



Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll

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The author of the critically acclaimed Elvis Presley biography *Last Train to Memphis* brings us the life of Sam Phillips, the visionary genius who singlehandedly steered the revolutionary path of Sun

Records. The music that he shaped in his tiny Memphis studio with artists as diverse as Elvis Presley, Ike Turner, Howlin' Wolf, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash, introduced a sound that had never been heard before. He brought forth a singular mix of black and white voices passionately proclaiming the vitality of the American vernacular tradition while at the same time declaring, once and for all, a new, *integrated* musical day. With extensive interviews and firsthand personal observations extending over a 25-year period with Phillips, along with wide-ranging interviews with nearly all the legendary Sun Records artists, Guralnick gives us an ardent, unrestrained portrait of an American original as compelling in his own right as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, or Thomas Edison.

Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll Details

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From Reader Review Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll for online ebook

Henry Sturcke says

Peter Guralnick tells an epic tale on an epic scale. One might ask whether the life of a man who owned the studio an eighteen-year-old happened to walk into to record a song for his mother is worth covering in over 700 pages. The answer is an unequivocal yes.

The music Sam Phillips captured is enough reason for this. Phillips is so famous for being the first to record Elvis, followed in quick succession by Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and then, a little later, Jerry Lee Lewis, that one forgets how much great, path-breaking music he had recorded before that. There was “Rocket 88” with Ike Turner’s group, with Jackie Brenston on vocals—often called the first rock & roll record—but also the first sessions with Howlin’ Wolf, B. B. King, and others.

Fortuitously, Phillips was a meticulous sound engineer. Many timeless monuments of early rock and blues were cut in less-than-ideal circumstances, but Phillips captured these seminal tracks in a self-designed state-of-the-art room. Yet Guralnick makes it clear that for Sam, it was always about more than music. From childhood in rural Alabama, close to Muscle Shoals, he heard in the music of those around him, black and white, a shared human spirituality. Racial segregation made no sense to him, and for him, the cross-over appeal of his tracks was a weapon in overcoming it.

For years, he was reticent about articulating his agenda, but both the teens who bought his records and disapproving adults understood. When the pushback came, in the late fifties, the hot-button issues were the payola scandal (the revelation that chronically underpaid disc jockeys raised themselves to a living wage through the largesse of promoters) and the irregular private life of the enormously talented and arrogant Jerry Lee Lewis. The underlying worry, however, was desegregation. Also, the major record companies, slow to catch on (and cash in) on the new trend were jealous of every dollar that went to Sun Records and other independent labels such as Chess and Atlantic rather than to them.

Guralnick tells the tale well, casting it as one of dazzling success and back-breaking setbacks. There is a bit of irony, as well. After Phillips reluctantly sold his contract with Elvis to RCA, knowing that he had no chance to keep him in the long run anyway, he still had a stable full of talent. But Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Roy Orbison all felt neglected because of the attention Sam lavished on the one he felt most talented of all, Jerry Lee Lewis. They deserted him just before Jerry Lee’s personal life became public and his record sales dropped to nothing. It’s not always the prospectors who first find gold who get rich in the ensuing rush. In a lengthy final chapter, the author details how he came to play Boswell to Sam’s Johnson. It’s an unusual feature, but I felt it worked. There are a few other idiosyncrasies in Guralnick’s style, however, such as the choice of the preposition “on” as in “to cut a record on [Artist’s Name].” Perhaps he picked that up from Phillips himself, but it was new to me. Another quirk is to write a sentence with a qualifier and then in parentheses take back the qualifier. Example: “almost painful (forget almost).” Even in a book of this length, one such sentence would have been enough. He also uses the verb “individuate” more than any other writer I’ve come across.

These are minor quibbles, though. My friends consider me very knowledgeable about this music, but there was much in the book new to me, such as the in-studio argument during the sessions to record “Great Balls of Fire” between Sam and Jerry Lee about whether God would send the singer to hell for blasphemy. Jerry Lee argued the affirmative, which may account for some of the anguished urgency in his vocal.

I give this book the full five stars because I believe it is worth reading not only by those for whom this music matters but for anyone interested in the social upheavals in America in the second half of the 20th century.

Shaun says

I received a free copy of this book through a Goodreads First Reads Giveaway.

This review is going to seem negative/harsh, but it is what it is.

First, the positive. You already know the book is about Sam Phillips and his life and career. The book is incredibly detailed and thoroughly researched. Peter Guralnick was a close friend to Sam Phillips and his son Knox Phillips so had unprecedented access. That shows. If someone were looking for source material for a biopic or television series, this would be all they would need. The life of Sam Phillips is incredibly interesting and that includes his personal and professional life. The information about starting Sun Records and the artists he worked with were exceptional.

Now, the negatives. First of all, this book is entirely too long and too detailed. I mean like so detailed it's tedious to read. I enjoy reading, but this felt like a chore. For example, the author has a sub-heading on page 503 of my copy called "My Meeting With Sam". On page 524, he still hasn't met with Sam and includes the sentence "...I hope I haven't stretched the limits of reader patience too much by now." He doesn't get to the first meeting with Sam until page 532. 29 pages between the sub-heading and his actual first encounter. That's just one example of the ramblings and digressions of the author. The book needed a hardened editor to take out meaningless details and side comments from the author that did not further the biography or storytelling. It was throwaway information.

The author makes no apologies or tries to hide his bias, pointing out in the author's note that he admired Sam and was a close friend of him and the family (in particular Sam's son, Knox). That doesn't excuse the author from tightening up the writing to exclude minutiae.

Overall, the excessive detail outweighed the extraordinary life and career of an important part of American history. If you live and breathe Sun Records or Sam Phillips, this book is for you. If you want to learn the minute details of Sam's personal life, this is for you. If you want just a general overview of Sam or Sun Records, there has to be a better resource out there.

Tosh says

I'm a mega-fan of Peter Guralnick's two volume biographies on Elvis Presley. For sure I thought a biography on Sam Phillips, the brains and sound maker for Sun Records, would be equally fascinating. But the truth is no. For one, this biography is way too long. Without a doubt, Guralnick feels very close to his subject matter, and clearly he loves the music that came out of Sun. Still, I had a hard time keeping my attention to this book. One also gets the feeling that Phillips was right behind Guralnick's shoulder as he was writing it. On many levels, it reads like an authorized biography - which can be good or bad.

Sam Phillips was a brilliant record producer. The Sun Records sound is a very eccentric noise. Which is not odd, considering that Phillips was an eccentric recording other eccentric artists. Elvis was the man who fell to Earth. Probably the closest thing to an alien in the early 1950s. I feel Phillips captured all the oddness in this young singer's recordings. One of the reasons why Sun Records era Elvis never sounds like an oldie, because it is still fresh due to the essence of his performance and voice. In my opinion, there is no such thing as a bad Sun Records release. My favorite is Carl Mann, and sadly he only gets a page or so out of this 660

page book.

Sam's life is not really that dramatic compared to Elvis. The narration of Elvis is a fascinating one, and it has all the trademarks of a tragic Shakespeare play. Guralnick beautifully played out on the heights and the super lows of Elvis, and Sam Phillips just doesn't have the emotional range for such a biography. Still, Sam Phillips is an interesting man. It would have been more interesting to me if there was a book length Q & A format, instead of the biography. Or even Guralnick's narration on knowing Phillips and what it meant to him. He writes about that in the second part of the book, which I think could have been a stand alone piece.

Still, this is a must read for anyone interested in Memphis or its musical history. The shocking thing to me, especially admiring and reading his Elvis bios, that this book should have been the essential read on that subject matter. It's up there, but not the best.

Sara says

Another great bio by Peter Guralnick! Written with the same attention to detail that he used in telling Elvis Presley's story, Guralnick has now turned his attention to "The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll"--Sam Phillips.

I loved the story of the Million Dollar Quartet--the day that Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis all got together at Sam Phillip's Sun Studios for a jam session. (Rockabilly has always been my absolute favorite style of music--fun to play, fun to sing, and fun to listen to.)

Learned a lot about the legendary producer Sam Phillips from this book--I didn't know that he hated the term "rockabilly" even though he had such a critical role in creating it. Did not know that he had a series of nervous breakdowns way before his historic discoveries of the likes of Howlin' Wolf, Elvis, Ike Turner, and all the rest. Did not know that he considered Howlin' Wolf to be an even bigger and more talented find than Elvis.

What I really admired about Sam Phillips from reading this book is how he had such an intense, almost reverent belief in man's quest for pure individuality. Mr. Phillips believed that America was the land of unlimited dreams and that it was only fitting that rock 'n' roll had its origins in our relatively young nation. He believed that music was all about "feeling" and if you didn't have that, well you might as well not be alive.

Sam Phillips also had a big heart toward others. He helped a young gawky Elvis find his inner rebel and told him to never let anyone change his way of "feeling" music. Elvis turned to Sam over the years and trusted his soul-searching advice implicitly. Sam believed strongly that it was the so-called ordinary people--the truck drivers (like Elvis), the down-trodden sharecroppers (like Jerry Lee Lewis), that were capable of truly communicating the "soul of man" through the magic of music.

James Thane says

Sam Phillips may not actually have been the man who invented rock 'n' roll, and it's hard to imagine that any one person might actually be singled out for that honor, but certainly Phillips was present close to the creation and was very instrumental in bringing rock 'n' roll to the world at large.

Born in 1923 to a relatively poor family in a tiny town in Alabama, Phillips always had big dreams and very early on, he fell in love with the music he heard as a child, much of it coming from black people working the

fields surrounding the farm his father rented. As a young man, he was fascinated by radio and was captivated by the idea of providing an outlet to people black and white who were gifted musically and who had no outlet for their talents. "I was looking for a higher ground," he said, "for what I knew existed in the soul of mankind. And especially at that time the black man's spirit and his [soul]."

For Phillips, Memphis, Tennessee was the cradle of the music he loved. He moved to the city and got a job in radio. But his overriding ambition at that time was to open a recording studio and early in 1950, he rented a small storefront and opened the Memphis Recording Service. The studio's principal endeavors early on centered on making audio recordings of weddings, funerals, school functions and business events. Phillips was still working in radio in order to make ends meet financially and could devote only a few hours of the day to the recording business. As time passed, though, he began recording musicians, often people who walked through the door to make a "personal" recording--that is one for their own enjoyment without any prospect of a commercial release.

After recording a few artists, most notably Howlin' Wolf, for small independent labels, Phillips decided early in 1952, to start his own record company and the result, of course, was Sun Records. In March of that year the first Sun release was an instrumental by a local blues artist named Johnny London. But the music business was very different in 1952 than it is today. Without YouTube, Facebook, iTunes, music videos, music streaming and all the other options available to musicians today, promoting a record was very difficult business, especially for a small independent label like Sun.

It meant that Phillips had to personally call on radio station DJs in the hope that they would play a record and help it find an audience. He had to personally visit record stores in the hope that they would stock the record. Most "hits" started small, slowly gaining a regional audience and then, with lots of hard work and more than a little luck, hopefully going national. But it was all a major grind.

Phillips continued to record mostly black artists who found a relatively small audience and only a few of whom managed to "cross over" and reach white audiences. He gradually came to believe that, given the racial climate that existed in the 1950s, if the music he loved was going to reach a much larger audience, he would have to find a white singer who could effectively bridge the gap between the two audiences. "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel," he said, "I could make a million dollars."

And then, in the summer of 1953, a young truck driver named Elvis Presley stopped by the Memphis Recording Service to make a "personal" record for his mother and the rest is history. Or, actually, it isn't. Elvis made his record and went on his way. There's some disagreement about who actually recorded him that day--Phillips or his assistant--but in any event that was that. Elvis apparently continued to drop by the studio to visit with Sam's assistant, and in early 1954, he cut another "personal." But again, nothing came of it.

Then, that summer, Phillips heard a song called "Without You," which he thought had commercial possibilities. The only problem was that he had no one to sing it. Fortunately, he remembered Elvis and invited him to come in and take a crack at the song. The session did not go well, but Phillips thought he saw something in Presley and so he brought him back into the studio and teamed him with Scotty Moore on guitar and Bill Black on bass. The three tried a number of songs that really weren't working and then during a break, Elvis began fooling around with an old Arthur Crudup song called "That's All Right, Mamma." Moore and Black joined in enthusiastically and Sam Phillips suddenly heard the sound he'd been looking for all his life. And after *that*, the rest was history.

Phillips would ultimately sell Presley's contract to RCA for \$35,000--money that he desperately needed--and

he would go on to discover and record Ike Turner, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Charlie Rich, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash among others. Ultimately, like Elvis, they would all move on to larger labels and bigger things, but like Elvis, it was Sam Phillips who found them, nurtured them and brought them to the attention of the larger world.

As a practical matter, though, the Sun Story ended almost as quickly as it began. By 1960, Phillips decided that there was no longer much room for independent record companies and he was increasingly tired of the law suits and all the other hassles that were involved. His first love remained radio and, although Sun Records continued to survive in various incarnations for a number of years, its best years were clearly behind it. And after 1960, Phillips would devote the bulk of his attention to his several radio stations.

He would live another forty-three years, but as a practical matter he had made his mark and his best years were already behind him, at least in terms of the contributions he would make to the music business. And therein lies the problem with this book. Peter Guralnick knew Sam Phillips for the better part of twenty-five years and openly admits that he loved the man. He interviewed him and members of his family hundreds of times through the years and he determined to write the most complete biography possible.

The problem is that, save for that fantastic creative span from the early 1950s to 1960, Sam Phillips is not all that interesting a subject. In his later years, he became increasingly eccentric (some might say just plain weird), and the story really drags. This book could have easily been trimmed by about a third and would have been better for it. But Guralnick, who has written an excellent two-volume biography of Elvis Presley (*Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* and *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*) is determined to let Phillips ramble on and on and on about his various philosophies of life and to relate practically every minute of it.

For general readers, the chapters detailing Phillips's early life and his magnificent work at Sun Studios are excellent and very entertaining. The rest of it gets to be something of a slog, but in the end, this is a very useful book and the first half or so will be of great interest to anyone interested in the origins of rock 'n' roll.

At the end of the book, Guralnick lists a number of collections of Sun recordings that will be of interest mostly to die-hard music fans, but for general readers and music lovers, a nice accompaniment to this book is the CD, "The Sun Story," which includes great cuts from many of the artists that Sam Phillips recorded on the label.

Chuck says

I've bounced in and out of this incredibly thorough biography of Sam Phillips for six months, finally grinding out the last 200 pages over the past several days.

Music has always been a big deal for me, and I've read a considerable amount about the early days of country music, blues, and rock and roll, in which Sam Phillips played such a huge and vital role as the founder and operator of Sun Records in Memphis. Nothing I've read, however, comes close to this book in terms of conveying vivid, three-dimensional portraits of the author's subjects: Sam Phillips, his family, his artists, and his business associates. Guralnick is a masterful writer and he achieves the perfect balance between his obvious fascination with Phillips and the objectivity critical to any serious biography.

Marti says

I was really enjoying the *Sun Records* TV series on CMT -- before it was cancelled -- which was one of the reasons I decided to read this. Needless to say the show changed quite a few things around - especially the character of Marion, who was the first assistant at Sun who was integral to keeping the label running. However, the life of Sam Phillips is indeed an epic story which begins in rural Alabama during the 1920's and 1930's and ends in 2003 with what I consider to be the beginning of the end of music (Phillips would probably agree as he was, in his last years, resisting the efforts of Clear Channel to buy his radio stations).

Phillips always had a messianic belief in the ability of music by sharecroppers and hillbillies to "change the world," even though it took years for others to see it. However, if not for the Great Depression, he might have become a lawyer; but instead of law school he had to find a job to support the family. Thank goodness, or the world might never have heard of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash or any of the others that came out of the Sun Records "*experiment*", as Sam himself called it. He once remarked that Elvis Presley is probably as influential a figure as Jesus Christ (and speaking as former PR person for El Vez the Mexican Elvis, I don't doubt it ...*not that he's better or greater.*).

Aside from Sun Records though, Phillips actually made more of his money from radio and sound engineering (a guy named Shelby Singleton bought Sun for \$1,000,000 in the late 1960's with the money he made from the hit song, *Harper Valley PTA*). And while this seems like "chump change" to me, it was well before the 1950's revival of the 1970's (and also Elvis Presley's death), not to mention at a time when nobody thought of pop singles and juke box music as anything but disposable. Needless to say, the acquisition paid many times the initial investment.

Phillips, did not seem to care as he never really wanted the hassle of a record label to begin with (but no other label wanted to put out the noncommercial records he was making, except for Chess, another indie that was struggling). He had actually begun his radio his career in the 1940s (where he met his wife), which is why he began WHER, which was to be run by all-women (no men would be involved in the day to day operations). When the novelty of it made it the most popular station in Memphis, it allowed him to buy more stations, including another all female station (WLIZ) in Florida. For someone with such a progressive attitude for the times (radio stations never had more than one "token" woman employee), it doesn't seem like it impacted his actions in his personal life. It wasn't just that he cheated on his wife Becky, but he did so openly with his secretary (remember, this was the 1950's). The fact that everyone in the triangle remained friendly is amazing to me.

Aside from that, anyone who likes music and the music business will find a lot to like here. However, I think you have to be a super fan to really give it five stars (and I do not have a Beatles level of knowledge or interest in a lot of this stuff). For instance, there were many artists and recordings mentioned that I was not overly familiar with, especially in the country genre (superstars like Howlin' Wolf, Ike Turner, B.B. King etc. are only the tip of the iceberg), and there is a lot of detail on the recording process for all of them. Although it makes me want to download more of the Sun catalog onto my MP3 player, I don't need to know how "the slapback effect" was tweaked on all of them.

The best part is that you certainly get a sense of what an eccentric character Phillips really was. There really are not many people like this in the music business anymore. This is the problem with music.

Steve says

There is no better biographer of fifties and sixties music figures than Guralnick, and he does an incredible job of conveying the background and the skills involved in not actually inventing rock 'n' roll, but of allowing it to spring into being in his presence. Phillips ran Sun Records, and the music he produced, by Howlin' Wolf, by Junior Parker, by Elvis Presley, by Jerry Lee Lewis, by Johnny Cash, by Charlie Rich, by many, many others, was uniformly honest, direct, inspired, and true. Beset by mental illness before he made those records, Phillips was a loner who preached to all the converted (and unconverted) who came into his life, including his wife, his long-time mistress, and all the various women who took up much of his time. Guralnick spends approximately 1/3 of this 660 page tome on the 40 plus years after Phillips stopped making records, which isn't as implicitly interesting, but which is told with energy and amusement enough to keep me stuck in the book to the end.

Bob Schnell says

Everything you ever wanted to know about Sam Phillips, and then some. Peter Guralnick's biography of the man who "invented" rock and roll is an exhaustive tale of Sam Phillips' wild ride of highs and lows and going off the rails. It is apparent that he was a gifted man with many talents but he couldn't maintain his focus. Time and again Sam brings a project to profitability and then loses interest. Even his pride and joy Sun Records couldn't keep him interested long enough to really make it the empire it could have been. Sam Phillips was lucky enough to have plenty of friends and lovers who stuck with him through thick and thin, but I'm still not sure why when he couldn't return their affection in kind. Even the artists who left Sun Records (because he wasn't able to get them where they wanted to go) remained his friends for decades.

The author spent many years on this project, getting to know Sam Phillips as a friend. Although this gives us some rare insight and private tales, in the end his love of the subject conflicts with his biographer's duty to be objective. As a result we get almost too much information through a forgiving filter. It is a great read for anyone with an interest in the early days of rock and roll, but the post-Sun Records years are a bit of a drag.

PS - I can see now how, as a child, I confused Sam Phillips with Wolfman Jack. Both of them were larger than life crazy guys with beards who always seemed to be on the scene.

Brian Poole says

Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n Roll is a compelling dive into the life of a colorful music industry pioneer.

Sam Phillips tells the story of the founder of Sun Records. It follows Phillips from his small town roots, through his early days as a Memphis radio announcer/DJ, engineer and promoter. Phillips, a staunch believer in racial equality, founded a Memphis recording studio to provide a platform for marginalized voices. He helped launch the careers of legends like Howlin' Wolf, B.B. King, Rufus Thomas and Ike Turner, while also starting his own radio station group.

After a couple of abortive attempts, Phillips finally founded Sun Records, which introduced the world to

early rock music icons Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Charlie Rich and Roy Orbison. For a short period, the small, independent Sun was one of the most influential forces in popular music. Phillips' unconventional (to put it mildly) private life played out as Sun's fortunes dimmed and Phillips concentrated on his other businesses (eventually selling a majority stake in Sun). In the last couple decades of his life, Phillips was an ubiquitous interview subject and industry event guest, as he worked to ensure his and Sun's legacies took their rightful places in the history of rock music.

Author Peter Guralnick cops right upfront that he and Sam Phillips had a friendship that lasted for almost a quarter century, until the latter's death. So *Sam Phillips* doesn't bear the kind of detached, third party approach of many biographies. Latter chapters are more a blend of biography and memoir. Some fans might miss that kind of dispassionate analysis of objective facts that many writers bring to biographies. And indeed, at points in *Sam Phillips*, one might wish for the author to be a tad more judgmental about his subject.

But more often, *Sam Phillips* provides a kind of insight into its colorful central character that could only be gleaned from a long acquaintance. Guralnick had years of discussions, interviews and personal interactions to draw from that provide shading and depth to his compelling reconstruction of past events. He crafts a portrait of a visionary who's always easy to find fascinating, even if he's not always easy to like.

In addition to the tale of its title luminary, *Sam Phillips* provides a lively history of the early days of rock 'n' roll. A long line of legends works its way into the story and Guralnick provides a compelling amount of detail about how their paths intersected with Sam's. For musicology-oriented readers, detailed descriptions of studio sessions that shaped the iconic sounds of various music superstars and how some of their most famous hits developed is irresistible. This is a love letter to the early days of rock and the author's passion for the subject is often quite infectious.

Guralnick touches on a couple issues in *Sam Phillips* that some readers might wish he'd expanded on. The specter of cultural appropriation pops up more than once, especially in how Phillips shifted his focus from providing a platform for the voices of poor black artists and achieved big success with white male singers appropriating the sounds of black music. How the battles Phillips fought for a place for independent record labels in the '50s recurred and played out in future generations would also have been fascinating. But those are huge topics worthy of their own tomes, so it's understandable how they appeared as no more than grace notes in an already packed narrative.

For fans of early rock, *Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll* should be required reading.

A version of this review originally appeared on www.thunderalleybcp.com

Janet says

A new Peter Guralnick book is something to be celebrated! My husband doesn't read nearly as often as I do, but this is one author he loves and can't put down.

Jo Stafford says

In 2001, I made a pilgrimage to Memphis, the home of so much of the music I love. When I stepped through the door of Sun Records I was struck by how small it was and I marveled that such a tiny space played such an enormous role in shaping musical history.

I came to Peter Guralnick's biography of legendary Sun founder Sam Phillips eager to learn more about the man whose enthusiasm for the blues, country, and rock'n'roll helped give birth to a revolution in popular culture. Having read Guralnick's magisterial two-volume biography of Elvis, my expectations were high.

There is a massive amount of information here, not all of it relevant. It is as though Guralnick wanted to include every piece of trivia he unearthed, and the book suffers under the weight of it all. Guralnick is an unabashed Phillips admirer but I grew weary of his seemingly endless anecdotes about the time he spent with the man.

Most of the book, though, is pure gold, a treasure trove for any serious music fan. My litmus test for writing about music is that it should inspire me to listen to the music. As I rummaged through my CD collection for Elvis, Howling Wolf, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Junior Parker, there's no doubt that this volume passed that test with flying colors.

Mike Prohot says

Like many reviewers, having spent time in Memphis and having lived through the late 50's and early 60's I wanted to like this book.

For the first 150 pages or so, as the story of Sam Phillips and his recording studio in the early days unfolded, it was interesting, entertaining and historical. Then I could sense things starting to go haywire.

I couldn't reconcile Sam Phillips actions with Peter Guralnick's apologist approach. I started wincing around page 69 when Guralnick is describing the beginnings of what would become Memphis Recording Service and Sam's right hand person and for all intents and purposes, his silent partner - Marion Keisker. Guralnick states, "At some point Sam and Marion had begun a physical affair.". And that was it. We never hear about it again although Sam and Marion are seemingly inseparable in those early days. I personally found it disturbing that clearly Sam took advantage of this woman or took advantage of her feelings for him and used her connections, money, time and effort to build his studio while he was living the ideal life with his wife - at least as is told in this book. From this point on, I could recognize a pattern of Guralnick as apologist for Sam Phillips shortcomings. Many other reviewers have touched on this.

To cut it short, I found Sam Phillips to be somewhat of a disturbing individual. He clearly used women - having multiple (not necessarily secret) affairs while married. He claimed to be something of a civil rights pioneer, but once Elvis was on board, his interest in the black artists and their unique sound kind of didn't matter all that much. His business dealings were in fact rather sketchy at best and his mid life "preaching" stage was creepy as he routinely gave overblown accounts of his achievements.

As I started to dislike Sam Phillips and Peter Guralnick's protectionism, I really struggled to get through this book - which could have been cut short by at least 300 pages. There is a story somewhere here, but Guralnick simply does not eke it out. He is too close to the subject matter.

It does not take a lot of effort to google around, do some research and come to the realization that Sam

Phillips did not "invent" rock'n' roll. It was a collective effort of the music industry- radio, musicians, club owners, recording companies and disc jockeys that distilled the sounds listeners wanted and reacted to. It is no secret that rock and roll borrowed heavily from the blues in regard to energy and rhythm and Sam Phillips was not the only individual at the time who was mining the talent pool for new sounds.

While there is some interesting stories about the artists that Sam Recorded in the early days, the story of Sam Phillips that comes out in this book, much like the story of Elvis, is both complicated and tragic sprinkled with talent and drive.

Finally, as I read reviews that rave about this book, I cannot believe that the reviewers actually struggled thought all 661 pages as I did and found it to be "WOW!". I have to assume they either read the cover notes only, or are related to or employed by the publisher and/or author. This is not a five star read in any way, shape or form.

Paul Wilner says

Critics and music-lovers are raving, but for me...too long, exhaustively researched but exhausting to read. He got way too close to Phillips to write about him objectively, which could be okay in other circumstances but the circular quotes from Sam demonstrate the nature of the problem. A great, larger than life figure as a producer and discoverer of talent, and the Million Dollar Quartet, Elvis, Jerry Lee and Ike Turner stories are fun, but the details of his business and personal life problems less so. I had high hopes for this and was disappointed; turned on the Louisiana Hayride video of Elvis in '57 two-thirds of the way through and it felt more vital. Guralnick clearly loves the man, and the music, so...no harm, no foul, as Chick Hearn would say. But this book, which originated in a magazine piece, could have benefited from a more cold-hearted edit that might have done even more justice to this warm-hearted man.

Tad Richards says

I have the same problem with all biographies. I want to read the early part -- the youth, the dreams, the world they grew up in, the world they created. I don't really want to read the part where they fall into addiction, or disillusionment. I don't always read biographies all the way through.

I did read this one all the way through. I did like the first part best, but the whole story was compelling enough. Guralnick knows his stuff, and what story could possibly be more interesting than the story of Sam Phillips and Sun Records?
