

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 so many artists have recorded Blackwell’s songs that his work reaches far beyond Presley’s shadow. The many hits Blackwell wrote made him one of rock & roll’s most influential songwriters.

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, however, 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 was then looking to expand his popularity from the South to the nation as a whole. Taking cues from Blackwell’s vocal phrasing, Presley turned the song into a 1956 sensation that topped the country, R&B, and pop charts alike.

In trying to describe the source of the song’s popularity, music critic Brian Gilmore wrote, “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 most of the early rockers were African American, 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.

Building on his early success, Blackwell continued to write for Presley, and he created a string of hit songs for other artists into the 1960s. Blackwell’s original compositions have appeared on an estimated 185 million records. Despite his connection to Presley, Blackwell famously avoided meeting the singer, reportedly because he thought he wouldn’t live up to Presley’s image of him.

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)