

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 entertainer known as the “King of Rock & Roll.” But many other artists also 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, though, 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 late 1955 and was looking to expand his southern regional popularity into national fame. 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.

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 Black artists were dominating rock at the time, Gilmore explained, Blackwell had penned “a rock & roll song that was tailored for the voice of a white singer.”

Presley soon followed 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.

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.”

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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), “Return to Sender” (Elvis Presley)

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

Blackwell made a fortune off 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 writing a string of hits for other artists into the 1960s. 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.

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 May 6, 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?
