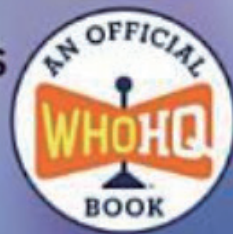
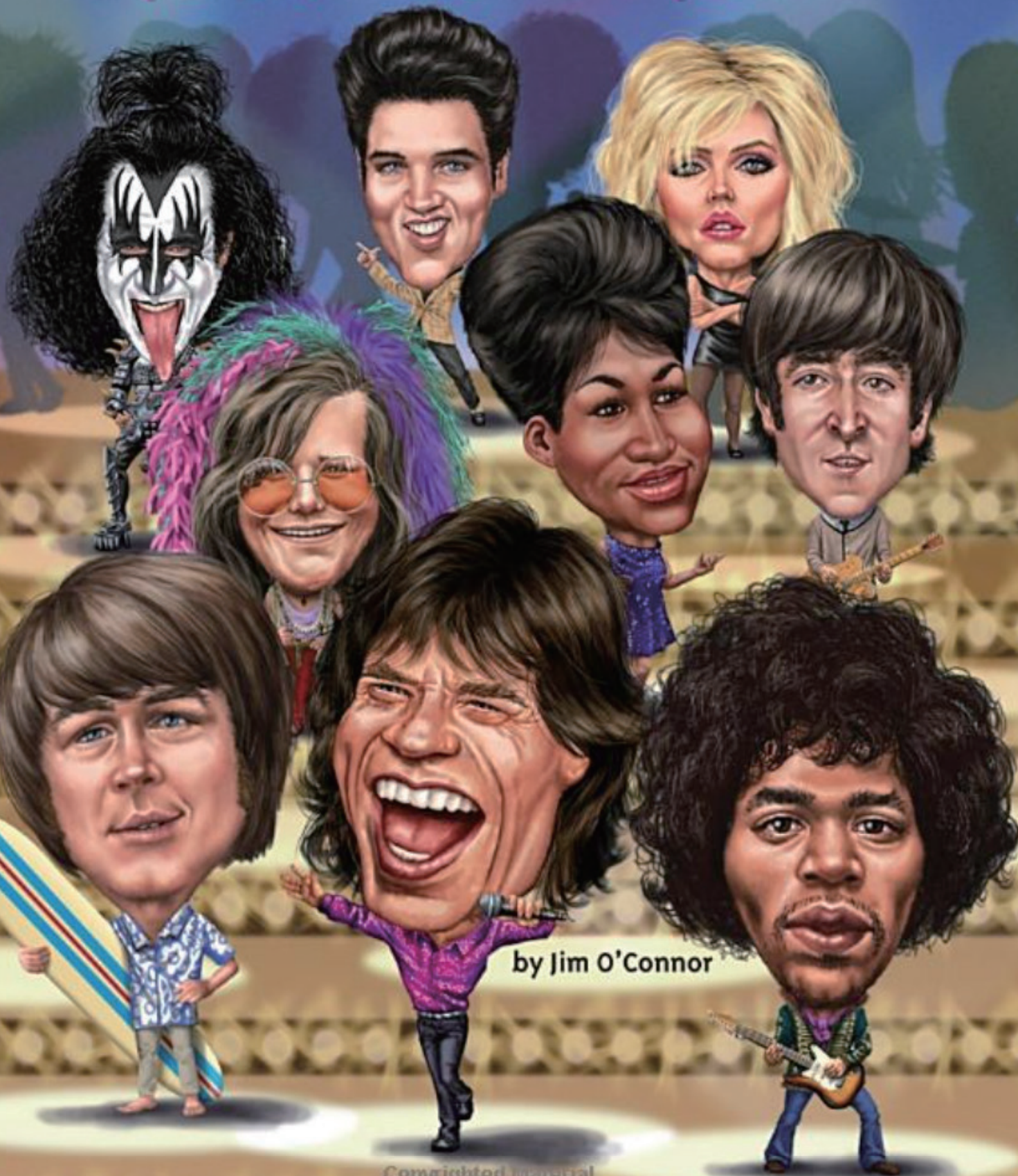


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# What Is Rock and Roll?



by Jim O'Connor

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by Jim O'Connor

illustrated by Gregory Copeland

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To Jane A., who stole my heart at the Fillmore East  
(by going into the wrong bathroom)—JOC

To my multitalented brother, Tim—GC

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.*

ISBN 9780451533814 (paperback)  
ISBN 9780451533838 (library binding)

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Contents

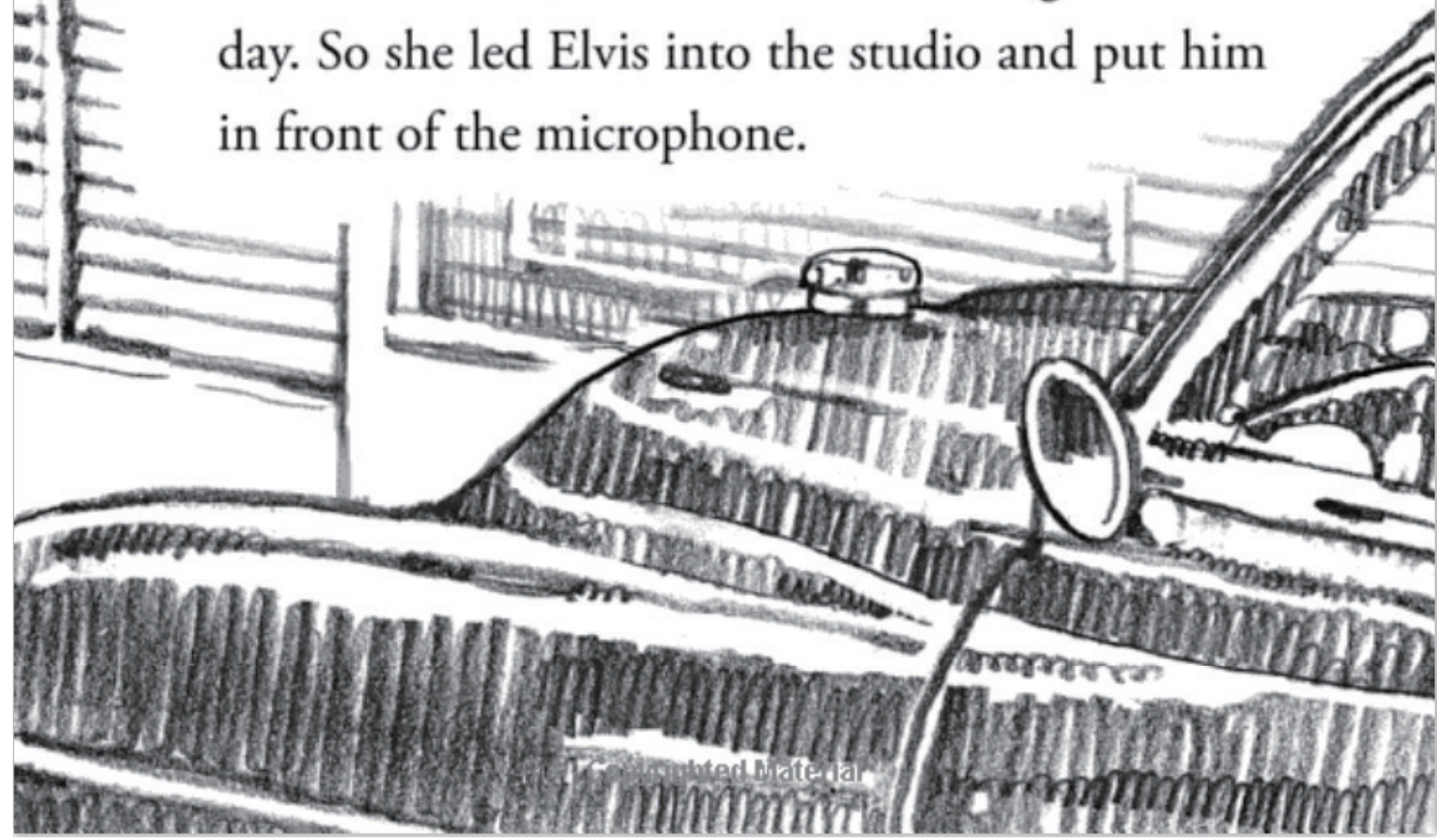
|                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| What Is Rock and Roll? . . . . . | 1   |
| The Roots of Rock . . . . .      | 3   |
| The Motown Sound . . . . .       | 12  |
| The Beatles . . . . .            | 24  |
| The Beach Boys . . . . .         | 38  |
| Acid Rock . . . . .              | 44  |
| Sounds of the '70s . . . . .     | 60  |
| A Kid from New Jersey . . . . .  | 71  |
| Grunge . . . . .                 | 78  |
| The King of Pop . . . . .        | 86  |
| Into the Future . . . . .        | 94  |
| Timelines . . . . .              | 102 |
| Bibliography . . . . .           | 104 |



## What Is Rock and Roll?

In August of 1953, an eighteen-year-old truck driver walked into a small building in Memphis, Tennessee. The neon signs in the windows read “Memphis Recording Service.”

The young man was named Elvis Presley. He wanted to record two songs, “My Happiness” and “That’s When Your Heartaches Begin,” as a birthday present for his mother. The receptionist, Marion Keisker, was also the sound engineer that day. So she led Elvis into the studio and put him in front of the microphone.



Then she went into the tiny control room and recorded what he sang.

There was something about the yearning quality in Elvis Presley's voice that intrigued her. So she decided to make a copy for her boss, Sam Phillips, to hear.

That was the beginning of Elvis Presley's career. It was also a breakthrough for rock and roll.



Sam Phillips

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Roots of Rock

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Rock and roll is true made-in-the-USA music. But in the early 1950s, if you asked kids what rock music was, most of them wouldn't have had a clue what you were talking about.

Rock music didn't just spring up one day out of nowhere. Its sound owes a lot to the rhythm and blues (R&B) music of the 1940s and '50s.





Rhythm and blues was the popular music of black Americans. The songs were exciting, with a strong, insistent beat. R&B music was completely different from what was played on radio stations for white audiences. Those stations played a mix of big band, jazz, and silly pop hits like “Doggie in the Window.” The music was safe and parent friendly.

Then white performers began covering popular black songs. (“Covering” means doing a new version of an older song.) Elvis Presley had a huge



Big Mama Thornton

hit with “Hound Dog.” It had first been recorded by a black singer named Big Mama Thornton in 1952.

Elvis rocketed to stardom in the mid-1950s. In large part he owed his success

to a man named Sam Phillips. Sam grew up very poor in Florence, Alabama. He was white. But as a young boy he picked cotton in the fields alongside black laborers who sang while they worked. Sam loved their music.

Sam later moved to Memphis, Tennessee. There he opened a recording studio and started his own record company—Sun Records. He signed up many African American performers. Sam wanted to bring their music to white audiences.

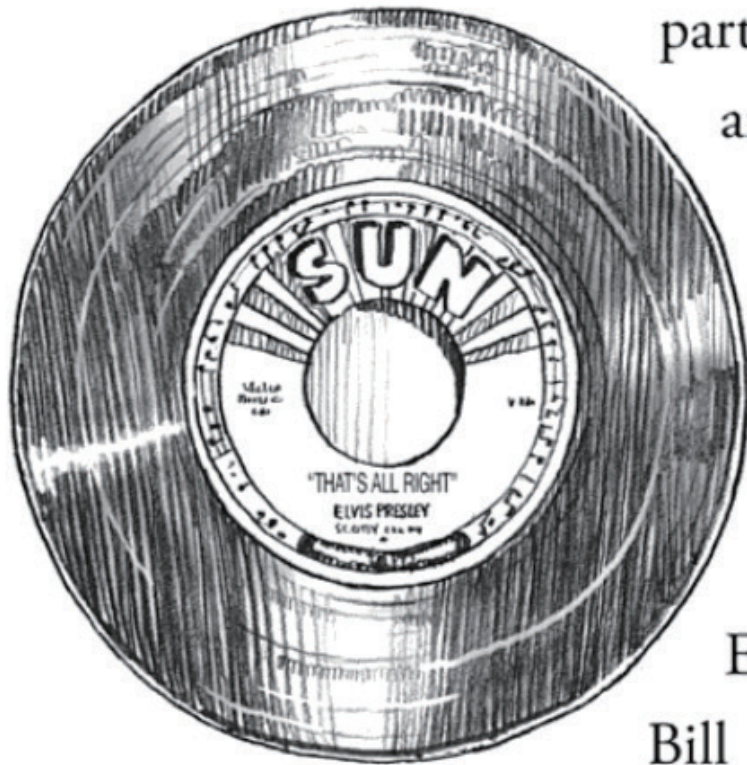


Sam also let amateurs, black and white, record in his tiny studio. That's how Elvis Presley got started. Sam believed Elvis had a special talent.

So Sam got two musicians he knew, guitar player Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black, to back up the young singer.

Often producers recorded a song in one or two takes. (A “take” is a single complete recording of a song.) This kept costs low. But Sam believed that singers—most of all, new singers—needed time to get it right. He would record the same song, or

parts of a song, over and over.



Sam did the same thing with Elvis.

In 1954, Sam Phillips recorded Elvis, Scotty, and Bill playing the old blues song “That’s All Right” and a speeded-up cover of the country music classic “Blue Moon of Kentucky.”