



## SAM PHILLIPS: PRODUCING THE SOUNDS OF A CHANGING SOUTH

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the recordings Sam Phillips produced at Sun Records, including Elvis Presley's early work, reflect trends of urbanization and integration in the 1950s American South?

#### OVERVIEW

As the U.S. recording industry grew in the first half of the 20th century, so too did the roles of those involved in producing recordings. A “producer” became one or more of many things: talent scout, studio owner, record label owner, repertoire selector, sound engineer, arranger, coach and more. Throughout the 1950s, producer Sam Phillips embodied several of these roles, choosing which artists to record at his Memphis studio and often helping select the material they would play. Phillips released some of the recordings on his Sun Records label, and sold other recordings to labels such as Chess in Chicago.



Though Memphis was segregated in the 1950s, Phillips' studio was not. He was enamored with black music and, as he states in *Soundbreaking* Episode One, wished to work specifically with black musicians. Phillips attributed his attitude, which was progressive for the time, to his parents' strong feelings about the need for racial equality and the years he spent working alongside African Americans at a North Alabama farm.

Phillips quickly established his studio as a hub of Southern African-American Blues, recording and producing albums for artists such as Howlin' Wolf and B.B. King and releasing what many consider the first ever Rock and Roll single, “Rocket 88” by Jackie Breston and His Delta Cats. But Phillips was aware of the obstacles African-American artists of the 1950's faced; regardless of his enthusiasm for their music, he knew those recordings would likely never “crossover” and be heard or bought by most white listeners. Phillips' assistant Marion Keiske remembers him remarking that if he “could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel,” he could get the whole country to listen.

In 1953 a young man entered Phillip's studio and asked Keiske about purchasing studio time. The singer, Elvis Presley, recorded two ballads for his mother and impressed Keiske enough that she made a note of his name. About a year later, at Keiske's urging, Phillips invited Presley to return

## OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

to his studio with the intention of having him record a few more ballads. The sessions were initially lackluster and had nearly drawn to a close when Presley and the other two musicians (guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black) began goofing around with a version of “That’s All Right,” a song penned and recorded by African-American musician Arthur Crudup. Phillips liked what he heard and encouraged Presley to do it again, this time for the record. “That’s All Right” marked the beginning of a run of hits for Presley, some of which are covers of songs previously recorded by African-American artists. Moreover, “That’s All Right” helped to launch an era in which styles associated with African-American musicians began moving into “mainstream” American culture.

Taking Sam Phillips as a case study, this lesson explores the role of the producer in the recording studio as one defined by an ability to guide the recording process but also to affect the wider cultural context. After investigating what a producer does and why an artist might benefit from a producer’s services, this lesson looks at the way Sam Phillips’ approach in some ways reflects the trend of urbanization in the American South. Like Phillips, many of his artists came from rural backgrounds and were seeking the benefits of urban life. That move toward the urban, and the racial mixing it fostered, was almost encoded in the music, as the lesson activities will illuminate. Finally, the lesson looks at Phillip’s guidance of a young Elvis Presley and suggests how the music they produced created an opening for African-American music to “crossover” into mainstream American popular music.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- What a “producer” is in music recording
- About Sam Phillips, his Memphis Recording Service Studio and Sun Records label in Memphis, TN
- About Elvis Presley’s early career and its social significance
- About the de facto segregation that often separated Pop and Rhythm and Blues music in the early and mid-20th century U.S.
- About trends of urbanization in the American South during the early and mid 20th century
- How race affected an individual’s access to opportunity in 1950s American South
- How Sam Phillips helped produce music that represented a mixing of sounds previously considered “white” or “black”

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Understand connections between popular culture and the time, place and social circumstances in which it was created
- Consider how popular culture can effect social change
- Discuss how the careers of particular artists reflect the attitudes of the society from which they emerged
- Make connections between popular culture and historical events such as urbanization and segregation
- Integrate and evaluate information presented in visual, oral and audio formats

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

#### 1. Play Clip 1, Soundbreaking - What Does a Producer Do? Have your students watch the clip and take notes on the possible roles played by producers. Ask your students:

- Based on what you just heard, what do you think a producer does?
- In what ways do you think a producer might be important to an artist who is recording an album? (Encourage your students to consider the value of an outside perspective.)
- Can you think of anyone in your life that plays a role similar to that of a “producer”? How might you benefit from that person’s assistance? (Students may name a friend, teacher, counselor, coach, parent, etc. This person could help them edit a paper, improve an athletic or music ability, gain perspective on an issue, etc.)

## PROCEDURE:

1. Play Clip 2, Soundbreaking - Sam Phillips and Sun Records. Ask your students:

- How do the speakers characterize Phillips' role at Sun Records? What were his goals?
- What do you think were some of the reasons why African-Americans left rural areas for industrial cities during this time? [Answers may include: to look for employment opportunities as the work force became more mechanized, to seek a better quality of life, to leave behind racial injustice in the rural areas, including "Jim Crow" laws that remained in effect in some areas into the 1960s, etc.]
- Can you think of anyone in your life that plays a role similar to that of a "producer"? How might you benefit from that person's assistance? (Students may name a friend, teacher, counselor, coach, parent, etc. This person could help them edit a paper, improve an athletic or music ability, gain perspective on an issue, etc.)

2. Distribute Handout 1: Sam Phillips. Have students read the paragraphs out loud. Then look at the map and population data on the second page of the handout. Ask your students:

- What do you notice about the population of Memphis in each decade of the census data shown here?
- Is there anything you see on this map that might have made Memphis an obvious choice or an easy place to relocate to? (Students may notice that Memphis is encircled by highways; from this zoomed-out perspective, it looks as if "all roads lead to Memphis.")

3. Inform students that according to 1950 census data, the population of Memphis was 37% "non-white" (the only census categories at the time were "white" and "non-white") and the majority of that 37% percent was African-American. Much of the transplanted population had arrived in Memphis from rural areas in Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Texas. Explain to your students that both Sam Phillips and

many of the black musicians he recorded in the 1950s came to Memphis from rural farming communities in the surrounding states.

4. Break your students into small groups for the Galley Walk of the Rural and Urban South circa 1950 activity. Distribute Handout 2: Gallery Walk Discussion Questions. Have each group name a "scribe" who will record their answers to the questions as they take the Gallery Walk. After students have visited the Gallery Walk Stations 1 - Attire, 2 - Labor, 3 - Food & 4 - Socialization with their groups, discuss each station and the following questions as a class. Ask your students:

- What do you think it was about the "urban" that attracted so many young people, both white and black? (Students may suggest from the photos that opportunity, fun, urban sophistication, the availability of goods, places to stay, and, for blacks in particular, areas that had black-owned businesses were all attractive.)
- Thinking about the "urban" images you saw in the Gallery Walk, why do you think Marty Stuart characterized the 1950s Memphis as a "black cat's town"? (Explain to your students that Memphis, compared to other Southern cities, was uncharacteristically open to African-American owned businesses throughout the early 20th century. Beale Street was a hub of African-American life with stores, restaurants, nightlife, recording studios, etc, and Blacks were welcome to walk through the front door. African-Americans were able to express themselves openly on Beale Street.)

5. Elvis, like Sam Phillips, moved to Memphis and was drawn to black life there at a time when the reach of segregation extended even to the Billboard record sales charts. The "Rhythm & Blues" chart represented "black" music separate from the main "Top Singles" charts. There are no songs from 1954 that appear in the top spots of both charts. Now

## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

Play Clip 3, Soundbreaking - Sam Phillips, Elvis Presley and 'Crossover' Success and ask your students:

- What is it that Phillips was so sure Elvis “could do” as an artist? What was Phillips hoping Elvis would accomplish? (Students may suggest that Phillips heard that Elvis was able to channel the sound and energy of “black” Rhythm and Blues music. He hoped that he could record Elvis and bring the sound of Black music to White listeners.)
- Thinking back to what we’ve learned about the role of a “producer” in this lesson, how did Phillips “produce” Elvis? (Students may recall the idea of “guidance” from a producer; Phillips heard him goofing around with a song by African-American blues musician Arthur Crudup and shifted the focus of the recording session, encouraging Presley to record “That’s All Right”

instead of the other material they had planned to record.)

- Why do you think we hear “That’s All Right” referred to as a “magic moment” and that through the recording of the song Phillips “freed the soul” of Elvis Presley? (The song represents a first step in the coming together of black and white music styles in the mainstream U.S. music market. Elvis was also familiar with and drawn to the African-American music of Memphis but had not thought, or been bold enough, to attempt to perform it. Phillips encouraged Elvis to embrace the sounds he loved rather than perform in a manner he thought was expected of him.)
- Based on what you know about Sam Phillips, why was he an ideal producer for the young Elvis Presley?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Instruct your students to recall the images of people they saw in the Gallery Walk and ask:

- In what ways could the recording sessions which produced “That’s All Right” represent Memphis and urbanization in the South at this time? (Students may notice that the song is a product of cultural convergence. Phillips and Presley lived in close proximity to African Americans, loved and respected black music, and rejected the idea that segregation applied to music.)
- In what ways did Sam Phillips use his position as a music producer to produce a cultural connection that extends far beyond a song? (It might be valuable to share author Peter Guralnick’s feelings about Phillips here: “His vision from the very beginning was that music, and specifically African-American music, could conquer all of the prejudice, all of the race prejudice, the class prejudice, the divisions, the categories into which music — like everything else in American life — was divided.”)
- In what ways might Sam Phillips’ decisions as a producer have had a positive impact on American race politics?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Sam Phillips was a proponent of integration and racial equality in the American South at a time when such a position was unpopular or even dangerous. Moreover, he acted on his beliefs, not just recording and producing black artists, but advocating on behalf of their work. Phillips came from a low-income family, lost his father when he was a teenager, and had to support his mother and siblings. Despite the challenges, Phillips finally succeeded. In many ways, Phillips’ life and career represent what many have called the “American Dream.”

Yet, however hard Phillips had to work, he had one constant benefit, especially in the

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

American South during segregation: he was white. Imagine Phillips in a similar position as a young man, but as an African-American young man. Have your students recall the images displayed during the Gallery Walk, the discussions of music and race throughout the lesson and consider the following questions:

- Phillips took out bank loans to open his recording studio. Do you think a 27-year old African-American in Memphis have been approved for a business loan in 1950? How would a young African-American have gathered or saved the money necessary to open a studio?
- Before opening a studio, Phillips learned about music technology by working at a radio station. Do you think a young black man in 1945 would have had this opportunity? (It would have been less likely, though it did happen at times.)
- Presley used Arthur Crudup's song and elements of African-American performance style to reach a large White audience, what do you think Crudup could have done to reach the same audience? Do you think it would have been possible? (Perhaps, but there were many obstacles. For instance, because Elvis sounded so "black" on record, in one early interview he was asked what high school he attended as a way to establish that he was white.)

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

*College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for English Language Arts*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text

Reading 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally

Speaking and Listening 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience

Speaking and Listening 6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative

tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing

Language 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings

## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual, Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response. Describe how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of pieces, including contrasting works and programs of music

Enduring Understanding: Response to music is informed by analyzing context (social, cultural, and historical) and how creators and performers manipulate the elements of music

Essential Question: How does understanding the structure and context of music inform a response?

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators'/performers' expressive intent. Describe a personal interpretation of works or contrasting works and explain how creators' and performers' application of the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres, cultures, and historical periods, convey expressive intent

Enduring Understanding: Through their use of elements and structures of music, creators and performers provide clues to their expressive intent



Essential Question: How do we discern the musical creators' and performers' expressive intent?

*Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding. Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life..

Enduring Understanding: Understanding connections to varied contexts and daily life enhances musicians' creating, performing, and responding.

Essential Question: How do the other arts, other disciplines, contexts and daily life inform creating, performing, and responding to music?

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- Soundbreaking – Sam Phillips and Sun Records
- Soundbreaking – What Does a Producer Do?
- Soundbreaking – Sam Phillips, Elvis Presley and Crossover Success

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- Elvis Presley

### HANDOUTS

- Gallery Walk Station 1: Attire
- Gallery Walk Station 2: Labor
- Gallery Walk Station 3: Food
- Gallery Walk Station 4: Socialization
- Handout 1: Sam Phillips
- Handout 2: Gallery Walk Discussion Questions