Scotty Moore: The last witness to a musical milestone
By Dan McCue
of the News staff

NASHVILLE — Even after all these years, Scotty Moore can still hear the young girls screaming at the swivel-hipped singer in his band.
"You know that swooosh sound you hear sometimes when you dive into the water?," said Moore, 67 at the time of the interview, as he recalled a string of raucous concerts that began nearly 45 years ago and continued almost unabated for the next three years.
"Well, the crowds would get so loud sometimes that that was all you heard. It was literally just like being under water," he continued, his voice and facial expression a mixture of amusement and awe.
"Now, I've said this many times over the years, but I really do think we were the only band ever that was literally directed by the singer's rear end," Moore laughed. "Because we would take cues from Elvis' movements when we couldn't hear what he was singing"
For years, Scotty Moore resisted requests for interviews, his reticence fueled by opportunists and unscrupulous writers he believed exploited Elvis Presley's sad decline and premature death for salacious headlines and profits.
During the mid-1980s, Moore's response to an interview request was typically a simple "No," followed by a gentlemanly, "I hope your understand."
Moore had given up the musician's life by then, but friends — among them Chet Atkins — encouraged him to pick up his guitar again.
"As you might imagine, I was pretty rusty for awhile," he said in the early 1990s, when the late night jokes about Elvis' later weight and substance abuse began to wane and a new appreciation of Elvis' music began to emerge.
The re-evaluation has been good for Moore, because in a very real sense — though Elvis' voice and incendiary early image continues to make the cash registers ring — the early seminal hits belong as much to the guitarist as to the man who stood along side so many years ago.
After all, it was Moore's cascading, country-infused guitar riffs that propelled Presley's early sides cut for Sun Records, a Memphis-based indy label, and his ferocious attack on his six string that helped send "Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock" into the stratosphere.
And when Presley opted to slow the tempo, on numbers ranging from "Harbor Lights" to "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You," Moore was right there with him, providing jazz influenced accompaniments or blues inspired staccato fills.

Music took hold early

Growing up on a farm about five miles outside Humbolt, Tennessee, Moore was the youngest member of a family whose recreation included playing as an informal combo. Among his earliest memories are those of his father and three brothers playing country and dance tunes on guitars, fiddle and banjo.
"It was mostly for their own enjoyment," Moore said. "Sometimes they'd go to a dinner and play music for people to square dance to"
By the time he was 8 years old, however, his brothers had all gone off and got married and his father considered himself too old to "fool" with music any longer.

Left to his own devices, Moore taught himself to play guitar by listening to the radio, and by the time he was out of school in the service, he was playing in a variety of groups.
Settling in Memphis after his stint in the Navy, Moore quickly became immersed in the same teeming local music scene as Elvis.
“It was the kind of place where you might play on Saturday night with a small orchestra, the next night with a strictly country band, and the night after that with somebody else.
“There weren’t too many groups that were together all the time. Instead, with all these musicians floating around, a guy would book a date in a club, and then go around and see who he could get to play with him.
“The clubs weren’t particular. They didn’t say, ‘You have to have two trumpets and one sax’ and so forth. It was whatever you showed up with and (you) hoped the crowd would like it”
Though much has been made of Elvis’ melding of country and rhythm and blues, Moore said labels were immaterial in the Memphis of the 1950s.
“We all more or less referred to the music we played as ‘Honky Tonk’ music” he said. “It didn’t have a label. You tried to play what was currently popular on the radio
“So long as there was a good beat or you had a half-way decent singer, whatever you were playing was fine with the people who turned up.”
Fairly quickly, however, Moore began to have ambitions beyond Memphis and formed a more or less stable combo called the Starlite Wranglers. It was his desire to have them make a record that originally brought him to Sun Records, the studio that fifty years later would be designated a national historic landmark.
“I got off early afternoons from my brother’s dry cleaning business where I worked, and almost every afternoon I would go by Sun Records just to see what as going on,” Moore remembered. “Sam Phillips, the owner of the label, and I would go next door, have a cup of coffee, and talk about the band and the local music scene”
“We knew nothing was going to happen (with the Starlite Wranglers) unless we either had a really great song or a bolt of lightning or something struck us. We were searching, just searching for something that would work and then somebody — I can’t remember whether it was Sam or Marion Keisker, his assistant — mentioned Elvis had been in to make a record for his mother.”
“‘Yeah, I remember, he had a pretty good voice,’ somebody said.”
“So I said, ‘Call him and get him to come in.’”
“Everyday after that, for about two weeks, I’d ask them, ‘You get a hold of that guy?’”
“‘No, Not yet’ they’d say.”
Finally, Sam told Marion to give me the number and turned to me and said, “You just call him and get him to come over to your house or something and see what you think.”
“I said, ‘Okay, you know, yeah, yeah, yeah, right. Real eager beaver.”
Moore trailed off, laughing.
Moore called the then 19-year-old Elvis Presley the following Saturday, explained who he was and invited him over.
“I said we were looking around for people to record and asked if he’d be interested,” Moore said.
“‘Yeah, probably,’ Elvis said.”
“How about you come over tomorrow to talk about it?”
“‘Sure.’ he said.”
The next day was July 4, 1954, and at the agreed upon hour, Elvis showed up at Moore’s house on Belze Street in Memphis wearing a black shirt, pink pants with a wide black stripe up the side of each leg, white shoes, and a greasy duck-tail haircut.

Bill Black, who was the Starlite wrangler's bass player and had also been invited to attend the meeting, turned and looked at Moore with raised his eyebrows.
"Elvis came in and we sat in the living room and he sang a lot of different songs. Oh gosh, he sang Eddie Harwell, Billy Eckstein, Hank Snow... a wide variety of stuff. After a couple of hours of that, we kind of dwindled off.. I think he..." Moore began to laugh. "...ran out of songs that he knew."
After Elvis went home, Moore called Phillips to offer his assessment.
"I said it seemed like he could sing just about everything," the guitarist recalled.
Phillips suggested they gather in the studio, and that Moore bring along Black so the two of them could provide a modest accompaniment to the aspiring singer.
What happened next, just a couple of nights later, changed the course of popular culture and music history forever.

Enter the Hillbilly Cat

Gathered in the spare room that serve as Sun's recording studio on Union Avenue, the trio once again began running through songs. Two or three, by Moore's recollection, made it to tape, but nothing really clicked.
"Then, while we were on a break, Elvis starts clowning around in the studio, doing "That's All Right Mama." Doing it real uptempo, just releasing tension. Bill picked up his bass, starting slapping on it, beating on it, yahooing and carrying on, so I picked up my guitar and tried to find out what key they were in."
Phillips, who was changing the tape on the engineering console, had left the door to the studio opening. Hearing the commotion, he stuck his head out and asked what they were playing.
"Ah, we don't know. We're just cutting up," Moore remembers saying.
"Sam said, 'Well, that didn't sound too bad. Why don't you back up and try to figure out what you did and we'll put that on tape."
"We all looked at each other and said, 'Well, what are we doing... then we did it, I'm sure, a few more times before we put a rough version on tape."
After listening to what they'd recorded, Phillips encouraged the combo to try it a few more times, to get their sound a little tighter.
"That's basically how the first song got done," said Moore, who upon Sam Phillips' death of respiratory failure on July 30, 2003 became the last surviving person who was in the room that faithful day.
Even today, Moore admits the combo knew it had something, but didn't know what.
"We didn't realize we had a style at that point.... but we knew we had a definite rhythm we were looking for, and every time we cut something we'd look for songs that would fit the pattern," he said.
Elvis contract with Sun Records was sold to RCA in November, 1955 for what was then the princely sum of $35,000, plus $5,000 Sun still owned Elvis in back royalties.
Even at the more sophisticated company, the band's method of recording remained pretty much the same, Moore said.
The combo would fish around for what "felt" right and then try to refined it over multiple takes.
"For me, it was always a matter of trying to make as much rhythm as I could and still have a few fill notes along the way," Moore said, explaining his contribution to the overall sound of those records.

“A lot of times what I played was simply a case of grabbing hold of a song and then doing the best I could” he chuckled.
“There really wasn’t any planning on those sessions. Everything was more or less spur of the moment. I mean, between takes, I’m fiddling and looking, trying to make something work... but as far as sitting down ahead of time and planning what I’d play.... that never happened.
“Most of it was occurring over the course of different takes,” Moore said.
The guitarist said despite the tremendous regional success of Elvis’s Sun Records and the stunning international success of the songs he recorded for RCA, the band itself was never really conscious of the ripples it was sending through the national psyche.
“We knew we were doing something a little bit different, but we figured it might end at any moment and that would be the bitter end,” he said. “Our philosophy was just to try and enjoy the moment.”
As far as suggestions that he, Elvis and Black must of known they were creating the soundtrack for a rebellion of the nation’s youth, Moore was buying none of it.
“Nah...we didn’t know it, one reason being we didn’t have the instant TV coverage like you do now. We might hear about something somebody said or of some kind of write-up a week or two after we’d been to a particular town, but by then we were a long way away.”
“Basically, we just went onstage to entertain,” Moore said. “That was our first thought, I mean, if you could see some of those shows, a lot of times, for half a song, there wouldn’t be anybody playing but the drummer and myself.
“Bill might be clowning and riding the bass, and Elvis’d be doing this and that and the other. They were entertaining people, and if the music was important we’d all have to tie it together.”
Though the songs they played were recorded in RCA’s state-of-the-art studios in New York, Hollywood and Nashville, the concerts Elvis and the band played were often performed under the most rudimentary conditions.
“At some of the places we played they only had one microphone — for Elvis, and if we had two, one to put on Bill<cm EQ>s bass, that was real lucky,” Moore said.
“After we did a few of those, I went back to Ray Butts, who had built my amplifier, and had him build me two boosters, to put on each side of the stage.
“But it wasn’t for the audience — I mean even with that my sound system was nothing compared to what they have today — but it gave Elvis the ability to hear a little of what I was playing as he moved from one side of the stage to the other.”

An epic era ends

The collaboration between Moore and Elvis — actually between Elvis and his entire first backing band — ended shortly before the singer departed for the Army in the winter of 1958. Sadly, for something that began so organically and so purely, it was money, or lack thereof, that broke up the combo.
When they started out as a trio, before D.J. Fontana joined them on drums, the group split its earnings 50 percent for Elvis, and 25 percent each for the other two. But a Elvis became more famous, his manager Col. Tom Parker, reworked the financial arrangement.
While Elvis began earning millions as his RCA recordings zoomed up the charts, his band, key participants in the creative process, earned a tiny royalty and were paid only $100 a week each to play with him on the road.

When they asked for a modest raise in light of all the money that was coming in and because Elvis's increasingly heavy movie schedule was keeping them off the road, the Colonel refused.
"That was some time in 1957," Moore said. "The road work was really slowing down and we said we just needed more money. When they wouldn't pay it, Bill and I split."
Though tensions in the group were high, the band did stay together long enough to complete one final tour of the west coast, playing Vancouver, British Columbia, Portland Oregan, Los Angeles, California, and in a few smaller towns over a 10 day period.
With that, as far as Scotty and Bill were concerned, it was over. And to this day, pop music critics contend Elvis Presley just never was the same.
Black went on to lead his own combo until his death in 1964. Moore was a record producer during the 1960s and 1970s, and though he, Black, Fontana and Presley's backing vocal group the Jordanaires did have a modest hit in their own right with a song called "Have Guitar Will Travel," lightning didn't strike twice for the musicians.
In time, Moore retired from that life altogether and started his own tape duplication and printing service in Nashville. Today he plays guitar only rarely, and says he'd only consider playing again publicly "if the circumstances were right."
"But you know, it's something you need to do every day to progress and I haven't progressed. What I'd play now would be the same as I played years ago."
The last time Moore saw Elvis was when the old band was gathered in Los Angeles to appear on Elvis' televised Christmas special in December, 1968.
The program, which featured Elvis and the band playing a medley of his original hits, is widely considered the comeback special of the singer who by then had been eclipsed by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix and other 1960s groups.
Didn't Moore ever want to say, "The records we made then were better than the one's you're making now?" Didn't he ever want to say "Let's try to do it again?"
"I didn't have to, he did," Moore said. "We hadn't seen each other in quite awhile, and during the taping of the special, I went to dinner at his house. The whole night he kept talking about our getting back together."
"All he was doing at this point was movies, movies, movies... he wanted to do a European tour, and he also knew that I had moved to Nashville by then and had my own studio.
"He said, 'What's the chance of our going in and lock up for a couple of weeks, do like we used to do and just see what we come up with?'
"I said, 'No problem. Just let me know when and I'll block out the time.' Of course, that just never happened," Moore said.