



The supreme supergroup that never was

A new musical looks at what happened when four of rock'n'roll's biggest legends met up to record together. By **Simon Hardeman**

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There's something tantalising and frustrating about the idea of musical megastars wandering around recording studios, passing each other in the corridors and toilets, chatting away, but not collaborating. What would have happened if they had got together? For instance, when Pink Floyd were recording *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* in 1967 in Studio 3 at Abbey Road and The Beatles were in Studio 2 recording *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, what would have resulted from them getting together? Would it have been the extraordinary explosion of psychedelia we might imagine?

A new musical about to open in London is inspired by just such a meeting: the fabled Million Dollar Quartet of 4 December 1956, when Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins, all enjoying the first flushes of success, found themselves in the same studio. The show imagines these fathers of rock'n'roll and country bashing out hits including "Blue Suede Shoes", "Folsom Prison Blues", "That's All Right", "I Walk the Line", "Great Balls of Fire", "Hound Dog", "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" and many more.

Surely this gleeful trading of hits, riffs,



PRESLEY CONTROLLED THINGS, SHOWCASING HIS VOCALS AND JOKING

and rock'n'roll moves is what would've happened when this foursome met? Well, no. The truth is less immediately satisfying but much more interesting. There is no evidence that they played any of these songs – none are on the tapes. Instead, there are fragments of gospel and standards, with a smattering of rock'n'roll and, although he was in the studio for at least some of the jam, Cash's voice can't be identified at any time. Moreover, the musical features Dyanne, a fictional Presley girlfriend, rather than Marilyn Evans, who is pictured in the full version of the now famous photo that appeared in the 5 December edition of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* (which coined the "Million Dollar Quartet" epithet). So what really happened?

That day in 1956 began with Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Records, and who had launched Presley, trying in his studios at 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, to record a follow-up for Perkins, whose "Blue Suede Shoes" had been a No 1. Phillips had decided to try to pump up Perkins's sound with his new signing, Jerry Lee Lewis, a piano-pounder whose only single, "Crazy Arms", had not been a hit (he would break through just a few weeks later with "Great Balls of Fire").

Cash, a big country star but who'd

only crossed over into mainstream chart success with "I Walk the Line", the previous year, was also there. Cash later said he was around the whole day, but other accounts suggest he just dropped in to get some money and wasn't.

Meanwhile Presley, whose manager "Col" Tom Parker had taken him away from Sun to the much bigger RCA Victor label, had called by with Evans, a Las Vegas showgirl. Presley had had No 1s with "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Don't Be Cruel" and "Love Me Tender" in 1956, and was just about the biggest singing star in the US, his epochal censored (filmed from the waist-up only) performance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* having happened only a few months earlier. It seems Presley joined Phillips in the control room and then went into the studio. Also there were Perkins's brothers (Clayton played upright bass, and Jay rhythm guitar) and drummer WS "Fluke" Holland, a key developer of the Sun sound who became Cash's drummer for four decades.

Phillips, ever the sharp businessman, left the tape running and, as the jam went on, called the local newspaper, the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, which sent Bob Johnson, its entertainment editor, and a photographer who captured the famous image.

The session was a rollicking mixture

of good-natured chat and largely fragmentary and often curious choices of songs – the third was an oompah version of "White Christmas". Perhaps the most fascinating bit was when Presley sang "Don't Be Cruel" in the style of "this guy in Las Vegas (with) Billy Ward and his Dominoes". "This guy" was, in fact, future soul superstar Jackie Wilson. Presley impersonated Wilson, by turns mocking and praising him: "There's a guy out there who's doin' a take-off of me, 'Don't Be Cruel'. He tried so hard, till he got much better, boy; much better than that record of mine... listen – he was real slender, a coloured guy, he had it a little bit slower than me... and he had his feet turned in, and all the time he was singing his feet was going in and out... he was tryin' too hard... but he was tryin' so hard and he got better, boy... I went back four nights straight to see that boy."

Presley controlled things, showcasing his vocals, and joking while others laughed dutifully – not unlike the toer-curlyng sycophantic sequences in his 1968 *Comeback Special*. He led the quartet (if we allow that Cash was there) through gospel numbers, eventually covering Chuck Berry's "Brown Eyed Handsome Man". Lewis and Presley linked Berry's lyrics – "that verse where that

woman lost both her arms... you ought to hear some of his stuff sitting around... I just come off a tour with this guy Chuck Berry... man!..." It was only after Presley appears to have left that Lewis took the lead, on both vocals and piano.

Cash later claimed that Lewis was so good that, "no one wanted to follow Jerry Lee, not even Presley". But the next day, in an interview, Presley was complimentary about Lewis. "That boy can go," he said. "I think he has a great future ahead of him." And he went on: "In fact, I never had a better time than yesterday afternoon when I dropped into Sam Phillips's place." With no controlling Col Tom Parker, no RCA suits pushing him towards blandness and B-movies, and none of his later button-busting rhinestoned bloatedness, perhaps it really was one of the most enjoyable times of his life.

And that fun is evident in the recordings of the sessions, which are a testament to the energy and vitality of a music in the process of being born. Yet they went largely unheard for a quarter of a century. Producer Shelby Singleton bought Sun in 1969, and licensed its catalogue to Charly Records in Europe and together they eventually found enough material for a release in 1981 (more was added to a 1987 release, which was augmented in 2006).

Phillips, who made sure that the session was taped and called a reporter and photographer; obviously knew that some kind of history was being made, but not everyone there did. *The Chicago Tribune* tracked Evans down two years ago, and asked what she remembered. "I remember that the outfit I was wearing was all wool." Was that all? "A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then." She and Presley had soon drifted apart: "We were just into different things. I always preferred classical music... He was extremely honourable. He was young."

As, indeed, was rock'n'roll. So by all means enjoy the musical, but don't expect its creatively imagined playlist of largely later hits to be the real story of this intimate, fascinating collision of some of the founders of late 20th-century culture. That remains, tantalisingly, on the dirty and poorly miked but compelling tapes of what Presley described the day after as "a barrelhouse of fun".

The album of the original session is on Sony/BMG, and streams on Spotify. *Million Dollar Quartet*: Noel Coward Theatre, London WC2 (0844 482 5141; www.milliondollarquartet.co.uk) 28 February to 1 October



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