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“You’ve Got to Have the Vision,” Girl:

Women and the Memphis Recording Studio

Music is sown into the soil of Memphis, Tennessee. The music of the city was cultivated in the Mississippi Delta. “Southern rural music—blues, country, gospel, field hollers, and work songs”—was planted into the ground by enslaved African Americans, sharecroppers and rural farmers.¹ Their songs spoke of the hardships and the joys of the rural Mississippi Delta. When the Great Depression hit and drought set in, migrants began to move to the city. Flood and replacement of manual labor by machines would also uproot these poor migrants—black and white—and force them into the city with seemingly greater economic opportunity. As they came to Memphis, the songs of these field hands merged with the faster paced urban sound to create a new sound that would be harvested in the nightclubs, recording studios, and radio stations across the city.² This sound, mastered by greats like Howlin’ Wolf, Arthur Crudup, Rufus Thomas, and Riley King, was pressed into records by Sam Phillips’s Memphis Recording Service, later Sun Studios, and was broadcast by disk jockeys at African American radio stations like WDIA, as well as traditionally white stations, like WHBQ, where Dewey Phillips’s *Red, Hot, and Blue* aired.

As this music was broadcast across the airwaves, its sound embedded itself into the music of young white Americans, who often stayed up late listening to the “race records” on the radio and visiting the forbidden nightclubs where these musicians played. Sam Phillips at Sun Records began to hear the traditionally white music in the city taking on attributes of the rhythm of the blues, and set out to capture the sound and make history.³ However, it was not Phillips who found the perfect ambassador for this sound, it was his secretary Marion Keisker. When she asked a young white boy who he sounded like when he walked through the doors of 706 Union

¹ Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 121.

² *Ibid.*, 122.

³ *Ibid.*, 132.

Avenue, he responded famously “I don’t sound like nobody.”⁴ Keisker wrote down his information and Sam Phillips decided to record the young man, Elvis Presley. Phillips was unhappy with the sound until the boy started joking around with the session musicians, playing an Arthur Crudup tune called “That’s Alright Mama.” At this moment, Memphis music exploded, harvesting prestige and public regard hardly seen for any place’s music anywhere. Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis would follow the success of Elvis at Sun and the work they produced would spark a revolution that would sweep through America’s youth and challenge traditions of segregation and conservative values across the country. But we would forget the efforts of Marion Keisker until decades later, when newspaper articles and Sun Records historians would discover the secretary’s contribution not only to Elvis’s career, but also to the life of Sun.⁵

Recordings from Stax and Hi Records, as well as the work done at other studios such as American, Memphis Sounds, and Ardent, reinforced yet redefined the notion of the Memphis sound with monumental recordings of black and white, mostly locally produced artists. And with the contribution of these artistic ventures, not only the color, but the gender of musicians and studio executives alike began to change. Estelle Axton most famously would own Stax Records with her brother and become involved in the business in a way few women could. She would mentor young women in all aspects of the business and begin to cultivate a militia of strong Stax women. These women would begin to garner respect in an industry that was and in many ways still is not ready to accept feminine empowerment and female executives.

⁴ “Sunrise in Memphis for the future king of rock,” *The Bath Chronicle* [Bath (UK)] 23 Aug 2007: 25, accessed June 29, 2014,

<http://search.proquest.com.relay.rhodes.edu:2048/docview/424124809?pq-origsite=summon>.

⁵ *Ibid.*; Personal interview with Bettye Berger on Thursday July 10, 2014 at 11:00 AM.

Others too like Earlice Taylor and Joyce Cobb came to Memphis after the recording industry had essentially left. They witnessed the burgeoning of live music in the city and participated in the growing jazz and big band scene. They discovered an industry that was broken and could still change. They found a place where they could prosper and a place that began to include more diversity in genre and style. These performers would exploit their own style within the pockets of sound in the city, defining a new generation of the Memphis musician.

While the music of Memphis is too diverse and broad to be simply defined it does seem to be a product of place and have its own unique sound. This function of place seems to have created a local infrastructure and style that persists in the history of Memphis music and manifests particularly in the heyday of Memphis's recording industry in the 1950s and 1960s. But, is there a place for women in this story? As I conducted my research and asked Memphis music professionals about women's place in the industry, many agreed that the Memphis industry had few women musicians and administrators: when I sat down to talk to the Phillips family about the women at Sun Records, Jud Phillips simply said "well, there weren't many." It seems that many aspiring female musicians took various turns in the Memphis industry, and it appears very clear that there were masculine and feminine roles in the business that limited the scope of women's involvement.⁶ Though women were often forced to be secretaries and clerical workers or the female vocalist in a man's group, it appears that in Memphis a small group of women became not only prominent but essential to the business that in many ways put Memphis on the map.

Of course, talking about women in Memphis music as a coherent thing is as tenuous as talking about Memphis music in general. Hank Davis himself, upon archiving the careers of the

⁶ Personal Interview with Jud Phillips and Rose Phillips Wednesday July 2, 2014 1:00 PM.

women at Sun Records expressed of Sun's recording habits of women, "if there's a pattern here, it escapes us."⁷ The distinct nature of each woman's musical style and personal experience, as well as the general dearth of records of female musicianship provides only a fragmented picture of women's place in Memphis music, but there are clues that illuminate how women operated within this newly burgeoning industry in Memphis.

The stories of women within the Memphis music industry reveal a push and pull between tradition and innovation—between the prejudice that women faced in their respective careers in a southern industry that would not fully accept them and the opportunities that this unique industry afforded them. While secondary literature on the subject is scarce, I have been able to conduct interviews with women involved in various levels of the music industry in Memphis, and the stories of Earlice Taylor, Deanie Parker, Bettye Berger, Joyce Cobb, Rose Phillips and others present a picture of the culture of an industry and a city. The goal of this research is to explore how the recording industry in Memphis treated its women. It traces the career paths of aspiring Memphis musicians, determining their struggles and successes within an industry and a populace not entirely equipped to accept them. Using case studies of women from the early days of the recording industry at Sun Records to the later years at Stax Records and other studios, this research attempts not to vilify or lionize the recording industry or a single recording studio, but explain how women were integrated into Memphis's recording studios and how they were subject to the unique challenges of domestic expectations, male dominance in the studio, genre, marketing, and studio size. These are the stories:

"I Need a Man:" Barbara Pittman and the Plight of the Sun Soloist

⁷ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles: The Women of Sun Records* (Bear Family Records, 2002).5.

The studio in Memphis was a complicated place to be as a woman, particularly at the beginning of the recording boom in the 1950s. Though there was recording in Memphis before Phillips—great recording of legends like Memphis Minnie and Lil Hardin—Sun Studios certainly carved out an unprecedented hole for Memphis musicians in the national charts and built a true industry from recording Memphis artists. However, this place in the national market and within the studio was created mostly for male artists like Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley. This is not a particularly new phenomenon. The national charts, as Bettye Berger—a booking agent for Sun and Stax artists—pointed out, certainly were not friendly to women artists.⁸ Those who often dominated the markets in the fifties had sweet voices like Doris Day and Patti Page.⁹ They sang in dulcet tones about delicate love and doggies in the window. Locally, women tended to be associated with easy listening and soft music. WHER-AM, Memphis’s all-girl radio station owned by Sam Phillips, forbade women from playing Sun’s records at all.¹⁰ However, around forty women singles artists and a myriad more session singers and background singers contributed to Sun’s musical life and the fledgling years of rock ‘n’ roll.¹¹ One of the most famous of these women is Barbara Pittman, a rockabilly singer at Sun Records. Barbara Pittman’s example shows us the complicated relationship that a woman could have with the studio. In some ways she was the exception—she was the only woman offered a contract by Sam Phillips and she would find regional success and eventual European success following the death

⁸ Quotes from Bettye Berger are from a personal interview on Thursday July 10, 2014 at 11:00 AM.

⁹ Interview with Rose Phillips; Quotes and references to Rose Phillips are from a personal interview on Wednesday July 2, 2014 at 1:00 PM.

¹⁰ “WHER — 1000 Beautiful Watts,” Produced by The Kitchen Sisters (Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson) with Valerie Velardi. *All Things Considered*, *NPR*, October 29, 2005 12:00 AM ET. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3304084>.

¹¹ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 4.

of Elvis and the reissuing of Sun's material.¹² Yet in some ways, she fell victim to the tastes of the rockabilly audience and the small nature of the local southern studio. Pittman's experiences corroborate with others' to create a strong example of how there was no place for the woman singer in the early Memphis recording studio.¹³

Barbara Pittman's childhood is fascinating because it was, as Hank Davis points out, a "press agent's dream;" yet it reveals the unique challenges that limited the amount of women who even walked through the doors of the recording studio. She grew up in the poor neighborhoods of Memphis, listened to live music, and mastered an instrument at a young age, just as many of her more famous Sun Records counterparts had done.¹⁴ Born in 1938, Pittman lived with a dozen brothers and sisters in the "poor white neighborhood" in North Memphis;¹⁵ her sister Carlene Day remembers that their mother was "on her own" in raising the children, and she was simply "worried about us getting educated to make a living."¹⁶ Even more fascinating was Day's recollection that the Pittman family did not have a radio. This kind of poverty as we have seen defined the music of Memphis. In Barbara Pittman's life, this phenomenon sparked her exposure to the music that came from a live source in the heart of the city; her uncle owned a pawn shop on Beale Street which Pittman would frequent to hear the jam sessions of blues greats like B.B. King.¹⁷ Her experience with the blues and other local music and natural talent crafted a rough yet unique musician who would diverge from the sweet and delicate voices that were selling in national markets. Pittman was no Patti Page or Doris Day, but instead had a soulful and

¹² Ken Burke, *Country Music Changed My Life: Tales of Tough Times and Triumph from Country's Legends* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 180.

¹³ Interview with Rose Phillips

¹⁴ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 73.

¹⁵ Ken Burke, *Country Music Changed My Life*, 171.

¹⁶ All quotes from Carlene Day are from a phone interview on July 10, 2014 at 9:09 AM

¹⁷ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 73.

low voice. Her unique style, she'd claim, would hinder her own career at Sun later: when she wanted to do an album of "real, gutsy blues," Phillips would allegedly steer her in a more feminine and light direction.¹⁸ However, remnants of the blues growl, the twelve-bar blues structure, and sexual themes would remain in her work, which owes a huge debt to the electric guitar and the suggestive tunes of women like Memphis Minnie, the blues singers on Beale Street, and blues singers elsewhere.¹⁹

Poverty also forced Barbara Pittman to learn on her own, and the first test of her talent came when she "entered the talent contest [at the local fair]...and won by singing Al Joseph." She even tap danced on stage. Day was quick to point out that her sister never had any dance or singing lessons, but she avidly pursued music: "She was always going through the house singing and carrying on... Anything she wanted to do just like playing the guitar [she did]...I don't know if Elvis knew how to play the guitar but Barbara did." Pittman's quick ear seems to have come directly out of these early stages in her training. She was known for picking up songs quickly in the studio, and as Pittman's sister remembers, Pittman won the contest with a song she, "heard on the radio...someone else's radio."

It is significant to note that the poverty that shaped Pittman's career hindered the careers of many other aspiring musicians in the Memphis area. Rose Phillips points out that entertainment was a "high risk occupation" that discouraged people from entering the music industry, especially women, as it easily could have hindered Barbara Pittman had she not been so unique.²⁰ As Carlene Day remembers, her mother "wasn't worried about that [music], but she

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁹ David Sanjek, "Can a 'Fujiyama Mama' be the Female Elvis?: The Wild, Wild Women of Rockabilly," in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whitely (New York: Routledge, 1997), 148.

²⁰ all quotes from Rose Phillips are from a personal interview on Wednesday July 2, 2014 at 1:00 PM.

was worried about us getting educated.” And since conceptualization of a woman as a career woman seems to have been both unusual and almost frowned upon (Rose Phillips commented that women “just didn’t think like that” in terms of executive ambition and Deanie Parker also explained in her interview she never knew she “could be a chemist,” etc),²¹ women were good for “raising the kids” without the funds or the wherewithal to seek childcare.²² Young women also took on the role of caretaker for their households, much like Barbara Pittman; her sister remembers that Pittman left her backstage during the talent competition, and often took care of her when she was young.²³ The special duties a woman had in the house, Jud and Rose Phillips mentioned, certainly prohibited women from practicing instruments or performing on stage. Poverty, in addition to night club culture, touring, marital status, and other factors contributed to a cultural selection process that, according to almost every person I interviewed, made women as a less reliable commodity.²⁴

However, with her success at the talent contest, Pittman’s ambitions grew, paralleling those of a young man who lived in the same neighborhood, Elvis Presley. Presley and Pittman would come to know each other at a young age; “mama was friends with his [Elvis’s] mother,” Day explained. Even her publicity picture hanging in the Rockabilly Hall of Fame was taken by Elvis. As Carlene Day remembers, late one night at Pittman’s house—her mother “chewed them out,” Day said, but she knew that Elvis was “such a nice boy” and that nothing nefarious was happening. Pittman’s sister also remembers the incredible support Pittman offered Elvis and her sister’s wealth of knowledge about music: “Elvis always wanted her to pick out songs for him.

²¹ Quotes and references to Deanie Parker are from a personal interview on June 26, 2014 at 10:00 AM unless otherwise cited.

²² Interview with Earlice Taylor

²³ Interview with Carlene Day

²⁴ Interviews with Rose and Jud Phillips, Earlice Taylor, Joyce Cobb, Deanie Parker.

He said she was very smart at picking them out. She said something about a song he would always stop and listen because he knew she knew what she was talking about.” Bettye Berger also suggested that Elvis held a respect for Barbara Pittman’s musicianship as well, saying, “He’d get Barbara to sing it so that he could copy it...her expression.” Accounts of their brief romantic relationship also revolve around their shared love of music; Rose Phillips remembers that Barbara Pittman mentioned that Pittman explained that she and Elvis discussed, “Music. It was always music...and singers they liked.” It seems plausible that this would be the foundation of their relationship, which was a product of their shared experiences in the poor neighborhoods of Memphis and their shared ambitions of becoming musicians.²⁵ Furthermore, her unique support of Elvis’s musicianship suggests that she had a talent that was worthy of Sun Studios and on par with its stars.

In fact, Barbara Pittman “really got her start,” as her sister points out, playing with Elvis at the Eagle’s Nest club, making ““big money”” at five dollars a night.²⁶ However, she was soon turned in by her stepfather and fired for being underage, as she was a few years younger than Elvis²⁷—and potentially because she was a young lady. Rose Phillips remembers that she was also thrown out of The Plantation Inn by officers who found her and a group of young ladies in the nightclub listening to music. Though the rules and the way they were enforced often varied in particular establishments, this story serves to emphasize the fact that there very well seem to have been were stigmas about women’s presence within night clubs, the places where many Memphis musicians honed their skills and gained exposure. This is not to say all women could not frequent these establishments. Bettye Berger remembers that when she saw Brenda

²⁵ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ken Burke, *Country Music Changed My Life: Tales of Tough Times and Triumph from Country’s Legends* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 173.

Patterson—a Memphis singer who recorded for Sun, CBS, and others—at a club called the Whirlaway. Patterson could not come in the audience to greet the crowd, however, she was able to build a reputation for herself as a performer in the nightclub. The potential danger for a young woman, or at least perceived danger for a young woman in a club that served drinks certainly curtailed Barbara Pittman’s initial presence within the music community. Rose Phillips went on to say that the rough atmosphere of these bars on the rockabilly tour circuit were rough places that were not always safe or comfortable for a solo female act or for one woman in a group of men. Not to mention Rose Phillips added that “in those days, you didn’t even drink in front of a woman,” which pervaded both society as a whole and particularly music culture. Both in the studio and in the night clubs in which Memphis music was fostered, it seems that drinking culture could have limited the exposure of women and the potential for women to record. According to Rose and Jud Phillips, the path forged by the early Memphis musician was to “sing [a song] in front of somebody,” get it recorded, and get it on local radio. This was difficult to accomplish in Memphis without the ability to get exposure and to hone one’s skills on the town.

Barbara Pittman’s appearances at the Eagle’s Nest definitely prove Jud and Rose Phillips’s point that exposure was key to the aspiring Memphis musician. Her work with Elvis would open Pittman’s world and introduce her to the possibility of stardom. Elvis introduced her to Sun Records, ingratiating her into the culture and exposing her to its inner workings. According to Pittman, he had the key, would answer the phones, and generally look after the place during the day with Pittman at his side.²⁸ Her connection to Elvis also connected her to many of the greats of Sun Records. Following her work at the Eagle’s Nest, Day remembers that “...Johnny Cash...Carl Perkins, all of them started coming to the house.” Within the Memphis

²⁸ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 73-74.

music scene it seems that in some ways there was an exclusive network of local talent—a network that could exclude women when many were not allowed on stage or even in the audience. Though Pittman would perform in places where no drinks were served, the ability to perform freely was in many ways necessary to her career, for instance she performed with Clyde Leopard’s band to support herself while recording at Sun.²⁹ Pittman’s case seems to effortlessly glide through this barrier despite her early setback, and her unique friendship with “The King” as well as her talent seems to have marked her for stardom.

This local exposure and intimate connection with those within the industry would certainly encourage Barbara Pittman to pursue a musical career and afford her an audition with Sun Records in 1955. However, after finishing her audition, the teenaged singer was told to “learn how to sing.”³⁰ Accounts vary about whether she was told by Sam Phillips or Marion Keisker, but her rough talent certainly precluded her from Sun’s stables; one of Barbara Pittman’s interviews says that Keisker told her to “learn how to type or get married” because she did not like the presence of women in the studio.³¹ This comment does not seem implausible about Keisker’s attitude towards women. However, it cannot be denied that Barbara Pittman’s rejection was heavily reliant on her youth and her lack of extensive performing experience regardless of sex. There were women recording singles at Sun Records before Barbara Pittman and women who were her contemporaries. Though much of these women’s material was not released, Sun Records did not outwardly reject based on sex. It seems that within the confines of the Memphis recording studio, there existed both the pressure to perform in a masculine-charged environment, and the pressure to return to the traditional role for the woman. Pittman’s rejection

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

³¹ Ken Burke, *Country Music Changed My Life*, 173.

is certain, and performing as a fourteen and fifteen year old certainly had not prepared her for an industry that was beginning to produce greats in 1954 and 1955. But, the characterization of the studio as a place that did not necessarily encourage females to walk through the doors recalls Rose Phillips's comment that in its day, Sun Records was a "good old boy's network," and used women's often supplementary and sparingly.

Pittman's rejection, however, did not encourage her to return to her proper place as a woman, but to train as a musician. A year on the road with Lash Larue, a traveling cowboy entertainer and movie star, certainly polished Barbara Pittman's skills.³² She first went along just to babysit, but soon began participating in the show, singing every night, and refining her low and bluesy voice.³³ These unique experiences afforded her with the unique opportunity to perform on the road in a relatively comfortable setting with other children and women performers. These opportunities did not exist for other women soloists in rockabilly typically. Jud Phillips mentioned that many musicians were "gigging all the time," performing on the road constantly in order to make a career, citing both examples within Memphis and outside of Memphis. "Elvis", he said, did around two-hundred shows the last ten years of his life, "and he was Elvis." For a working woman rockabilly musician, the stakes were even higher on the road. Rose Phillips remembers that Carl Perkins told her that the places that Sun artists had to perform in were "like the movie *Roadhouse*." Bettye Berger too remembers these rough-and-tumble places with crowds that certainly enjoyed watching women performers, but not atmospheres that were always safe or comfortable for women. Special accommodations in terms of dressing rooms and hotel rooms were also brought up as potential limiting factors to women as well. Jud Phillips mentioned that the lady would "invariably end up in the manager's office" to change and that

³² Ken Burke, *Country Music Changed My Life*, 173.

³³ *Ibid.*

keeping her separate from male band members was more effort and more expensive. Pittman's experiences on the road certainly marked her as a serious performer, no doubt, in a male-dominated industry and also were unusually safe: her mother made LaRue sign a contract to keep her safe. Even so, she was still dropped off at a phone booth in Ohio after the show and was forced to stay with family before returning to Memphis.³⁴ Although she was not the only one who had the will to travel and touring experience as a performer—other women who recorded at Sun Records like Hannah Fay certainly had traveled on the road and had become quite successful—she had yet another skill that few women were able to attain.

It was helpful that she was single and young too, for Barbara Pittman had the flexibility to travel that married women did not possibly possess. These expectations of performance and spending long hours in the studio, as it would be expected, discouraged women from entering the studio or to quit the game early because of familial expectation or biological concern. One comment made by a potential Sun artist Bette Kirby about her meeting with Sam Phillips said, “I kept thinking about my children.”³⁵ In addition, Cyd Mosteller, a session singer at Sun and Stax and a Memphis singer, remembered a few women singers in her interview who quit before their careers took off because of their marriages, saying “you’ve got to have the vision always.”³⁶ Mosteller too was fortunate in the sense that her husband would travel with her or knew the men she was travelling with in the area. The pressure of marriage and of the suburban housewife certainly was not characteristically southern. Friedan wrote that “In the fifteen years after World War II...[m]illions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the

³⁴ Ken Burke, *Country Music Changed My Life*, 173-174.

³⁵ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 51.

³⁶ All quotes from Cyd Mosteller are from a personal interview on July 14, 2014 at 11:00 AM.

American suburban housewife.”³⁷ However, this pressure is important in contextualizing the careers of many women at Sun. The studio often was pulling from local talent, not excluding the women. While many seasoned and professional musicians traveled to New York and Los Angeles and even Nashville to have large careers, it seems that that local women entering the studio came at a disadvantage to make any significant impact on the local or the national market.

Barbara Pittman certainly was still fairly green as she walked back into Sun Records in 1956. However, she returned to Sun with a strong voice and a strong will to succeed. She first recorded many demos for other artists—her demo for Elvis, “Playing for Keeps,” was, even Barbara Pittman admitted, a stark contrast from her performances a year earlier.³⁸ In addition to recording demos, she released material under her own name, Barbara Pittman. She recorded her famous song, “I Need a Man,” on September 24, 1956. It was, as Hank Davis points out, a clear attempt to claim the “female Elvis” title for Memphis and Sun.³⁹ Her record spent three months at the top of the Memphis charts and *Billboard Magazine* even commented on her challenging traditional male roles, “Here’s the back shack sound, feminine style.”⁴⁰ The title itself, “I Need a Man” recalls the feminine ownership and sexuality of blues legends like Memphis Minnie who challenged southern tradition of male sexuality and female conservatism. Pittman commented that her mother “locked me in the closet for a week,” when the song came out, because she was so young—not to mention the song was very suggestive for the times, as in the song Pittman says emphatically and consistently “I need a man, I need a man, I need a man to love.”⁴¹ This kind of song, with its time spent at the top of the Memphis charts, proved both

³⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York City: Norton and Company Inc., 1997), 18.

³⁸ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 75.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁴¹ Ken Burke, *Country Music Changed My Life*, 176.

Barbara Pittman's skill, but also that times were beginning to change. Cordell Jackson, who was rejected from Sun Records, remembered how people would leave her concerts upset about their sexual content, but it seems that the Memphis industry, having to compete with "female Elvis"s elsewhere and having a collection of talented women, produced this famous record and others that had a bluesy influence and fast beat that reflected the style of an Elvis record.⁴²

Barbara Pittman's record was not entirely unique at Sun, however, in its attempt to provide an "answer to Janis Martin" or to recreate the Elvis sound in the feminine image.⁴³ In some ways, Presley's in As Pete Daniel mentions, Sun Records would record several women like Jean Chapel and Maggie Sue Wimberley who would produce rockabilly and rock 'n' roll type singles with little success.⁴⁴ Elvis was the model of the successful Memphis musician who made it to the national level. Rose Phillips even remembers that Barbara Pittman told her that "before Elvis, we didn't know this was possible." The attempt by Sun and by Barbara Pittman especially to channel "The King" is mirrored in the general population of Sun Records artists who were attracted to this distinctive style and for this distinctive Memphis sound. "Elvis opened up the market for uniqueness," as Rose Phillips asserts. His influence in some ways sparked other markets to find a "female Elvis" as well. RCA had Janis Martin and Capitol had Wanda Jackson.

In 1956, Barbara Pittman was offered a contract with Phillips International, a label created to "get artists on the street and promote them" while Sun Records was sorting through "distribution issues" with DECCA according to Jud Phillips. The reason why more talented women with similar performing experience to Pittman's like The Miller Sisters or even Hannah

⁴² Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 153.

⁴³ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 72.

⁴⁴ Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions* 153.

Fay, did not receive recording contracts is still remain unclear. For certain, Sam Phillips was not adamantly opposed to women in Sun Studios. As we have seen, many women have walked through the doors of Sun Studios with support of the president of the record company. Hank Davis too brings up the fact that one of Sam Phillips's biggest regrets is that he did not produce a hit off of the talented country act the Miller Sisters.⁴⁵ However, Barbara Pittman claims that Phillips did not approve of her voice type, prevented her from doing the true blues that she wanted to do, and favored sweet voices akin to his favorite woman singer, Doris Day.⁴⁶ She, echoed by Bettye Berger who said that Phillips "did not know how to work with women," claimed that the studio owner was "uncomfortable with female artists."⁴⁷ It is hard to say whether Phillips's preferences killed the careers of Sun Records's women recording artists or if some cultural factors limited the potential for a woman to break out of a small southern studio. It is clear that Sam Phillips did not actively try to eliminate women from his business as evidenced by the number of female recording artists on Hank Davis's reissue and the fact that Pittman's final recording, "The Eleventh Commandment" was the most expensive in the new studio's history, although Phillips was certainly not pleased about it.⁴⁸ However, preference did seem to win out in some regards for the fact remains that one woman had a contract from Sun Records, a handful like Linda Gail Lewis and Maggie Sue Wimberley released singles, and many more women produced tapes that were forgotten in vaults until 2002.

Regardless of preference, distribution and promotion presented the most obvious problems for women in the studio. Women artists did not thrive like male artists' did in a genre pioneered by men. Though this phenomenon is not unique and happened before Elvis Presley's

⁴⁵ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 82.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 80.

debut, this masculine music certainly was dominant in a studio that created a model that worked so well—the Elvis model. Bettye Berger confirmed that Sam Phillips was looking specifically for a white man who “sounded like a black man.” Pete Daniel confirms that Sam Phillips knew he could make money on this sound before he ever discovered Elvis Presley, and seemed to pursue a similar style in other artists, which he found it again and again in Elvis and Cash and Perkins and Lewis among others.⁴⁹ This idea certainly created problems for women who were already the minority in a studio run by men. As Jud Phillips points out, “there was one promotion man at Sun;” because the studio could only support one to two people at a time, the choice to promote a male artist over a woman artist was obvious when women’s music was not as well established in the tradition of rockabilly.⁵⁰ Bill Justis’s “Raunchy” “buried” Pittman’s “I Need a Man” nationally because of its heavy promotion.⁵¹ According to Rose Phillips and Hank Davis, Pittman credited Jud Phillips Sr., the radio promoter at Sun Records, with the fact that she was heard at all. In general, “The men artists just showed more potential at that time,” Rose Phillips said, continuing with “once they sold Elvis, they were really focused on getting hits off of Jerry Lee.”

Though potential in terms of talent can be debated, it is undeniable that imale potential to sell was overwhelming to the Memphis female recording artist. The advent of birth control and the male sexuality that emanated from rock ‘n’ roll and rockabilly from the early greats like Elvis Presley certainly precluded the feminine point of view on stage and catered to the feminine point of view in the crowds and record stores.⁵² Presley’s suggestive dances and lyrics set the

⁴⁹ Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 134.

⁵⁰ Interview with Bettye Berger

⁵¹ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 82.

⁵² Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 153.

precedent for a genre that harnessed the buying power of a hoard of adoring teenage girls.⁵³ As Joyce Cobb described an industry in which the money followed the “screaming girls” in love with Elvis.⁵⁴ “By 1959, seventy-five million dollars’ worth of 45s alone were sold annually, most of them to teenagers with young girls in the majority,” no doubt due to rock ‘n’ roll and rockabilly’s influence on the nation’s markets,⁵⁵ and Barbara Pittman, oddly enough, was left behind because of her fellow women in the crowds and record stores.

Barbara Pittman’s star quality of course can be debated as well, and the fickle nature of talent and mass appeal certainly play into the narrative. Janis Martin at RCA, for instance, scored a hit in early 1956 with RCA and would appear on numerous television shows and graze the national charts. Martin, however, would pursue her career at a larger studio with more promotion money than Sun Records, although she would still never have the career of her male counterparts and would have an all-too-brief glimpse at stardom.⁵⁶ The direct comparison that Martin is to Pittman, however, further proves that while musical prejudice against women was everywhere, there was something about the Memphis industry and its women.

Barbara Pittman’s own assessment of her lack of promotion raises further questions about the Memphis studio’s demarcation of women’s roles. She maintains that ““Sam wouldn’t push my records even if they would start to sell.””⁵⁷ Sam’s brother, Jud, according to his son, was both frustrated with the system that promoted only a few chosen artists, and even allegedly

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁴ All quotes from Joyce Cobb are from a personal interview on Tuesday July 15, 2014 at 4:30 PM.

⁵⁵ David Sanjek, “Can a ‘Fujiyama Mama’ be the Female Elvis?”, 175.

⁵⁶ David Sanjek, “Can a ‘Fujiyama Mama’ be the Female Elvis?”, 153.

⁵⁷ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 82.

“encouraged Barbara to write,” because of her strong writing ability.⁵⁸ This was not unusual or unique to women, but the fact that the Sun Records team wanted to keep Barbara Pittman within the family both speaks to her talent and speaks to roles for women within the office. Mae Axton and other women songwriters were certainly a part of the system and worked as “heavy duty women in the peripheral.”⁵⁹ Pittman was even offered to go on tour with Elvis in 1958 before he was drafted, but just as many career leads in her life did, that one turned cold as well.⁶⁰ It seems to worsen the blow that the rockabilly queen Wanda Jackson would be included on the bill with Elvis on the road.⁶¹ In 1960, Pittman’s contract was over, and the recording industry in Memphis was slowing down for a while. She struggled to find work, but then pursued a career in film and singing for soundtracks in California.

This kind of career was typical of a graduate of Sun Records. In addition to the solo singers who found success elsewhere after their times at Sun Records, several more background singers and session singers who had relative anonymity in the recording studio found success elsewhere. Sun Records, as Barbara Pittman’s case proves, was not able to house a successful front woman in Rose Phillips’s own words, “The situation here didn’t allow them to be anything more than that [supporting musicians].” But Rose Phillips credits for giving women the opportunity to hone their skills and to gain some exposure.

This assessment seems accurate with one caveat: those who “made it” rarely stayed in Memphis. Cyd Mosteller’s successful career is the exception to the rule and proof of the rule.. Session singers and backup singers were not intimate parts of the process, often, as Cyd

⁵⁸ Interview with Jud Phillips

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Hank Davis, *Memphis Belles*, 73.

⁶¹ Billy Poore, *Rockabilly: A Forty-year Journey*, (Milwaukie: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1998), 60.

Mosteller remembers, coming into the studio after musicians and recording their parts on their own. She remembers the intimate nature of Sun's studio, although she also remembers, "kicking beer cans out of the way."⁶² Mosteller's career is emblematic of Jud Phillips's comment that more work for women was in the "really really country music or the...big rooms," as she would often sing vocal standards with her husband and his band in local performing spots. Her husband's connection to Bill Justis, music director at Sun, landed her the opportunity to sing a lovely high part on "Ballad of a Teenage Queen." Mosteller also worked briefly at Stax as well with Steve Cropper on a project, proving the "incestuous" relationship that many of the studios had with one another in terms of their session musicians.⁶³ Her later success as a jingle singer and voice-over artist, as well as her continued success as a singer has little to do with her session days and more to do with her fierce desire to sing. However, the sessions gave her the income she needed to survive in an industry that still could not afford to keep many women. Most significantly, Mosteller remembers that "there was more work in Nashville," and if she had not have married, she might have pursued her career there.

Brenda Patterson provides another compelling case for the Sun graduate. She represents the claim that Jud Phillips made that for a time, many Sun session singers and back-up singers were the real hit makers in Nashville. Cases like Janie Frickie, Dot Rhodes, and others support this claim, but Patterson, Bettye Berger claims, was "one of the greatest talents [she's] ever seen." She found success, as many other women had, with CBS and Clive Davis. Patterson would also appear on Paul Simon's albums among others and even produce a solo album in

⁶² This quote is from a follow-up interview with Cyd Mosteller on Thursday July 17 at 10:00 AM.

⁶³ Interview with Rose Phillips

1973.⁶⁴ Jud Phillips even remembers she got her own record label. Rose Phillips asserted that Sun Records acted as a practice field for Patterson and other back-up women like her. “They had to be as expressive and charismatic as the people performing in front of them,” she states, adding that it took a lot of professionalism to remain focused behind the antics of someone like Jerry Lee Lewis. And without doubt, Sun had many talented women in the peripheral who started within the small Memphis studio. Whether their success, like Barbara Pittman’s success, was in spite of or because of Sun Studio is difficult to say. Though some would go on to fame and fortune, Earlice Taylor remembers she met a “black woman who sang back-up for Elvis” whom no one remembered or had heard of. Nashville, thus, was the escape of the Memphis trap for many Memphis women musicians—and many male musicians as well. Bettye Berger remembers too that when she arrived in Nashville around 1980, “all the backup people had moved out there.”

These stories in conjunction with Pittman’s case seem to suggest that forces larger than talent and the fickle nature of the market were at work against the women of Sun Records and the women of the early Memphis recording industry. Bettye Berger, in corroboration with the Phillips family, does point out that Pittman was a “great talent” who was “misguided from the day she was born,” not convinced of how much talent she had. Complications in her personal life certainly did not help her on her way to local success either. However, it seems without a doubt that Pittman’s sole contract, her music, and the few singles released from other women paint the picture of a localized recording industry on the brink of change, but still subject to the white male dominance of artists like Elvis and businessmen like Sam Phillips.

⁶⁴ Brucelarochele, “Brenda Patterson: Forty Years on.” Accessed July 20, 2014. <http://brucelarochele.wordpress.com/2011/04/14/brenda-patterson-forty-years-on/>.

“Do Not Underestimate the Value of a Role Model:” Deanie Parker and the Paradox of

Stax

The culture of Stax in its regard to women is both a continuation of and deviation from the early days of the recording industry. Its founding and the founding of studios like American Studios and Royal Studios marked a clear shift in the Memphis recording industry away from the focus on the male rockabilly musicians and the “good old boy’s network” that existed at Sun Records. The brother and sister owners, Estelle Axton and Jim Stewart, clearly created a larger business with more female executives, however, male dominance still persisted, driven by cultural expectations similar to the expectations at Sun Records. Southern culture still pervaded the business and restricted the careers of many of its female artists and employees. No one knows Stax’s paradoxical relationship with progressivism and traditionalism better than Deanie Parker. Salesperson in the Satellite record store; a DJ on WLOK; a staff songwriter and director of publicity, artists, and community relations at Stax Records; and eventually CEO of Soulsville, the foundation now responsible for the Stax Museum and the Stax Academy charter school in Memphis, Parker is intimately acquainted with the culture of the business that she has devoted her life to. Her successes are greatly a product of her direct and positive demeanor, but she also views herself as a product of place, time, and circumstance. Parker’s depiction of Stax and her deep involvement in the company embody how the music industry was built on previous models yet developed an infrastructure supportive of a different sound and a different musician.

Stax Records pulled both from local and foreign talent. Rufus Thomas and Carla Thomas were from Memphis while the Staples Singers were from Chicago. Parker was a little bit of both, having been born in the Mississippi Delta and raised in southern Ohio. Though Parker had

not “worked her way to Memphis” until her high school years, she had quickly assimilated into the musical life of the city, performing in the Hamilton High School glee club, playing piano for a church choir, and singing with “group of guys who had just lost their lead singer” and who had the potential to turn professional. Her teacher was looking to “groom a professional group,” and pushed them to audition for a Beale Street contest—first prize was an audition at Stax. After winning the competition, the group auditioned with covers, only to be told by owner, Jim Stewart, they needed to produce original material. Parker returned home, studied the songs she liked, and wrote a song on her “upright white piano” that her mother had spent “two weeks’ salary on.” When she produced her song, “My Imaginary Guy”, Parker said Jim Stewart told her, “you know every record has two sides” meaning the new songwriter had to produce yet another song for her next meeting with Stewart.

Parker was quick to point out the significance of owning a piano was a privilege to have in the house. Earlice Taylor, Joyce Cobb and Rose Phillips certainly echoed these sentiments.⁶⁵ In a place defined by poverty and racial inequality, “it was a luxury” for a black family to own a piano or any instrument. And though Parker’s possession of a piano was unique in a poor city, it also distinguished her because she was a woman instrumentalist. In my research, I found very few, and most women played instruments traditional of women in the south like the piano or acoustic guitar.⁶⁶ Though the issue heavily relies on poverty as Parker pointed out, the issue seems greatly related to sex as well. Women like Evelyn Young, who played the saxophone, and Cordell Jackson, who played the electric guitar, are certainly exceptions to the rule. However, it was Cordell Jackson who found limited success in some ways because “southern culture would

⁶⁵ Interviews with Earlice Taylor; Interview with Jud and Rose Philips

⁶⁶ Candace Bailey, *Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).

not tolerate woman grinding against a guitar.”⁶⁷ Even in recent years, few women in the sphere of popular music have gone to record as instrumentalists. It does seem that in the genres of soul and rock ‘n’ roll heavily include the use of the electric guitar and other electric instruments, which have generally been conceived of as masculine instruments and have largely been played by men.⁶⁸ Though the acoustic guitar and the piano seemed somewhat popular, although still scarce entities in women’s music, some women broke traditional ground and recorded in studios with their instruments. It is unclear whether any women played on their recordings at Sun Records. Jud Phillips mentioned working with Carol Kaye, a renowned and nonlocal bass player, but she came to Memphis after the recording boom had slowed and worked briefly here. Joan Gilbert would contribute to her father, Noah Gilbert’s, string parts at Stax Records as a session musician as well. It is obvious that regardless of studio, women instrumentalists were scarce for reasons that still remain somewhat unclear.

Parker did not play in the studio, but she had a brief career as a singer. And though she has claimed many times that the reason her career was so brief was that she, “wasn’t good enough,”⁶⁹ her understanding of artists’ challenges at Stax provide some key insight to offer into the larger struggle of African American women artists in the south. She reiterates some of the themes we have discussed earlier: when asked about traditional roles in the industry, she responded, “Look at the musicians. Most of them are male...it’s easier for them to travel in a pack. When they go on the road they’re all looking for the same thing...a woman doesn’t fit into that. A gentleman would feel compelled to take care of the lady.” Whether this was Parker’s

⁶⁷ Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 153.

⁶⁸ Mavis Bayton, “Women and the Electric Guitar,” in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whitley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 40-41.

⁶⁹ Andrea Lisle, “Grooving again: Deanie Parker returns to songwriting,” Special to the *The Commercial Appeal*, Posted Feb 19, 2009. Accessed June 10, 2014. <http://www.commercialappeal.com/lifestyle/grooving-again>.

experience on the road with her group is unclear, but her work later as “mother hen” to many of Stax’s great artists as head of artist development qualifies her to explain this recurring phenomenon.⁷⁰ This stress in conjunction with the tension associated with race was a harsh reality many potential black women artists and potential Stax artists would face, for the studio pulled from both Motown artists from Detroit and Chicago like the Staples Singers and local talent from the primarily black neighborhood around the studio. This tension was evident, Parker mentions, on the road as well:

When I went on the road... and saw the difficulty that these artists had trying to take their music to the people that wanted to hear them they couldn’t go into the restrooms at the service stations...they couldn’t go into various places to eat...God forbid that you had got enough money to get yourself a decent automobile...a sheriff’d see you and swear you were speeding because you were driving a better car than he was...It was pretty damn scary.

Bettye Berger, too, spoke to the fact that the black artists “had a much harder time” than the white artists in traveling around the area and playing on the road. Though this does not speak to the culture of Stax Records directly, it does remind us that there was, in every type of musical situation, a distinct selection process of those who could become musicians and those who could not in the south. Parker’s experiences speak to challenges of women at Stax that many forget when considering Stax, a record label known for its acceptance of racial and gender differences, especially with its fleet of black female artists like Carla Thomas and Mavis Staples. Parker’s experiences do not immediately discount the idea that the environmental selection process we saw for female rockabilly musicians was worse for African American women, who were, in Joyce Cobb’s words, “the lowest of the low.”

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Still there were many successful women artists at Stax Records and that the label represented a fundamental step forward for the recording industry in Memphis. Women artists, though they were not entirely in the foreground, carved a place for themselves in the industry following Sun Records' decline in the sixties. In fact, Carla Thomas would produce the first number one hit for the record label, "Gee Whiz (Look at His Eyes)," released in 1960 and made popular in 1961, just two years after the label was founded.⁷¹ Part of this success of women in this field has to do with genre. Unlike the trademark rockabilly at Sun Records, Stax Records and others like Hi Records had picked up on a different sound and a more interracial group of artists. The new Memphis artist was not like the artists of Sun who imitated black music and infused his own experience with hillbilly and country sounds into the mix. The Stax artist and the new Memphis artist lived in the growing black community around Stax or had grown up in Georgia or Chicago, where black music thrived. The new Memphis sound, soul, was founded in gospel and blues roots and in the sound of Motown which was exploding in Detroit and Chicago.

The women of the new Memphis recording studio, particularly Stax, owed a large debt to the visceral southern gospel music, which had heavily influenced the gritty sound of soul and historically included women as innovators. Earlice Taylor mentions the importance of the church for many performers, and particularly to women performers, by describing "quartets" that consisted of mainly men, but would usually include one woman. These quartets would perform in churches, forcing musicians to "practice all the time" and to "keep on doing it" and "get[ting] used to being on stage." Further evidence is found in the case of Rosetta Tharpe, an electric guitar player, who played as a gospel singer on television and served as the early inspiration for

⁷¹ Rob Bowman, *Soulsville, USA: The Story of Stax Records* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 15.

many soul performers; she is included in the Stax museum as a propagator of the “Memphis sound” that came to be known as soul music. Her contribution to what history would call “the Memphis sound” on the chitlin’ circuit in addition to her appearances on television suggest that women’s presence was more visible and tangible in soul music than in other genres in Memphis.⁷² Others up the river like Etta James were “getting hot” and popularizing the music of black women.⁷³ The influence of Motown on soul also contributed to women’s success at Stax as well. In addition to the fact that Motown would produce some successful women artists, many artists from Stax would come out of the Chicago and Detroit sound like the Emotions and Mavis Staples from the Staples Singers.⁷⁴

This momentum of black female artists assured their presence within the Memphis studio. However, this new place in the industry did not always assure women a place of power or control. In Carla Thomas’s case “being Rufus Thomas’s daughter did not hurt when it came to becoming musically educated in the panorama of American vernacular music.”⁷⁵ Of course, her talent recommended her to produce hit records, but her father’s encouragement throughout her life certainly marked her as special and appropriate for the role of musician. Reports also claim that she was ““Jim Stewart’s pet,”” and that the Stax owner was a strong advocate for “Gee Whiz” when it did not instantly become a hit.⁷⁶ Though incredibly talented, Carla Thomas also had the good fortune of having male advocates in the studio who would support her records and keep her within the group of elite Stax Records stars. Mavis Staples too, another famed woman

⁷² Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin’ Circuit and the Road to Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 151-152.

⁷³ Interview with Bettye Berger; Earlice Taylor

⁷⁴ Interview with Earlice Taylor

⁷⁵ Rob Bowman, *Soulsville, USA: The Story of Stax Records* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

Stax artist, would have the support of her father throughout her career. Another group made up of sisters called The Emotions also had their father in the studio with them, and Pervis Staples was their manager—even though his sister Mavis “groom[ed] the three younger girls, helping them with their stage outfits and deportment.”⁷⁷ The nature of conflicting reports about The Emotions’ coming to Stax also embody male thinking within the studio. Pervis Staples wanted to bring the girls to Stax Records, while one of the members of the all-female group, Sheila Hutchinson, recalls that winning a talent contest in Chicago gave the group the chance to record at Stax.⁷⁸ This sort of controversy muddies the waters in determining how autonomous female musicians could be about their careers. Though these women certainly garnered their fame from their talent, the male presence in the peripheral confirms that in some ways, these women’s careers were not entirely their own. Subject to not only patriarchal guidance, but also the guidance of male studio executives and male producers like Al Bell and Steve Cropper suggest that though women had broken into the male hierarchy of the studio, women still had progress to make in order to produce music for themselves.

We can see this attitude transferred into the production side of Stax Records as well. Deanie Parker, with her direct attitude and her no-nonsense work ethic said as a high powered publicity head, working with outside publicists, many of them male, to promote artists and events was not overly problematic in her experience, “The gender bias was not evident...not to the extent that any woman who wanted to step out of a traditional role would not be discouraged. Challenged? Yes, but not discouraged.” She remembers very little in the way of gender discrimination in the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 184-185.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

workplace, but did acknowledge that despite changes in the industry due to changes in administration and shifts in genre, the industry was still in many ways run by men.

Parker speaks particularly of a fellow female songwriter's experiences as evidence that though men did not actively discriminate against women given the culture of Stax, the fact that they did outnumber women could cause problems of perspective and otherness. She explains, "There were some...we had a writer...she had some challenges at Stax working with an all-male production staff because they had an allegiance." Parker explained that men have a certain "camaraderie" due to shared experiences, and seeing that men still had the majority in production and musicianship, it caused difficulty of perspective. "You have to find a new ingredient to make it blend," Parker put it. Parker's acquaintance's ingredient was her spaghetti, which Deanie Parker said she cooked every night for her team so that they would hear her suggestions and legitimize her presence within the group. Parker too admitted there were times—even though she often disregarded criticism—that "[she had] to argue with the man because they don't see it that way" that a woman might.

Despite these challenges, Deanie Parker insists that the culture was a fundamental shift away from the past, and her continual advancement within the company certainly reinforces her words. It seems that a continual theme in the empowerment of women at Stax was the encouragement of Estelle Axton, part owner of the label. Though Deanie Parker said that Estelle Axton never "sat us down and talked about it," she was a major influence in the employment strategies of the company. Parker speaks of an organization unafraid to mentor any of its employees, black or white, feminine or male. And to some extent, especially under Axton's influence we can see this come to life. After quitting her brief stint as an artist, Parker was hired as counter help in the Satellite Record store, the store which later became the larger Stax label.

Parker would be the first salaried African American employee as she pursued a college degree.⁷⁹ She housed greater ambitions than the typical “clerical positions” that women held in record studios, referring to jobs that required “making sure the coffee [was] perked in the morning” and keeping a “log of sales.” With the encouragement of Estelle Axton, Parker even began to program her own radio show on WLOK: “Estelle would help me with the content...the core of it was about homemaking. We would talk about the content...She even brought me a book of poems to read on the air.” Though Parker realized that “Estelle Axton was a shrewd woman” and using Parker’s loyalty to Stax to test demos and play records, it is obvious “what a change agent she was” in redefining the role of studio executive. Parker could not continue to express how unusual it was to have such a woman for professional guidance, explaining, “do not underestimate the value of a role model.”

With the support of many at Stax Records behind her, Deanie Parker became director of publicity, community relations, and artists. She asserts that her “experiences in growth in development at Stax Records were unparalleled when compared to most other industry companies and organizations and for certain nonrelated companies and organizations.” She credits the culture of Stax embodied by a statement of Jim Stewart: ““I always felt that women are responsible for eighty to ninety percent of records that are bought...If they are influencing that, why not leave them in key positions in the company?””⁸⁰ This culture seems largely influenced by Estelle Axton, who seemed to act as a filter for musicians wishing to come and record at Stax: “That’s where they’d go, before they went into the studio to talk to Estelle” Bettye Berger recalls. Axton’s role as both gatekeeper and front woman at Stax gave a woman

⁷⁹ Robert Gordon, *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2013), 79.

⁸⁰ Rob Bowman, *Soulsville, USA*, 47.

the authority to begin to break the male hegemony that would still creep into the experience for women at Stax, starting with her influence in hiring women like Deanie Parker. Despite the fact that she had no former training as a publicist, Parker would work hard with both key studio employees like Al Bell as well as freelance publicists like Al Abrams and publicists from huge markets in Chicago, New York, etc who would help Stax compete in the national market. Of her learning experiences within the publicity department, Parker says, “it was a hell of an opportunity to learn so much from some really great guys.”⁸¹ It is also noted that following Deanie Parker’s success, Marlene Powell and Sandy Meadors would hold “key positions in the company.”⁸²

Here, we see that the localized nature of the studio actually worked to promote women’s involvement in the industry because of Estelle’s relationship to the company and because the company had an attitude that Parker stressed transcended gender just as it transcended race. Axton was the sister of the man who wanted to build the company, and investor in the early days of the record label. By virtue of this connection and the small size of the company—especially in the fledgling years of the company in the early sixties—she was able to foster a relationship and to mentor her employees in an unprecedented and unusual way. Her influence, it seems, produced a culture that did not simply revolve around the “good old boy’s network” that had—and continues—to exist at studios where males still dominate. Estelle’s encouragement of her women employees came in many ways before feminism became prominent in Memphis and certainly came before the rise of the National Organization of Women in Memphis in 1966.⁸³ Though the 1960s certainly saw feminism begin to develop, Stax still stands out as a place where

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Finding Aid, NOW Collection, Shelby County Room, Benjamin Hooks Library, Memphis, TN.

women held unprecedented roles as executives. Deanie Parker's praise of Estelle's influence recalls a comment made by Rose Phillips that Sun Records lacked, "You needed women in secure enough positions to put themselves on the line" to hire fellow women employees as Estelle did at Stax. It is important to note her influence while also contextualizing her within place, time, and genre.

It is also important to note that Estelle Axton was not the first studio owner in Memphis. After her rejection from Sun Records, musician Cordell Jackson would in 1956 create her own record studio, Moon Records. Though small and with influence on a niche audience, Jackson's studio is both worthy of note and yet another example of women having to redefine male thinking as studio owners and executives. Cordell Jackson's case also reminds us that male thinking was still predominant in the studio well after 1956. Hers and Estelle Axton's case prove that in the Memphis recording industry, it seems imperative that women take roles of power in order to produce a stronger output of female artists within the community, though Jackson's studio produced a less famous sound.

Axton's presence within Parker's life certainly gave the former head of publicity the tools to succeed and the prominence within the industry to become powerful within the community in her own right. Though Parker says it is too early to understand her role as CEO of Soulsville, from which she retired from in 2007, we can surmise that the "opportunities for growth and development" at Stax for which she expressed great thanks for extended to her being offered the position to begin a new chapter in Stax's musical life. Parker oversaw the activities of the Stax Academy music program, the Soulsville charter school, and the maintaining of the place which cemented her place within Memphis music history. Her work within Stax and her example as

both an artist and employee marked both the struggles that continue to exist within the Memphis music industry and the hope that the industry will be more welcome to feminine empowerment.

“It’s Just Hard to Say Where the Business is Now”: Reflections on the Current State of Affairs in Memphis

Joyce Cobb and Earlice Taylor came to Memphis after the recording industry left. There were still some places to record like Royal Studios, but ultimately the fall of Stax and American and Sun certainly dealt a blow to the city’s musical life. Earlice Taylor returned to Memphis, her hometown, from Chicago, where she participated in gospel and choral groups and dabbled in opera. Joyce Cobb, who specializes in jazz, vocal pop standards, rock, and country and western had found success cutting a country song in Nashville, “He Just Loved You Out of Me.” She came to Memphis from Nashville when Stax recruited her to record on a “subsidiary label” for country music; however the record label fell shortly after Cobb moved to Memphis. Each woman commands a unique repertoire in a unique setting, but both share a perspective on Memphis women’s music that speak to the existence of systematic problems and progress.

“Memphis was hard on its women,” Joyce Cobb recalls. Taylor agrees adding, “Memphis doesn’t push their own.” Cobb and Taylor cite the reasons for women’s hardship that have been mentioned throughout this work. Cobb very adamantly stated that the Memphis as well as national markets catered to the “screaming girls,” whose consumerism drove especially the sexually charged atmosphere of the Memphis music economy, with acts like Isaac Hayes and Elvis Presley. Certainly, the market has been defined by not only the choices of men, but the musicianship of men and their sexuality. Soul and rock ‘n’ roll, though they encouraged the

sexual liberation of the baby boomer generation, also seem to have particularly created an environment hostile to the female performer and her relationship with the male audience. While men had enjoyed a more liberated status, this newfound freedom beginning in Memphis in the 1950s, in which “sex was everywhere” seems to have encouraged particularly hoards of young screaming women to buy male.

There was the issue of women’s status in society as well, as Taylor puts it: “women had no place in the world.” Women were not expected to work high powered jobs, but were expected to raise the children, clean the house, and serve as domestic workers if they had to earn money. Taylor remembers that many recording studios and employers of live performers “won’t consider investing in women,” because of their potential to become mothers and to stop pursuing a career full time. Even Joyce Cobb remembers an experience with a record executive in which he “made the mistake of telling me that I was an African American woman and not a white male,” which made her less viable a performer. The status of women, both performers pointed out, certainly added to the hardship of feminine breakthrough in an industry already overrun with men.

Biological concerns also were listed as hardships within the infrastructure of the southern recording studio. Earlice Taylor particularly points out that many executives “won’t consider investing in” women due to their potential to quit the business and start a family. Not to mention that the stress of travel for a primary caregiver was impossible. Taylor even remembers an instance in which her talented friend, Gail Jones Murphy, did not travel because of religion, which greatly damaged her career. Questions of travel and investment return are two themes that undeniably plotted the careers of numerous female musicians and aspiring female musicians in conjunction with their marital status, their societal status, and even their safety.

There were a myriad of potential stars and a handful of success stories. A few are mentioned here, and many more exist in the annals of Memphis music. Examining the problems for women in the area, we find an industry that was in some ways a microcosm of the larger markets. As Jud Phillips shrewdly pointed out, few women had success on the top charts in the 1950s and even in the 1960s. In other ways, Memphis looks distinctly difficult for women, both with the hostility of the rockabilly market, the particular grittiness and masculinity of the sound, and small studios that had to heavily favor a few acts. Nashville and other markets had more room for women because of the genre and size of their industry. "Nashville is a songwriter's town," Joyce Cobb mentions. Women and men both were included in the process because, Cobb argues, the focus fell not on the performer so much as the song itself. Not to mention, Nashville housed more opportunity for all musicians, and artists of both genders often left the delta to find a place in music city. In a place where there was particularly no work for women, Nashville's more numerous opportunities prove Memphis's problem with small studios and women performers. The women who participated in the industry determined their own fates, yet sometimes fell victim to the prejudice and the barriers put up by an industry and a society with growing pains.

But now that many of the major studios have left and the music industry in Memphis has slowed, what has happened to women's music? Cobb and Taylor present a picture that is not entirely devoid of the male hegemony that defined the industry for so long, but they do point to a burgeoning music scene in Memphis that has included many women and will continue to include women. First off, it is impossible to ignore the success that Joyce Cobb and Earlice Taylor have enjoyed within the industry. Cobb dove into the live music scene, exploiting her diversity and her knowledge of American standards like Ella Fitzgerald and Cole Porter. She was approached

to write a song with Shoe Productions, creating “Dig the Gold,” which premiered at number forty-two on the national charts. She also immersed herself into the burgeoning jazz scene that had been latent in the days of the recording industry. She has worked with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra to street musicians, making quite a name for herself in the process. Taylor as well has found success in the jazz scene in Memphis. Though, as she puts it, “[doesn’t] depend on singing to feed [herself],” she is still well-known in the big band, jazz circuit that has become more prominent in the area. Both, with exception to Cobb’s one experience mentioned above, cite little evidence to suggest that they have experienced overt sexism in their musical careers.

“It’s just hard to say what the business is now.” Cobb says. But she points to “all the talent” of the emergence of a generation of go-getters; she finds the future in the “young unknown people who are sounding better.” She refers to the problems of marketing the Memphis talent and the struggles that exist for those that remain in a city that markets a fraction of its live music—blues and rock ‘n’ roll—without investing in its other local talent. Women seem to hold a steady place among this new generation. Amy LaVere, a singer-songwriter, Valerie June, a bluesy artist, and Kim Richardson, a folk artist, all are representing the new generation of Memphis women who are asserting themselves both locally and nationally. This Memphis generation, in Cobb’s view, seems to distinguish itself from the sexy images and the need to look “luscious” that feeds the standards of the national market. While women are paraded as sexual objects in music videos, Cobb claims that, “the Memphis industry seems to have more of a conscience,” housing strong musicians rather than strong models. These women are building on the shoulders of the women before them. Their talent forges the new landscape of the Memphis

music industry and promises a continuing and growing tradition of women musicians in Memphis.

As a female musician in Memphis, I too see the numerous women musicians that the city fosters, and having conducted this research, I now think of the pioneering women who came before them. I came into this project looking for answers that in many cases I could not answer. I was looking to criticize a sexist industry and explain the struggle of every Memphis woman musician. Instead, I found a few stories, threads of a tapestry woven from the rich stories of women who lived in a complicated time and place. I found incredible women who persevered in a system that was not resistant to change and also not wholly progressive. I now remember Barbara Pittman's growl and Deanie Parker's unshakeable determination when I see a woman on stage in Memphis. In addition to those participating in the recording industry, we have a woman conductor at the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, many women faculty in the Rhodes Music Department, and local women in Opera Memphis. Though there are more spots for men still in Memphis and across the nation, I consider myself a part of a new generation of women musicians ready to break free of the tradition of male dominance in music. However, this project has reminded me that to increase women's presence in music is not to forget the past or to acknowledge the faults of an industry. If anything, we all must remember those women who have been forgotten and overlooked. We must continue to dig up stories of the women in Memphis music and use them as role models; we must apply Deanie Parker's strategy for emulating Estelle Axton and apply it to an industry that still could use some feminine influence. Parker says, "You have to be able to extract from their behavior and their actions and achievements... what it is that you can grasp and what you can use to become a more effective person."

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You've worked with a pretty major, diverse group of artists. What's the biggest thing you've learned so far in your time collaborating as a songwriter/producer? What I've learned is that the lack of an ego is a superpower. I'm a believer that anybody at any moment could have a better idea than you will ever have. So I think humility is what gives you the ears to hear that idea. When a person comes to my studio, especially if it's somebody that I've never met before, I have to expose my own vulnerabilities first. To give them the signal, look this a safe space. What that ends up doing is it gives the artist an opportunity to tell me things about their personal life they would never in a million years want anyone else to know. So that we can then take those stories and turn them into music, because that's the process. I've been to the Memphis greater chamber back in may where I did get some reference there, but I have not actually signed up due to the price of membership. Also the company lending was Accion and because of the people who introduced us to them we would've gotten the loan without the need for collateral or credit in our names. It's just because of our age that set us back. Thanks for the tips though man. Very very true, cause if you want to invest in big studio. you'll have to get your money back at some point. [a loan] And the bands who got the money for production, are already signed and have deals with the big facilities. you on the other hand will have loads of peops for whom you're going to work for free. or for very cheap price. When you started the Memphis Recording Service, in 1950, it was unheard of in the South for a white man to record black artists. You must have known it would be difficult -- why didn't you gravitate toward something more conventional, like country music or big bands? I never heard no music I didn't like. I said, "Becky, I've got a wild notion that women in radio could have some appeal. But how in hell are we gonna get anybody who can compete in this market?" The people who came in to record for me [at Sun] had never seen a radio station much less a recording studio. And I thought -- these girls can be taught, too. It wasn't all woman, it wasn't all female, it was all girl. I don't give a damn if they were 50 years old, they were all girls.