of rock 'n' roll, and entered the Pop Top 10 in July 1953, one year before Elvis recorded "That's All Right." Everyone around Haley began to sense that they were onto something, even if they didn't know what it was.

In 1954, Haley signed with Decca Records, and in June he recorded a cover version of Big Joe Turner's R&B hit "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" that became a Top 10 pop hit. Haley had already recorded "Rock around the Clock" (set to loosely the melody of Hank Williams' "Move It on Over") and the song's publisher, James Myers, went to Hollywood and arranged for it to be interpolated into an upcoming movie about juvenile delinquency, *Blackboard Jungle*. After the movie was released in March 1955, it became a sensation among teenagers, much like *East of Eden* (released the same month) and *The Wild One* (released in 1953). Unlike the others, *Blackboard Jungle* featured rock 'n' roll, thereby marrying video and rock 'n' roll for the first time. The impact of "Rock around the Clock" played at full volume in a darkened theater coupled with on-screen images of bad teenage behavior made an indelible imprint on a generation starved for content that spoke directly to them. The movie's success encouraged Decca to rerelease "Rock around the Clock," and by July 1955, it was atop the pop charts. Meanwhile, Elvis Presley was still barely known outside the mid-South. In Haley's wake, white pop artists began seizing upon R&B hits, producing what are now regarded as comically inept cover versions. Haley, though, evinced a real understanding of R&B. He wasn't playing R&B as an exercise in faddism; he had come to understand it, love it, and play it with unshakable conviction.

"Rock around the Clock" was still in the charts when Steve Sholes began serious negotiations with Sam Phillips at Sun Records. It was well-known that Haley had been a country musician, and Sholes



almost certainly signed Elvis Presley in part because he thought Elvis could be his Bill Haley. No one could have foreseen that kids nationwide would identify with Elvis and his music in a way that they would never identify with Haley and his music. For one thing, Haley's records were musically accomplished. Danny Cedrone's guitar solo on "Rock around the Clock" couldn't be replicated by a kid sitting on his bed with a chord book. Scotty Moore's guitar solos on Elvis' records were no less effective, but immeasurably simpler. Beyond that, Elvis had a galvanic effect upon teenagers that Haley did not have. Elvis looked dangerous; Haley looked avuncular. Kids wanted to *be* Elvis in a way that they didn't want to *be* Bill Haley. At first, those kids were in the mid-South and within the listening area of the *Louisiana Hayride*, where Elvis appeared almost every week in 1955. On August 12, 1955, Elvis was in Kilgore, Texas. An eighteen year-old would-be country singer, Bob Luman, was in the audience. A girl in his class had seen Elvis in Longview the night before. "She said, 'You ain't gonna believe this guy.' I got so interested, I told my girl we were gonna go, and we did. Man, I didn't believe it. This cat came out in red pants and a green coat and he stood behind the mic for five minutes before he made a move. Then he hit his guitar a lick, and he broke two strings. Hell, I'd been playing for ten years and hadn't broken a total of two strings. So there he was, these two strings dangling, and he hadn't done anything, and these high school girls were screaming and fainting and running up to the stage. Then he started to move his hips real slow, like he had a thing for his guitar. He made chills run up my back, like when your hair starts grabbing your collar. That's the last time I tried to sing like Webb Pierce or Lefty Frizzell." Just ten months earlier, Elvis had made his first appearance on the *Louisiana Hayride*, and three months later, he was on RCA. Within the year he was eliciting the same response throughout the United States.

Because Elvis Presley had been signed by RCA's country division, the head offices of the other major labels (Decca, Columbia, and Capitol), brought pressure upon their country A&R men to find the "next Elvis." Hundreds of young hopefuls were sucked in and spat out of Nashville. A few, such as Buddy Holly, Johnny Burnette, and Conway Twitty, would resurface another place another time, but they... along with most of the others... were cut loose after one or two sessions in 1956. There is a cult, mostly in Europe, for the rockabilly recordings made in Nashville circa 1956, but at the time they sold no better than attempts by older artists to cut rockabilly. Ernest Tubb recorded Chuck Berry's "Maybellene." Webb Pierce recorded a benighted vocal version of Bill Justis' hit instrumental "Raunchy" and tried covering the Everly Brothers' "Bye, Bye Love."

Buck Owens recorded rockabilly pseudonymously as Corky Jones. One of the era's biggest country stars, Faron Young summed up the feelings of most of his contemporaries when he said, "Hell, we all started trying to put a bit of that jiggery in there. You're making a quarter million a year, and suddenly you're down to seventy-five, eighty thousand, you'll do anything." The desperation was almost palpable. Booking agent Hal Smith handled Ernest Tubb. "We came to the conclusion that the best thing to do would be to get out of the business," Smith told researcher Ronnie Pugh. "Ernest's brother was in the insurance business in Texas, so he said, 'I could go into business with Bud, but this is all I've ever done.' It was so sad."

The generational divide that saw the musical tastes of adults and teenagers diverge was felt as keenly in country music as in pop. RCA's Steve Sholes had already noted that the older consumers weren't buying sufficient records to support the industry, and, at the same time, television was tempting country music's traditional audience to stay at home and not support live music, either. In 1950, tickets for the *Grand Ole Opry* were sold out weeks in advance and the portion of the show



networked by NBC radio reached an estimated ten million listeners. By 1957, the auditorium was three-quarters empty some nights, and NBC dropped it from the network radio schedule. One by one, the other radio barndances folded, including the *Louisiana Hayride*. Elvis left the *Hayride* in 1956; he'd already driven away older patrons and once he left, the teenagers forsook the show. It was one of those moments, like the end of the Second World War or the onset of the Great Depression, when all bets were off, and no one knew what would happen next in any field of music.

Country music quickly forgot about rockabilly and reinvented itself. It soon became clear that Elvis represented more of an opportunity than a threat because he'd opened up pop radio. By the late 1940s, virtually every major country hit was "covered" for the pop market. Most of Hank Williams' biggest songs and many of the era's other hits became pop hits for artists such as Patti Page, Perry Como, Tony Bennett, and Frankie Laine. After Elvis and Bill Haley, a country artist who wasn't *too* country or an R&B artist who didn't sound *too* black could get played on pop radio and could land a spot on network television. The top country songs of 1953 included "There Stands the Glass," "Your Cheatin' Heart," and "A Dear John Letter." The top country songs of 1957 included "Young Love," "A White Sport Coat and a Pink Carnation," and "My Special Angel." Songs about drinking and cheating had been replaced with songs about teenage romance. Hard country instruments like the fiddle, steel guitar, and banjo had been replaced by the piano, electric guitar, and choruses. Country diction was replaced by singers who sounded curiously placeless. The new face of country music was called the Nashville Sound.

The *Grand Ole Opry* wasn't the only institution threatened by television and changing tastes. The *Opry* was broadcast "live" on radio, and radio itself was threatened. Radio's response was two-fold: chase the youth market (then poorly served by television) and replace costly "live" music shows with disc-jockey shows. In 1946, there were just nine television stations; ten years later, every city had at least one television station, and most major markets had stations affiliated with the three major networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS (the fourth original network, Dumont, ceased broadcasting in 1956). At its inception, music on radio was entirely "live," and remained predominantly "live" into the 1950s, but disc-jockey shows usurped live music because they were infinitely cheaper to produce in the wake of declining advertising revenue. Then, as locally owned stations began to be taken over by conglomerates, the Top 40 format came into existence. In Omaha, Nebraska, a local radio station owner, Todd Storz, was in a diner when he observed kids selecting the same songs repeatedly. Inspired by what he saw, he began the policy of playing a limited number of hits in rotation. Storz began buying up stations in Kansas City, St. Louis, New Orleans, Miami, Oklahoma City and Minneapolis, and instituted the Top 40 format in them all. Top 40 reduced the need for anything other than young, disposable dee-jays. And so as the older listeners departed, radio reinvented itself as a youth-oriented medium with dee-jays, on-air contests, and above all rock 'n' roll records. A generational divide was created. Henceforth, it would be unusual for adults and their teenage children to listen to the same stations.

Stations targeting African American listeners had been among the first to embrace the dee-jay because of the underlying assumption of the station owners, almost all of whom were white, that African Americans didn't have the disposable income to support advertisers. Thus, R&B programming had to be cheaper. R&B disc-jockey shows proliferated throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s. The era's most influential dee-jay, Alan Freed, began playing R&B on WJW, Cleveland in 1951 before switching to WINS, New York, in 1954. In an era of stifling social conformity, underscored by the anti-



Communist witch hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the R&B stations seemed to exude freedom and anti-authoritarianism. The fact that the lyrics of R&B songs were under constant assault for their suggestiveness only heightened their appeal. As Arnold Passman wrote in his 1971 book *The Dee-Jays*, “Banging home the beloved rhythm & blues records with the aid of a cowbell and phone book, [Alan] Freed, moored behind just the flickering light of the VU meters in a dark studio, was perhaps the head witch-doctor McCarthy failed to burn.” And, just as it took white singers like Bill Haley and Elvis Presley to bring R&B-inflected music to mass media, so it took a white dee-jay to become the leading proponent of their music. Freed, the son of a Lithuanian Jewish father and a Welsh Baptist mother, adopted a patois that could pass for African American. “The criticism was basically from the Negro community,” said WINS program director, Robert Smith. “That he was an outsider, that he was imitating them, and why shouldn’t it be a Negro. We were invited to appear and explain why a white man was playing this black music. Our target was the entire market: we didn’t think black or white.” To that point, Smith was plausible...even laudable, but when he told the meeting that he didn’t know whether Freed was black or white when he hired him, he probably stretched the truth. The point, though, is that WINS was targeting listeners by age, not by race. Rock ‘n’ roll might not have cross-generational appeal, but it certainly had cross-racial appeal.

When the music industry’s trade paper, *Billboard*, noted that Elvis Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel” and Carl Perkins’ “Blue Suede Shoes” were selling in pop, country, and R&B, it was at a loss to find a term to describe their music. “Mongrel music,” they called it in their issue of March 3, 1956, but the term “rock ‘n’ roll” quickly caught on. Initially, “rock ‘n’ roll” was a synonym for R&B. Alan Freed always took credit for coining it, although it would be less contentious to say that he popularized it. White singers like Elvis, Bill Haley, and Carl Perkins couldn’t be called R&B, and “rock ‘n’ roll” was the term that came to be applied to them. African American artists who appealed broadly to teenagers, such as Fats Domino and Chuck Berry, were dubbed rock ‘n’ roll, too.

“Rockabilly” never caught on either as a descriptor or as a musical style. In 1957, pop vocalist Guy Mitchell had a Top 10 hit with a song called “Rock-a-Billy,” but it wasn’t rockabilly; it was a novelty song. Elvis’ Sun records were rockabilly, and were regional hits. Nationwide rockabilly hits were few in number. Of the few, Carl Perkins’ “Blue Suede Shoes” was the most successful. One of Perkins’ verses included the couplet, “You can burn my house, steal my car/Drink my liquor from an old fruit jar.” Here were the honky tonk roots that distinguished rockabilly from rock ‘n’ roll. “Blue Suede Shoes” was a song that bridged the juke joint and the sock hop. In its purest form, rockabilly was too primitive and too country for pop radio. Its “garage” aesthetic has influenced alternative music since the mid-1950s, but the “hillbilly” element within rockabilly made it unpalatable to a mass audience. Just as Elvis had shown the way into rockabilly, he showed the way out of it. At RCA, he broadened his musical palette, bringing in a piano and vocal chorus together with songs from the New York music mill. The stark, small group primitivism of “That’s All Right” soon gave way to more polished productions that sold in unprecedented quantities. In June 1956, RCA announced that Elvis was consuming half of the company’s pressing capacity. Others who’d begun as rockabillys followed Presley’s lead, chief among them Buddy Holly, Conway Twitty, and Johnny Burnette. The hillbilly edges were skillfully removed because the commercial impetus to do as Elvis was doing was overwhelming.

Elvis Presley sung ballads, schmoozed with the stars of the day, and earned the grudging praise of weekend television’s preeminent host, Ed Sullivan, but that made him no less of a polarizing figure.



The more successful he became, the more he became a pointed challenge to the conformity and smugness of post-War America. Others who challenged to Fifties norms, such as the Beat writers (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, etc.), were marginalized by their invisibility. Ginsberg's poem *Howl* was published in 1956, the year that Elvis broke through nationally. It was a truly seditious work, yet attracted barely a fraction of the opprobrium that Elvis attracted. It seemed as if the entirety of popular music revolved around Elvis. He seemed to attract or repel everything else, and was almost omnipresent in a way that is hard to understand today when music is so fragmented. He was in concert, on television, in magazines, on radio, and in movies. Elvis merchandise (lunchboxes, bracelets, buttons, record players, etc.) crowded the stores. And so for all his humility and espousal of family values, he became the lightning rod for those to whom rock 'n' roll and the burgeoning youth culture was anathema.

Some of those who objected to rock 'n' roll had overtly racist motives. "Rock 'n' roll," wrote Asa Carter, Secretary of the North Alabama White Citizens' Council, "is a means of pulling down the white man to the level of the Negro. It is part of a plot to undermine the morals of the youth of our nation. It is sexualistic, unmoralistic, and the best way to bring people of both races together." The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* had come down in May 1954, declaring that the segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. To those who disagreed with that decision, rock 'n' roll was a dreadful harbinger of things to come. The bastions of the entertainment industry hoped that rock 'n' roll was a fad that would quickly pass. As early as 1956, some in the industry heralded Trinidadian calypso music as the craze most likely to supplant rock 'n' roll, and artists as diverse as the Norman Luboff Choir, Maya Angelou, and Robert Mitchum recorded calypso LPs. Frank Sinatra was one of many former big band singers who deplored rock 'n' roll on a musical level. Writing for *Western World* magazine (November 1957), he said, "My only deep sorrow is the unrelenting insistence of recording and motion picture companies upon purveying the most brutal, ugly, vicious form of expression it has been my displeasure to hear and naturally I'm referring to the bulk of rock 'n' roll. It fosters almost totally negative and destructive reactions in young people. It smells phony and false. It is sung, played, and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiteration, and sly, lewd, in plain fact, dirty lyrics, it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the Earth."

Meanwhile, the four major record companies (RCA Victor, Columbia, Decca, and Capitol) that had enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the pop charts since the end of World War II were seeing upstart indie labels, like Sun, squeeze them out of the singles charts. At the end of 1957, *Billboard* magazine estimated that 70 percent of the year's top hits were on independent labels. In 1957, RCA promoted Steve Sholes from head of Specialty Singles (country, R&B, kiddies music, etc.) to become head of popular singles, but he didn't sign another major rock 'n' roll star. Unable to successfully replicate the music, the majors came up with the idea of cutting the retail price of their singles from 99c to 59c, knowing that the independents didn't own pressing plants or distribution companies, and couldn't match that price reduction. Sam Phillips of Sun Records spoke out vehemently against this. "Musical excitement has come from lots of independents experimenting and recording under all kinds of competitive conditions," he told *Billboard*. "Cutting the profit margin would cut the area in which to play with new ideas. It's too late to go back to the stereotyped records that the majors enjoyed selling for twenty-five years." The idea was quietly dropped because it became apparent that price-point was not a determining factor in purchasing decisions.



Adults began buying 33 RPM LP records, a format that had been introduced in 1948 and was still dominated by the major labels. Only the majors could easily afford the bigger budgets associated with acquiring Broadway shows, and recording large orchestras. The pace of adult life was reflected in mixing a cocktail and relaxing as an LP played. The pace of teenage life was reflected in the ever-changing mix of a stack of singles. Adults could more easily afford LPs; teenagers could more easily afford singles. The independent labels, with their ears to the ground, had the flexibility to respond to trends and trends within trends. Accordingly, rock 'n' roll was experienced at 45 RPM, and that would remain the case until the Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, and others created album rock in the late 1960s.

Still unable to accept that the independents were more attuned to the tastes of financially enfranchised teenagers, the majors blamed payola (the practise of playing disc jockeys for airplay). It's beyond question that the independents were more habituated to paying for airplay, but it's also beyond question that the flexible and entrepreneurial independents stayed on top of rapidly evolving tastes. The contention of Columbia Records' head of A&R, Mitch Miller, was that Columbia was owned by CBS, Inc. and that he couldn't risk offering commercial bribery on behalf of a corporate behemoth (similarly, RCA Victor was owned by NBC/General Electric). And so, it was generally assumed that the parent companies of the major labels exerted some pressure upon Congress to investigate payola in the belief that this would level the playing field. In November 1959, the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight announced plans to initiate hearings. Alan Freed became the most notable casualty. Asked by his employer, WABC (a company owned by ABC and Paramount Theaters) to swear under oath that he had not taken payola, Freed refused and was dismissed on November 21. In May the following year, he was indicted under commercial bribery laws. Others went down with him, but the practice of payola merely became less blatant, and eventually crept into the business culture of the major labels as well.

The first generation of rock 'n' roll stars, with the notable exception of Bill Haley, came from the South, and had grown up on Southern vernacular music. The next generation, Ricky Nelson and Ritchie Valens for instance, came of age in the rock 'n' roll era and hadn't grown up in the South. They hadn't listened to Bill Monroe or Ernest Tubb on the *Grand Ole Opry*, nor had they sought out R&B records. For them, it was as if rock 'n' roll had sprung fully formed from the radio in 1956. Ricky Nelson almost certainly bought Elvis' second LP and almost certainly had no comprehension of what Chick Crumpacker was writing about when he called Elvis "the most original singer of commercial folk music since Jimmie Rodgers." With a new generation of artists ungrounded in the roots of rock 'n' roll, it was inevitable that the music would change.

The day that Valens and Buddy Holly perished in a plane crash, February 3, 1959, became fixed in pop music mythology as "the day the music died." "The music" being rock 'n' roll. It's true that Elvis was in the Army and that his music would change upon his discharge in 1960. It's true that Little Richard had temporarily forsaken rock 'n' roll for the ministry and that Chuck Berry was laying low, trying to sidestep charges that he'd brought a minor across state lines for the purposes of prostitution. And it was true that Jerry Lee Lewis had seen his career nosedive after the news broke that he'd married his thirteen year-old cousin. And it was true that Alan Freed was off the air and many of his contemporaries were running scared. But rock 'n' roll had changed from the moment Bill Haley tore into "Rock the Joint" or Elvis "stumped" upon "That's All Right." Death and disgrace didn't materially affect the pace of change. The music could not stand still. It would never again stand still.