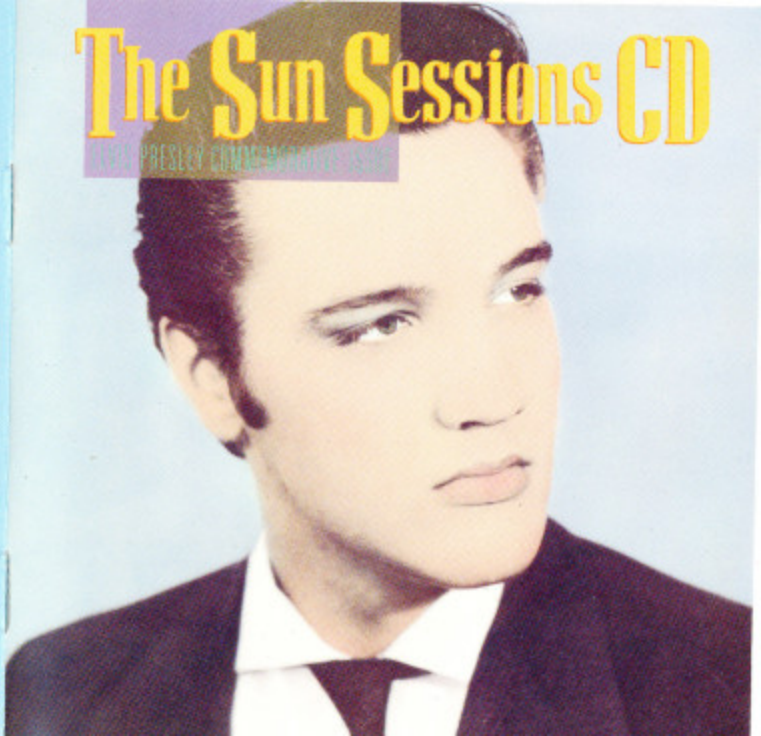
The Sun Sessions CD



THE MASTER TAKES
1. That's All Right
2. Blue Moon of Kentucky
3. Good Rockin' Tonight
4. I Don't Care if the Sun Don't Shine
5. Milkcow Blues Boogie
6. You're a Heartbreaker
7. Baby, Let's Play House
8. I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone
9. Mystery Train
10. I Forgot to Remember to Forget
11. I Love You Because
12. Blue Moon
13. Tomorrow Night
14. I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin')
15. Just Because
16. Trying to Get to You

THE OUTTAKES
17. Harbor Lights
18. I Love You Because—take 2
19. That's All Right
20. Blue Moon of Kentucky
21. I Don't Care if the Sun Don't Shine
22. I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone (My Baby's Gone)—take 9
23. I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin')
24. When It Rains, It Really Pours

THE ALTERNATE TAKES (previously unreleased)
25. I Love You Because—take 3
26. I Love You Because—take 5
27. I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone (My Baby's Gone)—take 7
28. I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone (My Baby's Gone)—take 12

SUN SESSIONS REFERENCE ABSTRACT
by Gregg Geller

BABY, LET'S PLAY HOUSE (A. Gunter)
Sun 217 (U-143); RCA 20/47-6383 (F2WB-8046)
Recorded December 1954 or February 1955; Released April 1955
Source: Arthur Gunter, Excello 2047, 1954

BLUE MOON (R. Rodgers-L. Hart)
RCA LPM-1254 (F2WB-8117)
Recorded July 1954; Released March 1956
Probable sources: Billy Eckstine, MGM 10311, 1948
Ivory Joe Hunter, MGM 11132, 1952

BLUE MOON OF KENTUCKY (B. Monroe)
Sun 209 (U-129); RCA 20/47-6380 (F2WB-8041)
Recorded July 1954; Released July 1954
Outtake officially released September 1984 (RCA CPM6-5172)
Source: Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys, Columbia 20370, 1947

GOOD ROCKIN' TONIGHT (R. Brown)
Sun 210 (U-131); RCA 20/47-6381 (F2WB-8043)
Recorded September 1954; Released September 1954
Sources: Roy Brown, Deluxe 1093, 1947
Wynonie "Mr. Blues" Harris, King 4210, 1948

HARBOR LIGHTS (H. Williams-J. Kennedy)
RCA CPL1-1349 (EPA3-2742)
Recorded July 1954; Released January 1976
Possible source: Harry Owens and His Royal Hawaiians

I DON'T CARE IF THE SUN DON'T SHINE (M. David)
Sun 210 (U-130); RCA 20/47-6381 (F2WB-8042)
Recorded September 1954; Released September 1954
Outtakes officially released September 1984 (RCA CPM6-5172)
Probable source: Patti Page, Mercury 5396, 1950

I FORGOT TO REMEMBER TO FORGET (S. Kesler-C. Feathers)
Sun 223 (U-157); RCA 20/47-6357 (F2WB-8000)
Recorded July 1955; Released August 1955
Source: Charlie Feathers and Stan Kesler, songwriter's demo

I'LL NEVER LET YOU GO (LITTLE DARLIN') (J. Wakely)
RCA LPM-1254 (F2WB-8116)
Recorded possibly January 1955; Released March 1956
Outtake officially released September 1984 (RCA CPM6-5172)
Source: Jimmy Wakely, Decca 5973, 1943

I LOVE YOU BECAUSE (L. Payne)
RCA LPM 1254 (G2WB-1086)
Recorded July 1954; Released March 1956
Master take compiled from takes 3, 5
Take 2 released January 1974 (RCA CPL1-0341)
Takes 1, 3, 4, 5 released June 1987 (RCA 6414-1-R)
Probable sources: Leon Payne, Capitol 40238, 1949
Eddie Fisher, RCA Victor 20-4619, 1950

I'M LEFT, YOU'RE RIGHT, SHE'S GONE (S. Kesler-W. Taylor)
Sun 217 (U-142); RCA 20/47-6383 (F2WB-8047)
Recorded December 1954; Released April 1955
Take 9 officially released September 1984 (RCA CPM6-5172)
Alternate takes 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 released June 1987 (RCA 6414-1-R)
Source: Bill Taylor and Stan Kesler, songwriter's demo

JUST BECAUSE (B. Shelton-J. Shelton-S. Robin)
RCA LPM-1254 (F2WB-8118)
Recorded possibly September 1954; Released March 1956
Source: The Shelton Brothers, Decca 5872, 1942

MILKCOW BLUES BOOGIE *(K. Arnold)*
Sun 215 (U-140); RCA 20/47-6382 (F2WB-8044)
Recorded December 1954;
Released January 1955
Possible sources: Kokomo Arnold, Decca 7029, 1935
Johnnie Lee Wills, Decca 5985, 1941
Moon Mullican, King 607, 1946
Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys (as "Brain Cloudy Blues"), Columbia 20113, 1946

MYSTERY TRAIN *(H. Parker-S. Phillips)*
Sun 223 (U-156); RCA 20/47-6357 (F2WB-8001)
Recorded February or July 1955;
Released August 1955
Source: Little Junior's Blue Flames, Sun 193, 1953

THAT'S ALL RIGHT *(A. Crudup)*
Sun 209 (U-128); RCA 20/47-6380 (F2WB-8040)
Recorded July 1954; Released July 1954
Outtake released September 1984 (RCA CPM6-5172)
Source: Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, RCA Victor 20-2205, 1947

TOMORROW NIGHT *(S. Coslow-W. Grosz)*
RCA AFL1-5418 (F2WB-8115)
Recorded probably 1954; Released March 1985
Source: Lonnie Johnson, King 4201, 1948

TRYING TO GET TO YOU *(C. Singleton-R.M. McCoy)*
RCA LPM-1254 (F2WB-8039)
Recorded probably July 1955;
Released March 1956
Source: The Eagles, Mercury 70391, 1954

WHEN IT RAINS, IT REALLY POURS *(W. Emerson)*
RCA CPL1-4848 (NPA5-5826)
Recorded probably July 1955;
Released November 1983
Source: Billy "The Kid" Emerson, Sun 214, 1955

YOU'RE A HEARTBREAKER *(J. Sallee)*
Sun 215 (U-141); RCA 20/47-6382 (F2WB-8045)
Recorded December 1954;
Released January 1955
Source: Jack Sallee, songwriter's demo

Produced by Sam Phillips
at the Memphis Recording Service
706 Union, Memphis, Tennessee
July 1954-July 1955

This Compilation:
A&R Director: Gregg Geller
Marketing Director: Don Wardell
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Hand Tinting: Theresa Alberi-Weinberg
Thanks to Sam Phillips, Knox Phillips, Ger Rijff, Colin Escott, Stan Kesler, Stanley Booth, Marion Keisker and Scotty Moore

He tried not to show it, but he felt so inferior... Elvis Presley probably innately was the most introverted person that [ever] came into that studio. He didn't play with bands. He didn't go to this little club and pick and grin. All he did was sit with his guitar on the side of his bed at home. I don't think he even played on the front porch.

—Sam Phillips, founder of Sun Records

It was on a hot summer day in 1953 that a young man, just out of high school, first showed up at the door of the Memphis Recording Service, a custom studio whose motto read "We record anything—anywhere—anytime." For a few minutes he paced nervously outside the plateglass window clutching a beat-up guitar, then finally plunged into the small outer office whose reception area was already filled to capacity by the three or four customers waiting to make a "personal" record at their own for just $3.98 plus tax. Sitting behind the desk jammed to the left of the door was an attractive woman in her mid-thirties, who took the young man's name and politely asked him to take a seat while he waited his turn. "[At first] I wondered if he wanted a handout," Marion Keisker later recalled. "We get a lot of drifters along Union Avenue. His hair was long and shaggy, and he was wearing khaki work clothes and was dirty. Of course he had his guitar."

"Who do you sound like?" Mrs. Keisker asked, just to make conversation.

"I don't sound like nobody," said the young man politely.

When it finally came his turn to record, Marion Keisker ushered the young man back into the little studio where blues singers B.B. King and Howlin' Wolf and Ike Turner had all cut their first sides for Memphis Recording Service owner Sam Phillips, who had a leasing arrangement with the Chess and Modern labels in Chicago and Los Angeles. Phillips, who had recently started his own label, Sun, was just about to go out for lunch, so Marion set up the acetate disc cutter herself and, halfway through the young man's performance of his first song, an old Ink Spots number called "My Happiness," she decided to make a reference tape as well. His guitar playing was rudimentary, and his singing style "changed every eight bars" as he swung erratically from a thin tenor to a somewhat wobbly bass and back again—but Marion felt there was something "different" about his voice and she thought Sam would, too. She got about a third of "My Happiness" on tape and all of his second song, another Ink Spots number called "That's When Your Heartaches Begin," complete with recitation. She noted down his address and a neighbor's telephone number on a piece of paper that was headed: "Elvis Presley. Good ballad singer. Hold."

The young man returned some six months later, on January 4, 1954, and recorded two more slow numbers, this time in a western style, "Casual Love Affair" and "I'll Never Stand in Your Way." On this occasion it was 31-year-old Sam Phillips who noted the singer's name and the fact that he was "a good ballad singer." If anything suited to his style were to come up in a commercial vein, Sam assured the young truck driver, he would call him. "I had never sung anything but slow music and ballads in my life at that time," said Elvis Presley, reminiscing just two years later.

He stopped by the studio often in the next few months, trying out songs and seeking out advice, but Sam Phillips didn't call him for anything even resembling a session until June. Phillips had gotten

a demonstration record that spring from Peer Publishing in Nashville on a song called "Without You" and, struck by the soulful quality in the singer's voice, had contacted Peer to see if he could put out the demo on Sun. No one at Peer even knew the name of the singer, though; it was just a young black man who had been hanging around the studio.

"What about the kid with sideburns?" said Marion Keisker.

"If you can get him over here..." said Phillips.

I called and asked him at his convenience to come see us," recalled Marion. "I turned around, and there was Elvis coming through the door. I think he ran all the way."

As good an idea as it may have seemed to everyone involved, it didn't work out the way that any of them planned. For whatever reason, Elvis Presley couldn't capture the special quality that Sam Phillips had heard in that anonymous black man's voice, and Sam Phillips was definitely looking for something different. For Phillips, who had started out as a radio announcer and engineer in his hometown of Florence, Alabama, individuality had always been the one quality he had most pursued and prized. In Memphis he had made his reputation broadcasting the big bands on a national hookup from the Hotel Peabody Skyway, but he soon grew disillusioned with the way those bands were "programmed." Every orchestra, every number sounded alike. It just seemed to me that [the Negro people] were the only ones who had any freshness left in their music." That was why he had started the Memphis Recording Service in 1950, "just to make records with some of [the] great Negro artists." And it was why he had started his own record label two years later. He had never, he boasted at the time, "made a record with an established star yet," and he was looking even then for the same distinctiveness that he continues to seek to this day.

"Without You" was simply not the right vehicle to bring it out in this singer. At Phillips' instigation the young man ran through every song in his repertoire, including "Rag Mop," a host of Billy Eckstine favorites, and just about every number in the Dean Martin songbook. Sam Phillips wasn't sure just what he heard, but he knew he heard something. "I suppose it was all the gospel singing Elvis had done that gave me a hint of that special thing," he said a year or two later. Marion Keisker had evidently heard the same thing when she originally noted the name. "Over and over," she told Elvis biographer Jerry Hopkins, "I remember Sam saying, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.'"

At this same time there was a young guitarist in Memphis named Scotty Moore who also had a vision. Moore, recently out of the Navy and working as a hotter in in his brother's drycleaning establishment, had just cut a record for Sun with the group he was fronting, Doug Poindexter and the Starlite Wranglers. The record, "My Kind of Carrying On," has been pointed to as a seminal step in the development of rockabilly music, but if it in fact represented the seed of the revolution, it was a very modest seed that remained to be planted. For Scotty Moore it was contact with Sam Phillips that crystallized his sense of where the music was going.

"He knew there was a crossover coming," says Scotty. "He foresaw it. I think that recording all those black artists had to give him an insight: he just didn't know where that insight would lead. Well, Sam and I got to be pretty good friends, just by my hanging around the studio all the time. It got to be an almost daily thing, in fact. I would get through work and just drift down to the studio, and we would sit there over coffee at Miss Taylor's Cafe next door and say to each other, 'What is it?'"

That was where Sam Phillips first mentioned Elvis Presley's name to Scotty Moore. "The best I can remember, he can sing pretty good," Sam said. Well, that started me to thinking, and every day after that I would ask him, 'Did you call the guy?' 'No.' 'Did you call the guy?' After a couple of weeks of this—either me or Marion bothering him all the time—he finally went back to the studio one day and actually came up with the number. He told me, 'You get him to come over the house and see what you think of him.' Which I did.

"Bill Black [the bass player in the Starlite Wranglers] lived just a couple of doors down, and he came down and listened for a while. Well, you know, Elvis came in, he was wearing a pink suit and white shoes and ducktail, I thought my wife was going to go out the back door. We sat around a couple of hours going through a bit of everything—Marty Robbins, Billy Eckstine, Hank Snow, Eddy Arnold, you name it. After he left Bill came back and said, 'What do you think?' I said, 'Well, he sings good, but I can't really say he knocks me out.' This was on a Sunday afternoon. The next day I told Sam the same thing, and he called Elvis to set up an audition.

"A few days later, I believe it was the following Monday night [this would have been July 5, 1954, following that June 27 initial meeting], Elvis came in for the audition. Sam just wanted to see what he sounded like on tape, because quite naturally you can sound quite a bit different in the studio than sitting around the living room singing. It wasn't intended to be a session—that was the reason just Bill and I were there. Well, we tried three or four things. 'I Love You Because' I believe was the first thing we actually put on tape. Then we were taking a break, I don't know, we were having Cokes and coffee, and all of a sudden Elvis started singing a song, jumping around and just acting the fool, and then Bill picked up his bass and he started acting the fool, too, and, you know, I started playing with 'em. Sam, I think, had the door to the control booth open—I don't know, he was either editing some tape or doing something—and he stuck his head out and said, 'What are you doing?' And we said 'We don't know.' 'Well, back up,' he said, 'try to find a place to start, and do it again.'"

And that, according to Scotty Moore, was the genesis of "That's All Right," a free-flying blues with a country beat that sounds—for all the work that went into it—as fresh and spontaneous as the most spontaneous Howlin' Wolf blues that Sam Phillips ever put on wax. The next night the trio came up with "Blue Moon of Kentucky," a reworking of the Bill Monroe classic arrived at under similar circumstances, and by the end of the week Sam Phillips had a two-sided acetate to deliver to three Memphis disc jockeys. Country DJs Uncle Richard and Sleepy Eye John jumped on the bluegrass tune, but it was the irrepressible Dewey Phillips, a Memphis tastemaker whose role in the popularization of rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues cannot be overstated, who really put the record across. He played it over and over again, first one side, then the other, while the unwitting subject of all this furor went to the movies (a western double bill). "When the phone calls and telegrams started to come in," Dewey told writer Stanley Booth, "I got hold of Elvis' daddy, Vernon. He said Elvis was down at Suzore's No. 2 Theatre. 'Get him over here,' I said, and before long Elvis came running in. 'Sit down, I'm gone interview you,' I said. He said, 'Mr. Phillips, I don't know nothing about being interviewed.' 'Just don't say

nothing dirty,' I told him.

"He sat down, and I said I'd let him know when we were ready to start. I had a couple of records cued up, and while they played we talked. I asked him where he went to high school, and he said, 'Humes.' I wanted to get that out, because a lot of people had thought he was colored. Finally I said, 'All right, Elvis, thank you very much.' 'Aren't you gone interview me?' he asked. 'I already have,' I said. 'The mike's been open the whole time.' He broke out in a cold sweat."

The record was released on July 19, just two weeks after it was recorded. On July 27, Marion Keisker brought a very uncomfortable-looking Elvis Presley down to the Memphis Press-Scimitar building, where he was interviewed by theater critic Edwin Howard (who would later make a record of his own for Sun). "Marion said he was a truck driver," recalled Howard, "and he could only come during his lunch hour. I'll never forget…he walked in there looking like the wrath of God. Pimples all over his face. Duck-tail hair. Had a funny-looking thin bowtie on. He was very hard to interview. About all I could get out of him was yes and no."

On July 30 Elvis appeared at an outdoor concert at the Overton Park Shell headlined by Slim Whitman. He didn't go over very well at the afternoon show, where he sang mostly ballads. In the evening he came back with "Good Rockin' Tonight," and the shock was heard all around the world. Elvis Presley himself was no less shocked, it seemed. "My very first appearance," he recalled in a 1956 interview, "I was on a show in Memphis as an extra added single. I was scared stiff. I came out, and I was doing a fast-type tune, and everybody was hollering, and I didn't know what they were hollering at. Everybody was screaming and everything, and I came offstage and my manager told me that they was hollering because I was wiggling. And so I went back out for an encore, and I did a little more. And the more I did, the wilder they went."

That was the story in a nutshell; that was the genesis of Elvis Presley. The more he did, the wilder they went. Everyone knows something of the progression of events. Sometimes it is portrayed Hollywood-style as a long, hard, rollercoaster-like climb, with obstacles looming along the way. Unquestionably, to the participants it must have seemed like a perilous ride which could come to an end at any moment ("We didn't have any idea how this thing was going to turn out," says Sam Phillips today). With the benefit of hindsight, though, it seems more like a nuclear explosion.

"On September 10, Elvis recorded 'Good Rockin' Tonight,' the Wynonie Harris blues with which he had shaken up the Overton Park Shell, while 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' hit the top of the Memphis Country & Western charts (it had probably sold 20,000 copies nationally at this point). In October he made his debut on the Louisiana Hayride, the Saturday night broadcast on which Hank Williams had made his reputation, and the next month signed on as a regular, after quitting his job at Crown Electric. In November, too, he was named eighth-most-promising Country & Western vocalist by Billboard magazine (behind Tommy Collins, Justin Tubb, and Jimmy "C" Newman), and in December he was acknowledged as "the hottest piece of merchandise on the Louisiana Hayride…the youngster with the hillbilly blues beat" by the same magazine. Within a year he had left forever the schoolhouse gyms and hardwood floors, the shopping center openings and impromptu shows on the back of a flatbed truck, and signed with RCA Victor. By the time he was 21-years-old he had acquired the status of legend and would never again be able to venture out in the world.

All this is known and can be interpreted in various ways. What isn't known, and what can perhaps never by fully explained, is where the music came from and what caused it to hit the way it did. Nor is it simply that there never was a phenomenon quite like Elvis Presley either before or since. If this were all there was to the story, you could always point to Sinatra or the Beatles, say, as similar manifestations of cultural implosion. No, what is truly astonishing—what is unique—about Elvis Presley is that at 19 he knew instinctively not so much who he was as what he wanted to be and that, out of that desire, he was able to create a style which was original from start to finish.

That is what is so important about this record. It shows the creation of the style. It shows Elvis Presley and Sam Phillips groping for something it would have been impossible to name (simply because it didn't exist), struggling to discover a common language, and, together, creating a new form out of what anyone else might have discarded on the scrapheap of history. Even this might be deserving of only passing cultural note, were it not for the fact that the ten sides that Sun issued in the sixteen months that Elvis Presley was on the label are so perfectly realized that, had he never recorded again, they alone would be sufficient to sustain the legend of the birth of rock 'n' roll. This is the most improbable story of all: in a tiny Memphis studio, in 1954 and 1955, Sam Phillips and Elvis Presley created rock 'n' roll.

What do we actually hear on the Sun sides? Here is what Bob Johnson, the Memphis Press-Scimitar reporter who followed Elvis from the beginning of his career, wrote at the time. "'That's All Right' was in the R&B idiom of Negro field jazz, 'Blue Moon' more in the country field, but there was a curious blending of the two different musics in both…(Sam Phillips) doesn't know how to catalogue Elvis exactly. He has a white voice, sings with a Negro rhythm which borrows in mood and emphasis from country style." When I first read these words 32 years after they were written, in 1967, it was as if the theory of relativity had finally been proved by practical demonstration. Certainly this is the received wisdom about Elvis ("A white boy with black hips," as the New York Times once said), but as often as I and others had stated it, sometimes I wondered if we were not merely perpetuating some abstract theoretical construct on to which the participants themselves had unaccountably latched. It's only recently that I've had a chance (mainly through the Dutch publisher and archivist, Ger Rijff, whose Long Lonely Highway and Faces and Stages: An Elvis Presley Time-Frame are essential reading and viewing) to scrutinize some of the contemporary accounts, and there is no longer any question in my mind that Elvis and Sam Phillips knew exactly what they were doing, if not why they were doing it. "The colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I'm doing now, man, for more years than I know," declared Elvis in a 1956 interview. "They played it like that in the shanties and in their juke joints, and nobody paid it no mind till I goosed it up. I got it from them. Down in Tupelo, Mississippi, I used to hear old Arthur Crudup (the Mississippi bluesman who originated "That's All Right") bang his box the way I do now, and I said if I ever got to the place I could feel all old Arthur felt, I'd be a music man like nobody ever saw."

He may or may not have gotten to that place—but, of course, he did become a music man like nobody ever saw. With this record we see, insofar as you can ever see anything of the nature of creativity, how the process occurred.

The issued sides (the first ten cuts) have been written about so often that I'm not going to dwell on them here. They illustrate perfectly Sam Phillips' belief in purity, simplicity, and economy of musical expression. They also possess that indefinable spark that could not have been drawn out, no matter what the production methods, if it had not simply arrived unbidden. For a clue to the more prosaic mysteries, though, listen to the outtakes and the five completed master takes (from "I Love You Because" to "Trying to Get to You") that RCA put out after Elvis came to the label. It's here that we see for the first time the extent to which spontaneity merely served as handmaiden to a great deal of experimentation and hard work. It's here that we are finally able to glimpse not just the range of styles attempted but the range of possibilities. Musically, the song selection runs the gamut from the most sentimental of ballads ("I Love You Because" and the Hawaiian-inspired "Harbor Lights") to the most low-down of blues—but all have one element in common: a willingness to go out on a limb, a zest for taking risks, for venturing off into unknown territory, regardless of whether anyone has ever been there before.

Listen to "Blue Moon," the Rodgers and Hart ballad which Billy Eckstine recorded in 1948 in a satin-and-silk version with which Elvis must have been familiar (Eckstine was one of his favorite singers). What is he doing to this song? What is that eerie falsetto wail? The first time I heard this cut on Elvis's debut album in 1956 when I was 12 years old, I was outraged! I must have taken it as a betrayal of rock 'n' roll. Now I hear it somewhat differently: now it seems touching to me, a ghostly echo from the past, though whose past—Elvis' or mine—I'm not really sure. That isn't really the point, though. The point is that here in the course of a single song we witness the first rock 'n' roll wedding; we see an improbable marriage of the most unlikely elements approaching consummation. Here is the crooner who admired Dean Martin and Eddie Fisher, the devout church-goer whose single greatest ambition was to sing with the gospel Songfellows, the Beale St. dreamer who listened to R&B "bird groups" and wanted more than anything to be able to sing like Clyde McPhatter, the apprentice bluesman who wanted to feel all that Arthur Crudup had felt. We hear the western clip clop of Scotty Moore's guitar. We hear all of these elements coming together, or not coming together as the case may be. We see Elvis Presley struggling blindly to create a new music by instinct and will. And we see Sam Phillips doing all that he can—technically and psychologically—to further that instinct, fulfilling his own mission "to bring out of a person what was in him, to recognize that individual's unique quality and then to find the key to unlock it."

"Tomorrow Night," "I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin')," the various takes of "I Love You Because" and "I Don't Care If the Sun Don't Shine" all offer the same blend of drama and tentative resolution. On the alternate takes of "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone," a straightforward country tune written expressly for Elvis by Stan Kesler and Bill Taylor, the musicians explore a blues direction which seems unpromising at first, is then refined but finally discarded for the light breezy flavor of the issued take. "Don't make it too damn complicated," Sam remonstrated with Scotty after an unsuccessful take of "When It Rains, It Really Pours," a blues which was never completed in the Sun studio and to which Elvis eventually returned nearly two years later. "That's All Right," the song which has always been portrayed mainly as an inspired accident, appears here in a version very close to the issued take and yet undeniably lacking the magic. Simplify, simplify. Sam Phillips seems to keep on saying. "All right, boys, we just about on it now. Do it again. Do it one time for Sam." And they did. The guitar solo got less complicated. The vocal communicated more of the essence of the song. The whole finally flowed. And at the end, just as he did when the band finally started hitting it on "Blue Moon of Kentucky," Sam Phillips might pronounce himself pleased. "That's fine," he says. "Hell, that's different. That's a pop song now, nearly 'bout." And it is.

You can see the sessions in your mind's eye. Time didn't matter. Trends didn't matter. Mistakes didn't matter. "You just forgot about making a record and tried to show him," Carl Perkins later recalled. "I'd walk out on a limb, I'd try things I knew I couldn't do, and then have to work my way out of it. I'd say, 'Mr. Phillips, that's terrible.' He said, 'That's original.' I said, 'But it's just a big original mistake.' And he said, 'That's what Sun Records is. That's what we are.'" There was simply no containing the enthusiasm, the ingenuousness, the sense of possibilities. You listen to the Elvis Sun sessions, and you sense the belief in those possibilities, the firm conviction that it didn't matter a damn what the rest of creation thought as it went about its appointed rounds, that it didn't matter a damn it to the "music industry" Memphis was just another backwater town out of which nothing, and no one, of significance could ever come—there was simply no formula that could encapsulate Sam Phillips' vision or Elvis' omnivorous embrace of the world and all that was in it. That is what I think the records finally come down to: a young man hungry for success—no, hungry for everything—and just impatient to get on with it. A few years ago I happened to be watching the television documentary, "The Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll," with Sam Phillips, when Elvis came on the screen, looking impossibly young, impossibly expectant.

"Ah, wasn't he something? Let me tell you something about him. Elvis—you looking at him now, back then—he looks so clumsy and so totally uncoordinated. And this was the beauty of it, he was being himself. Well, he had that little innocence about him, and yet he had, even then, he had a little something that was almost impudent in a way. That was his crutch. He certainly didn't mean to be impudent, but he had enough of that, along with what he could convey, that he was just beautiful and lovely—and I'm not talking about physical beauty, because he was not that good-looking then. Really, by conventional standards he was supposed to have been thrown off that stage, and I—listen, I calculated that stuff in my mind. Are they going to resent him? With his long sideburns? That could be a plus or a minus. But I looked at it as this. When he came through like he did, it was neither. He stood on his own."

—Peter Guralnick
April, 1987

SCOTTY MOORE, LEAD GUITAR BILL BLACK, BASS
ELVIS PRESLEY, VOCALS, GUITAR