

Memphis and the Birth of Rock-n-Roll

Essential Questions: What role did Memphis play in the creation of rock 'n roll and soul music?

The story of rock 'n roll in Memphis really begins with the story of the blues. Blues was originally the folk music of African Americans in the south. Blues developed in the post- Civil War period, but did not become part of mainstream American culture until the beginning of the twentieth century. W.C. Handy is credited with bringing blues into the mainstream by writing and publishing blues sheet music for the first time. Handy and his business partner Harry Pace opened a publishing house on Beale Street in 1913. Memphis was the largest city on the Mississippi between New Orleans and St. Louis and was a natural gathering place for blues musicians.

Memphis was a segregated city with separate churches, schools and hospitals for its white and African American citizens. However, it was impossible to segregate the airwaves. Locals could tune in stations playing everything from gospel to country to the blues. It was in this rich musical environment that Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Sam Phillips created a new musical sound known as rockabilly. Phillips, a producer and owner of Sun Records, recognized that white singers who could sing “black” music would take the music world by storm. Thus, the rockabilly style was formed.

Rockabilly combined elements of country music with the drums that were commonly used in jazz and blues compositions. A strong, danceable beat combined with bold lyrics meant that rockabilly songs captured the interest of white teens. Many of the early songs were remakes of blues songs. Elvis' first hit was an upbeat remake of the classic blues song “That's All Right (Mama)” by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup. “Hound Dog,” another Elvis hit, was also a remake of a blues song by Big Mama Thornton. Over time the music of some rockabilly artists, like Elvis, became less influenced by country music and evolved into rock 'n roll. Rock 'n roll became a cultural phenomenon and made Elvis an international superstar. In the 1960's, new groups like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones emerged who took rock 'n roll in new directions.

At the same time that rock 'n roll was evolving in Memphis, soul music was evolving as well. Like rock 'n roll, soul music had its roots in jazz, blues and gospel. The term “soul music” itself referred to its origins in gospel. Soul music evolved out of the African American experience and was particularly influential in the 1960's.

If Sun Records was the birthplace of rock 'n roll, then Memphis' Stax Records was the home of southern soul. Stax Records was created by Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton in 1961. Booker T & the MGs, Sam and Dave and Otis Redding were some the artists who recorded at

Stax in the sixties. In Memphis, the soul music both influenced and was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement.

Sources: “Sam Phillips.” *Sunrecords.com*. Sun Record Company, n.d. Web. 27 July 2014. < <http://www.sunrecords.com/artists/sam-phillips>>

“About Sun Records.” *Sunrecords.com*. Sun Record Company, n.d. Web. 27 July 2014. < <http://www.sunrecords.com/about>>

“Memphis School.” *Trail of the Hellhound: Delta Blues in the Lower Mississippi Valley*. National Park Service. 2001. Web. 27 July, 2014. < http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/schools/memphis_school.htm>

“This Day in History: Elvis Presley records ‘That All Right (Mama)’.” *History.com*. The History Channel. 2014. Web. 27 July 2014. < <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/elvis-presley-records-quotthats-all-right-mamaquot>>

“Stax Records.” *Staxrecords.com*. Stax Records/Concord Music Group, 2014. Web. 27 July 2014. < <http://www.staxrecords.com/about/>>

Memphis and the Birth of Rock-n-Roll

Use the text as a reference to color in the picture and answer the question below.



What role did Memphis play in the creation of rock 'n roll and soul music?

Your response should be about 1-2 sentences.
