

Elvis and Sun Studios

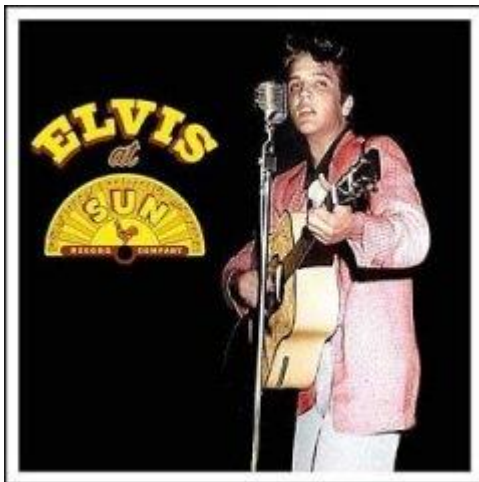
Have you ever been to Sun Studios? Whether you are standing outside and admiring the signage or inside the small museum taking photos at the microphone where Elvis stood, it is a magical reminder that great things grow out of small opportunities. This month, 70 years ago, Elvis recorded his first hit record "That's all right" at Sun Studios.

Here are the facts

History of Sun Studios in Memphis

Sun Studio, located at 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, is often referred to as the birthplace of rock 'n' roll. It was founded by Sam Phillips as Memphis Recording Service in 1950. The studio initially served as a recording facility for local Blues artists, providing a space where artists could pay to record their music. In 1952, Phillips launched Sun Records, a record label that would become legendary for discovering and recording some of the most influential musicians of the 20th century.

The studio's early recordings included Blues and R&B artists such as B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, and Junior Parker. Phillips' goal was to capture the raw, emotional sound of the African American music he loved and bring it to a wider audience.



Significance of Sun Studios in the career of Elvis Presley

Elvis Presley, who would become known as the King of Rock 'n' Roll, first walked into Sun Studio in 1953. He paid \$3.98 to record two songs, "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin", as a gift for his mother. Sam Phillips's assistant, Marion Keisker, took note of Presley's unique voice and potential.

In 1954, Phillips invited Presley back to the studio to record with guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black. The breakthrough moment came when they recorded "That's all right", a Blues song originally by Arthur Crudup. Phillips recognised the potential of the recording and had it released as a single, which received enthusiastic airplay on local radio stations. This recording is often considered one of the first rock 'n' roll records.

The success of "That's all right" launched Elvis Presley's career. Under Sun Records, Presley recorded other hits like "Blue Moon of Kentucky", "Good Rockin' Tonight" and "Mystery Train". These recordings showcased a blend of Country, Blues, and R&B, which would define the rockabilly genre and Elvis' early sound.

Elvis's time at Sun Studio was relatively brief but profoundly impactful. By 1955, his popularity had grown so much that RCA Victor bought his contract from Sun Records for

\$35,000, a record sum at the time. This move allowed Elvis to reach a national audience, solidifying his place in music history.

Sun Studio continued to influence the music industry, recording artists like Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Roy Orbison. These musicians, along with Elvis, became known as the "Million Dollar Quartet" and helped shape the sound of rock 'n' roll.

Today, Sun Studio is a National Historic Landmark and a popular tourist attraction, preserving the legacy of its groundbreaking contributions to music.

Now let's hear some of the back story

- When Sam Phillips brought Elvis in to see what he could do, Elvis was an unknown truck driver.



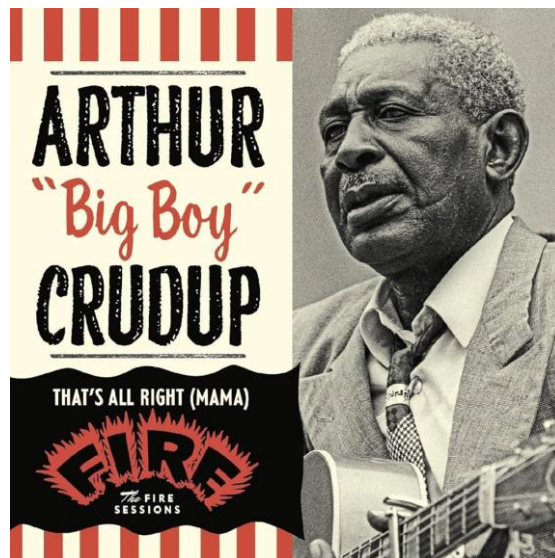
- The version of "That's all right" that Phillips recorded was unrehearsed! Elvis liked to release recordings that were often largely unrehearsed, throughout his career. When a song was right, he just knew it! Here are some more examples of songs that were released largely unrehearsed. These songs further illustrate Elvis Presley's ability to capture magic in the moment, relying on his natural talent and charisma to create memorable recordings with minimal rehearsal.
 1. **"Blue Moon of Kentucky" (1954)** - The flip side of "That's all right," this track was also recorded in a similar impromptu manner during the same session as "That's all right". The song, originally a waltz by Bill Monroe, was given an upbeat rockabilly twist by Elvis and his band.
 2. **"Mystery Train" (1955)** - Another Sun Studio classic, "Mystery Train" was recorded with minimal rehearsal. The raw, energetic feel of the track is a hallmark of the Sun Studio sessions.
 3. **"Hound Dog" (1956)** - Recorded at RCA Studios, the version of "Hound Dog" that became a hit was captured in just a few takes. Elvis's raw and powerful performance was largely unrehearsed, contributing to the song's electrifying energy.

4. **"Don't Be Cruel" (1956)** - During the same session as "Hound Dog", "Don't Be Cruel" was recorded with a similar spontaneous approach. The result was one of Elvis's biggest hits.
 5. **"Heartbreak Hotel" (1956)** - While not entirely unrehearsed, the recording session for "Heartbreak Hotel" had an impromptu and experimental feel. The haunting reverb effect, which became a defining feature of the song, was discovered during the session itself.
 6. **"One Night" (1957)** - Elvis recorded "One Night" in a spontaneous, high-energy session. The song was originally more explicit, but Elvis altered the lyrics during the recording, leading to the final, more suggestive version.
 7. **"Jailhouse Rock" (1957)** - The recording session for "Jailhouse Rock" was charged with energy, capturing the raw power of Elvis's performance. The track was recorded quickly, with Elvis bringing a sense of urgency and excitement to the take.
 8. **"A Big Hunk o' Love" (1958)** - Recorded during Elvis's time in the Army, this track was done in a whirlwind session while he was on leave. The urgency and spontaneity of the recording session are evident in the final product.
 9. **"I Got Stung" (1958)** - Also recorded during Elvis's leave from the Army, this track was captured in a single session with minimal rehearsal. The song's brisk pace and dynamic energy highlight the spontaneity of the recording.
 10. **"His Latest Flame" (1961)** - The recording of "His Latest Flame" was marked by a spontaneous and energetic performance from Elvis and his band. The song was captured quickly, with Elvis's enthusiasm driving the session.
 11. **"Little Sister" (1961)** - Recorded during the same session as "His Latest Flame", "Little Sister" was another track where the final version was largely unrehearsed. The spontaneous energy of the session is evident in the recording.
 12. **"Are You Lonesome Tonight?" (1960)** - Although the arrangement was prepared, Elvis's performance on this track was largely impromptu, especially the spoken-word bridge, which was delivered with a heartfelt and spontaneous feel.
- The sequence of events that led to the recording of "That's all right" began when Elvis recorded "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin", and Phillips' assistant Marion Keisker wrote down "Good ballad singer. Hold" in her notes. It was Kreisler who was impressed enough by the incredibly shy young singer that she repeatedly brought his name up to Phillips over the next year and mentioned that he seemed worth following up with.



Elvis, Bill and Scotty

- When Elvis first met and sang with guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black they were unimpressed. “He didn’t knock me out,” Moore told Phillips, “[but] the boy’s got a good voice.”
- Phillips tried “That’s all right” because Elvis began to mess around on the guitar, playing and singing “That’s all right”, but at least twice as fast as the original.
- “That’s all right” was released to Memphis radio station WHBQ just two days after it was recorded. It became an instant regional hit and set him on his path toward stardom.
- Arthur Crudup wrote and recorded the original version of “That’s all right”. Elvis did publicly credit the songwriter: “Down in Tupelo, Mississippi, I used to hear old Arthur Crudup bang his box the way I do now,” Presley told The Charlotte Observer in 1956, “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.”
- Crudup himself liked Presley’s interpretation. “He made it into a kind of hillbilly record,” Crudup later told the Los Angeles Times. “But I liked it. I thought it would be a hit. Some people like the blues, some don’t. But the way he did it, everyone liked it.”



If you ever get to Memphis, visit Sun Studios. It is an important part of Elvis’ history, and well worth it! <https://www.sunstudio.com/about> And listen (again) to “That’s all right” – raw, beautiful Elvis ... right there!

BSH would like to acknowledge these sources for information in this article:

- <https://chicago.suntimes.com/music/2024/07/05/bluesman-arthur-crudup-wrote-thats-all-right-elvis-first-hit-song-but-he-barely-got-paid-for-it>
- <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/elvis-presley-records-thats-all-right-mama>
- ChatGPT