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A Tribute To-

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The Sun Discography

Memphis in May Festival

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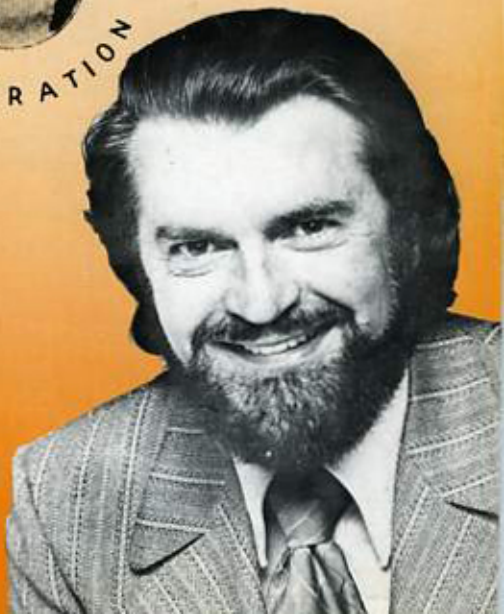

Nov. 11. 1987----

In what Knox Phillips called one of the most candid interviews with his father, Sam Phillips spent two hours on a hot afternoon addressing the dynamics that shaped rock 'n' roll. Sam Phillips has granted only a handful of interviews since he sold Sun Records in 1969. Here is the essence of a man who, according to Rolling Stone magazine, "created a music so innovative and alive that the music itself became a revolutionary force that in turn changed everything."

MEMPHIS, Tenn.----- When the grainy eyes of **Sam Phillips** become great balls of fire, you begin to grasp the passion that inspired the birth of rock 'n' roll music at his Sun Records studio.

"The one thing you must remember is that when black artists walked into Sun Studios, they all thought they would have to please the white man behind the glass," a wild-eyed **Phillips** said during a conversation that included sons Jerry, 38, and Knox, 41, in the horseshoe-shaped living room of his spacious ranch home in suburban Memphis. The boys were respectfully quiet as their 64-year-old father rolled into a gospel cadence.

"But I was not looking for another Nat King Cole - or another Count Basie - we had plenty of those. I was looking for what was coming from a man's soul and a man's conviction. I didn't care about his past. If it was innate and natural and felt good to him and it communicated. . . .

"That was just beautiful." He paused. "That was simply elegant."

One of the first inductees into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, **Sam Phillips** was the first white man to record the black blues of B. B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Howlin' Wolf and Junior Parker. Fellow Hall of Fame inductees Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Roy Orbison graduated from **Phillips**' school of rhythm and blues at Sun Studios in Memphis. And **Phillips** sold the contract of the most important artist of the 20th century - Elvis Presley - to RCA Records.

To understand **Phillips**, you first need to understand his independent roots.

Phillips is a product of his environment - a tightly knit rural area just outside Florence, Ala.

"I grew up on what everybody called a plantation - but believe me, it wasn't a plantation," said **Phillips**, dressed in a blue sweat shirt complemented by a gold TCB (taking care of business) necklace. "It was just an old farm. I grew up with a lot of black people working in the fields, and it was during the Depression between 1930 and the war, so we were all poor - black and white."

The poverty erased any perception of prejudice in the **Phillips** family. A teenaged **Sam** grew to appreciate the difference between black and white soul.

"There was a certain feeling I developed as a young person for black people," he said. "Somehow they were able to get pleasure out of things that I

couldn't see them enjoying. I heard them sing a lot, and I didn't hear white folks going down the cotton rows singing that much."

Segregation in the fields did not run as deep in Alabama - where farmland was minimally agricultural - as it did farther west in the more fertile Arkansas or the Mississippi Delta. There, the fields were larger, and whites supervised large groups of blacks.

"Where I grew up, it was rough for all races to eke out an existence," **Phillips** said. "So with those bonds and ties, we had so many things in common, it impressed me to the extent long after we moved off of the farm (before **Phillips** turned 16). It became a subconscious thing with me - all the things I had seen and heard."

Phillips experienced the futility of the fields and the hope found in country churches. "There were a few small black churches - and when I say small, I mean if they had 50 members, they were a big church," he recalled. "Even the most religious Southern people would have an hour or hour-and-15-minute service. But the blacks, their services would go on four hours or even all day. That kind of fascinated me. Knowing they had no formal training in music - it just wasn't taught in the little black schools they went to - I knew there had to be a reason. These people never seemed to be really down in the dumps, and I wondered why. I guess their solace came from their belief in God, and it's gonna be all right somehow, and it kind of impressed me that was one helluva philosophy under the conditions.

"In hearing their artistry and seeing their dexterity, it occurred to me as I became an adult that we just might be missing a great culture in the South," **Phillips** continued. "And it was a culture that was mainly overlooked because they were black people. And I was never satisfied with that type of thing because I was raised to respect black people. My father and mother made us understand who was Uncle Silas (Payne, who introduced **Phillips** to field hollers in Florence) and who was Aunt Minnie, and how they were to be treated with respect. I never for one time - and I think this had great influence on me - I never heard my father ever abuse a black person. That, to me, showed a sense of kinship. It ensconced in me a type of feeling for the South, although we had all sorts of segregation, we also had a great amount of integration in spirit and common problems."

As **Phillips** matured, he sensed regret in not first realizing and then sustaining the culture of the South. "That gave me a feeling that if you can survive things like that, there's a possibility you can do a lot more than you might think you could do under conditions that are not necessarily conducive to you.

"And that was a subconscious thing when I got into the radio business," he said. "I was able to start with a little small station, then another small station 40 miles east of Florence, then from that to a big 50,000-watt station (WLAC) in Nashville, then from there to (radio station WREC in) the greatest city in the world, which I still love, Memphis. So in the matter of a few years, I went from a snotty-nosed Alabama kid to putting on the big bands at the Peabody Hotel. I went from what looked like an impossible situation."

Phillips engineered live broadcasts of Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey from the Hotel Peabody Skyway from 1945 to 1950, when he opened a "very modest" recording studio called Memphis Recording Service in a former radiator shop at 706 Union in Memphis. Once the studio was open, he would use the big-band

income to stock his studio. "I would buy a little piece of equipment at a time," he said. "Gosh, I had a little four-position mixer to begin with."

Phillips was hooked.

"There was a religious fervor to experiment," he said. "I didn't know if I could do it mechanically and by mechanically, I mean, Knox was 6 years old and Jerry was 3 years old. I had a wife, a deaf mute aunt who was brilliant and I had a widowed mother who was getting old. And with what little I had . . . I unconsciously went back to the farm to see what I could do."

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The farm mixed with the fandango.

Phillips was influenced by spritely big-band music, most notably with dominant rhythm sections. When mixing the big-band shows, he stressed the rhythm sections over the horns, which sent his soul back to the driving emotion of the farm. Meanwhile, at the Memphis Recording Service (renamed Sun Studios - for a new beginning - in spring, 1952), **Phillips** recorded weddings, funerals, conventions and "anything to keep the doors open."

"I would get up around 5:30 and work at the radio station from 7 until 3," he said. "Then I'd work the P.A. system at the Peabody after that. And then I'd work with the unproven talent at Sun - which I loved the most. I dropped down to 125 pounds and almost had a nervous breakdown, so I had to decide whether I could stay on with the job that I loved at the radio station or go into recording.

"So I talked to my wife, Becky, and decided I had to do one or another. I've always felt that if anything is worthwhile and you're not talking to just hear yourself rattle, you should be willing to gamble. When I made the determination that I had to devote full time to recording, it was just the willingness to work awfully hard and to sacrifice what I could to try and prove there was some great artistry that was being overlooked because it wasn't in vogue.

"Period."

It's usually reported that **Phillips** made Elvis Presley sound black when he began recording the King in 1954. Actually, it was the "irrational" raw emotion and feeling that **Phillips** encouraged his student to express.

"Feeling has as much to say as the words do," he said. "You can have the greatest words in the world and if they're not believable, they don't strike a chord and they're not said convincingly, it's not a great song. I don't care if it's gut-bucket blues, and maybe it's not a prolific song verbiagely, but if you get my attention, it's a great song. But the way it's said and even the repetition of something that might even be the whole hook can turn you upside down and not turn you loose at all."

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The definitive highlights of the historic nine-record boxed set, "Sun Records - The Blues Years, 1950-1956" (marketed by Charly Records, 156 Ilderton Rd., London, England, SE15 1NT), are the raw recordings of Howlin' Wolf (Chester Burnett).

Whether it is a guttural jump tune such as "Everybody's in the Mood" or the two-bar Delta guitar of "Come Back Home," Howlin' Wolf's voice consistently sounds like bald tires spinning on rough gravel.

Wolf copped the lonely country yodel of Jimmie Rodgers and layered it over plantation blues by way of fuzzy amplifiers. Within that sound are the roots of rock 'n' roll. A West Memphis running mate named Ike Turner introduced Wolf to **Phillips** and Sun Records.

The rest is history.

"I still say to this day Wolf had, by any standard, the worst voice I have ever heard," **Phillips** said, offering a rare smile. "It was so bad that it was magnificent. It contained all of the raw beauty that everything I had thought about in one man."

Phillips added that half the battle in recording seminal blues artists - such as Wolf, Jackie Brenston (whose "Rocket 88," featuring Turner on lead vocals, was the inspiration for "Good Golly Miss Molly") and Rosco Gordon - was securing the musicians' trust.

"It took me awhile to convince them there wasn't a Catch-22 when they'd come in for an audition, that it wouldn't cost them something before they got out the front door," he said. "After they knew that was not true and they felt like they could open up and sing their song, then it all began to come out.

"You're exploring the greatest thing on Earth and that is what the human being is capable of producing from within," **Phillips** declared. "I took a lot of ribbing about recording black men. Some of it was tongue in cheek, but in a way they meant it. But what helped me out was realizing that 90 percent of it (recording) was emotion and mind. The rest of it is just this old frame that carries around that emotion and mind. When people truly understand emotion, then they get a feeling that they have an outlet for theirs (emotion). And then, they might be able to get their message over."

Did raw Southern singers such as Wolf and Elvis perceive the potential of communication? "They just didn't know they'd have an opportunity," **Phillips** said. "They didn't think that somebody could see inside this very complex situation.

"They had to approach life from an entirely different perspective. And believe me, habit patterns can be very, very dangerous if we are all followers. Once you communicate - whether it is you, or Howlin' Wolf, or Elvis Presley, or Jerry Lee Lewis, or Carl Perkins, you're kind of a leader.

Phillips leaned over the tape recorder and whispered, "You've got somebody to listen to you. And to pay a little attention. And you might be able - somehow or another - to get to the point where they can equate and to know you a little better. Maybe they never shook hands with you, or maybe never saw you in person. But they heard you on that RADIO."

Elvis Presley wanted to get on that radio. In 1953, Presley was a truck driver for Crown Electric in Memphis before he walked into Sun Studios, asking

Phillips for an audition. Intensely introverted, he told **Phillips** he wanted to make a record for his mother's birthday (although his mother's birthday was months away).

"He wanted to do something to establish a little identity and what the hell is wrong with that?" **Phillips** asked. "I had to handle Elvis just like I handled black artists and that was to give him the necessary psychological stance to deliver the things that he had in an unprofound way. You just don't want to tell somebody `say this word this way.' You let them alone. You experiment with them. You give them time. But you let them know who's in charge and I always did that, but I didn't do it in an unkind way.

"This is going to sound strange, but I never got too close to my artists on a social basis. Although we were a family of people as a small record label, I kind of kept my distance from them. And it wasn't because I was unfriendly or anything like that. I wanted them to know at all times that I knew what I was doing, even though I maybe didn't know exactly which way to go with each artist immediately. Usually you didn't.

"I don't mean I could get back there and magically wave a wand or turn a knob, but I knew pretty well what I wanted and I just wasn't going to be pleased right away. It could've been a flop - I've cut flops, like everyone else. But I knew what I wanted. It wasn't as if we were a bunch of wild geese in there and nobody had a definitive approach to what we were going to do.

"So Elvis, like all the rest of them, went through the stages of this, but he was an excellent student, as were most of the artists at that time, because they were so desirous and hungry to establish identity," **Phillips** said. "They really didn't think of making a hit record because that was so far out. It was `If I could just get a record out.' And I never overly encouraged them, but I assure you, I didn't discourage them. It could work if there was something there that I could work with and they were inspired by the demeanor and the manner in which I ran my sessions. And I ran my sessions. That was an absolute necessity.

"The basis in fact is that I had my priorities right - and God knows, all of us have had, at one time or another, our priorities wrong. But mine wasn't to get rich. Not one time in my life did I go into that studio - and I can face my God and say this - looking to record a hit. God knows, I hoped that we would. But I wanted to be able to sustain myself selling records of different artists and gradually build from that. I knew we were going to do things different, or I wasn't interested worth a damn. Otherwise, I'd just go back and do my Peabody bands. I just knew that this was culture and it was so embedded in these people because of hardship, but by God, that's what it was. Generation after generation after generation, these (Southern) people have been overlooked - black and white!"

Until Sun Records was established, there was no place in the South for artists to record. Slide guitarist Earl Hooker and Ike Turner were 60 miles from Memphis in Clarksdale, Miss., and Little Junior Parker was across the Mississippi River in West Memphis - but they all were unknowns until the rising of the Sun.

"I'm just telling you that to me, the things I was trying to do far exceeded any financial reward," **Phillips** said. "Beyond what I had to say and until I proved my ass right or my ass wrong."

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Step by step, the Sun stable marched out of the door.

Phillips sold Presley's contract to RCA Records for $40,000. Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins followed, signing with Columbia. Jerry Lee Lewis then went with Mercury and **Phillips** fired his chief engineer, Jack Clement. There were myriad reasons for the departures - from normal attrition to low royalty rates to **Phillips**' notorious fiscal conservatism. (In a separate interview, Sun artist and Memphis disc jockey Rufus Thomas told me that **Phillips** was "tighter than the bolts on the Brooklyn Bridge.")

How did **Phillips** feel about the mutiny?

"If I'm nothing else - and I may be nothing else - I am a realist," **Phillips** said. "Naturally, I didn't want them to leave. It was just like being in labor a long time and having a damn child. But I don't regret it. People decided there was money to be made in all of this. But these people, being realistic financially and every other way, I couldn't ask them to stay with me with the (modest) guarantees I could give them as a small businessman. And I wasn't going to be obligated to anybody who was going to try to dictate to me what I had to do. Just like I told the guy (Steve Sholes) I sold Presley's contract to. He wanted me to come over there (RCA) and produce for them. I told him, `Steve, the damn stuff I want to do, I wouldn't last as long as a snowball in July at a major record company and in addition to that I wouldn't be worth a damn to you unless I had total freedom."

Having sold the WEZI Memphis radio station in January (he still owns two small radio stations in Florence and a station in Lake Worth, Fla.), today **Phillips** and his sons dabble in the stock market and oversee their seven successful music publishing companies. **Sam Phillips** is also one of the original stockholders in the Holiday Inn chain.

"I kind of want to take it easy," **Phillips** said. "Things have been blessed upon me over my life, yet it seems like I've made a lot of demands on myself.

"I guess I've enjoyed having the opportunity to experience the things that I had with feeling, with the human mind and the human spirit to the extent that I could go to my grave tonight, look back and say, `God knows, I made as many or more mistakes as anybody on the face of this Earth, but I could flip that coin over and say somehow I was blessed to the extent that. . .

"*Hey, it didn't sting too bad!*"