

JERRY LEE'S FIRST SESSION

Well, back during that time there was a lot of people coming in there from a lot of places, because the place was pretty famous by then, and it was the only place in Memphis. So there was always somebody wanting to be heard, coming by there, and I found that if they were local I could stall it for a period of time if I wanted to. But if they were just in town, I might as well go ahead and get it over with so they could go on and leave, or whatever, because I, you know, so anyway I was real busy. I was making records and stuff. But I was back in the control room doing something and Sally, Sam's secretary, came back in the control room and said there's a guy out here says he plays the piano like Chet Atkins. Well, all right. I was a Chet Atkins fan, and I wanted to hear that. I said, "Sure, send him back."

So, Jerry Lee came back, and sure enough, he played something like Chet on the piano - "Wildwood Flower" and I enjoyed it. I thought it was real nice, but it wasn't what you would want to make a record out of, you know, when Rock and Roll was king. At that point country music, the bottom had kind of dropped out of country music. The only person I can recall that was sort of hot country right then, was George Jones.

So Jerry Lee did that instrumental bit on the piano. I said, "What else you do?" He said, "I play mostly country." At that time he was playing in a little ole place in Ferriday, Louisiana. He would play the piano with his left hand, and the drums with his right hand, and he had another guy playing bass with him, or something, and that was it. Now, I never heard that group. (laughs) But he really wasn't into rock and roll. But he could really just flat sing country stuff - "Seasons of My Heart" .

But I told him country music wasn't happening right then, Rock and Roll was happening, that's what we were cutting around there and I said, "Do you know any Rock and Roll songs," and he said "No". He said "I'll learn some". I said, "Why don't you do that"

In the meantime I'd put down four or five things on tape that I loved, and he left and I had his name and address on the box, and he drifted away and I got to listening to that tape and playing it for people and a lot of them around there were jubilant - it was a great tape, I think. It was definitely energetic. I played that tape for a lot of people, and they loved it. But anyway, I played it for Sam later, I think Jerry left town that day, and Sam flipped over it.

He sort of chewed me out. He knew not to chew me out too much, because that's the first time anybody made any mention of me being empowered to go around making any kind of deals with these people. I was there to listen and put them on tape if I thought they had any kind of potential and let Sam hear them. Well, I thought Jerry Lee had potential when I first heard him, so I put him on tape. Got his name and phone number on the back of the tape. We could call him at any point, see. Then it wasn't any big deal. Sam didn't really chew me out. He just said, you know, when anything like that walks in, sign it. So, after that when somebody walked in, if I thought they could cut hit records, I'd start making tapes, hire musicians and stuff.

Anyhow, we'd get some tapes cut, then sign some contracts and Sam would put them out. But he had the say - he was the only one who had the say about what was released. I talked him into a few little things - not a whole lot. We pretty much agreed on the stuff. We just cut tapes all the time and once in a while we'd go through them and pick out the best stuff and put out some records. And when we had like 6 singles out with Johnny Cash - make up an album - 12 sides - never cut an album with Johnny Cash - it wasn't the thing to do in those days. Albums were only about 10% of the market at that point, I think, something like that.

But now, anyway, with Jerry Lee, we sat around listening to that tape for two or three weeks and I was going to call him but he walked in one day, him, and let's see, his cousin, J. W. Brown. Jerry Lee had started a little goatee. I told him to shave it off.

I said "I been meaning to call you, I want to cut some tapes - Sam likes the stuff we've got", but he said he'd learned some rock and roll songs. Said he'd written one, written a song. So we went back there - Now, I don't think we heard anything that day. That's right, it was on a Monday or Tuesday. But I remember we set it up for Thursday when he would come back and I would have three or four musicians there and we would cut some tapes. So he came back - Sam hadn't seen Jerry Lee at this point, Sam went to the disc jockey convention that week over here in Nashville, that's the reason I remember it was on Thursday. Also, I remember the heat kept going off. It was as cold as shit. And I had these - it was a heat sound, that's what it was, had these electric heaters in the control room to keep warm and they kept blowing the circuit breaker, you know, tripping the circuit breaker, cutting off the board.

November 14, 1956: I had Billy Lee Riley and Roland Janes and J. M. Van Eaton {who had to be picked up by Janes because he was still in high school] on the drums and we taped "End of the Road", that was the song he had written, his first one we taped.

Then I asked him - "Crazy Arms" at this time had already been a big hit, by Ray Price. It had been a hit for six months and then it had been covered by the Andrews Sisters and they did a big pop hit. At this point it was on its way down by the Andrews sisters. It had been a big hit twice - it had been a hit for six months. I said, you know "Crazy Arms"? He said, "I know most of it." I said, "Let's do it now" or something like that. So he did it, and he didn't know some of the words, sort of made up some of the words and it was a one take, and on that particular take, Billy Riley had gone into the head. He was playing the guitar and the bass player was off somewhere. So all we really had on that record was the piano and the drum - set of drums, no bass. But we had a mic on the bass drum, so it had a good bottom. At the very end of it the bass player walked in - I think Riley was playing the bass. He didn't think we were cutting for real. We sort of weren't. But at the very end of "Crazy Arms." Riley picked up the electric guitar, or the bass player, somebody picked it up and hit a wrong chord, a bad chord and it is still on the record, just because they didn't think - accidental chord he found. It was on the B, I think, the wrong chord, but it didn't bother us too much.

But the thing I really liked was . . . Jerry had worked up a kind of rock and roll version of an old Gene Autry song called "Your The Only Star in My Blue Heaven," which was always waltz time.

[Clement starts singing smoothly, "Yooouurr the only starr in my blue heaaaven"]
Jerry did it [Clement starts pounding on the table like its a piano] "Your the only star in my blue heaaaaaa ... vunnn And (thump, thump) you're shining (thump, thump) just for meeeeee"

Sam came back from Nashville, and we got in there . . you know, I'd cut the tapes and when he'd come in, I'd play him things I'd cut, and he'd pick what he wanted to put out. We had been playing the tapes over and over, and we finally got to "Crazy Arms" and that would be the one we'd play over and over and over before the day was out. And then Sam came back. By that time I'd decided that would be the first one I'd play him. So, I put the tape on the machine, and had it queued up, and he came back to the control room, and I hit the start button; and it really didn't even get to the singing part before he stopped it and said, "I can sell that." Just from the intro. It was nothing but a piano and a drum! Didn't even have a bass on it. The bass player was in the bathroom at the time.



photo:
Bill Francis