



# Bill Black and D.J. Fontana

BY ROBERT BURKE WARREN



For a rocket to break free from the grip of Earth's gravitational pull, it needs raw, crude thrust, a blast of primal power; the higher it ascends, the less potent combustion is needed. Musically speaking, bassist Bill Black and drummer D.J. Fontana were just such a necessary component for the rise of Elvis Presley. In addition to their perfect qualifications as musicians, the personalities of the affable "never-met-a-stranger" showman Black and the laid-back yet authoritatively professional Fontana would contribute beyond measure to the evolution of Presley's persona from gawky, unfocused music geek to Hillbilly Cat to King of Rock & Roll.

On Presley's initial 1954 recordings for Sun Records, his fellow Memphian Bill Black was the entire rhythm section. While Scotty Moore's pared-down, reverb-drenched electric guitar shared the forefront with Presley's chugging acoustic, Black incorporated a percussive slapping technique on his weathered "doghouse" bass. This method, borne of necessity in the days when drums were frowned upon, drew from the battered instrument both the melodic underpinning and the rhythmic force that propelled that historic first single — "That's All Right Mama," b/w "Blue Moon of Kentucky" — into the firmament. In fact, it was Black's clowning at Presley's awkward Sun audition that inspired Elvis to start "joking around" with the Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup blues "That's All Right Mama," providing a *Eureka!* moment for the label's Sam Phillips, who heretofore had been uncomfortably listening to Elvis croon a la Dean Martin and Eddy Arnold. This Black-initiated formula would work yet again when the bassman's goofy falsetto imitation of Bill Monroe's country hit "Blue Moon of Kentucky" — designed to get a laugh and loosen everybody up — inspired the B side, which

also became a smash. (Monroe, always looking for a hit, would copy Black's arrangement for a successful rerecording of his tune.)

"He didn't impress me too damn much," Bill Black is reported to have said after his first experience playing with the pimply faced, greasy, ill-at-ease boy-who-would-be King. But Black had to admit the kid could sing, and clearly, the wound-up young'un was emboldened by Black's humor and performing style, which included riding on and jumping off his hapless double bass.

The combo of "Scotty and Bill" made for a dynamic yin-and-yang start. Both veterans of the armed forces and the Memphis music scene by the time Phillips hooked them up with green-as-a-gourd Presley, they renamed themselves the Blue Moon Boys. Moore was the buttoned-up pro, managing and booking the act, while the exuberant Black made sure they were all having big fun. It did not take long for Phillips to recognize and exploit what he'd stumbled on, and the gigs and attention came fast and furious. It would take more adjustments, however, before the plate-shifting proceedings would truly shake the world.

Once the attention of the spellbound record-buying public had been focused, more professional touches would widen the circle of fandom beyond anyone's expectations, for good and for ill. This broadening of appeal would come via three things: a move from independent Sun to RCA, the acquisition of Colonel Tom Parker as manager, and the addition to Presley's band of drummer Dominic Joseph "D.J." Fontana.

As Presley, Moore, and Black had gone about setting the woods on fire with Phillips gleefully handing out matches, Fontana had been busy keeping time as staff drummer on Shreveport's *Louisiana Hayride*, a gig he landed after spending his teens and early twenties

All the king's men: D.J. Fontana, Bill Black, and Elvis Presley (from left) rehearse for 'The Milton Berle Show,' June 4, 1956.



Come again? Elvis sings, Black listens, 1956.



All that's gold: Presley and gold record of "Heartbreak Hotel" with Fontana, Black, and Scotty Moore (from left)

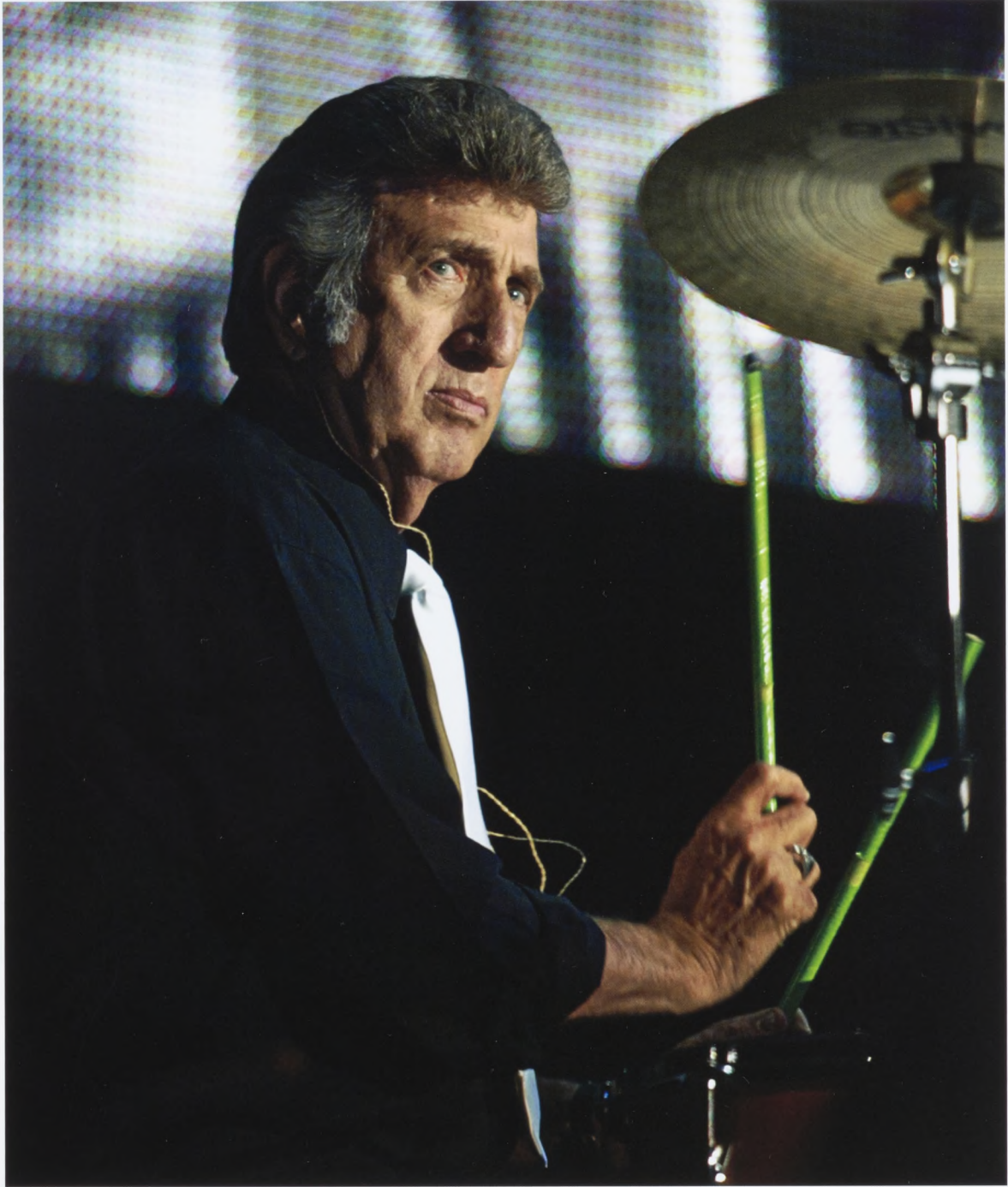
crossing color lines and playing swing, jazz, Dixieland, and country all over his native Louisiana. Although segregation was the law, Fontana has said, "amongst musicians, we had no problem. We'd go to a black club, and they wouldn't bother us because we were with the band." As the nationwide success of any hillbilly singer was contingent on an appearance on the *Hayride*, it was inevitable that Fontana would cross paths with Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys.

On the *Hayride*, Fontana spent much of his time during the weekly Saturday-night broadcast waiting for artists like Slim Whitman, Faron Young, and Rose Maddox to request drums. More often than not, the performers eschewed traps, hewing to the accepted notion that drums were too loud and distracting. When Presley's band made their *Louisiana Hayride* debut in October of 1954, however, the trio enthusiastically pressed Fontana into service, and although he played behind the curtain, they rocked the joint. Within a year, Fontana was a permanent band member.

The hiring of Fontana coincided with Presley's move from Sun to RCA. His presence is heralded by the authoritative snare drum *crack* on "Heartbreak Hotel." Fontana has recalled the slick RCA session engineers trying in vain to capture the echo and vibe of Phillips's legendary storefront studio. It didn't matter much. The Presley juggernaut was well under way, with the swinging simplicity of DJ. Fontana propelling historic recordings like "Teddy Bear," "Don't Be Cruel," "Jailhouse Rock," and literally hundreds of others into the collective jukebox of American culture. Fontana would go on to tour extensively and record 460 songs with Elvis, staying with the King following the acrimonious departure of Black and Moore in 1958. After parting ways with Presley in 1969,



Instrumentally yours: Bill Black's Combo, c. 1961, with Black on the electric Fender



**Long live the King:** Fontana performs at the Elvis Presley 25th Anniversary Concert on August 16, 2002, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Fontana would eventually grace the recordings of artists as diverse as Paul McCartney, Cheap Trick, Dolly Parton, Chris Isaak, and Charley Pride, among many others.

After 1958, Bill Black would never again play with Presley, but his subsequent group, Bill Black's Combo, would score seventeen instrumental hits in the early sixties, with the album *Solid and Raunchy* spending seven months in the *Billboard* Top 100. The group opened for the Beatles on their first U.S. tour in 1964. Even after Black's death from a brain tumor in 1965, different versions of the Combo would continue to perform.

It is nigh impossible to imagine what Elvis Presley's semi-

nal recordings would have sounded like had musicians other than Bill Black and D.J. Fontana crossed paths with him. Who would have liberated him from his early onstage insecurity with an off-color joke and a relentlessly propulsive slapping bass line? Who would have supplied the swing of a big-band drummer combined with rockabilly energy while maintaining his composure as all around him was swirling cultural chaos? Thanks to Bill Black and D.J. Fontana, true architects of rock & roll, we need not spend much energy trying to answer those questions. Now these men can take their places among those who have made the stars shine in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ♪