



OTIS BLACKWELL: SONGWRITER TO “THE KING”



As the songwriter of two of Elvis Presley’s most well-known hits, Otis Blackwell will always be linked to the man known as the “King of Rock & Roll,” Elvis Presley. 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 important songwriters. Those hit songs include “Great Balls of Fire” for Jerry Lee Lewis, “Fever” for Peggy Lee, and “Handy Man” for James Taylor and other artists.

Born in 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.

Blackwell began writing songs in his teens but turned his attention to performing after winning a local talent show. He soon grew tired traveling, however, and chose to work on songwriting while working a job at a New York tailor shop pressing clothes.

Blackwell’s demo tape of “Don’t Be Cruel” caught the ear of Presley, who was then looking to expand his popularity from only the South to the entire nation. Closely following how Blackwell sang on his version, Presley turned the song into a 1956 sensation that topped the country, R&B, and pop charts.

Presley soon followed with another success, “All Shook Up,” which Blackwell wrote after his publisher shook



a bottle of soda and jokingly challenged him to write a song about it.

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LISTEN

“All Shook Up” (Elvis Presley), “Don’t Be Cruel” (Elvis Presley), “Great Balls of Fire” (Jerry Lee Lewis), “Handy Man” (Jimmy Jones, Del Shannon, James Taylor)



OTIS BLACKWELL: SONGWRITER TO “THE KING” (CONTINUED)

Building on his early success, Blackwell continued to write for Presley, but he also created a string of hit songs for other artists into the 1960s. 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 1977, Blackwell released an album of a dozen of his greatest hits. It was called *These Are My Songs!* He died of a heart attack in 2002 in Nashville. Eight years later, he was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Circle the phrase “his work reaches far beyond Presley’s shadow” in the first paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrase that help you understand its meaning. Then, explain the phrase in your own words.

2. What song did Blackwell write about a bottle of soda?

3. Why do you think Blackwell never wanted to meet Presley?

