

Handout 1 - Sam Phillips

Sam Phillips was born in northwest Alabama in 1923 to a family of tenant farmers. Though they worked borrowed land, unlike “sharecroppers,” who also farmed land owned by others, tenant farmers provided their own tools and livestock and could, over time, earn enough money to buy land, start a business or move elsewhere. Nonetheless, tenant farming was hard labor done by the poorest of citizens, and, at the time one of the only workplaces in Alabama not governed by segregation laws. While whites and blacks would be required to use different entrances to a theater downtown, when it came to picking cotton the poor of all colors worked in the fields together. It was in this environment that Sam Phillips first heard and developed the love for African-American music that would shape his career.

Phillip’s stint as a radio DJ in the 1940s allowed him to survey most of the popularly released music of the day. Armed with a knowledge of the industry and a sense of what music he thought worked best, Phillips relocated about 150 miles west and opened the Memphis Recording Service, soon renamed “Sun Studios,” in 1950. Speaking to an NPR reporter in 2001, Phillips recalled what he hoped to record in his new studio, “I really wanted to try to do something with..Black artists coming out of the Delta...because I was very close to them all my life.”

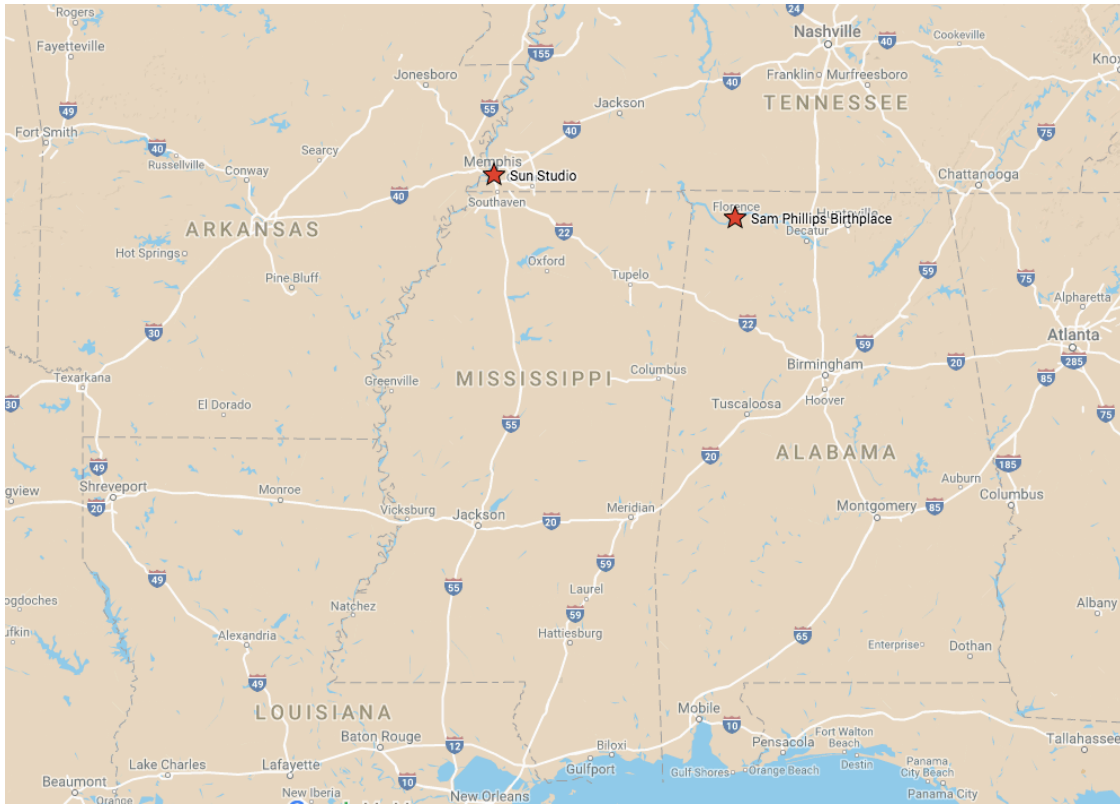
In the 1950s, public life in Tennessee was segregated, governed by “Jim Crow” laws that demanded the separation of whites and non-whites. While Phillips could not have sat at a lunch counter or shared a bus seat with black men, he was able to invite them into his private recording studio. And he did. The recordings made by artists such as B.B. King, Howlin’ Wolf, Bobby Bland, Rufus Thomas, James Cotton and others at Phillips’ studio in the early part of the 1950s helped define the African-American musical landscape of the era. Phillips felt that the style of music he was recording would appeal to a mass audience, but he knew it was unlikely that an artist like Roscoe Gordon (pictured with Phillips here) could “crossover” and gain traction with a white audience. Phillips’ long time studio assistant Marion Keikser recalls him stating repeatedly that if he “could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel” that the whole country would listen.



Roscoe Gordon & Sam Phillips
 Credit: Hi Lo Music courtesy of the Sam Phillips family



Sun Studios & The Birthplace of Sam Phillips



Historical Population of Memphis 1900 - 1950

| Year | Population | % Increase |
|------|------------|------------|
| 1900 | 102,320 | - |
| 1910 | 131,105 | 28.1% |
| 1920 | 162,351 | 23.8% |
| 1930 | 253,143 | 55.9% |
| 1940 | 292,942 | 15.7% |
| 1950 | 396,000 | 35.2% |