

A Star is Born

The King at Bethel Springs

The history is not in doubt; Elvis Presley performed at Bethel Springs, Tennessee in the earliest days of his career. Multiple eyewitnesses attest to the facts, among them, a young Carl Perkins who met Presley at the show.



Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley signing autographs at Overton Park Shell in 1956. By the time this photo was taken, the pioneers of rock 'n' roll were well on their way to becoming household names, but both were virtual unknowns when they met at Bethel Springs, Tennessee two years earlier.

Perkins was so impressed with the encounter that he mentioned Bethel Springs in later media interviews, and included a detailed account of the evening in his autobiography, *Go Cat Go!* This report will offer verifiable, factual evidence and cultural context for this historic concert in McNairy County, Tennessee.

Methods & Sources

For more than a decade, Arts in McNairy, the nonprofit arts agency serving McNairy (Tennessee) and surrounding counties has maintained a standing Traditional Arts Committee. The Committee periodically conducts surveys and oral history interviews to document the events, places, people, music, art, craft, literature and material culture unique and significant to the region, while constantly combing print and digital media archives for stories that bear on the area's contemporary and traditional creative heritage.

This report is compiled from primary sources, including interviews with eyewitnesses who attended the Elvis performance at Bethel Springs, conducted by Arts in McNairy survey teams in March 2009, December 2009 and February 2023. Reliable media sources which have published accounts of the events described here, or other related content, are also cited in this document.

An Elvis concert reunion was held December 11, 2009 at Bethel Springs school with local musicians performing and the W.S. Holland Band headlining. The concert was sponsored by Arts in McNairy and organized by Pat and Harold Knight. W.S. Holland, the original drummer for Carl Perkins, and later Johnny Cash, offered his recollections of the Elvis performance at Bethel Springs, and sat for an interview. More than a dozen others who attended the original concert came to the reunion and provided information. These contacts led to a number of other sources who had firsthand knowledge of the local Elvis show, including more attendees and their family members, Bethel Springs school personnel, and community historians.

At the invitation of Judy Olson and Pat Huggins, Arts in McNairy's 2023 survey team developed a new questionnaire designed to get at unanswered questions about this particular historic happening. Mrs. Olson and Huggins hope to use the information to commemorate this significant cultural event that occurred in their hometown in some meaningful way. The combined team convened an open meeting, graciously hosted by the City of Bethel Springs, at the local community center, February 25, 2023. Five people who witnessed the Elvis concert and several others recorded oral history interviews and a companion survey was placed on the Arts in McNairy website for those who were unable to attend the meeting. Response to the event and the online questionnaire were good.

More than thirty people with first hand knowledge of the Elvis performance at Bethel Springs, Tennessee have provided information that inform the contents of this report. It is the most thorough documentation of the event yet compiled.



February 2023, five McNairy County residents who attended an early Elvis Presley concert gathered at Bethel Springs Community Center to reminisce and share memories with Arts in McNairy's survey team. Left to Right: Vernon Hickman, Ann Ellis, Billie Teague, Don Smith, Jackie Miller. Photo by Deon Strickland

Narrative Report

In the summer of 1954, all was calm on Main Street America. World War II was in the rearview mirror and America was booming. Cities and small towns flourished across the country and infrastructure suitable to a great nation was being built everywhere. Unemployment was low and optimism was high, as the emergent American middle class—the most economically robust the world had ever seen—seemed to foreshadow a new golden age for traditional values.

Then came Elvis Presley.

In July of that year, Sun Studio owner, Sam Phillips, matched a talented young singer from Tupelo, Mississippi, with a pair of veteran Memphis honky-tonkers,

Scotty Moore and Bill Black, in an effort to produce marketable country music singles for Phillips's struggling new label.

At first, it did not go well for the trio. Phillips heard nothing that piqued his interest in the session, but just as they planned to throw in the towel, Elvis Presley began fooling around with an uptempo version of a little known song called *That's All Right*, by blues artist, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Bassist, Bill Black, joined in providing a bouncy rhythm for the tune, while guitarist, Scotty Moore, weaved a nuanced lead guitar in and out of Presley's impressive vocal performance. Phillips liked what he heard, and encouraged the tired group to keep going, recording several takes of the unusual tune.

Phillips took the unreleased recording over to his friend Dewey Phillips (no relation) who had a popular, and musically eclectic, radio program, Red, Hot and Blue, on Memphis's WHBQ. At the time, Dewey Phillips was a celebrity deejay and the most influential music tastemaker in Memphis and Mid South radio. He took a chance on *That's All Right*, and Sam Phillips instincts were more than good; they were prophetic.

Dewey Phillips reportedly played the single fourteen times, back to back, as the phone at WHBQ rang off the hook with requests to hear *That's All Right* again and again. The record quickly rose to the top of the Mid South charts and Elvis Presley's star was on the rise.

Through the remainder of the summer, the Blue Moon Boys—Sam Phillips's new name for the trio—played club dates and made public appearances around Memphis, primarily arranged by band member and manager, Scotty Moore. Before recording with Presley, Moore and Black were members of a popular honky-tonk group known as The Starlite Wranglers. The new band naturally played many of the same seedy Memphis clubs, but Moore began to cast an eye more broadly around the region, on the lookout for more wholesome venues that catered to the younger record buyers in Presley's growing fandom.

The strong, youthful response to Elvis Presley's first record had Sam Phillips itching to get back in the studio, but he had to find the balance between pushing the rising single he had, and taking the time to record new material with no guarantee of similar success. The band continued to promote their first single with live engagements in Memphis, while Presley did a few radio spots. It would be early fall before Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys were back at Sun for three days of recording.

During this time, Phillips also called in a favor from Memphis deejay and music promoter, Bob Neal. Neal played Presley's singles on his WMPS radio show and

booked the group on a country music show at Overton Park Shell. Scotty Moore was still The Blue Moon Boys' de facto manager, but through the late summer and early fall of 1954, Bob Neal began to play a larger role in promoting Presley's career. He was the promoter of the popular, recurring music show at Overton Park and was just beginning to arrange touring package shows for Sam Phillips's emerging stable of Sun recording artists as well as other Memphis-based talent.

Phillips, Moore and Neal knew artists had to get out of Memphis to connect to a larger segment of the record-buying public in the region. First Moore and then Neal arranged shows at National Guard armories, county fairs, civic events, courthouse lawns, high school gymnasiums, and just about anywhere else they were hiring music acts.

One such place was Bethel Springs, Tennessee.

The principal at Bethel Springs school, Curry Hendrix, regularly booked musical artists to play the school gymnasium/auditorium as a means of raising funds. Modest artist's fees would be taken out of the door receipts, with the rest of the money reserved for school projects. Other schools in the area held similar events, and a number of popular entertainers are known to have performed in the County to take advantage of such opportunities.



Left to Right: Scotty Moore (guitar), Bill Black (bass), Elvis Presley (guitar/vocals) at an early performance, much as they would have appeared at Bethel Springs in 1954.

The best evidence suggests that Elvis Presley performed at Bethel Springs in September 1954. Though the exact date could not be recalled by attendees, several speculated about a Friday night in mid September, consistent with the scheduling of other school concerts. The known facts support that conclusion. One Elvis concert goer recalled that the show occurred just before he went into the armed services in October 1954. Thereafter, his service took him out of the region making attendance at a later date unfeasible. Similarly, both Carl Perkins and W.S. Holland recalled that their first audition for Sam Phillips relied on information provided by Presley at Bethel Spring. Both remembered the concert occurring just days before their arrival at Sun in

October 1954. Most convincingly, one Bethel Springs student recorded reflections on the show in a batch of diary entries from September 1954. She later confirmed the timeline for her family, recalling that Presley wasn't the only performer on the bill that evening.

Many attendees validate the claim of another artist performing on the Bethel Springs bill with Elvis Presley. Several recalled at least one other male performer taking the stage with country western costuming, a typical hillbilly rhythm section, steel guitar player, and maybe a fiddler. One attendee thought Bud Deckelman, a Memphis country artist with a new hit out on Meteor Records, performed that night. Another insisted that Bob Neal arranged the show and emceed it himself. This is remarkably consistent with what is known about Bob Neal's later track record as a promoter.

Three months after the Bethel Spring concert, Neal launched his own talent management, promotion and booking agency, arranging many public appearances for Presley, Deckelman and a host of other Memphis recording artists. These shows followed a format strikingly similar to the one witnesses described at Bethel Springs. Indeed, Presley and Deckelman sometimes appeared on the same bill together with Neal as the primary promotor and emcee.

Eyewitness reports of the Bethel Springs performance are, in many ways, typical of other documented Elvis shows from the era: the audience was primarily young and responsive, especially the women; Presley's flamboyant attire (black and white with pink accents) instantly set him apart from other entertainers of the day; the controversial performance style, which earned him the nickname, "Elvis the Pelvis," was very much in evidence; etc. It seemed to most everyone at the show that they were witnessing something new and different in the world of entertainment. Reaction from the local crowd was mostly positive.

Scotty Moore and Bill Black accompanied Presley at Bethel Springs. The show opened with *That's All Right*, and almost everyone recalls Presley performing the only other Sun release he had under his belt at the time: *Blue Moon of Kentucky*. Both were met with enthusiasm. A variety of other country covers have been reported, but it seems likely that another musician with show business aspirations would be in the best position to recall Presley's set list. Fortunately, one was in attendance that evening. In addition to the Sun material, Carl Perkins recalled that Hank Snow's *I'm Moving On* and Lead Belly's *Cotton Fields* were included in the performance.

Perkins offered firsthand accounts of the Bethel Springs show in at least one interview and his autobiography. Additionally, he was recognized by several audience members that night. Perkins was well known to many in the area,

performing at the Latta Ford weekend jamborees in Selmer, and at informal musical gatherings in local homes. He had made the first known recordings of his career for Stanton Littlejohn at Eastview in 1951. Some of Perkins earliest musical collaborators lived at, or near, Bethel Springs, and the Coley family claimed that the Perkins Brothers Band joined them for dinner the night of the Presley performance. Others attest to the fact that Perkins often visited the Coley home, while mandolinist Benny Coley's performances with Perkins are well documented.

A near universal memory among attendees was a stumble by the future King of Rock 'n' Roll as he navigated the crowded stage. Some say he tripped on his own feet, others say it was an amplifier cable or guitar cord that did him in, but nearly everyone recalled the awkward moment. One attendee claimed to have retrieved a guitar pick Presley dropped during the incident, cherishing it for many years as a keepsake of the occasion, but ultimately losing track of it during a move. Presley is said to have cracked a joke to cover his clumsiness, which endeared him all the more to the small audience.

Reports of the crowd size vary, but generally agree that there were less than one hundred, and maybe fewer than fifty, in attendance. The admission price was fifty cents or less, and one persistent bit of local lore, repeated often in interviews, says that so little money was raised that Bethel Springs principal, Curry Hendrix, embarrassed for the performers, allowed them to keep all proceeds from the concert. A variation on the tale has Elvis and his promoters being disappointed with the turnout, donating all of proceeds back to the school.

Recollections of Presley's transportation vary, but one attendee recalled that the automobile, possibly a black, 1954 Ford or Packard, got stuck on a tree stump when the band arrived and had to be dislodged by a group of local boys. After the show concluded, Carl Perkins (as well as W.S. Holland) reported that he had conversation with Presley and his bandmates as they loaded up their instruments. The exchange was brief, but included Presley sharing information about Sam Phillips and Sun Records.

And just like that, Elvis Presley drove away, into the limelight of superstardom.

The old gym is long gone, razed to make room for a new one, but the history and the fond memories of the King at Bethel Springs remain.



Marie King (left), a Bethel Springs native and musical talent in her own right, performed on occasion with Carl Perkins (right). This photo is believed to have been taken at Chickasaw State Park circa 1952. Marie (deceased) attended the Elvis performance at Bethel Springs with her sister Betty King (deceased). Two generations of the King family graciously provided information for this report. Photo courtesy of Terry Harrison.

Event Timeline

July 5, 1954—Elvis Presley records *That's All Right* at Sun Studio. Owner and producer, Sam Phillips, has a hunch about the record and gives copies to deejays, Bob Neal at WMPS, and Dewey Phillips at WHBQ.

July 8, 1954—McNairy County's own, Dewey Phillips, plays *That's All Right* on his show, Red, Hot and Blue, for the first time, igniting Elvis's career and eventually turning the world of popular music on its ear.

July 9, 1954—Sam Phillips rushes Elvis back into the studio to record a B-side for *That's All Right* based on the instant popularity of the song. They record *Blue Moon of Kentucky* and send it over to the pressing plant to begin production on the 45 single some will call the first rock 'n' roll record.

July 19, 1954—Sun releases *That's All Right/Blue Moon of Kentucky*. There is immediate pushback from some country and R&B radio stations who refuse to play the record because it is neither country nor R&B—and somehow both—all to no avail. Demand for the record continues to rise throughout the summer as Phillips, Neal and others broadcast it over the Memphis airwaves.

July 30, 1954—With *That's All Right/Blue Moon of Kentucky* climbing the regional charts and getting increasing airplay, Elvis performs his first live show as a recording artist, opening for popular, country star Slim Whitman on one of Bob Neal's package shows at Overton Park Shell. His unconventional look and performance style create a minor stir.

Aug.-Sept. 1954—Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys (the band's new name) play club dates, charity benefits, grand opening ceremonies, etc., in Memphis. Elvis appears briefly on WHBQ and a West Memphis Arkansas radio program. In Jackson, Tennessee, Carl Perkins hears Elvis's single, instantly recognizing a musical kinship. He determines to meet Presley if he can.

Sept. 12-16, 1954—Elvis and the band are back in the studio, for several productive recording sessions that yield Presley's second Sun release *Good Rockin' Tonight/I Don't Care if the Sun Don't Shine*. The single is released Sept. 25, 1954, offering an even clearer declaration of Phillips's and Presley's creative intentions.

***Sept. 17, 1954**—Elvis plays his first documented live show outside of Memphis, at Bethel Springs school. Carl Perkins, who is playing The Cotton Boll club in Henderson, Tennessee the same night, asks off between sets to attend the Elvis performance and the two meet for the first time following the show.

Oct. 2, 1954—Elvis receives a chilly reception at the Grand Ole' Opry. The Nashville country music establishment does not appreciate the new rockabilly sound emanating from Memphis. Several cutting remarks reportedly lead Elvis to vow he will never return. The one bright spot is, bluegrass legend and Opry member, Bill Monroe, tells the band he likes Elvis's new rendition of his song, *Blue Moon of Kentucky*.

Early Oct. 1954—Following the meeting at Bethel Springs, Carl Perkins and The Perkins Brothers Band make the trip to Memphis for their first Sun audition.

Perkins signs a contract and begins recording in late 1954. His first single will be released in February 1955. Later that year, Perkins's rockabilly anthem, *Blue Suede Shoes*, will become Sun's biggest hit around the time Presley's Sun contract is bought out by RCA.

Jan. 1, 1955—Bob Neal becomes Elvis Presley's full-time manager and begins booking him on touring package shows with other Sun stars and Memphis area country acts.

*More documentation is needed to make this date conclusive, but it can be confidently stated that the performance occurred in September 1954.

Relevant Media & Interviews

I first met Elvis in 1954 in a little town called Bethel Springs, Tennessee, south of Jackson. I had heard 'That's All Right, Mama,' and I was playing a club there and heard he was playing at the schoolhouse down there, so we took off and went down to catch his show...He was very much the same as the last time I saw him and the first time I saw him...He never changed; he just polished what he started with. But he always had it.

—Carl Perkins, *Echoes of Love: Elvis' Friends Remember* (Rolling Stone, Issue 248) September 22, 1977

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Before he made his first business trip to Memphis, Carl [Perkins] had a chance to see Presley perform at a high school gymnasium in Bethel Springs, Tennessee... Carl, accompanied by Jay and Clayton [Perkins] found only about a hundred people on hand...Carl found it interesting that most of those present were young teens, as opposed to the older crowd he was used to seeing in the tonks. Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to him that his style of music might appeal to this audience.

Presley was recognizable immediately as the star by his pink shirt, white sport coat and black pegged-and-pleated slacks...His appearance had an electric effect on the audience, particularly the girls, who began screaming when they laid eyes on him...what Carl saw moved him...Presley wasn't wearing the sequined suits that had become so popular with country artists, and he wasn't going to be standing flat-footed in cowboy boots singing into the microphone. He was free to move around, as Carl was with his extra long guitar cord. Only in his plain brown shoes did any aspect of Presley's appearance approach the conventional.

When they kicked off their show with ‘That’s All Right,’ Carl was drawn to the front of the room. Standing off to one side, close to the band, he saw and heard an uncanny replication of the Perkins Brothers Band’s sound.

Presley, like Carl, couldn’t stand still while he sang...Elvis slung his guitar behind his back and danced free, hips swiveling and legs shaking...When he sang he would sometimes hold the microphone tenderly and caress it, or tilt it forward to the floor and lean into it, making over it as if it were his beloved. All the while, girls screamed and shouted and boys applauded and egged him on. Carl had seen similar responses to his music in the tonks, but he never knew if the tumult was more the product of genuine excitement over the sounds or the alcohol taking hold. Here there was no question—it was the music and it was the artist.

For all his apparent confidence, though, between songs Presley revealed his unease. In his patter he stuttered badly and tripped over himself, figuratively, trying to crack jokes...in an odd way the stuttering worked to Presley’s advantage. It might have made him even more endearing to the females, but it most certainly was of a piece with his singing style, in which he incorporated a stuttering technique that added extra tension to his material.

The set only lasted about half an hour, and in addition to ‘That’s all Right’ and ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky,’ Presley’s repertoire included ‘Cotton Fields,’ and ‘I’m Moving On’...As Presley was taking his bow and backing away from the mic after his closing song, his feet got tangled in [Scotty] Moore’s guitar cord and he fell square on his backside. With the applause rising, he jumped up and scooted out of sight, heading for the fire escape that would lead him to his car.

...“Sure enjoyed the show, man,” Carl said as he approached Elvis...”You sure can sing. Y’all are good, pickin’ and singin’.”

“Well, thank you,” Elvis said softly.

“Reckon they takin’ on anybody down there at Sun Records,” Carl asked...”This is my brothers there. We play about the same type of thing you do.”

“Well, good, man, good,” Elvis answered, “...I guess I better be goin’; we gotta get on back to Memphis.”

Perfunct. Succinct. Matter of fact. Elvis had been polite and now was going on his way. Years later Sam Phillips would describe him as “probably innately the most introverted person that [ever] came into that studio.” That’s the Elvis Carl met in Bethel Springs, Tennessee. But Elvis had said enough; said it in the auditorium, with his music. Carl pulled out of the parking lot determined he would go through the same door Presley had kicked open, and soon.

—Carl Perkins and David McGee, *Go, Cat, Go!* (Hyperion: New York, 1996) 80-82

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It was in 1952 when [Bob] Neal started Memphis Promotions, bringing in the big package shows to Overton Park in that city. The first show was headed by Hank Snow and Webb Pierce. During the summer of 1954 Neal booked shows into the band shell of that park, and he recalls that they included Slim Whitman, Charlie and Ira Louvin and others.

About this time Sam Phillips called Neal and asked him to include a youngster named Elvis Presley in one of these shows. “Blue Moon of Kentucky” had just been released, and Phillips was convinced Elvis was a pretty fair country singer. He had to hurry and get him in the union first, and Neal promptly booked Presley. He stole the show. From that day through the next 18 months, Presley headed most of the Neal-booked shows.

—*New Act From Memphis: Bob Neal Remembers* (Billboard, Section I—C6) May 23, 1970

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Scotty [Moore] took his duties as manager seriously. He and Sam agreed that it made no sense to put Elvis into some of the rough joints that Scotty and Bill had been playing, so he went looking for schoolhouses and local Elks Club and Lions Club events [Aug.—Sept. 1954] within a seventy-five-mile radius of Memphis that might be looking for a singer.

—Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Back Bay Books, Little Brown and Company: Boston, New York, London, 1994 ) 117

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Interviews and Information for this report provided by (in no particular order):

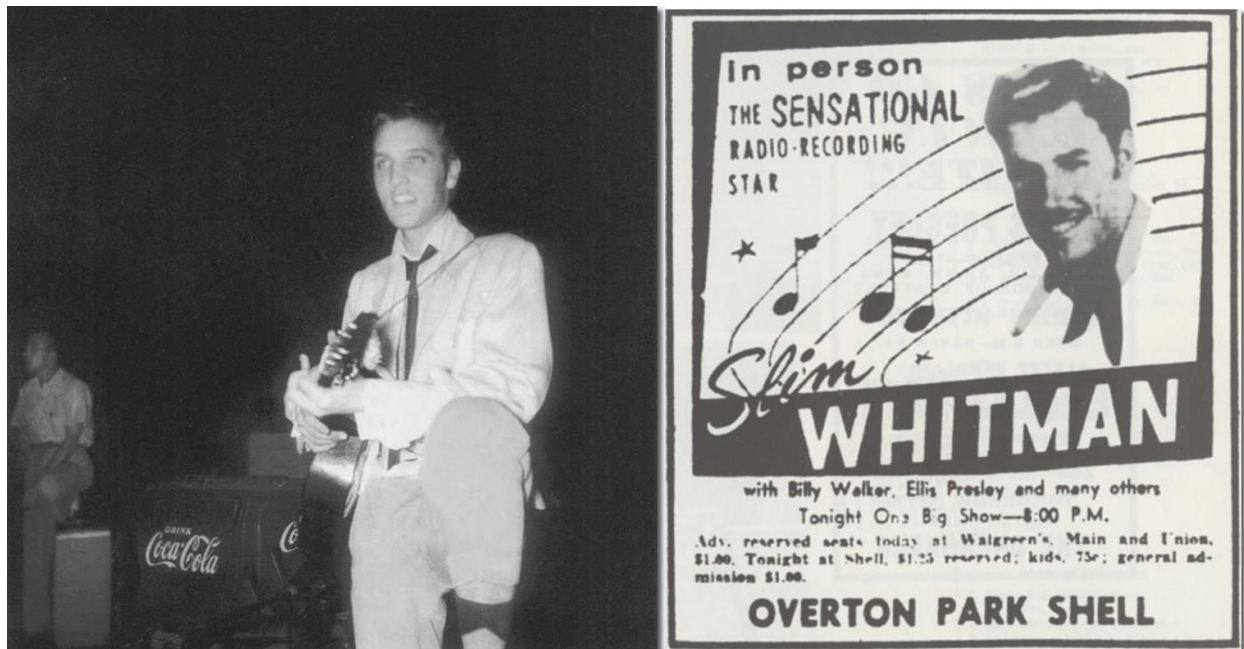
John M. Wood	Vernon Hickman	Janice Turner
Jackie Miller	Judith Olson	Gail McCullar
Pat Huggins	Don Smith	Ann Ellis
Billie Teague	Tony Chapman	Betty King
Terry Harrison	Darren Turner	Brenda Watkins
Harold Knight	Bobbie Randolph	Homer Hill
Marie King	Betty Lou King	Nancy Whitley
Joe Gortney	Jonnie Weatherford	Danny Hendrix

Kenneth Hill	Pat Knight	Freddie Thomas
David Johnson	Benny Coley	Norman McVay
Tim Henry	James Denny	Faye Mitchell
Bobbie Latta	Curry Hendrix	Effie Carrie Woods
Linda George	Carol Ann Woods	Sammy Henry
Sam Tull	Bobby Ray	Gordan Michael

Conclusions

Elvis Presley performed at Bethel Springs, Tennessee in September 1954, most likely on the evening of Friday, September 17. The show is significant as an early performance by one of the twentieth century's most iconic entertainers, but it is also historic in a number of ways.

While the show has long been known to music journalists, historians and fans, all have struggled to pin down a date that might help place this early performance in the context of Elvis Presley's storied career. Some have attempted to date it as late as spring of 1955, assuming that it was one of many shows arranged by promoter, Bob Neal, but this report conclusively establishes the earlier date.



July 1954, Elvis backstage at Overton Park Shell (Left), where he performed his first live concert as a Sun recording artist, opening for Slim Whitman. A virtual unknown at the time, advertisers misspelled his name "Ellis Presley" (Right). A little over two months later, he would perform his first live show outside of Memphis at Bethel Springs, Tennessee.

The Bethel Springs show appears to be an instance of experimental co-management between Scotty Moore and Bob Neal; a trial run for what would soon become Neal's exclusive management of Presley's career beginning in January 1955. It is likely that Moore, who was still officially managing the Blue Moon Boys in 1954, arranged the show with the more experienced promoter's advice and assistance. It is not out of the question that Neal promoted and emceed the event himself.

In any event, the show is the first documented live performance by Elvis Presley, outside of Memphis, Tennessee. To put it another way, it was the King of Rock 'n' Roll's first road gig. As such, the Bethel Springs performance occupies an honored place on the timeline of American music history.

Another "first" associated with the event is the introduction of two founding fathers of rock 'n' roll. The Bethel Springs show brought Elvis Presley into Carl Perkins's backyard—almost literally—facilitating their first meeting. More than just an interesting footnote in music history, Carl Perkins would emphatically state that what he saw and heard at Bethel Springs, Tennessee significantly altered the trajectory of his career, and thus the course of popular music.

Seeing Presley confirmed for Perkins that the two were kindred spirits, performing the same type of music, which had yet to be categorized as rockabilly or rock 'n' roll. It was a game changer for Perkins. He would later recall that the response of the Bethel Springs crowd opened his eyes to astonishing new possibilities; he clearly saw then that the path forward led through Sun Records and the acceptance of this new music by younger audiences.

It is safe to say that Elvis Presley would have been a pop music sensation, no matter where he performed his earliest roadshow. Similarly, Carl Perkins would likely have sought him out regardless of venue location. But the fact is, these historic events took place at Bethel Springs, Tennessee, and the world has never been quite the same since.

Acknowledgements

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