

Otis Blackwell: Songwriter to “The King”

As the songwriter of two of Elvis Presley’s career-making hits, Otis Blackwell will always be linked to the man known as the King of Rock & Roll. But many other artists gave voice to Blackwell’s work, leaving behind a legacy that reaches far beyond Presley’s shadow. Indeed, Blackwell is considered one of rock & roll’s most influential songwriters. According to the Songwriters Hall of Fame, “Blackwell is without question one of the select songwriters whose songs literally helped redefine America’s popular music in the early and mid-1950s.”

Born February 16, 1932, in Brooklyn, New York, Blackwell grew up next to a movie theater and developed a passion for Hollywood’s singing cowboys and their western music. “Like the blues, it told a story,” he once said. “But it didn’t have the same restrictive construction. A cowboy song could do anything.”

Blackwell began writing songs in his teens, but turned his attention to performing after winning a local talent show. He soon tired of the road, choosing instead to focus on songwriting while working a day job pressing clothes at a New York tailor shop.

Blackwell’s demo tape of “Don’t Be Cruel” caught the ear of Presley, who had just signed with RCA Records in November 1955 and was looking to expand his southern regional popularity to national stardom. Taking cues from Blackwell’s distinctive vocal phrasing, Presley turned the song into a 1956 sensation that topped the country, R&B, and pop charts alike.

In trying to explain the song’s popularity, music critic Brian Gilmore observed: “Some say it was the pop nature of the tune, but others insist it is the country feel that made it so appealing. Actually, it was much simpler.” While African American artists were dominating rock at the time, Gilmore continued, “Otis Blackwell had written a rock & roll song that was tailored for the voice of a white singer.”

Presley soon followed this success with “All Shook Up,” which Blackwell penned after his publisher shook a bottle of soda and jokingly challenged him to write a song about it.



Presley’s manager, Colonel Tom Parker, insisted that Blackwell share writing credit with Presley to increase the artist’s profit—a common practice at the time among stars. “I said no at first,” Blackwell explained, “but they said Elvis is gonna turn the business around, so I said okay. The cat was hot. That’s why his name is on the songs.” Blackwell still made a fortune off of Presley’s star power, but despite their connection, he famously avoided meeting the singer, because Blackwell feared that he wouldn’t live up to Presley’s image of him.

Building on his early success, Blackwell continued to write for Presley while penning a string of hits for other artists into the 1960s. His songs have appeared on an estimated 185 million records.

In 1976, Blackwell recorded a dozen of his best-known hits. He died of a heart attack on May 6, 2002, in Nashville. Eight years later, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Sources: *American Songwriter*; *New York Times*; *Riding on a Blue Note: Jazz and American Pop*, by Gary Giddins; Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (rockhall.com); *San Francisco Weekly*

LISTEN:

Some of Otis Blackwell’s songs made popular by other artists:

- “All Shook Up” (Elvis Presley)
- “Breathless” (Jerry Lee Lewis)
- “Don’t Be Cruel” (Elvis Presley)
- “Fever” (Peggy Lee)
- “Great Balls of Fire” (Jerry Lee Lewis)
- “Handy Man” (Jimmy Jones, Del Shannon, James Taylor)
- “Hey Little Girl” (Dee Clark)
- “Return to Sender” (Elvis Presley)

READ:

American Songwriter (July 1, 2007): Brian Gilmore recounts the story of the making of “Don’t Be Cruel” and its impact on both its songwriter and artist. Go to americansongwriter.com and search for “Don’t Be Cruel.”

(americansongwriter.com/2007/07/dont-be-cruel-otis-blackwells-triumph)