



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 8, 2010

The King Still Works for Uncle Sam

Great legends are often built on the ashes of someone's destruction — whether figurative or literal. Competition is often a zero-sum game. One man's moment of triumph is another's devastating defeat. Bobby Thomson hit the home run that made him forever famous, the "shot heard around the world" in the ninth inning of the final playoff game, the home run that won the pennant for the New York Giants and sent the Brooklyn Dodgers home for a long and bitter winter. But Ralph Branca, the Dodger pitcher who surrendered that home run, was forever marked as a loser. The world must seem merciless to a man who was one of the best pitchers in the game of Major League Baseball, but must go through life labeled a "loser" because of one pitch in the ultimate game of a fabled season.



We will probably never know what drove a certain man in Miami in 1955 to pronounce the awful judgment on himself as a hopeless, incurable loser. All that was known of him is that he committed suicide in a Miami hotel room that year and died with no identification on him and a terse suicide note that said only "I walk a lonely street." The next day the *Miami Herald*, trying both to generate reader interest and help police identify the mystery man, ran the story on page one, accompanied by a photo of the victim and the question in a headline, "Do you know this man?"

One of the people who saw the story was a country music songwriter named Tommy Druden. Druden read the article and the brief suicide note and started thinking. Then he called Mae Axton, another songwriter and the mother of future singing and songwriting star Hoyt Axton. Druden and Axton were fascinated by the story and the mysterious note. What might have happened to that man that drove him to that final, desperate act? Who was he? Why was he so unbearably lonely? What was on the street he was walking, the street called "lonely." Soon they had written a song about it.

Then they found the perfect singer to give voice to that mournful number. He was a rising young star in the country-western field, but he was also a rockabilly star, a gospel singer, a rhythm and blues artist with few if any equals. And he was catching on fast in the new genre called rock 'n' roll. All together, he was the total package. And better still, in the days when there were still distinct musical sub-genres associated with the artist's color, he was a white singer who sounded black — giving him great "crossover" potential. A young man whose beautiful baritone and commanding stage presence, along with his swiveling hips and special talent for driving young women wild had him ticketed for unparalleled stardom. The young man, one of several young stars to shine for Sam Phillips's Sun Records in Memphis, Tennessee, had only recently come under contract to RCA Victor records. RCA had purchased the singer's contract from Sun for \$35,000, considered big money for a future star in



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those more frugal times. Mitch Miller, president of Columbia records had earlier inquired about the contract and heard a suggested price of \$25,000.

"Forget it," Miller replied. "No artist is worth that kind of money."

But when Druden and Axton had their song ready to market, the young singer was right on the brink of a huge, unprecedented stardom. His manager drove a hard bargain. The young man — "the boy" his manager called him — would record the song if given a songwriting credit. That was a legal, contractual fiction, since "the boy" had played no part in the creation of the song. He would have the singular role of making it famous, however. He had just the right bluesy voice, the ability to put pathos to music, his pain reflecting the heartbreak, his body pulsating to the rhythm, his unique voice rising and falling through the peaks and valleys that led a man finally to the ultimate despair. For the young man, just turned 21, gave voice to Druden's and Axton's imaginings of what might be on a street called "lonely." Well ... Waaaaal! The "Well" was a wail.

*Waaaall, since my baby left me,
I found a new place to dwell.
It's down at the end of Lonely Street,
At Heartbreak Hotel.
Where I live so lonely baby,
I live so lonely
I live so lonely, I could die.*

It went downhill, so to speak, from there. The bellhop's tears keep falling. The desk clerk's dressed in black. "Well, they been so long on Lonely Street/They'll never, they'll never look back...They live so lonely, they live so lonely, baby. They live so lonely they could die."

A young pianist named Floyd Cramer played a honky tonk piano that fit the mood and the sound perfectly. The singer was accompanied by Scotty Moore on the rhythm guitar and Bill Black on bass. The sound was gripping, irresistible. RCA Victor, already having taken a gamble on buying the contract for what was then considered huge money for a young performer still untried on the national stage, was reluctant to put the song to wax. It was so *damn mournful! Depressing*. It *sounded* like a suicide note. Who on Earth was going to buy it?

It was the "B" side of the singer's first release with RCA Victor. The "A" side was a more conventional song of loneliness, "I Was the One."

*I was the one who taught her to kiss
The way that she kisses you no-ow
And you know the wa-ay she touches your cheek.
Well, I taught her ho-ow*

It got some play. It got into circulation nationally the way a release from Sun Records, with its regional distribution, never could. And it was released in January, 1956, just as the singing star was making his national TV debut on *The Stage Show* with Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. In his first TV appearance, he sang "Shake, Rattle and Roll" and "Flip, Flop and Fly." In subsequent weeks, he would sing "I Was the One." Singing that song, he sounded like a much older singer. He was riding a crest higher than any



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entertainer ever rode. The disc jockeys turned the record over and started playing the "B" side. "Heartbreak Hotel" took off. Youngsters who had never had a real heartbreak and had never been to a hotel were buying the record and identifying with its mournful sound. It shot to number one.

When the star performed it on TV, it was with all the accompanying body language, the bumps and grinds with the quaking voice and swiveling hips. The girls went crazy. Suddenly, bobbysoxers who loved the new genre called rock 'n' roll, were tuning in the Dorsey Brothers on Saturday night to see and hear their heartthrob, introduced as a "rising young star from Memphis, Tennessee." He would soon belong to the nation and the world.

He had a unique sound. He dressed in wild, clashing colors and when the money started coming in, he bought Cadillacs, especially pink Cadillacs. The press, fascinated by him, said he was unfailingly polite, answering questions with, a "sir" or "ma'am" at the end of every response. He was devoted to his mother. He did not drink or smoke. He was already a legend. And the legend was growing by the hour.

So if your baby leaves you

You've got a tale to tell

Just take a walk down Lonely Street to

Heartbreak Hotel.

Where you'll be lonely, baby, you'll live so lonely

You'll live so lonely, you could die.

The song stayed at Number One until some time in March. By then, the same singer had another release, "I Want You, I Need You, I Love Your." It, too, would go gold. Everything he touched went gold or platinum. He was truly phenomenal. His success seemed inevitable. But was it?

"When I found him all he had was a million dollars worth of talent," his manager would boast. "Now he's got a million dollars."

And millions and millions more. And all those Cadillacs. One for every day of the week. And a brand new home for his parents. Graceland, he called it. So a fabulous career and a life unimaginable, let alone unattainable for most mortal men, was launched by the death of that mystery man. Tommy Druden and Mae Axton wrote a huge hit. So the song worked out well for everyone. Except, of course, the poor man who died.

The singer could not go anywhere without drawing huge, ecstatic crowds. A good-natured young man, he sometimes had to defend himself when someone tried to take a shot at him for his celebrity. His quickness with his fists added to the legend. He soon took up karate and became a black belt. He excelled at everything he did.

He followed his success on *The Stage Show* with a pair of appearances on *The Milton Berle Show*. The bumps and grinds got more pronounced. The switchboard at NBC lit up with angry protests after he did "Hound Dog" on Uncle Miltie's show. Ed Sullivan announced he would not have such a lewd, vulgar act on his show. Then the star appeared on *The Steve Allen Show* and for the only time in the history of the two shows, Steve Allen beat Ed Sullivan in the ratings. Ed had to pull in his horns. The manager of "the boy" had TV's foremost gatekeeper of talent in the jaws of his trap. Then he sprung it. Ed could have the act, but he would have to pay dearly — the unheard-of price of \$50,000 for three shows. The biggest star in entertainment would appear on the biggest show in show business. The legend just got bigger.



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He went to Hollywood and started making movies. The name of his first movie, originally called *The Reno Brothers* was changed to *Love Me Tender* to piggyback promotion of the movie by naming it after the song from the picture that the singer performed on Sullivan's show before it had even been released. RCA Victor received more than a million requests for the song before it had been made into a record. It, too, went gold. His second movie was another box office success and produced two more gold records: "Loving You" and "Teddy Bear."

Then Uncle Sam came calling. The young man went into the Army and not as an entertainer. He drove a tank. He went to Germany. He lived in a barracks. He became a sergeant, a Spec 5. He served his time and came home, with stories about "the girl he left behind." He insisted it was nothing serious, but the girl, a 14-year-old daughter of an Air Force colonel, soon moved to Memphis and lived at Graceland. Still, the singer would appear to be noncommittal. At a press conference he was asked to describe his "ideal girl."

"Female, sir," he said with customary politeness, disclosing a lively, mischievous wit. His ideal girl? It might be Ann-Margaret. It might be Natalie Wood. It might even be Barbara Stanwyck, a "girl" old enough to be his mother. "The boy" had very catholic tastes.

The press tried to play up an imagined romance between "the boy" and Nancy Sinatra, but he politely reminded them that she was engaged to singer Tommy Sands. Back home, in his early years, he had been attracted to Anita Carter of the Carter Family, the first family of country music. Hank Williams, the King of the Hillbillies had felt the same attraction. She wisely avoided both stars.

There had never been anything like him in the history of recorded music. RCA Victor had big stars — Mario Lanza and Perry Como to name just a couple — but nothing like "the boy." Within a couple of months of his first recordings with his new record label, the new star was already one of the top record-sellers in RCA Victor's history. The company couldn't print his records fast enough to keep up with demand. About the time he came back from the service *Billboard* magazine announced that he had already sold more records than anyone in recording history. He was 25 years old.

And the hits kept coming. It was as though he had never been away. The screamers were back. His first TV appearance since his last performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was a "Welcome Home" special hosted by singing legend Frank Sinatra. It drew a huge share of the ratings. He made more movies, churned out more gold records. Before the invention of contraptions that spew forth money, the young man was a singing, dancing ATM machine.

In his early stardom he had a whole generation "All Shook Up." The song had been written by rhythm and blues composer Otis Blackwell, who had also written "Don't Be Cruel," The inspiration for it came from a dropped bottle of Pepsi Cola. The stirred up carbonation, the frantic foam, the "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions, recollected in tranquility" captured perfectly the mood and the angst of the "Shook-Up Generation."

Well, mah hands are shaky an' mah knees are weak

Ah can't seem to stand on mah own two feet.

Who-hooh do ya thank uh when ya have such luck?

Ah'm in love; Ah'm all shook up!

Elvis Aron Presley was born January 8, 1935. He would be 75 today. A star as bright and hot as he was can't burn that long. But he was still burning when he died on August 16, 1977 at the age of 42.



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"Burning Love" had been a hit that year — or was it the year before? A third of a century after his death, he still grosses some \$55 million a year. Perhaps he really couldn't help falling in love. One thing is for sure. Decades after leaving this world, through songs of heartbreak and loneliness, he can't stop making money. And it's a good thing, too. Because a good chunk of it goes to the U.S. Treasury through the Internal Revenue Service. He is still the "All-American Boy." And now more than ever...

"Uncle Sam needs you, boy."

Photo of Sgt. Elvis Presley: AP Images



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