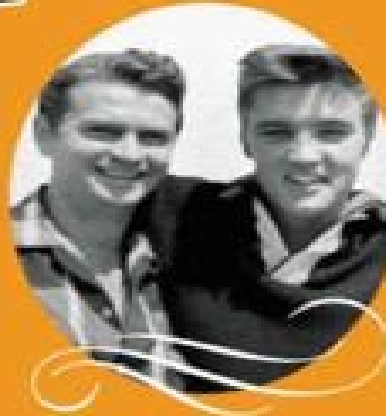




**SAM PHILLIPS**

THE MAN WHO INVENTED

**ROCK 'N' ROLL**

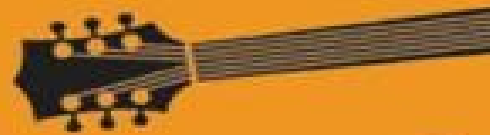


.....  
**HOW ONE MAN DISCOVERED**

Howlin' Wolf, Ike Turner,  
Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash,  
and Elvis Presley,

**AND HOW HIS TINY LABEL,**

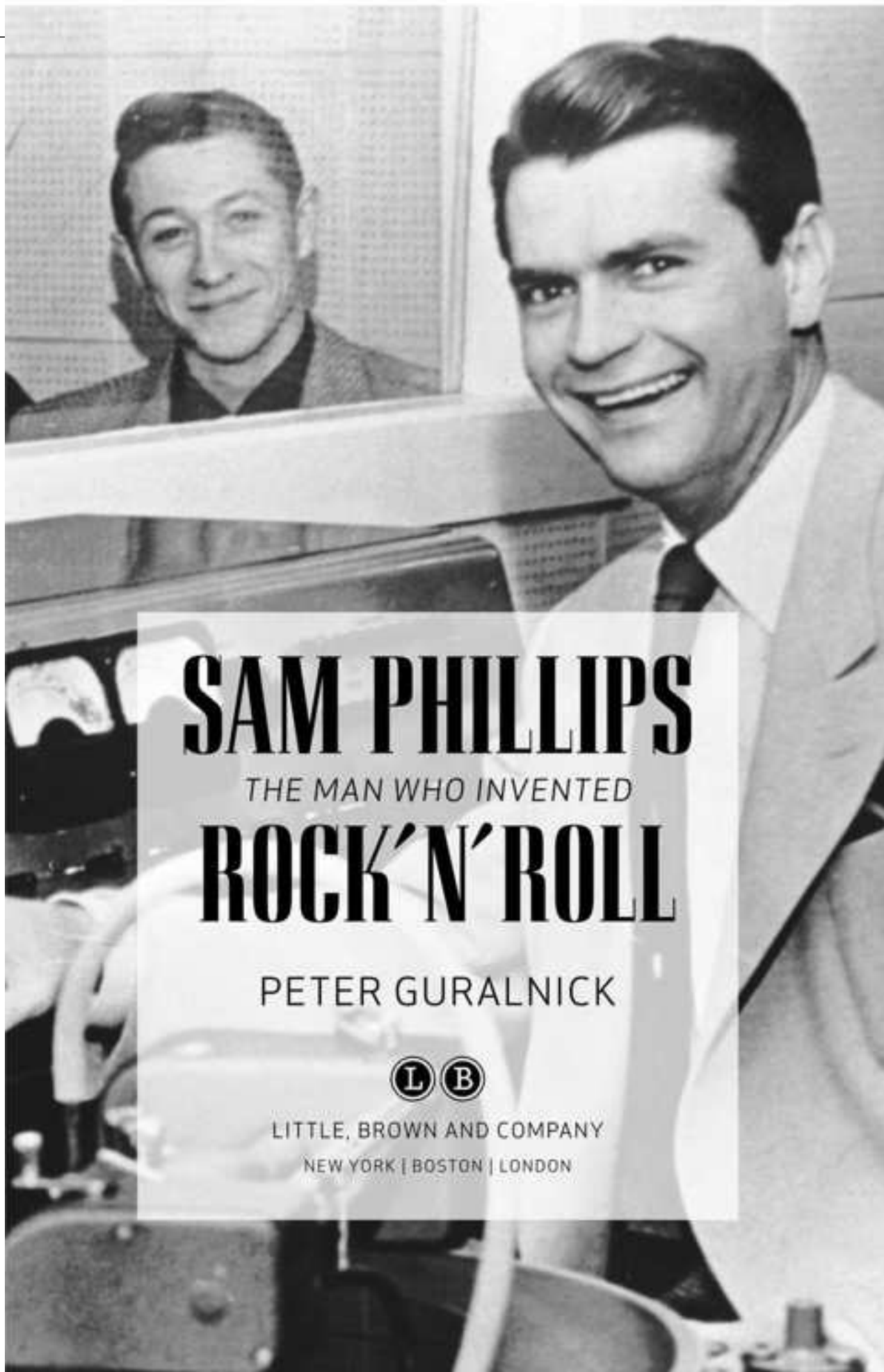
**SUN RECORDS OF MEMPHIS**  
**REVOLUTIONIZED THE WORLD!**



.....  
**PETER GURALNICK**

Author of *LAST TRAIN TO MEMPHIS* and *CARELESS LOVE*





**SAM PHILLIPS**  
*THE MAN WHO INVENTED*  
**ROCK'N'ROLL**

PETER GURALNICK



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

NEW YORK | BOSTON | LONDON



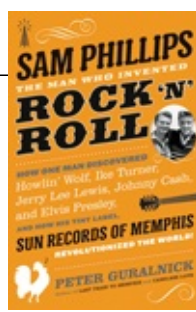
Elvis, Bill Black, and Scotty Moore, February 1955, through the control room window. *Courtesy of the Sam Phillips Family*



Acetate "Rocket 88." Courtesy of Jerry Gibson and Jim Cole



"Mystery Train" tape box with instructions for mastering. Courtesy of Ernst Jorgensen



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*For Knox Phillips*

*And for Ava, Anastasia, and Frances*



Sam and Becky with Knox and Jerry, May 1949. *Courtesy of the Sam Phillips Family*

It's a great story, and it will go down in history. I don't know how great the book will be—but it's a great story. Peter, look, let me just tell you like I told all of my children, like I told every artist that walked in the door. Don't be afraid of it. No matter what I say to you, don't be afraid of it. But be frightened to death of not giving your best judgment to everything. Don't let history down. Fuck Sam Phillips. Fuck anything that goes. It's an important era—you got so much more responsibility to the world than you got to any one person, including my ass.

*The AUTHOR acknowledges that this is so. The AUTHOR suggests that if he doesn't come in for criticism in Sam's terms he will have fucked up.*

If you don't, you're just another one of the motherfuckers that are using this thing to the detriment of the beautiful changes it wrought. That's not right. If you let that happen, you ain't a very conscientious, dedicated, devoted person. It ain't for you to put me in a good light. Just put me in the focus that I'm supposed to be in. Man, I don't give a damn if you say one good thing about me. Your charge is to put all of it in focus and ferret out the bullshit. There's been enough of that. I'm going to tell you, Peter, Ferret it out, for God's sake. Look, and tell your damn publisher, "Hey, if it takes me forever to write it, it's going to be the most authentic thing that has ever emanated from this era. With all the contradictions to the contrary." You read me?

AUTHOR: *I do. (And he does.)*

*"From this, he took a lesson: value the original, fragile, and rough. That's the art." —HOLLAND COOPER on the art of Henri Matisse*

*"To us, their less tried successors, they appear magnified... pushing out into the unknown in obedience to an inward voice, to an impulse beating in the blood, to a dream of the future. They were wonderful; and it must be owned they were ready for the wonderful." —JOSEPH CONRAD, Lord Jim*



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## Author's Note

IT WAS A HEAVY CHARGE, as I think should be evident from the dramatic reconstruction on the opposite page—but one from which I never felt I could shrink.

I met Sam Phillips in a flood (see chapter 9), and as I wrote at the time, from that first meeting his words had all the weight of vatic truth. He seemed like an Old Testament prophet to me, in both look and manner. Or, as singer-songwriter John Prine said, in describing his own first meeting with Sam, his eyes would grow wide, “like fire and brimstone. It looked like his eyebrows and his eyes themselves were on fire—they were just wild—you’d swear that his hair would kind of get curly, and his hands moved like a preacher’s.”

I mean, it was *something!*

But that wasn’t it—not really. At least not all of it. I suppose I should confess at the start what I am sure will become immediately apparent to the reader: this is a book written out of admiration and love. Nor will it be any less evident that this book is different from the two other biographies I have written, on Elvis Presley and Sam Cooke. Not that there was any less admiration or love in those books. But I *knew* Sam Phillips, I knew him for almost twenty-five years, I was with him through good times and bad, and while I might not necessarily have chosen to have my responsibilities read to me by my subject, they are the same responsibilities felt by any other biographer (ferret out the truth, don’t be afraid of it, and, in the end, “Fuck anything that goes”)—they are the self-imposed responsibilities taken on by every writer, of fiction or nonfiction, for better or worse.

In that spirit perhaps I should also add that Sam would have disclaimed the subtitle of this book—well, to be perfectly honest, he would have both claimed and disclaimed it, as he frequently did, more often than not in the same elongated sentence. “I didn’t set out to revolutionize the world,” he said on time. Instead, what he wanted to do was to test the proposition that there was something “very profound” in the lives of ordinary people, black and white, irrespective of social acceptance. “I knew the physical separation of the races—but I knew the integration of their souls.” That was what he sought out to capture when he first opened his studio in January of 1950, “when Negro artists in the South who wanted to make a record,” he declared early on, “just had no place to go.” It went against all practical considerations, it went against all well-intended advice. He considered himself not a crusader (“I don’t like crusaders as such”) but an *explorer*. To Sam, “Rock and roll was no accident. Absolutely not an accident at all.” “You can say,” he told me, “he had the light coming on, and it spotted the possum. *Right there.*”

Well, I guess that’s one way of putting it. Let’s just say Sam was the man who *discovered* rock ’n’ roll. But more to the point, he considered it his mission in life “to open up an area of freedom with the artist himself”—whether that artist was Elvis Presley or Howlin’ Wolf or B.B. King or Johnny Cash—“to recognize that individual’s unique quality and then to find the key to unlock it.” That was what he sought to do with every artist who entered his studio, whether or not they ever achieved

worldly success, whether or not they were ever likely to achieve it.

It might have seemed sometimes to an outsider as if the musicians were just fumbling around, and the producer (a term that did not even exist then, and that Sam to some extent would always disdain, I think he might have preferred to be called a practicing psychologist) was just letting things go to rack and ruin. But he wasn't. He was simply trying to pare things down to their most expressive essence. Michelangelo said: "In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it." That was what Sam Phillips saw not in marble but in untried, untested, unspoken-for people: an eloquence and a gift that sometimes they did not even know they possessed. Like other celebrated American artists—like Walt Whitman, who sought to encompass the full range of the American experience in his poetry; like William Faulkner, who could see past prejudice to individual distinctions; like Mark Twain, who celebrated the freedom of the river and a refusal to be civilized—Sam was driven by a creative vision that left him with no alternative but to persist in his determination to give voice to those who had no voice. "With the belief that I had in this music, in these people," he said, "I would have been the biggest damn coward on God's green earth if I had not."

From the day I first met him in 1979, Sam Phillips began telling me the story of his life. Not in so many words, of course. But then, given his discursive nature, it may well have *been* so many words. To Sam his life was epic, mythic, intimate, and instructive by turns, and the tone he used to describe it was casual, colloquial, lyrical, thundering, and eloquently collusive. All of which pretty much ruled out any hope of linearity. What you were going for, in Sam's terms, was "just another swinging day on the fair."

He saw himself as a teacher and a preacher. That was the motivation that drove him to expound his message to the world, long after he had stopped making records. But in a very real sense the person that he created in later life to convey that message did a disservice to the watchful, reactive role he had fashioned for himself when all of his attention was focused on no more than "to bring out of every person what was in him... to help him express what he believed his message to be." To Sam every session was meant to be like "the making of *Gone with the Wind*," with all its epic grandeur—but at the same time every session had to be fun, too. If it wasn't fun, it wasn't worth doing, he said, and if you weren't doing something different, of course, then you weren't doing anything at all. As far as failure went, there could be no such thing in his studio, because in the end, Sam insisted, it was all about individuated self-expression, nothing more, nothing less.

"Perfect imperfection" was the watchword—both in life and in art—in other words, take the hardship you're dealt and then make something of it. If Ike Turner's guitarist's amp fell off the car on the way up to Memphis to cut "Rocket 88," well, stuff some paper where the speaker cone was ruptured, and THEN YOU HAD AN ORIGINAL SOUND! If a telephone went off in the middle of a session, well, you kept that telephone in—just make sure it's THE BEST-SOUNDING DAMN TELEPHONE IN THE WORLD.

You can see how this could affect a person—and by "person," in this instance I mean me. Meeting Sam for me was a life-changing event—but for all of the impact of his message, and for all of the faith that in retrospect I think I can say he hit virtually every point in his narrative at that first meeting, I soon discovered that it was a message that could all too easily be misunderstood. When Sam referred to his mental breakdown and electroshock treatment, for example, not long after opening the studio (he even called his wife, Becky, to verify the dates of his hospitalization), I thought it represented a triumph over darkness once and for all. But that wasn't quite what Sam meant, although there would

have been no telling that at the time. (He didn't mean the opposite either.) So many of the conclusions I came to, after that first immersion in the Book of Sam, the conclusions to which Sam was pointing in a sense was *always* pointing, were so much more nuanced than the supremely confident language which they were clothed. I mean, it wasn't that they didn't hold up over the years. They did. They were, if anything, reinforced. But they were *modified*, as all of our truths are modified, by the life that was lived. They were like the family anecdotes that we all tell one another, a neat summation that encapsulates a far deeper and more complex reality.

Since that time I have continued to be engaged in a running dialogue with Sam, as I'm sure will escape the notice of no one who reads this book. The conversation is never anything less than lively—it is thought-provoking, engaging, frequently as challenging as it was in real life. The difference is simply, that in real life, there was no shut-off valve. Now, more than ten years after his death, I can simply take my leave of Sam after three, four, maybe even five hours, and go on to other pursuits. It is, I suppose, more civilized—but given the choice, I'm not sure with Sam polite discourse would even be the preferred mode.

How many times have I wanted to ask him questions of both fact and opinion? I study the transcripts of our conversations, I pore over other interviews and try to read between the lines, attempting to gauge what his vocal and facial expressions must have been—I torture my brain, sometimes trying to interpret Sam's Ciceronian syntax or, in many instances, guess at the period of conclusion at which he never quite arrived.

Occasionally—well, *more* than occasionally—I think of Sam's reaction. More than once I've hesitated momentarily at revealing some of the things he appeared to have kept secret. Or at least things I didn't know about. Which, of course, are by no means the same thing, though often one is tempted to conflate the two. But in the end I hope I've kept faith with Sam's charge of total honesty (“I don't want any accolades. I just want the truth. And, God believe me, Peter... if you fuck it up, then you're a goddamn crook as far as I'm concerned, and I'll tell you to your teeth”), tempered with the same consideration for people that Sam so often showed, in his own way, particularly in his creative endeavors. I've also tried to hold up as an example to myself his inextinguishable faith in humanity. Not *soppy* inextinguishable faith. What I'm talking about is the broad framework that would banish forever the exclamation “That's disgusting” with reference to behavior with which we're not familiar or of which we do not approve, and substitute instead the recognition *That's human*. There was nothing, in other words, in Sam's cosmogony that could make us less than human, even if it didn't conform to the more convenient tale we would like to tell about ourselves.

Sam always made it plain—not just to me but to everyone around him—that he wanted hard, unvarnished truths, and I never doubted for a moment that he did. As Jerry Phillips said at one point while pondering whether or not to tell a particularly uncomfortable story about his father, “Sam would just say, ‘Tell the goddamn truth’”—and that is what he and every other member of Sam's family was committed to. Not so much in the sense of, Let the chips fall wherever they fucking may (his wife, Becky, was too kind for that, his older son, Knox, too devoted, and his longtime companion, Sal Wilbourn, underneath a fiercely protective outer shell, perhaps in the end too fragile), but there was never any sense on anyone's part, least of all Sam's, of hiding his humanity under a neatly formed construct, of sacrificing the truth at any point to an invitingly colorful legend.

There were so many crazy times, so many two-fisted drinking dinners (I'm speaking here of Sam with two fists)—Knox and I discussed all the time the wreck of all our well-conceived plans and expectations. (“That was a weird interview with Sam,” Knox might say. “I mean, weird *good*.”) But without meaning in any way to equate my own outsider status with Knox's own indissoluble bond with

his father—I mean, *close* doesn't even begin to describe it—there was not, we always hasten to agree, ~~there was not one single moment either of us would not give everything to have back.~~ As Sam would certainly say, they were all great, they were all to be prized—because they were all, each and every one of them, indubitably *real*. R-E-A-L.

As you can see, nearly everyone who loved Sam has contributed to this book. Not all of them understood Sam. In fact, outside the immediate family, most—with the notable exception of self-proclaimed-and-proud-of-it “nuts” like Jack Clement and Sputnik Monroe or more reserved wisemen like Roland Janes—probably did not. Some preferred to think of him as a kind of high-achieving “rodeo clown”—and permitted themselves to be, simply, amused by some of his more outrageous pronouncements or actions (cf. his appearance on the *David Letterman* show). But there was no one that I encountered who was untouched, or was not in some way inspired, by Sam. There was no one who failed to recognize his unique—well, if they wouldn't give him “genius,” every one of them was ready to concede they had never met anyone else even remotely like Sam.

Which brings me back to my role in this book. Because, of course, like everyone else in Sam's life I was assigned a role, however small—and like everyone else, as should be clear from just a smattering of our dialogue, *I was expected to carry it out*. In writing the book I felt I had to take advantage of that role, not to enlarge myself but to give the kind of firsthand insight that however well I might feel I knew Elvis or Sam Cooke, I simply was not afforded by personal experience. It's not that the events that I witnessed were magnified in any way by my presence—but they were no less colorful or characteristic either, and it was, of course, a rare opportunity to report from the front lines.

Occasionally (*very* occasionally) I was a witness to history, more often to the unfettered expression of personality—but, most important, I was afforded a glimpse, whether advertent or inadvertent, of what Sam might say, of some of the dramedy of real life. Sitting with Sam just before (and just after) he delivered his paean to Johnny Cash and Jesus and the Hotel Peabody at a NARAS celebration in Memphis that shocked and offended half the audience while raising Sam up even higher in the shockabilly esteem of the rest. Private moments of desolation and despair (well, perhaps despair is too big a word for his feelings—*doubt* maybe?), when he might unburden himself of his frustrations, then castigating himself for giving in to negative thinking, against all of his strongly held beliefs. Those times when he would call up a long-since-forgotten past and summon up unsung heroes (unsung even in the body of this book) like Alex “Puddin’” Beck, an African-American plumber's assistant, who was as brilliant as any advanced-degree sanitary engineer, Sam said, and could emerge from the messiest and smelliest job as clean as a whistle. “Hey,” said Sam without a smidgen of irony, “are you gonna tell me people like that are not brilliant?” And then there were those rare exposed moments when all pretense was cast aside and Sam stood, like Lear upon the heath, raging at unseen cataracts and hurricanes.

One thing that for me can be difficult about many biographies—well, about so many stories in general—is the predictable spinning out of the tale. With Elvis Presley and Sam Cooke that issue never really presented itself—they both died so young. But Sam Phillips lived to the age of eighty, and to all intents and purposes he had by then been retired from any active engagement in the recording business for over forty years. Sam was never boring—at least not to me—but a recitation of all his accolades and honors would have been. I have done my best to avoid that recitation. Instead, I have attempted to write a book that conforms to Sam's definition of what a recording session ought to be, as epic as, well, take your pick of epics, but as intimate as sexual relations. That tells a story that, like most stories, can be both heroic and tragic at the same time, in its own mortal way.

Sometimes in the middle of the night he arrives unbidden. He even sets me riddles. In one dream

he said to my bewilderment (both then and now), "I am nothing if not an idealist.... I am everything but an idealist.... ~~The boy cannot fully understand.~~" I dream of Sam. I dream of my grandfather. I dream of Solomon Burke and the songwriter Doc Pomus. All gone. They come around less frequently now. But whenever Sam arrives, as often as not rattling at the window in the midst of a torrent of conflicting concerns, I always listen.



Sam at eight. *Courtesy of the Sam Phillips Family*

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## ONE | “I Dare You!”

*Nothing passed my ears. A mockingbird or a whippoorwill—out in the country on a calm afternoon. The silence of the cottonfields, that beautiful rhythmic silence, with a hoe hitting a rock every now and then and just as it spaded through the dirt, you could hear it. That was just unbelievable music to hear that bird maybe three hundred yards away, the wind not even blowing in your direction, or no wind at all. But it carried, it got to my ears. I would hear somebody speak to a mule harshly, I heard that. I mean, I heard everything. It wasn't any time until I began to observe people [too], more by sound—I certainly didn't know what to do with everything I heard, but I knew I had something that could be an asset if I could just figure out what to do with it.*

**I**N LATER YEARS Sam Phillips would always refer to the moment of his arrival on this earth with wonderment not altogether free of caustic amusement. “You take my ass dying when I was born, and you take a drunk doctor showing up—man, he didn't even make it till I was born—and my mama being so kind she got up out of bed and put *him* to bed until he sobered up, and then the midwife comes and Mama feels so sorry for Dr. Cornelius she named me after him!”



The Phillips Family, 1916 (before J.W. and Sam were born). Left to right: Charles, Irene, Horace, Madgie, and Tom. Standing at back: Mary and Turner. *Courtesy of the Sam Phillips Family*





Nobody ever took more pleasure in his own story than Sam Phillips. It was, in his telling, a poet as much as a realistic vision, a mythic journey combining narrative action, revolutionary rhetoric, Delphic pronouncements, and the satisfaction, like that of any Old Testament god, of being able to look back on the result and pronounce it “good.” He would return again and again to the same themes over the years, with different details and different emphases, but always with the same underlying message: the inherent nobility not so much of man as of *freedom*, and the implied responsibility—the *obligation*—for each of us to be as different as our individuated natures allowed us to be. To be different, in Sam’s words, *in the extreme*.

But it always started out with a slight, sickly looking tow-headed little boy looking out at the world from the 323-acre farm at the Bend of the River, about ten miles outside Florence, Alabama. His daddy didn’t own the farm, just rented it, and by the time Sam was eight years old, his two older brothers and older sister had all married, leaving him at home with his seventeen-year-old sister Irene, his fifteen-year-old brother, Tom, and the next youngest, ten-year-old J.W. (John William, later to be known as Jud), who was, like Sam, something of an afterthought for parents who were forty-four and nearly forty by the time their youngest child was born.

He and his family worked the fields with mules, along with dozens of others, black and white sharecroppers, poor people—his daddy was a *fair* man, he treated them all the same. His daddy didn’t say much; the one thing that really made him mad was if someone told him a lie—it didn’t matter what it was, he would stand up and tell them to their face. Daddy had a feel for the land, he grew corn, ham and sweet sorghum, and the cotton rows were half a mile long. His mama was kind to everyone and believed wholeheartedly in all her children, and worried a lot—there was nothing she wouldn’t do for any of them, and nothing she couldn’t do as well as any man. Sometimes at night she might dip a little snuff and pick the guitar, old folk songs like “Barbara Allen” and “Aura Lee,” the guitar took on all the properties of a human voice, but she didn’t sing, it was almost as if she were quilting the music together.

Just like Daddy, she taught them how to work, by her example. She taught them responsibility by the kindness she and Daddy showed to others less fortunate, including relatives, passing strangers, and, by the presence in their own home, her sister Emma, blinded in one eye and made deaf and mute by Rocky Mountain spotted fever when she was three. Sam observed Aunt Emma closely and, in order to communicate with her (she was a well-educated woman, a graduate of the internationally renowned Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind at Talladega), learned to sign almost before he could read. He was the only one in the family who could communicate fully with her except for Mama and his sister Irene, who wanted to become a nurse. Even when he was working (and there was seldom a time that he wasn’t), he was watching, listening, observing: the interactions of people, the scudding of the clouds across the sky, the communication of crickets and frogs (he was convinced that he could talk to them—and not just as a little boy either), the flow of the beautiful Tennessee River. He couldn’t understand why all the little black boys and girls he worked and played with couldn’t go to the same little country school that he did; he registered the unfairness of the way in which people were arbitrarily set apart by the color of their skin, and he thought, What if I had been born black? And he admired the way they dealt with adversity—he envied them their power of resilience, their ability to maintain belief in a situation in which he doubted he could have sustained belief himself. But, for the most part, knowing how different his feelings were even from those closest to him, from his very family, and knowing how much more different he intended to *be*, he kept his thoughts to himself and listened to the cappella singing that came from the fields, testament as he saw it, whether sacred or secular, to an invincible human spirit and spirituality.

They found a way to worship. You could hear it. You could feel it. You didn't have to be inside a building, you could participate in a cotton patch, picking four rows at a time, at 110 degrees! I mean, I saw the inequity. But even at five or six years old I found myself caught up in a type of emotional reaction that was, instead of depressing—I mean, these were some of the astutest people I've ever known, and they were in [most] cases almost totally overlooked, except as a beast of burden—but even at that age, I recognized that: Hey! The backs of these people aren't broken, they [can] find it in their souls to live a life that is not going to take the joy of living away.



Sam and J.W. (Jud). *Courtesy of the Sam Phillips Family*

**S**AMUEL CORNELIUS PHILLIPS (remember Dr. Cornelius) was born on January 5, 1923, in the only home that his father would ever own, in a tiny hamlet six or seven miles north of Florence called Lovelace Community, named for his mother's family and populated with musically talented Lovelaces and practical, hardworking Phillippes. When he was just nine months old, the house burned down, and the family moved in and out of town, then to the old Martin place on Chisholm Highway and then further out in the country to the old Pickens place in Oakland, which was an eight-year-old's (and later seventy-eight-year-old's) 323-acre vision of Eden. His overwhelming impression, his overwhelming *experience*, was of hard work—his mama and his daddy never stopped, and his brother Horace, old by fourteen years, was, everyone acknowledged, a “mechanical genius,” who would make a career of heavy equipment. The sensibility of the two youngest, though, Sam and his brashly self-assured brother J.W., was different in type if not in kind. J.W. possessed the sort of robust personality to which everyone, adults and children alike, was inevitably drawn. He was confident, articulate, outgoing, a natural leader, even if Sam sometimes mistrusted just where his leadership might be taking them. He was warmhearted and trustful just like their daddy, but unlike Daddy there was no holdback in his speech: he proclaimed his views eloquently and convincingly, although his young

brother occasionally questioned whether J.W. really knew what he was talking about.

Sam saw himself as set apart and wasn't about to apologize for it. He prized independence and artistry, even when he was too young to put a name on them. He saw Daddy as an artist of the soil, and he saw music as an expression of innate spirituality. He was a delicate child, "a runt that really had a rough time surviving," as he frequently said, but for all of that, he was determined to go his own way. "I got impatient with children doing the same things other children did. I had the ability to love other people, but I also had the ability to tell them what I thought, even at an early age. I wasn't a spoiled person, but for some reason or another I was totally an independent cat, and to be that, and be as sick as I was and not be screaming for Mama must have signified something." What it signified, Sam firmly believed, was that he had his own eyes and ears to assess things with, and they were going to lead him to the greater goal he had in mind, even if he couldn't say precisely what it was. It was not lost on him, however, what he sacrificed in terms of popularity. It was impossible not to like J.W., and his younger brother was well aware, and for J.W. the approval of others was the greatest authenticator. As for himself, despite all his bravado, he couldn't help but regret the absence of that same easy camaraderie. He was, he recognized with some asperity, "the greenest persimmon on the tree. If you took a bite of me, you didn't like me too much."

Growing up, he was surrounded by music—square dances, round dances, once a month, at a neighbor's, a relative's, sometimes at home. On those occasions you pushed all the furniture out of the room and everybody would sing and play—fiddle, banjo, ukulele, guitar—sometimes his sober-sided daddy might even call. His sister Irene made sure to take him and J.W. along, from the time they were no more than four or five years old, and he would sit in a corner, just watching all of his grown-up brothers and sisters and all the others, hardworking farmers and their wives, dancing and having a good time. When he was six, just before the October stock market crash, they got a Graphophone record player at Kilgore Furniture Store—they set it on the floor and wound it up and played the one record they were able to afford with their initial purchase, Jimmie Rodgers' "Waiting for a Train," over and over. Though Rodgers has come to be universally invoked as the "Father of Country Music," the song was a blues, profound in its portrait of loss and displacement and uncanny in its foreshadowing of the Great Depression that hovered unseen just over the horizon. "All around the water tank," Sam would quote sixty, seventy years later at the drop of a hat, "'Waiting for a train / A thousand miles away from home / Sleeping in the rain...' And then he walks up to a brakeman 'to give him a line of talk'—you know, he was trying to get in that boxcar—and this brakeman says, 'Well, you got any money, I'll see that you don't walk.' But Jimmie didn't have any money, and 'He slammed the boxcar door.' If you can just visualize that—Depression, hard times, won't be another train for a long time. Let me tell you something, Jimmie Rodgers didn't waste a word."

**T**HE DEPRESSION didn't hit the Phillips family as hard as some, but it hit hard enough to inalterably change the pattern and outcome of their lives. Charlie Phillips was able to hold on for the first few years, but then in 1933, when cotton was down to five cents a pound, he recognized that he could no longer make a living off the land, and the family moved to town. It was like being cast out of paradise.

Sam's daddy's first job off the farm was flagging on the old L&N railroad bridge, which had a single lane for vehicular traffic, working from six in the evening till six in the morning seven days a week for thirty dollars. He moved the family in and out of town over the next few years, keeping the job as the salary increased to thirty-five and then forty dollars a week but continuing to farm simply

because of his love of the land. He grade-contracted for others, he terraced the Florence State Teacher College amphitheater with mules and sodded it with Bermuda grass (“He was,” said Sam, “the greatest sculptor of the soil I’ve ever seen”), he grew an experimental vegetable garden for Dr. Willingham. the president of the college, he held out a helping hand to others when he could barely afford the rest himself—and his youngest son took it all in. The way he was with people, the way he was with animals, the kindness he showed to others, the expectations he had of himself. “My daddy didn’t do things I didn’t see. He didn’t know I was looking at him, I wasn’t *staring*—but my daddy never ceased to amaze me. He knew the soil. He knew mules. I mean, he *knew* mules! My daddy never used a stick or a whip or anything. Mules would work for him, people would work for him—and they would rise and achieve above their normal capacity.” His daddy was never truly happy in town, the little boy felt. Even as a small child he saw his father fueled by an agrarian vision—though he certainly couldn’t have named it at the time. There was an idealism, he believed, that fed his father beyond faith and hard work. His daddy would never have chosen to make a *living* off the land if he hadn’t had to. “There was something clean about the soil, there was something clean about plowing a mule—I could just take the soil in his hands and watch it produce for him.” It was the purity of a dream.



Sam and Aunt Emma, late 1955 or early 1956. *Courtesy of the Sam Phillips Family*

He was a frail but determined child. Even though his brother was twice his size, and much more physically commanding, he and J.W. fought like cats and dogs—but they always got together again afterward. You just couldn’t help but love J.W., but it was his aunt Emma who truly fascinated him for her refusal to be intellectually inhibited by her inability to hear or speak. He was well aware of the example of Helen Keller, across the river in Tuscumbia, and he had long, animated signifying discussions with his aunt, who read the newspaper cover to cover every day and irritated some members of the family with her strong opinions and behavior that could just as easily be described

willful as strong-willed. Only Sam and his mother were able to calm Aunt Emma down, and of all the nephews and nieces he was clearly her favorite.

When he was in the sixth grade, the family moved to Royal Avenue in North Florence, directly behind the cotton gin where they had once brought their cotton. When the circus came to town, it passed right by their house, with the elephants at the head of the parade, before pitching tent by the railroad track in East Florence, a mile and a half away. The carnival set up in back of the store right across the alley from them. And any children in the neighborhood could ride for free.

It was in the sixth grade, too, that he had his first drum lesson, on the kind of “field” drum that you wore around your neck, from the city music director, Mr. D. F. Stuber. Sam had been begging his mama and daddy for music lessons, beating on pots and pans till he like to drove his mama crazy, and he had to rake leaves and mow Mr. Stuber’s yard while his daddy grew a garden for Mr. Stuber to help pay for the lessons. He wasn’t the best drummer in the world, he knew, but he was diligent in his application, and with sufficient practice, Mr. Stuber assured him, he could join the marching band the following year when he entered junior high school.

It was during this time that Uncle Silas joined the Phillips household. According to the official Phillips Family Reunion book, Charlie and Madgie Phillips “never turned anyone away who needed food, clothing, shelter, comfort, love, and affection.” They raised three children in addition to their own, and many others, including Aunt Emma, lived with them, so that there were frequently as many as “nineteen or twenty... around the Phillips supper table.” In this case it was Silas Payne, a poor black sharecropper, originally from Louisiana, who had worked on the old Pickens place and was, said Sam, a “genius with chickens” even after he went blind from syphilis. Another family had taken him in after the Phillipses moved to town, but when the Miles family could no longer afford to care for him, Charlie Phillips borrowed the cotton gin manager Mr. Wiggins’ 1929 Chevrolet and moved Uncle Silas in with them.

The story of Uncle Silas is at the epicenter of everything that Sam Phillips ever believed both about himself and the “common man,” in that most uncommon narrative that became the lodestar for his life. It was not sympathy for this old black man’s plight that drew him to Silas Payne—far from it, Sam Phillips always insisted. Rather, it was admiration for those same qualities of imagination, creativity, and invincible determination that he had first noted in the black fieldworkers on his father’s farm—that and the kind of emotional freedom, the unqualified generosity and kindness that Uncle Silas himself would have most liked to be able to achieve.

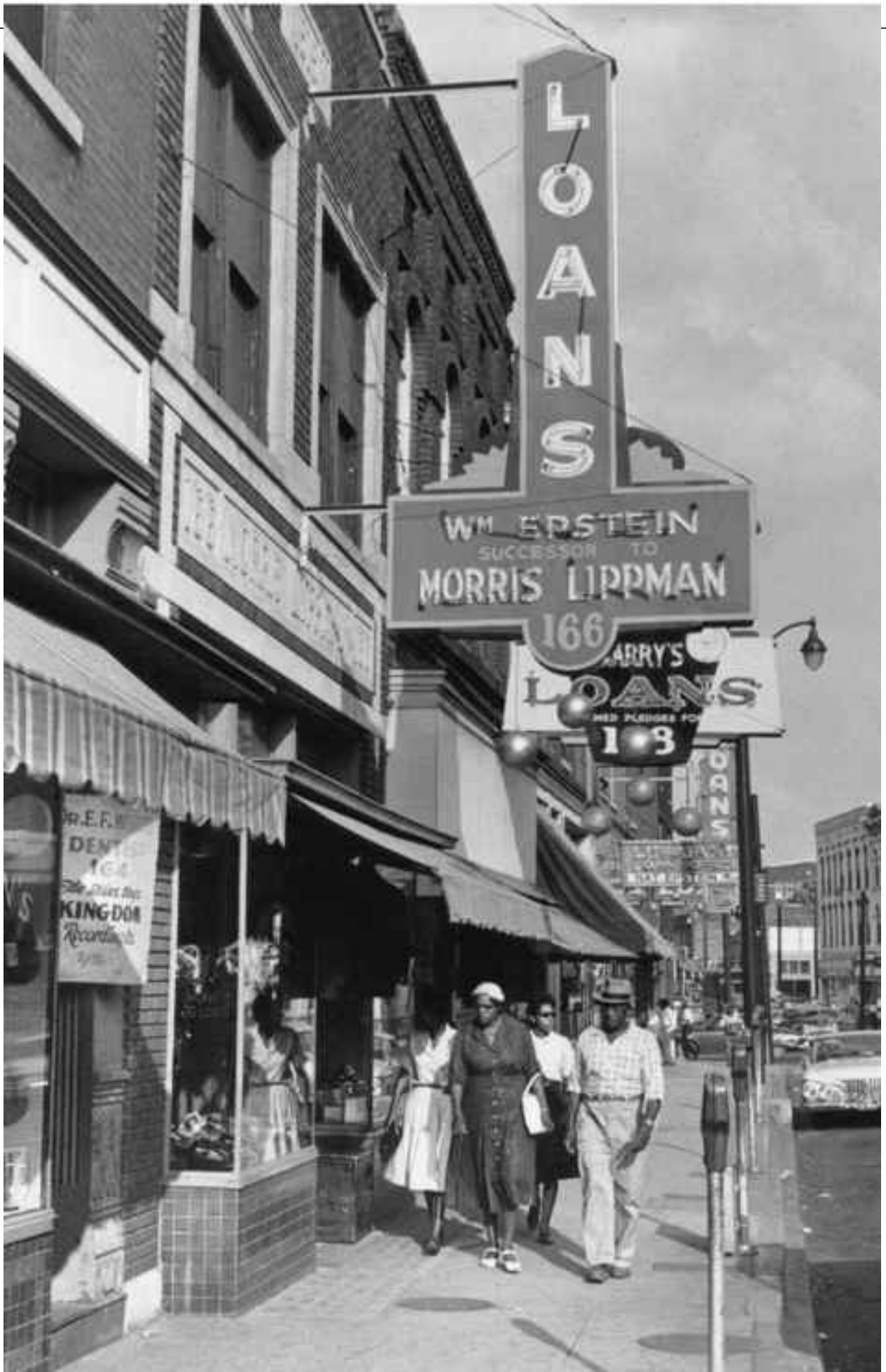
He recognized that even for his father, just like for nearly everyone else who lived nearby, whether there may have been no overt prejudice, whites were still whites, niggers niggers—for all of his daddy’s fair-mindedness (who else took a colored man into his house?), that was simply the way he had been taught and raised. For the young boy, though, there was something almost magical about Uncle Silas, with the hundreds of chickens he kept out back, every one of whom he could distinguish by name, and the Bible stories he rhymed up, the songs he sang, the stories he told of an Africa he had never known, with battercake trees and a Molasses River that took a twelve-year-old boy away to a world in which he was freed from all the emotional and physical bonds by which he felt so constricted in his day-to-day existence.

Not long after Uncle Silas came to live with them—right after graduating sixth grade in June 1936—Sam became ill, so ill, in fact, that old Dr. Duckett was just about ready to give up on him. He had two bouts of double pneumonia, and his lungs were weakened by pleurisy to the point where he almost hurt too much to breathe. The doctor, a gruff old-timer with flowing hair and a long white beard, knew the family’s limited resources and brought his patient oranges to build up his strength.

but one day after the doctor's visit, Sam heard his mother and Mrs. Reynolds, the lady who lived right behind them on North Royal, talking about him, and he suddenly sensed that he might be about to die. He didn't tell his mother that he had overheard their conversation, but he experienced a sudden and almost overwhelming sense of panic at the thought of the world going on without him, at the thought of all the things he would not get to do, all the ongoing narratives, his own and everyone else's, whose outcome he would never learn. That panic returned from time to time, but it was soothed as much by anything not just by his mother's reassurances and ministrations as by Uncle Silas' constant reiterations that not only was he going to get better, he was going to be able to achieve the kind of things he could scarcely formulate in words or even dream of now.

"He liked to sit in the kitchen and put me on his knee, grab me by my bony shoulder and say, 'Samuel, you're going to grow up and be a great man someday.' I mean, I was just a sickly kid—physically, I don't know, maybe mentally, too—but somehow, as much as I didn't believe him, I did believe him. Because he sounded so confident. And he was a great storyteller—but [what I got from his stories] is that, number one, you must have a belief in things that are unknown to you, that what you see and hear is really not all that important, except for the moment. I mean, Africa was just another way of him pointing to the things that were all over and available to us one way or another. Africa was a state of mind that he hoped everybody could see and be a part of or participate in." Most of all, rather than moralize, he just tried to teach the sickly little boy, as much by example as anything else, "how to live and be happy, no matter what came along, [that] even when you're feeling bad, you're feeling good."

This enforced isolation only served to underscore the privations that Silas and Sam's aunt Emma had had to learn to put up with and endure and further sharpened his own powers of observation. Even when he sat out on the porch swing watching the world go by, he listened for different cadences of speech. Without even heeding the words, he studied movement and demeanor, and he grew to believe, for all his fears and insecurities, that he had been granted a God-given gift, the ability to read people in the same way that other people read books.



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