

## Sun Records and Race Records



Source: *Chicago Defender*, May 15, 1926

Before the 1950s, recordings by African-American artists released by American record companies were known as “race records.” *Billboard* published a hit chart of “race records” in the late 1940s (the magazine changed the title of the chart to “Rhythm & Blues” in 1949). While these records were originally intended for African-American audiences, over the years many white listeners began to purchase them as well. In the days before the Civil Rights movement, however, many radio stations would not play them.

Sun Records of Memphis, Tennessee, founded by Sam Phillips in 1952, issued many recordings by African-American artists. Phillips produced the song “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats, a Rhythm and Blues record that is sometimes called the first Rock and Roll song. Phillips was interested in promoting Blues and other African American-inspired music with both black and white audiences when he met Elvis Presley in 1954.

Marion Keisker, the receptionist at Sun Records, later told an interviewer, “Over and over I remember Sam saying, ‘If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.’” \*

Phillips produced Elvis’ first single and helped launch his career. Sun Records also helped launch the careers of several other important early Rock and Roll stars, including Jerry Lee Lewis and Roy Orbison.

\*Quoted in Jerry Hopkins, *Elvis*, 1971.