

SONS OF SUN

Elvis, Jerry Lee, Johnny and Me

(The Sam Phillips Story)

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CHARACTERS

Sam Phillips

Marion Keisker - Sam's friend and assistant, mid 30s

Sam's mother - 40s

Sam's school teacher - 30s

Narrator - a contemporary music journalist-historian, male, 40s

Mr Connelly - radio station manager, 40s

Dewey Phillips - influential Memphis DJ, 30s

Horace Phillips - older brother of Sam's, late 20s

Howlin' Wolf (Mr Chester Burnett)

Elvis

Johnny Cash

Carl Perkins

Jerry Lee Lewis

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The characters listed above are tailored for an acting cast of three.

TIME: 1932 to 1959

2017 - Narrator

SETTINGS – An inner-city bar, 2017

Cotton fields, 1932

School room, 1938

Beale St, Memphis, 1945

Memphis Recording Service, 1950 - 59

Radio station in Memphis, 1954

SONG SELECTIONS

ACT 1

- 1) Little Red Rooster (Dixon)**
- 2) Where Would I Go But to the Lord? (Trad)**
- 3) Cotton Fields (Leadbelly)**
- 4) Peace In the Valley (Dorsey)**
- 5) Night Train To Memphis (Acuff)**
- 6) Boogie In the Park (Louis)**
- 7) Rocket 88 (Turner)**
- 8) How Many More Years? (Burnett)**
- 9) Just Walkin' In the Rain (The Prisonaires)**
- 10) Love My Baby/Tiger Man (Thomas)**
- 11) Blue Moon (Rodgers/Hart)**
- 12) Harbour Lights (Williams/Kennedy)**
- 13) When It Rains It Really Pours (Emerson)**
- 14) Tomorrow Night (Coslow/Grosz)**
- 15) That's All Right (Crudup)**
- 16) Good Rockin' Tonight (Brown)**
- 17) Baby Let's Play House (Gunter)**

ACT 2

- 1) Blue Moon of Kentucky (Monroe)**
- 2) Mystery Train (Parker/Phillips)**
- 3) All My Trials (Yarrow/Stookey/Okun)**
- 4) Everybody's Trying To Be My Baby (Perkins)**
- 5) Blue Suede Shoes (Perkins)**
- 6) Honey Don't (Perkins)**
- 7) Heartbreak Hotel (Axton/Durden/Presley)**
- 8) Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord) (Trad)**
- 9) Folsom Prison Blues (Cash)**
- 10) I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin') (Wakely)**
- 11) A Mess Of Blues (Pomus/Schuman)**
- 12) I Walk The Line (Cash)**
- 13) Ooby Dooby (Orbison)**
- 14) Brown Eyed Handsome Man (Berry)**
- 15) Great Balls Of Fire (Lewis)**
- 16) Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On (Lewis)**
- 17) Matchbox (Perkins)**
- 18) I Still Miss Someone (Cash)**
- 19) I Fell in Love (Smith)**
- 20) Sun King Rising (Kennedy)**
- 21) An American Trilogy**

CAST

Matthew Charleston – Sam Phillips

Victoria Beck – Marion Keisker/Sam’s mother/Sam’s schoolteacher

Ben Maclaine – Narrator and all other male characters

SONS OF SUN BAND

John Kennedy – vocals, rhythm guitar

Murray Cook – lead guitar

Paul Scott – bass guitar

ACT 1

Band play Little Red Rooster. Guitar continues under narration. Spotlight on narrator. The other two actors are seated in darkness behind him.

NARRATOR: Memphis, Tennessee. Founded in 1819. By the early 1900s it was the city with the world's largest cotton market, a market where the workers paid a terrible price. Through the brutality of slavery and the tedium of cotton picking, an African-American music of daily survival emerged. In those long days, a sound of hope, belief and stoicism would eventually lead to the joyous sounds emanating out of 1950s radios; the rock and roll classics that have become the soundtrack to our lives. It was Sam Phillips who got many of those songs from the street and the field and the lonely little southern bars to the world. At the beginning, all he had was two tape machines: one recording then feeding the sound into the second machine a split second later. That was the famous slapback echo effect. It was genius. Nobody else could work it out. His music gave the world a symphony for the soul. As Sam said: many of the world's great discoveries have been made in daydreams, and that's how I began, and how I imagined the blues began...in somebody's dream.

Band begins Where Would I Go But To The Lord. It is 1932. Sam is nine years old.

NARRATOR: Samuel Cornelius Phillips. Nine years old. Born January 5th, 1923. Every afternoon straight from school, he goes out to the fields to pick cotton. Him and his seven brothers and sisters. He's the youngest. Out in the fields, Sam listened to the singing of the Negroes.

SAM: And I try and sing along too. But my brother Horace, he says, I can't sing good. He keeps telling me to shut up.

NARRATOR: In his home in Florence, Alabama, a black man, Uncle Silas Payne, had just started living with the family.

SAM: I like Uncle Silas. He sings songs about pancakes, and he tells me how bad this Depression is, then starts singin' pancake songs again. All the night. I sing along too – real loud. And Uncle Silas don't care how I sound.

Where Would I Go Lord But To The Lord continues rising in volume towards its conclusion.

NARRATOR: In 1938, Sam was fifteen years old. When he wasn't in the fields, he spent his spare time playing tuba in his school marching band and dreaming of music.

Enter a female school teacher.

TEACHER: Sam, I'm sorry to have to tell you. You're just not good enough to play in this band.

SAM: But Maam, I love the band.

TEACHER: Sam, I'm not asking you to leave the band. I'm asking you to lead it. Remember that day you forgot your tuba and I asked you to conduct? Well, those kids played better with you in front of them.

SAM: Maam, I don't know what you mean.

TEACHER: Well, I've got an idea. I think with some help you could learn how to conduct the band on your own. How about at practice on Tuesday we start tryin' to do that? *(Pause)* Well, what do you think?

SAM: I'll be there, Maam.

Band play Cotton Fields by Leadbelly

Sam then turns and speaks to a radio manager.

SAM: Mr Connelly, I want to get into radio real bad. Real bad. Why don't you let me host a gospel music program on your station?

MR CONNELLY: Woah, slow down, Sam. This is the third time you've come around here this week.

SAM: I love music more than anybody. I listen to the radio all night, every night. I know all the singers.

MR CONNELLY: I'm busy right now. Too many things on my mind. Bills to pay.

SAM: I ain't askin' for no money from ya.

MR CONNELLY: You'll work for nothing?

SAM: Yes sir. I'll work for nothing...for a month.

MR CONNELLY: Well, if you want it that badly, it's yours. I do admire ambition in a boy.

SAM: Yes, Mr Connelly. I've got lots of plans with music and radio...and when I'm older I'd also like to be a criminal defence lawyer helping the poor too.

MR CONNELLY: That's the way! Big plans, Sam. Come by on Saturday afternoon about two and we'll have a talk and a soda.

Exit Mr Connelly.

Music stops.

Enter Sam's mother wiping her hands on an apron.

MOTHER: Sam, there's no way around it. You're gonna have to go out and earn some money for the family now that your Daddy's gone. I need everyone to give somethin' to keep this land goin' especially when your brothers and sisters are all tryin' to feed their own children too.

SAM: You mean go away from high school, Mama? I don't want to. How can I be a lawyer if I don't go to school?

MOTHER: You learned to sign for deaf Aunt Emma without going to school.

SAM: But Mama –

MOTHER: Horace, Horace, get in here and help me talk some sense into your baby brother.

Enter Horace Phillips.

HORACE: I'm hearin' what's goin' on, Mama. The family needs money, Sam. You gotta do what Mama tells you and what I tell you.

SAM: It's not fair.

HORACE: You might not think it's fair but I was workin' from the age of ten, getting up at five in the mornin' with Daddy and our brothers and Uncle Silas.

MOTHER: The grocer needs somebody and the funeral parlour's advertisin' for help.

Sam takes the newspaper from his mother.

MOTHER: I'm proud of you, son.

HORACE (*Slapping him on the back*): That's it, baby brother.

Exit Horace Phillips

Band begin Peace In The Valley.

Narrator begins at song's conclusion.

NARRATOR: Sam worked to help support his family, and then after a whirlwind romance, he married Rebecca Burns. That was in 1942 and Sam was 19 years old. Three years later, they had a son, Knox, and that year, after working in radio across the south, Sam made it to where he always wanted to be – Beale St, Memphis, where he became friends with the popular and influential DJ, Dewey Phillips.

Sam speaks the following to Dewey Phillips who staggers towards him. Sam puts his arm around him and the two boys look across at the lights of

Memphis. Dewey drinks heavily, Sam moderately. Dewey moves to the side to urinate before rejoining Sam.

SAM: Beale Street. Man, that's beautiful. Hey Dewey, it was Uncle Silas who first told me about Beale St. In '39, my family drove through here. Five of us brothers crammed into a little Coupe, top down in the pouring rain at four in the mornin'. Man, even at that time, I'm telling you Broadway never looked that busy! People everywhere. People who must of saved every penny to have a vacation on Beale St. And the music...someone on every corner strumming a guitar, or banging on a lard can with a broomstick and a string. Man, the energy of the place! I'll never forget it. All this music...one day Dewey, one day I'm gonna make records right here in Memphis, and it's the black music from all around here that's gonna get heard.

DEWEY: That takes money. That takes time. You got neither but nobody thinks much like you Sam Phillips and you ain't even been poppin' pills! I'd like to hear your big plans when you have been poppin'! What are you gonna do then...be President? C'mon, let's get our feet tappin' where the women are wild. I need to get myself a rhythm and blues girlfriend. I'm gonna find me the right Negro girl for the rest of my life right on down there in Beale St!

Exit Dewey.

Band play Night Train To Memphis by Roy Acuff.

In the studio, Sam fiddles with band equipment, inspects microphones and suggests the band could move over there or perhaps over there.

SAM: I've moved the mics on you boys. You play this song loud onstage, don't ya? I don't want you to play at studio volume. I'm looking for an intimate sound. I want you to play as close to what sounds natural to y'all. I am a sound hound!

Night Train To Memphis continues with Alleluia choruses from the actors.

Enter Marion Keisker.

Music stops.

NARRATOR (*To Audience*): This is Marion Keisker. She worked with Sam down at radio station WREC.

MARION: He would keep tellin' me about his dreams of producing music in his own studio. As the months went by, those dreams became plans and we started looking together for an empty shop-front. I just got it in my mind that I wanted to help Sam. I knew he was a married man and I was a divorcee with a nine-year old son. Don't you dare ask me if I'm in love with Sam Phillips!

SAM: Have we really bought this place, Marion? 706 Union Avenue? An auto-repair shop? Look at these walls. If I'm to get the sound I want out of this place, I'm gonna have to get my hands real dirty. And you know what, Marion? I can't wait.

MARION: You'll need a good carpenter though.

SAM: Can we afford it?

MARION: Maybe for half-a-day, but that's all.

SAM: It don't matter. I can build it with my own damn hands and I can get by with less than anybody with my sound equipment because I can make it do more.

MARION: I was thinking we'll need some business cards.

SAM: Good idea.

MARION: Sam, what are we called? I was thinking The Sam Phillips Studio.

SAM: No.

MARION: Well, you got a better idea?

SAM: Memphis Recording Service – we record anything – anywhere – anytime. What do you think?

MARION: Oh, I like that.

Enter Dewey Phillips who is high.

DEWEY: Hey ho ho Samuel Cornelius Phillips, I'm ready to get a record label goin' right outta this ol' shop. From here straight to my radio show. A big label goin' strong with yours truly, Big Daddy-O-Dewey!

MARION: Oh no, Sam. You would be better –

DEWEY: Don't listen to Marion. She don't like me much, never has. We'll call it the Phillips label – after you Sam - The Hottest Thing In The Country. The hottest thing goin' in 1950!

MARION: Don't come cryin' to me if it don't work.

DEWEY: Will you stop killin' the party, Marion. Can't you do a bit of positive thinkin'? Goddamnit!

MARION: Dewey, I'm not stayin' in this room any longer to listen to your crazy pill poppin' drinkin' plans. I'll be back early in the mornin', Sam.

DEWEY: Remember he's a married man, Marion. Why don't you go Boogie In Another Park?

Band play Boogie in The Park by Joe Hill Louis.

MARION (*To Audience*): I took no joy from it but I was right. Dewey was no good. Always up all night for all the wrong reasons. Boogie In The Park only sold a couple of hundred copies and that Phillips label died. Right through 1951 Sam was recording some great songs and some not so great ones too, all being recorded in this studio for other labels. Sam was worried about his family's welfare as Becky had just given birth to a second son, little Jerry.

SAM: Marion....what time is it?

MARION: It's eight o'clock Sam, have you been here all night again?

SAM: Well Marion this is what happens when you have Ike Turner in your studio. You know how crazy that man is. I wasted so much time trying to convince him to put Jackie, the sax player, on the vocals because everyone, except Ike, knows he can't sing.

MARION: Sam, you gotta slow down. You look terrible.

SAM: Yeah I know, I know – but Marion I have to tell you this funny story. So the band were driving up Highway 61 from Mississippi and Willie's guitar amp falls off the top of the car. Now it busted the tube in the amp. The boys were fooling around trying to fix it and I said let's just plug the damn thing in! Marion, you should've heard it! This great distorted sound. You shoulda heard the fun that was in that thing! Now, they're playing this song called Rocket 88, and man, anything with a rocket in it, that's automatically moving!

MARION: Sam. Are you alright?

SAM: I'm fine. I just haven't slept is all. I can't turn my mind off.

MARION: It's the eighteen-hour days: the radio station job, recordin' here, running to the Peabody Hotel for the big band broadcasts, night after night after night. C'mon Sam, you are going home.

SAM: I can't go home. I've got work to do.

MARION: I'll take care of it. Let's go Sam. Now.

Band begins Rocket 88

NARRATOR: Sam was hospitalized twice for nervous breakdowns and was given courses of electro-shock therapy. Meanwhile, that song, Rocket 88, became the first rock'n'roll song with Sam later hailed as the founder and inventor of the form. Straight from hospital, Sam threw himself back into work. He kept tellin' all his musicians to play the music like it was their own. The sound he wanted had nothing to do with perfection. Sam wanted spontaneity, the essence of the song. He wanted the right spirit shining through. It had to be...imperfectly perfect! While his studio was rockin' into the future, Sam was fighting an old race battle at WREC.

SAM (*On phone*): No, I ain't workin' for you at that radio station no more, Mr Wooten, because you're a bigot. I ain't gonna take your snide remarks about me bein' with black musicians, you goddamn son-of-a bitch. You've pushed me too far – but I would like to thank you – because I'm just gonna keep recordin' and producin' on my own and I never want to see your miserable face and your lousy job again.

Sam slams down phone

MARION: Well done. He's had that comin' for a long time. (*Pause*) Mr Chester Burnett is here.

Enter Howlin' Wolf.

SAM: Wolf, come in! You are the medicine I need. Marion, this man makes the music where the soul of man never dies. Freedom, truth, heart. Wolf, come sit on that little chair, all six foot six, and what, 300 pounds? Relax and stick out your big feet, and play like a madman, and warm that harmonica when you feel like a singin' break. Play your ass off 'cause, mam, you got one big ass!

HOWLIN' WOLF: I'm down today, Mr Phillips. I got no money for rent, no money for food. I was broke when I was born...I don't have to tell you nuthin'...forty years old. I feel like a nobody today.

SAM: You a nobody. Wolf, listen to me. I've learnt so much from you. You're a master painter. In three verses you tell the greatest stories I'll ever hear in my life. You a nobody. You're No 1 as far as I'm concerned. Lord, you been out there playin' for twenty years already. How come no-one's been recordin' you?

HOWLIN' WOLF: Mr Phillips, where would us blacks ever get a chance to record somethin' before this place got built?

SAM: Let's go now, Wolf! Marion, order Wolf and his fine band the biggest godawmighty hamburgers in Memphis.

Exit Howlin' Wolf. Band play How Many More Years.

Sam picks up the phone.

SAM: Leonard, what do you want from me? Chess Records, RPM Records, you can all go to hell. I'm sick of arguin' with y'all and not seeing any money. The competition's getting bigger everywhere, and now you wanna take the Wolf to Chicago to record there..... are you threatening me? Well, I'll tell you something. I got a pistol in the top drawer I'd be happy to introduce you to. You will hear from my lawyer.

Sam leaves phone off-hook.

SAM: That's enough for one day –

MARION: That's enough for five days. *(Pause)* Sam, I won't draw my pay this month.

SAM: Marion, you gotta feed yourself. And what about your son? You gotta look after him. No, Marion, no. We'll manage somehow. My Daddy lost everything that he lived and worked for. One day he had money. The next he knew it was gone. *(Long Pause)* All that music when I was a kid comes from hard times: dry earth, wind, floods, slavery. Y'know, some Sunday mornings back in Florence, I'd sit on the balcony with Uncle Silas and we would watch people passin' by on their way to church and they'd be singing and the sun would be shining. Man, they'd sing so beautifully, this glorious and uplifting sound. Marion, even when these people were feeling bad they were feeling good. *(Pause)* I sure as hell can't quit.

MARION: Well then. We've got to change things so you're taking home a good wage and the creditors aren't knocking on the door every week. I'm fending off some angry people. I know it's crazy but I think you gotta start again. Start afresh in this studio.

SAM: Marion, we've been...I don't want to start my own label.

MARION: To make any money you need to claim ownership of what you record. That's pure and simple business. (*Pause*) Sam, do we really have to have this conversation again?

Long Pause

SAM: Congratulations Marion. I think you've just got yourself a new job! Here's to Sun Records.

NARRATOR: That's what he called it – Sun Records, the label yellow with a rooster in the middle. He released records every two or three weeks and during that first couple of years he recorded songs that the public and the critics never stopped loving.

Just Walkin' In The Rain by The Prisonaires is sung unaccompanied. Band then play Love My Baby/Tiger Man by Rufus Thomas.

MARION (*To Audience*): But the bills continued mounting and there was nothing much left for promotion. Sam couldn't hold many of the black artists he nurtured. Some went off to labels dedicated to rhythm and blues. Some felt bitter and discarded. His biggest disappointment was not getting Howlin' Wolf. Sam had the vision of wanting white kids to enjoy black kids' music and black kids to enjoy white kids' music. He was always looking for the power of the feel between the races. One day, Sam said: 'If I could only find a white boy who could sing like a Negro, I could make a million dollars!'

SAM: I never said that.

MARION (*To Sam*): Yes, you did.

SAM (*To Marion*): Who's next? Haven't I got to record somethin' for a bah-mitzvah?

MARION: That bah-mitzvah is tomorrow. I wish you'd write more things down. And are you ever gonna get a desk? Y'know, I've just met a very charming young man. He says he lives real close and that he wants to record something. He must only be seventeen, eighteen. He says he wants to make a recording so he can take it home and show and please his Ma. He said:

Enter Elvis who moves close to Marion.

ELVIS: If you know anyone that needs a singer...

MARION: What kind of a singer are you?

ELVIS: I sing all kinds.

Band plays Blue Moon under the following dialogue.

MARION: Well, who do you sound like?

ELVIS: I don't sound like nobody else.

SAM: I got a lot on my plate, Marion. And I ain't feeling sentimental today. Who's next?

MARION: That boy's waiting. Let him record something. I told him it's \$3.98 plus tax.

SAM: What's your name?

ELVIS (*Very softly*): Elvis, sir.

SAM: Speak up, man!.

MARION: Don't shout, Sam. He's very shy.

Blue Moon finishes.

ELVIS: I'm Elvis Presley, sir.

Elvis moves over to the stage band, confers with band and begins to run through songs. The first song is the slow ballad Harbour Lights. Sam listens at control desk. Song peters out after two verses.

SAM: That's real nice, Elvis. And what else have you got?

Band begin When It Rains It Really Pours, a stronger rhythmic song. Song breaks down in laughter after first two lines.

ELVIS: I just can't do it with all these people around.

SAM: Elvis, now you gonna have to get used to people watching you. Not too close to that microphone you hear? Okay, let's go again.

Band restarts When It Rains It Really Pours. Song finishes.

SAM (*Getting excited*): Yeah. That's starting to cook. Now we're getting somewhere. Tape's still rolling.

Band start another slow ballad Tomorrow Night. Song finishes.

SAM: Alright...Let's take a break now. I've got to change the tape.

During the break the band singer begins in jest a sped-up version of the Arthur Crudup song That's All Right, Mama. Then, the band gets behind it. They're having great fun. Suddenly, Sam stops them.

SAM: Whoa whoa whoa a minute! What is that? What have you been doin', Elvis? You been holdin' out on me all this time, through all these months, and all those ballads we've been doin'? What in God's name are you doin' there?

ELVIS: You like that, Mr Phillips?

SAM: Do I like it? That thing is a hit! It's a hit!

Exit Elvis.

Band plays That's All Right, Mama.

Enter DJ Dewey Phillips. He spins a seven-inch record on his finger and takes some pills.

Sam and Marion drink coffee and look at the papers.

DEWEY: This is Dewey Phillips on WHBQ in Memphis, Tennessee, and this is Red Hot an' Blue. It's Friday night, tomorrow's payday, a bath day, that's a good deal! They say I'm a fast talkin' crazy hillbilly. Now, my good friend at Sun Studios, Sam Phillips, no relation, how many times do I have to tell people that – well, Sam's given me somethin' I just gotta play. Now, I told Sam that I didn't think I could play it 'cause I couldn't classify it. I regretted sayin' that. So this goes out to Vernon, Bernice, little Olive and Ed, JB and Bullfrog. It's the Arthur Crudup song That's All Right, Mama – sounding like nothin' you heard before and made by a local white boy who went to school not a mile from here, Elvis Presley. That's right, remember the name, Elvis Presley. I'll make you remember it 'cause I'm gonna play it seven times tonight! That's All Right, Mama. Sit on it and if you can't sit on it, lay on it!

Band continue That's All Right Mama. Music stops.

DEWEY: And just landing in my hot hot hands, more Elvis Presley.

Band begin Good Rockin' Tonight

DEWEY: Good Rockin' Tonight. Good Rockin Tonight! That's what I'll be doing when I get home to my rhythm and blues lady! Lay on it!

Band continue Good Rockin' Tonight

Music stops.

Sam and Marion are at an Elvis concert enjoying the pandemonium and moving together side by side. A recording of screaming teenage girls can be heard.

MARION: What in God's name is that man doing with his legs?

SAM: He's just keepin' time, Marion.

MARION: All these little girls screaming –

SAM: That's right! Includin' you!

MARION: They know how that music's making them feel and their mothers know it too.

SAM: And the boyfriends want to beat him up because they know what it is too! Sex! Yes mam, Memphis is falling in love with Elvis.

MARION: Forget Memphis, you mark my words, Sam Phillips. The whole world is gonna fall in love with Elvis.

Baby Let's Play house begins.

SAM: Marion, this is what I've been waitin' for my whole life.

Sam and Marion exit as song plays out. Lights fade to black.

End of Act 1

INTERVAL

ACT 2

*Band play Blue Moon of Kentucky which segues into Mystery Train.
The narrator combs his hair and pours himself a whisky.*

NARRATOR: Elvis sold records for Sun but only in certain states and not on a big scale nationwide. He was an overnight sensation in the south but it wasn't enough to make Sam a rich man. Imitators, hopefuls, anybody who had just picked up a guitar came knocking on the Memphis Recording Service door all through 1955. Everyone wanted to be Elvis. Sam made many records he loved but that didn't mean they all sold well. He needed some hits. He needed greater national exposure, a presence in big cities like Chicago and New York.

Sam and Marion in the studio. Sam is exhausted. He does not allow Marion to say anything as they glance at paperwork.

SAM: Marion, we've put out five Elvis records. He's on the road every night. When am I gonna record him again? I got major record companies showin' interest, Colonel Tom Parker sniffin' everythin'. You know he's been spreadin' rumours that Elvis' contract is for sale. So I called him and said: Tom, what's all this?

And he said: Well, are ya interested?

And I said: Enough money.

And he said: Well, how much is that?

And I said: Thirty five thousand dollars. No record company will pay that even if Jesus Christ and The Devil came down to do a duet!

MARION: You're not really thinking of selling Elvis?

SAM: What choice do I have? You've seen the figures. We need that money. We gotta get help, hire other people. I cannot drive thousands of miles anymore to record shops and radio stations. Jesus.

Band play All My Trials. Song Finishes. Marion exits.

Two members of stage band become the brothers of Carl Perkins.

NARRATOR: But Sam did have more road trips. One day, arriving back at the studio, three greasy haired brothers were waiting for him.

SAM (*Calling out, in the opposite direction to the waiting brothers*): Becky, I promise you I won't be too late tonight and I'll have a day off on the weekend for sure. We'll drive somewhere on Sunday for a picnic with the boys. I promise. (*Looking across to Carl Perkins*) What do you boys want at this hour?

CARL: That's a mighty fine two tone blue Cadillac your wife just drove away.

SAM: What of it? Who are you?

CARL: We're the Perkins Brothers. I'm Carl Perkins.

SAM: Mr Perkins, I got work to do. You can leave a message with my assistant, Marion.

CARL: I've done that. We're not leaving any more messages. We want to audition for you, Mr Phillips. You don't know what it would mean to us. One song.

SAM: I'm a busy man, Mr Perkins. Now, if you don't mind.

CARL: One song. Please.

SAM: Godawmighty. It better be good.

Band play Everybody's Trying To Be My Baby. Song finishes.

SAM: My God, you three are hard drinkin' whisky boned boys. Carl, your voice don't sound like nobody else. You're writin', arrangin', speeding up blues licks, taking those country songs and puttin' on the black man's rhythm. Your rhythm driven like Elvis.

CARL: Mr Phillips, I was playin' what Elvis plays now a long time before him. A long time. Do you understand that?

SAM: Is that so.

CARL: That's the truth of the matter.

SAM: I guess I better tell Bob Neal you should go on tour with Elvis if you're so goddamn sure about that.

Band plays intro chords to Blue Suede Shoes.

CARL: Mr Phillips, it's like five-thirty in the mornin', ain't it? Don't you want us to stop?

SAM: Carl, that clock on the wall has said 5.30 for the last three and half years!

CARL: Mr Phillips, that was terrible.

SAM: It was original.

CARL: But it was just a big original mistake!

SAM: That's what Sun Records is! That's what we are! If we gotta work through a few mistakes in order to unlock what's unique about you then so be it! Let's keep playin' cat and we might just have ourselves a rolling stone!

CARL: A rolling stone?

SAM: A hit! A rolling stone is a hit!

Band play Honey Don't.

Sam picks up the phone.

SAM: Tom Parker, what do you want? What's the news on Elvis? *(Pause)* You got what I asked for from RCA Records? You got \$35,000 for Elvis. Jesus. Of course, I'm gonna keep my end of the bargain. *(Pause)* Whatever you've got in store for Elvis, make sure you treat him right. Keep him workin' on the music. And tell RCA, I want no calls on how I recorded him.

Band play Heartbreak Hotel. The band singer then begins a version of the gospel song Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord).

Enter Johnny Cash.

JOHNNY: Mr Phillips, I'm JR Cash. This here's my band. We've got some gospel songs prepared.

Singing stops.

SAM: Look Mr Cash, gospel songs don't sell. I told you this when you first called me and I'm telling you again now. I'm not sayin' you can't sing it. I just can't sell it. Now what else have you got?

JOHNNY: I got some other songs that are not about our Lord.

SAM: Amen.

Band begin Folsom Prison Blues.

SAM: Tell your boss you won't be selling any home appliances for the rest of the day.

Band finish song. Enter Marion.

MARION (*To Audience*): Elvis would sometimes send me a postcard. He never forgot how I convinced Sam to give him a start. Across town, Sam set up an all-female radio station after his proposal for an all-negro station got knocked back by bigoted licensing boards. The all-female radio station was called WHER – 1000 Beautiful Watts of Sound and we girls did everything.

There was not one man around! Sam's wife Becky was a fine DJ and there were many others too. We loved it. Meanwhile, Carl Perkins needed a hit record.

Enter Carl.

SAM: Carl, I hear what you're saying.

CARL: Mr Phillips, I recorded Blue Suede Shoes and Honey Don't before Christmas. When are they gonna be released?

SAM: Carl. The wheels are in motion. You got some great songs there but you have to be patient.

CARL: Patient? I heard how much you got for Elvis and right now I ain't seen a cent from Sun Records.

SAM: Carl, we are all waiting to get paid.

CARL: Mr Phillips, I'm playin' one dollar, two dollar a night joints. I'm still pickin' cotton. That's where I gotta go now. When the record comes out, I need to be paid quick.

Exit Carl.

SAM: What?

MARION: You know, Carl's right.

SAM: Oh, is that so –

MARION: I can look into this Sam.

SAM: Marion, I'll take care of it.

MARION: Sam, you just got paid for Elvis –

SAM: Marion! He can wait.

MARION: You never listen to me anymore. It's get this, get that, call that person. We are supposed to be partners.

SAM: You see me more than my wife! My sons! Jesus, what do you want from me? The wage is alright, ain't it?

MARION: It's not about that.

SAM: You like it over at WHER, don't ya?

Marion becomes teary.

SAM: Don't put this on me, Marion. We're still partners.

MARION: I gotta get home now.

SAM: I gotta get a drink.

Marion exits.

Band play I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin').

Narration begins over song.

NARRATOR: Sales of Blue Suede Shoes was taking Sun Records to another level. At the record's peak, Carl was in a car accident on the way to New York. He survived but only just. Carl's wife was eight months pregnant with their third child. That accident ruined his chances of major stardom.

Enter Marion. Sam is attending to a microphone.

MARION: Carl will be in hospital for months, Sam. I won't ask again but what about his royalties? I'm more than capable of doing some calculations.

SAM: Okay Marion. You win.

Marion and Sam stare hard at one another.

NARRATOR: The royalties...could anybody ever get to the bottom of the royalties? Stories varied. It was everything from Sam robbing his artists blind to Sam having no money to pay himself.

SAM: Well now, look who's back. Good to see ya Carl.

Enter Carl. He moves very close to Sam.

CARL: Blue Suede Shoes is selling 20,000 copies a day and RCA have got Elvis singin' it. That paperwork, those figures you sent me. I couldn't make it out. People are telling me I should get over \$100,000 dollars. This cheque, it's \$26,000, and what's more, that was real nice of you to get me that Cadillac now I'm out of hospital. Do you think I would have accepted it if I knew it was coming out of my royalties. Tell me, how much I'm truly owed?

SAM: I ain't gonna rob you or anyone. Shops are slow to pay same as they ever were.

Carl drinks some whisky

CARL: So you keep saying Sam.

Exit Carl.

Band play A Mess of Blues which then segues into I Walk The Line. As I Walk The Line continues, Sam speaks to Johnny Cash.

SAM: I know you recorded I Walk The Line as a slow ballad, JR - but it drags. The faster version is the one I chose. It's doin' great on the country charts. It's hittin' the pop charts. Why are you complainin'?

JOHNNY: You lied to me, Sam.

SAM: I didn't lie. I made a company choice.

JOHNNY: I want you to withdraw the fast version and replace it with the ballad version.

SAM: I won't do that. The sales figures say I'm right.

JOHNNY: And I want to record gospel songs.

SAM: You ain't gonna do gospel songs for Sun Records.

JOHNNY: You don't understand what I want to do.

Long Pause

SAM: Hey, wait. I been meaning to thank you for bringing Roy Orbison to me.

JOHNNY: When Roy first called you, you said Johnny Cash don't run Sun Records. You slammed the phone in his ear.

SAM: That was a mistake. You got a big heart, Johnny Cash. Tell Roy to give me a call.

JOHNNY: No problem. And if you don't mind me saying, you won't find a better singer than Roy.

Exit Johnny Cash.

Band play Ooby Dooby by Roy Orbison.

NARRATOR: 1956 was a sleepless year for Sam. One day in early December a gathering happened in the studio that will live forever in

modern musical history. Was it planned? Was it coincidence? We'll never know.

Enter Marion. Enter Jerry Lee Lewis. Stage band represent Cash, Perkins and Presley.

MARION (*To Sam*): Jerry Lee is here Sam to start putting piano on those songs of Carl's. (*To Jerry*) Carl's already in the studio, Jerry Lee. Johnny's around too. Your record, Jerry Lee, that old song Crazy Arms. I love it.

JERRY LEE: Well, thank you Maam. The devil musta been off my shoulder when I recorded it to impress a woman as nice as you.

MARION: Elvis is in there too.

SAM: Elvis, Elvis, what are you doing here? This is special. With all four of you, I better roll tape! Play whatever you want!

Band plays Brown Eyed Handsome Man. Sam, as if on the street, is yelling out to the passing public.

SAM: Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, I want to thank you for getting down here so quickly. I have something real special for ya'll today. Right here in my little studio I've got none other than... Elvis, Carl, Jerry Lee and Johnny Cash bangin' away together. That's right. This may never happen again! Get yourselves inside for a photo opportunity!

Band continue Brown Eyed Handsome Man.

Lights cross fade to Sam and Jerry Lee who are in the studio, drinking.

SAM: People ask me why I record piano on lots of my records? People who say that ain't heard you, Jerry Lee!

JERRY: I don't care who hears me! It ain't gonna help them and I'll tell you why. Just so you know all about me, Mr Phillips, I ain't walkin' with God. God is walkin' against me. I'm a sinner. You're a sinner.

SAM: Jerry – now look Jerry.

JERRY: And I'm goin' to H..E..L..L...and the only way back for me to be redeemed is to be born again and stay pure like a little child...I mean no sin, no sin whatsoever.

SAM: Impossible, Jerry. Impossible. In my opinion, Jesus Christ is just as real today –

JERRY: You got to be so pure, so pure. You gotta walk and talk with God to go to heaven.

SAM: Oh maybe, maybe. You gotta be good but you don't have to be The Virgin Mary. I only know that I ain't never seen more talent than in those ten fingers of yours – never. That's gotta be a gift from somewhere holy.

Jerry Lee starts lighting matches.

JERRY: It don't matter to me what you think you believe. I've studied the bible through and nothing you say can help either of us.

SAM: Put the matches away for the love of God!

Jerry lights another match.

JERRY: The truth is in the bible. I got no angels hovering above. Not one wing! I just got the devil in me coming through every paw. The devil! And the bible tells me that every single page! That devil's eating me every day! And if this studio is holy I can set it alight right now and it will not burn! This studio will not burn!

SAM: This studio is indeed holy and music saves souls but it will burn alright! You're insane, Jerry. Insane!

Sam grabs Jerry Lee and gets the matches out of his hand. Jerry Lee laughs. Both exit.

Band play Great Balls Of Fire

NARRATOR: By the time the calendar hit mid '57, Jerry Lee, to everybody's surprise, had become the big Sun Records star. When Jerry Lee's next hit arrived, he was being touted as the new Elvis.

Exit narrator. Band play Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On

Enter Carl

MARION: Can I get you some coffee, Carl? You don't look so well.

CARL: No thanks, Maam.

MARION: What can I do for you?

CARL: Y'know, Johnny and I are getting sick of all the time Sam spends on Jerry Lee. He's all we hear about now. We're always waitin' for money too. It don't matter so much to Jerry Lee. He only buys pills and lighter fluid.

MARION: I'm not here as much as I once was so I don't know everything that's going on. Other people are looking after things. Sun Records is a big business now.

CARL: By other people you mean...Sally? Sally Willbourn? Sounds like we're both feeling unappreciated.

MARION: We don't always get what we want.

CARL: Sometimes we got to look elsewhere to get what we deserve.

MARION: Be careful, Carl. Sam wouldn't want to lose you. Say, can I buy you something to eat? You look as if you ain't eaten for days.

CARL: I haven't had a night in the same bed for five weeks. My kids are forgettin' my name. C'mon Maam. I'm buying.

Band play Matchbox. Exit Marion and Carl

Sam on the phone

SAM: Those promoters want Jerry Lee to tour England! Of course, he'll do it. Jerry Lee's gonna be the worldwide breakthrough for Sun Records. Those English people won't know what hits them when he touches down. Book the tour, Jimmy. Book it quick. If I could swim to England I'd do it but you know me...I ain't ever gettin' up in a jet plane!

Enter Johnny Cash, under-slept and rattled.

JOHNNY: More time on Jerry, hey Sam? Things are gettin' real syrupy in that new studio you've just built across town. All these extra musicians and new producers. Why am I over there gettin' smothered by people?

SAM: That new studio is one of the best in the country. It's got everything. Jack Clement knows what he's doing. He's a great producer, songwriter, arranger, you name it.

JOHNNY: I'm not liking what you're trying to turn me into. Sending me to Canada. The girls in the shoppin' malls were eight years old! You're hell-bent on me becoming a pop act. Well, I ain't that. I'm a gospel act. I'm a country act but I ain't no pop act.

SAM: Whatta you been doin' with those pills? You look terrible. And I'm hearing things that you ain't tellin' me. Is that right, Johnny? Is there somethin' you ain't tellin' me?

JOHNNY: Columbia Records. And I'm gonna take it. They're gonna let me record gospel.

SAM: I consider this a serious betrayal. Why didn't you say something?

JOHNNY: You ain't honest with my money. Marshall in the band thinks you're robbin' me blind.

SAM: I don't care what you or anybody else thinks. You're contracted for sixty-five more songs with Sun Records and you're gonna have to record 'em with Jack at my new studio you've just been criticizing. All those songs are gonna come out for years to come on Sun Records regardless of what

you do or where you go. You got that? And tell Carl to face me like a man if he's gettin' offers. Go on get outta here, go and clear your head.

JOHNNY: One day I'll get myself a Cadillac too. And hopefully, it won't come out of my royalties.

Exit Johnny. Enter Marion.

MARION: Sam, you got a minute?

SAM: No, I haven't Marion. I haven't.

Marion puts her resignation letter in front of him

SAM: What is this?

MARION: It's a letter of resignation. I'm going to join the air force.

SAM: The air-force. Marion. Jesus.

MARION: I'll clear my desk in the next couple of days.

Pause

SAM: Take your time with the desk.

MARION: So long, Sam.

Band play I Still Miss Someone

Exit Marion.

Enter Jerry Lee

JERRY (*Laughs*): I'm going out to get myself hitched tomorrow. Hitched for the third time!

SAM: Promotors are booking you for England. You've already had two marriages, you greedy son-of-a-bitch. You're gonna have more English girls than you'll know what to do with. You're twenty-two years old. Why in the hell do you want to marry again...and for the lord of me, why do you want to marry your thirteen-year old cousin?

JERRY LEE: It's legal in Louisiana. I don't see no problem.

SAM: You don't see no problem! You don't see no problem! I ought to punch you. You're gonna get yourself in so much trouble. I don't care what's legal and what isn't legal in these states ... Jerry, can you just go away and think about it?

Jerry exits. I Fell In Love by Warren Smith begins.

Jerry Lee faces the English press over the conclusion of I Fell In Love.

JERRY LEE: You men of the newspapers want the truth. My wife is fifteen. Fifteen. She ain't thirteen. That's not true. She...yes...yes sir I'm divorced. I've done nothing illegal. I'm walkin' with God every step of the way with my new wife. Is she my cousin? I ain't gonna lie, she is, but she's my second cousin and she's fifteen.

Song finishes.

Sam is on the phone to Jerry.

SAM: What did I tell you about marryin' your thirteen year old cousin, Jerry Lee! You're goin' down further every day. Now that the news is out about your child bride, your sales are plummetin', appearance money is drying up, concerts are gettin' cancelled. You'll be playin' two dollar joints for the next thirty years and you know something else? No other label will touch you. Oh, you want my advice. Jerry, divorce your second wife.

NARRATOR: With Roy feeling misrepresented, Elvis long gone, Carl unable to recapture his early magic, Johnny going to Columbia, and Jerry's spectacular demise in the middle of '58, it was the beginning of the end for Sun Records. After '58, the releases continued all the way to '69, but the hits were few.

Band plays Sun King Rising

MARION (*To Audience*): But Sam was never a man to rest. He became a partner in the Holiday Inn Motel Chain. He separated from Becky and began a lifetime love affair with another Sun Records assistant, Sally Wilbourn. He sold Sun Records for a million dollars.

NARRATOR: The big American industry awards were showered upon him from the 80s onwards.

MARION: During his life Sam Phillips didn't have many close friends. The pursuit of his vision kept him from having those kind of relationships. What he did have, however, was the respect of some of the biggest names in the history of music.

NARRATOR: Johnny Cash said of him: I think Sam's a genius. It was like Camelot. For one shining moment in history there was a unique situation. Never before, never after. And he was the man that brought it all about. And Carl Perkins said: Sam Phillips was Thomas Edison with music. He was light years ahead of the rest of us.

MARION (*To Audience*): And all the boys even got back together in '85 to make an album called *The Class of '55*: Johnny, Jerry Lee, Carl and Roy taking the place of Elvis. All good pals again.

Marion exits.

NARRATOR: Marion Keisker died of cancer in 1989. Sam and Sally were together until Sam's death of respiratory failure in 2003. Sam's death was only one day before the Original Sun Studio was designated as a National Historic Landmark.

Narrator exits.

Enter Sam

SAM: Music is such an opportunity for everybody. You'll never regret one millisecond of the time or devotion that you give to your music. I don't know how many people would have been lost in this world if they hadn't of felt the influence of music on their life and the type of thing that we were doing. It made them...made them – happily so, say good gosh, you know, maybe I could do that too. You go anywhere on earth, and rock'n'roll music is symbolic of freedom. Not democracy, not Christianity. Rock'n'Roll music. When I think of all the voices that came through this one studio: Wolf, Elvis, Carl, Johnny, Jerry Lee – all the sounds, the magic of these sons of Sun...man, in one decade we produced a millenium's worth of music. All that from this here little studio...this has gotta be the biggest cathedral in all of the world. And you have to remember one thing. There ain't nothin' that moves the soul like music.

Sam exits slowly.

Band play An American Trilogy

THE END