

This Day in History... December 4, 1956

The Million Dollar Quartet's Only Session

Music history took an unforgettable turn on December 4, 1956, when Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash all happened to end up at Sun Studios on the same day. What began as a coincidence quickly became one of the most legendary and unplanned jam sessions in American music history.

Carl Perkins, already well known for writing and recording the hit "Blue Suede Shoes," arrived at Sun Studios that morning with his brothers Clayton and Jay. He was there to record new material and continue building on the success he had earned the year before. Sam Phillips, the innovative and energetic owner of Sun Records, wanted to expand Perkins's sound. To help do that, he invited a young but mostly unknown piano player named Jerry Lee Lewis to play on the session. Lewis had been working around Memphis and was starting to gain attention for his energetic piano style and powerful voice, but he had not yet become the star he would soon be.



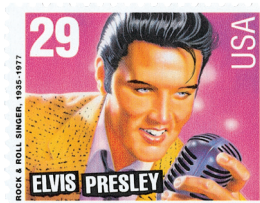
From blues on Beale Street to the birth of rock 'n' roll at Sun Studio, Tennessee shaped American music. Memphis gave rise to rockabilly, rhythm & blues, and early rock, making Sun Studio a crossroads where these styles fused and spread worldwide.



The surviving members of the quartet did reunion recordings in 1982 and '86.

For years, the tapes sat unreleased. When Shelby Singleton purchased Sun Records in 1969, he discovered thousands of hours of forgotten recordings, including the impromptu quartet session. In 1981, he finally released a 17-track LP titled *Million Dollar Quartet*. More material surfaced later, leading to the 1987 release of *The Complete Million Dollar Session* and a 2006 expanded edition. In total, around 47 tracks—many of them fragments mixed with casual conversation—have been made public. They reveal a spontaneous moment in music history, unpolished but full of energy.

The story grew even more popular in the 21st century. In 2007, the legendary session was adapted into a stage musical, *Million Dollar Quartet*, which later opened on Broadway in 2010. More than half a century after that December afternoon, the magic of the moment continues to inspire musicians and audiences around the world.



Elvis was the biggest star at the time of the recording, having appeared on television and in his first movie.

As Perkins worked through takes in the studio, another familiar figure walked through the door: Elvis Presley. Only 21 years old, Elvis had already become a national sensation after signing with RCA and releasing hits like "Heartbreak Hotel." Although he was no longer under contract with Sun, he still felt a strong connection to the studio and to Phillips, the man who helped launch his career. Elvis dropped by simply to say hello and catch up. When he heard Perkins recording, he couldn't resist joining in. Before long, Elvis was in the studio singing, joking, and jamming with Perkins and Lewis as if the three had planned it all along.

A short time later, Johnny Cash arrived. Cash had been having success on the country charts with songs like "I Walk the Line," and he often stopped by Sun Studios when he was in town. Cash later said he had been the first to arrive that day, hoping to watch his friend Carl Perkins record, but according to most accounts he walked in after Elvis. Either way, once Cash joined the group, the lineup was complete: four of the most influential figures in American music gathered in one small room without any warning.

What followed was not a formal recording session but a relaxed and joyful jam. The musicians played and sang the gospel songs they had grown up hearing in church, along with early rockabilly numbers, country tunes, rhythm-and-blues favorites, and anything else that came to mind. At first, no one planned to save the moment, but recording engineer Jack Clement quickly realized what was happening. "I'd be remiss not to record this," he later said. He flipped on the tape machine and quietly captured the only session the four men would ever share.

Sam Phillips knew he was witnessing something extraordinary. He called a reporter and photographer from the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, who arrived in time to document the gathering. The next day, the paper ran a story titled "Million Dollar Quartet," along with a now-famous photograph of the four musicians crowded around a piano.



The second Elvis Presley stamp was a Forever stamp picturing a 1955 photograph of the King of Rock 'n' Roll.



In 2021, the piano from this session was put up for auction as "the most important piano in rock and roll history." However, no bids met the \$700,000 reserve price, so it didn't sell.

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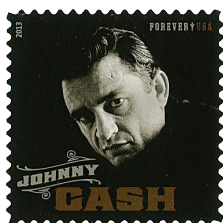
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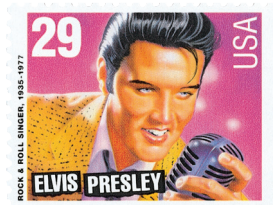
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