



Rob Bowman & Ross Johnson

All photographs

courtesy of Stan Kesler

STAN KESLER: THE FLIP SIDE OF SUN, Part 2

In the last issue, Stan Kesler discussed his songwriting and early days in Memphis playing steel guitar in country bands led by Rex Torian, Al Rogers, and Clyde Leppard. After Leppard recorded for Sam Phillips's legendary Sun Records, Stan soon became a regular session player at Sun and a songwriter for a variety of Sun artists. By late 1956, Stan had also started playing bass and, as hardcore country music became less in favor at Sun, it became his regular instrument.

About a year later, Stan started Crystal Records, his first label. He followed it in the early sixties with two other labels, Penn and XL. With the release of "Woolly Bully" on XL, Stan began a successful run of hits for Sam the Sham & the Pharaohs. Altogether, Kesler produced nine Sam the Sham records that entered the *Billboard* charts in

1965-67. All during this time, Stan continued working for Sam Phillips as a staff engineer.

In partnership with Clyde Leppard, he had also opened his own recording studio in Memphis in the late fifties. Jack Clement became a partner in a second studio called Echo in 1960. Several years later, with still more partners, Stan opened the Sounds of Memphis studio. Over the course of all this studio work he engineered a number of regional hits as well as a few national ones for the likes of James Carr and Willie Cobb. Along the way he also helped develop a number of important Memphis studio groups including what eventually became the house band at Chips Moman's American Studio.

In early 1972 he sold his interest in the Sounds of Memphis Studio and went to work as an engineer for Moman, first at Onyx Studio and shortly thereafter at American. When Moman relocated to Atlanta and then Nashville, Stan followed. By 1973, he was working in Nashville at Pete Drake's studio as both engineer and producer. Two and a half years later, Stan returned to Memphis. By 1978 he was back at Phillips Studio, initially as a secretary (!). Over time, he was persuaded into engineering recording sessions once again.

Today Stan is still at Phillips where he manages the studio in addition to engineering sessions. For the past four years he has also been involved in the Sun Rhythm Section band along with Sonny Burgess, Paul Burlison, D. J. Fontana, Smoogy Smith, and Marcus Van Storey. For the first time in thirty years, Stan is performing on the road and recording as part of a band. So far, one album has been released on Flying Fish and the band has toured Europe. In 1987, rejuvenated by his recent success with the Sun Rhythm Section, Stan sat down with us at Phillips Studio.

When you started out at Sun, in 1954, you were playing pedal steel on country sessions. When did you start playing bass?

Over at the Cotton Club we had this upright bass that just kind of laid there. I would pick it up every once in a while and play on a song or two and then go back to the steel. And in the studio I'd pick up the bass sometimes when they'd be in there jamming, I'd fool around with it. Roy Orbison's band walked out on him, and Sam called J. M. [Van

Eaton] and me to come in and record with Roy. [Orbison's] "Sweet and Easy to Love" was the first song I played bass on, and that was upright bass.

That would have been December '56?

I believe so, because my [electric] bass is a '57 model, my Fender, and it wasn't too long after that that I bought that Fender bass.

Did you pretty quickly start playing bass for the most part and drop playing the pedal steel?

No, I just kind of eased into it more or less because, see, an upright bass you've just about got to play regular to build up those muscles. Especially in rock 'n' roll, you've got to be moving. You've got to have some strength in those arms, and I couldn't do that because I had to play steel a lot. I didn't play a lot of bass until I got my electric bass.

Now when you were playing pedal steel it seemed, looking at the discographies, that there was basically a separate Sun house country band with Quinton Claunch, Bill Cantrell, yourself, Wayne Deal or Marcus Van Storey on bass, I guess sometimes maybe Clyde on drums, maybe Johnny Bernero on some of it.

Bernero was on some of it, I imagine.

Whereas the rockabilly house band seemed to be Roland Janes, J. M. Van Eaton, and Billy Lee Riley.

See, they came along way after. All this country stuff that I played steel on, some of that was cut I think in late '54 and maybe some in '55. They weren't even there at that time. There was no house band except us. If there was a house band it was the country band. Roland didn't come in till late '56. There was no rock 'n' roll band. For instance, with Carl Perkins I played steel on his record. I played with his band. But when he did his rock 'n' roll records I wasn't on 'em, so he just used his band. The same way with Sonny Burgess and the rest of them. Usually, they would bring their own bands.

Did Sam Phillips have a basic idea of what he wanted in terms of a country sound?

Yeah, more or less, but Sam was smart enough, too, to leave a lot of the arranging to the musicians. The way I always produce records, I go in and say,

"OK, there's a song and there's a singer, let 'em hear it and see what you can do with it." And let the musicians do their own thing, because, after all, a musician that you're paying a couple hundred dollars for a three-hour session, he ought to be able to create something. He'd better be able to create something. If he's worth that, why should I go and pay him that money and then tell him what to play? Although, if it's not sounding exactly what you want to hear, it may be just as good, but you know you'll say, "Let's go this way with it, let's change this lick and put it over here or whatever." That's the way Sam did it.

So he generally left it up to you guys then?

Yeah, right. Sam worked more with the singer, which is the main thing. He worked more with the singer than he did with the arrangement of the song. He more or less left the arrangements to the musicians, but Sam Phillips knew how to get the best out of everybody that worked with him — the singer, the steel player, the guitar player, whoever. He knew how to make you want to put your best into it.

How would he make Stan Kesler give his best?

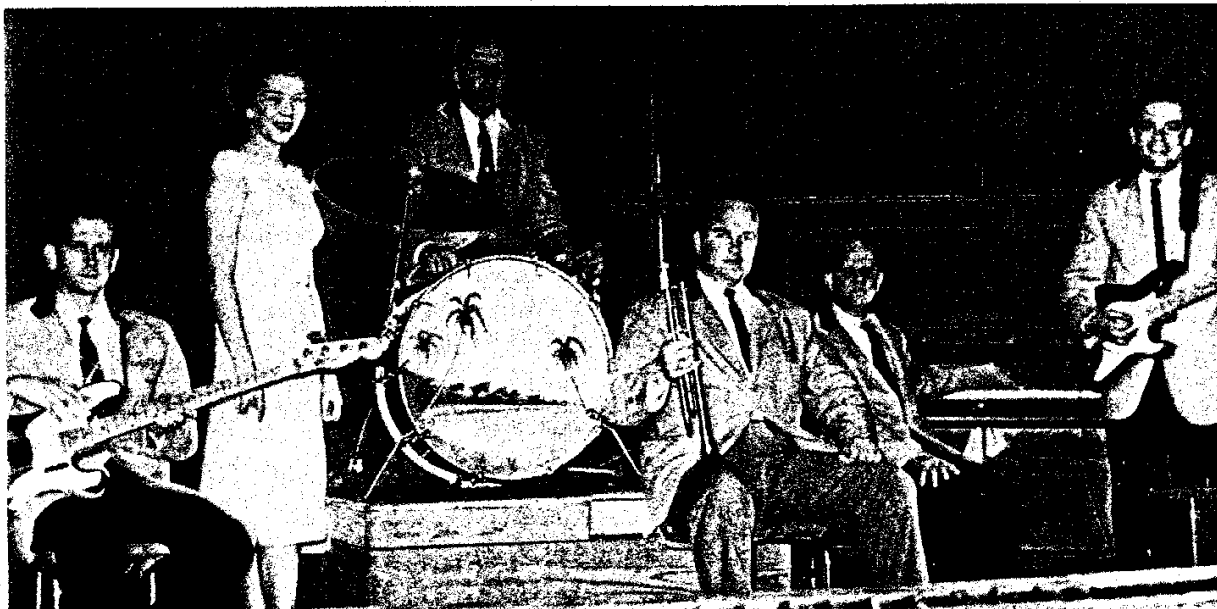
Just that old charm. He would just put that old charm on you. Maybe he'd tell you how good you sound or whatever, but he just knew how to get it out of you.

So Sam was a psychologist to some degree.

Exactly. Sam Phillips could sit here and talk to you for ten minutes and you'll think that you're on top of the world. He has that kind of charisma, that kind of power. It's hard to explain but he could just talk to you and make you feel that you are the greatest at whatever you do and that you have to do this for him.

When he would work with the singers, would he actually come out onto the floor with them and sing phrases and show them how he wanted them to sing?

I don't remember him doing that. I remember him just kind of talking through the talk-back more than anything else. He'd come outside sometimes, but I don't think he ever did that. He'd say things like, "Well now,



Clyde Leppard & the Snearly Ranch Boys, ca. 1957: bassist Stan Kesler, singer Barbara Pittman, drummer Clyde Leppard, trumpet player Hank Byars, pianist Ray Martin, and guitarist Jimmy Pritchett.

you seem a little flat in this place and you need to put a little more feel into it. See if you can get a little more feel in this phrase." Stuff like that. He was good at it. I guess it's a natural talent, because if he walked in that door right now and he talked to you, if you'd never met him, he'd make you feel like you'd known him for ten years.

With the country house band, was there one or another of you who would basically lead that band in the studio, basically work up the arrangements?

I don't remember it being that way. It was just kind of everybody did their contribution. If anybody had a suggestion they just said what it was. I could say, "Well, this song sounds like a fiddle intro. Let's do a fiddle intro and see how it sounds." And Bill [Cantrell] would work it up. He might try and say, "Look, I think steel would sound better." And we'd try the steel or whatever. It was more of a co-op deal.

What equipment were you using then?

I had what maybe was the first pedal steel in Memphis. It was called a Multichord. I still have the thing at home. It got to where it wouldn't stay in tune.

You'd tune it up and you'd push a pedal and it would be out of tune. It started off, it had six pedals on it. It had these little wire cables that came up and pulled the things, you know, that pushed the pedal. And those things would break, so Buddy Holobaugh, Clyde Leppard's guitarist, was somewhat of a mechanic. He said, "I'll get something that'll hold it." So he went and got some dog chains that he put on the thing and, sure enough, it worked. And they were flexible. You could fold the thing up and it worked. It didn't break.

Was Multichord the name of the company that made them?

Yeah.

Do you remember what year you first got it?

It must have been probably 1953.

One year before your first Sun sessions.

Yeah, right.

What about your picking technique?

I think that I stole a little bit of Bud Isaacs. See, Bud Isaacs was the first pedal steel guitar player. The first pedal steel record I ever heard was Webb Pierce's "Slowly" and he kicked the song off, and I said, "God, how in the world is he doing this?" You know, you can twist that bar around and do certain things but you can't do that. I said, "Hell, this son of a bitch got some

magic somewhere here." I started trying to duplicate it, man, and I couldn't imagine what he was doing. Finally I learned that he had those pedals, and then I found out that I could get one of those guitars, so I hot-footed it up to Houck Music Company and got one.

It must have been magic when you first took it home and started playing around with it.

It was the thrill of a lifetime.

So you were saying that you stole your picking technique.

I think I stole a lot of it from Isaacs. There again, I think it was probably a conglomeration of Bud Isaacs, Roy Wiggins, Don Helms, everybody that I'd heard, plus some of my own stuff. I never did think of myself as having a distinctive style, although Sam Phillips was always knocked out with my playing.

When Sam Phillips would set up mikes for you, was it just basically one mike in front of the amp?

Yeah.

Did you have any special setting in terms of treble, bass, volume in the studio?

Well, I would set it the way I thought it sounded good to me. Sometimes Sam would have me change it. Not very often but once in a while he'd say, "Well, we may need a little more treble on your amp" or maybe there was a little

too much treble on it, but usually it sounded about right.

Was there a basic setting that worked well for 706 Union?

Not particularly, not that I remember anyway. I think it depended on the song, the session, the singer, everything.

I know at Stax, before they went to multi-tracking and they were still cutting live from the floor, everything was left set up in exactly the same place for years. Was it that way at Sun? Was your pedal steel in the same place whenever you did sessions? Did they have a basic set-up that worked for that room?

It seems like to me that I played in different places in the room. I can't remember, though. It was pretty similar. Usually the drums were kind of to the back, the piano was over to the left wall as you were walking into the studio facing the control room. I remember sitting close to the piano, close to the glass some, but it seems like to me also that I sat over on the right sometimes.

Did the piano and bass stay over there constantly?

Yeah, they were basically in the same place. The drums usually were in the same place.

Stan, you brought a number of artists to Sun, didn't you?

Let me tell you how I brought Warren Smith to Sun. We were playing one night at the Cotton Club and Warren came in and he wanted to sit in and he got up and sang a Ray Price song. He sounded real good. He came from Mississippi, somewhere down there around Jackson. Anyway, we started working with him. Clyde took him to his place and we started working with him. I took him over to Sun, over to Sam and Sam listened to him and he said, "Yeah, let's find a good song for him and we'll record him. So I got busy and I wrote "I'd Rather Be Safe Than Sorry." So we started looking around and one day Sam called me. He said, "Hey, come down, I think I got a song that that new guy you got there might do." So I went down and he had it on a dub. Johnny Cash was singing the dub, "Rock 'n' Roll Ruby." George Jones and Johnny Cash wrote that song. George sold Johnny his half for forty dollars. Anyway, we got Warren and them to

come in. I played steel guitar on the record. It's just a shuffle kind of thing and Johnny Bernero played drums and we cut it. Of course, it was supposed to be a co-op deal. As soon as the record became a hit, Warren comes to us and says, "I don't need you guys. I'm getting me another band." We said, "OK, go on, boy!"

Which explains why you don't play on "Ubangi Stomp."

That's right.

Did he split from Clyde's band right after that?

Yeah. Clyde was feeding him and giving him a place to stay and giving him a little work here and there singing at the Cotton Club. You know, we'd hired him, we go and get him a record gig and then he says bye.

Who else did you bring to Sun?

I brought Barbara [Pittman], I brought Smokey [Joe Baugh], I brought Bill Taylor and Warren Smith. I brought them in there and if they'd had producers then, I would have been the producer on the records but all I wanted to do was write songs and pick.

I was going to ask you whether you were serving as a talent scout for Sam?

Well, in a sense, you know, I was.

But you weren't getting paid to do it as such.

Right. I was just doing it so I could get some songs recorded and just do whatever.

At Sun had you been doing some work on the board? Had you actually engineered sessions there?

Not at 706.

Jack and Sam did nearly all that.

Uh-huh. The only thing I did, I would crank up the board and if I wasn't playing on a session I would go in there and fool around if somebody was out there playing. In 1957, I believe it was, I started a label called Crystal with Gene Luchessi and Drew Canale. We cut — and this is a collector's item — Jimmy Pritchett's "That's the Way I Feel." I was cutting my records at WHBQ radio station's studio, as Sam didn't rent his studio for nobody. So on this particular session the equipment went bad. It broke down and Billy Riley was with me. He said, "Hell, I'll call Sam. I'll make him." So Sam happened to be at the studio and Sam said, "Oh OK, c'mon, y'all can do it." So we went down and we cut that record, "That's the Way I Feel." It was cut over at 706.

That's interesting. Was Riley on it?

Yeah, Riley, Johnny Bernero, Ace

Local talent, mid-fifties: Buddy Hall, Smokey Joe Baugh, Bill Taylor (standing); Kesler, Clyde Leppard (kneeling).



Cannon. I don't think there's much sax on it but Ace is on it. Smokey Joe, I believe, played piano and Jan Leadbitter played bass, I think. That's probably it.

Did you get some regional airplay on it?

Yeah, it was a good record. We didn't know what we were doing, none of us. I mean Drew Canale wouldn't put any money into it. Nobody knew what to do, so it just kind of fell by the way.

How many records did Crystal put out?

I had a record on Pritchett. I had one on Jimmy Knight, one on Jean Kelly ("The Cotton Patch Cinderella"), and Don Jose. We put out four releases, I think it was.

Were the roles of Canale and Luchessi basically just as money men?

Yeah. Canale put in a thousand dollars and expected back 10,000 next week. That was in '57. So in 1960 I was in recording in Echo Studios on Manassas. We had split and I owned it by myself. I had the whole thing. I didn't have any equipment or anything but I had the studio. Gene came to me and he asked me would I be interested to go back in the record business. I said, "I tell you, I'd be interested but not like we did before." And he said, "Well, I got a friend, Paul Bomarito. Me and Paul want to put some money in it."

So Drew was out of it.

Yeah, me and Drew wouldn't work. I said, "I'll do it but I'm not going to do it like we did before. If you'll turn over all the productions, give me the money to cut the sessions and let me do it the way I want to do it — if you've got that much faith in me — I'll do it. Otherwise, forget it." And he said, "Well, you got it. Do what you need to do." They spent somewhere around \$15- to \$20,000 which for that time was a pretty good investment. At the beginning it worried me. We did Bobby Wood, "I'm a Fool for Loving You." We leased the thing to Joy. That was in '64. In '65 we came up with "Wooly Bully." That did it. That did the trick and turned us around.

When you were working over at 706, how did Sam Phillips view your efforts with your own labels? Was he aware of that? Did he approve of it?

He didn't care. He was doing so well. It wasn't going to hurt him. Of course, actually when I put out Crystal Records, I was just working for him on a session basis. In other words, Sam would call me to do a session whenever they needed me.

So you were on a session basis at Sun. You were never getting a salary.

The only thing is a lot of times Jack [Clement] or Sam they would want to experiment with a group or with a certain artist and they'd take me and Roland [Janes] and J. M. [Van Eaton] and maybe Riley or whoever and they'd go in and they'd pay us two dollars an hour and they'd just experiment. They just paid us like that.

Were the sessions union scale then?

No, we wasn't union. See, I wasn't even union. I think J. M. and Roland and them were. See, that's where the discographies get messed up. Like Cliff Thomas: we worked on that ["Sorry I Lied"/"Leave It to Me," Phillips Int. 3531] and I think the discography's got Jack Clement playing bass. But what happened, we'd do it and they'd take what they wanted to release and they'd have to clear it with the union. Well, they'd have to put somebody's name on the contract that had a union card. So the discography is not altogether correct when you look at those things. There's a lot of discrepancies there.

Did you ever think of joining the union?

With Clyde we were doing so well without the union. I was going to join the union at one time and this guy that was head of the union — this was way back like 1959 or '60, early, early — he told me, "You been playing around here non-union so long we don't want you in the union. We don't want hillbillies and niggers in this union anyway." I said OK. So I didn't join. I'd been in the union one time before, I think in '49, and then I had to drop out. Then when I tried to get back in, he said, "We don't want you in the union." Vince Skillman was who it was. He just died here a while back, bless his heart.

At what point did you start seeing yourself as more of a producer-engineer? Was it a gradual thing?

It was kind of a gradual thing. In 1959 Clyde and I put in our own studio. We got some semi-pro equipment. Back

in those days you didn't have much choice in equipment.

Did you get Ampex?

No. I wish it had been Ampex. Ampex was the thing, but no, we had a Magnecord which was the next best thing to Ampex. It was just a step down from Ampex. It was a pretty good recorder. A lot of radio stations used them, you know. Anyway, we put in a little studio and it just kind of went from there and from my experience with Sam [at Sun], I just kind of evolved into producing. We were up on Main Street. And we moved down here to Manassas and went in with Jack Clement. Jack was partners with us for a while, and he left and went to Nashville. He went to work for RCA. I just kind of slowly worked into it.

When the Phillips Studio opened on Madison in 1960 do you recall a point where your duties became more engineer-oriented than say sideman? Was that gradual?

When they opened this studio, see, he had Scotty [Moore] working here [on Madison]. I was still doing a session now and then, but me and Clyde had that studio on Main Street when they opened here. And then later the very same year, 1960, we moved to Echo down on Manassas. I was there about two or three years and Scotty left here and went to Nashville. That's when I went to work here as an engineer. My studio was closed up because urban renewal was taking the buildings. When Scotty left and went to Nashville was when I went to work here as an engineer.

So I guess your career as an engineer started with your own studios. Did you start seeing yourself differently?

I really didn't think about it, to be honest with you. I was fascinated with recording. I was fascinated with cutting records. I was fascinated with the actual process of mixing and all that. All I wanted to do was cut records. I wanted to make music and cut records, write songs and be in the music business. But I never gave enough thought to the business end of it.

How did you get hooked up with Sam the Sham and "Wooly Bully"?

Where I first saw Sam the Sham was when he had this record out, "Haunted House." He was on George Klein's

"Dance Party" [a Memphis television program similar to "American Bandstand"]. Sam, man, he took a stove, a kitchen stove up there to act out this whole thing and I said, "Man!" I was really impressed with him. So it wasn't long after that—I think it was the following week—he came down here to cut a dub.

At Echo?

No, at Phillips. What happened was urban renewal took over that property down there [Echo's]. So I just went to Phillips and worked for Sam Phillips again as an engineer. And he had a mastering room. We did masters and we did dubs for people. So Sam the Sham came in to make a little dub on something. I got talking to him and asked him would he be interested in coming and working with me some. And he said, "Yeah." So we came in. I think we did one session and then the next time he came in was when we cut "Woolly Bully." That was cut right here in Studio A. We got through three cuts. I could have used the second cut but I wanted to see what he was gonna do with the words on the third cut, because he was making them up as he went. They went out there and they were playing a song called "Hully Gully." That's where "Woolly Bully" basically comes from. We started doing that and he made up the words as he went along practically. And I said, "Well, that sounds pretty good. Let's do one more take," and he came up with that. I forget just what the line was, I think it's the one about the "wooly jaw." He changed that somehow and I liked it better than the other one, so that's the one I used.

Did he do the crazy count-off for each one?

No, he didn't.

Because that really makes it too.

That's right. After I released the record on XL, Sam came in one day and he said, "Stan, you left that count-off on there." I said, "Yeah, I sure did." He said, "Mexicans will make fun of me." I said, "Let them make fun; we'll make money." I loved that count-off. I loved it so much I left it on. He didn't mean for me to leave it on there. He just did it that one time just for the heck of it. He just counted it off. He's not a Mexican anyway. He a Spanish gypsy or something. But anyway, he didn't like that

count-off being on there.

Did Sam Phillips influence you that way, because there's not a lot of record men who would put out a record as crazy as "Woolly Bully" with ad-libbed lyrics, with a count-off like that and expect to get anywhere with it.

Yeah, I think Sam influenced me and I'll tell you what, when Sam heard the record, he said, "You got a smash."

Well, Sam was crazy enough that he would have released that record too.

Exactly. But you know, we pitched that record to everybody in the business, and I mean every company in the business turned it down. We had a distributor in Nashville, Howard Allison at Southern Distributors, I believe it was. He ran Southern Distributors and he liked the record and he was trying to help us get it leased. We got it out and we got it playing pretty good. After a while, WMPS here got on it and it started happening a little bit. It was beginning to catch on. It was beginning to sound pleasing to people instead of strange. Finally I think Howard called the guy who was head of MGM and said, "Look, this record's happening. It's going to be a hit. Now I'm going to lease the record today so if

you want it I'm going to let you have it, but you better grab it today." The guy said, "Well, let me call you back." Later that afternoon he called back and said, "Yeah, Howard, I'll take it. What do you want it for?" Howard said, "Well, they want a thousand up front plus 9 percent." So the guy said, "OK." What he was doing, he was just trying to appease his distributor [Howard Allison] by saying, "Yeah, we'll take it if you believe in it that much."

"We can drop a thousand bucks and live with it if it's going to keep life simple."

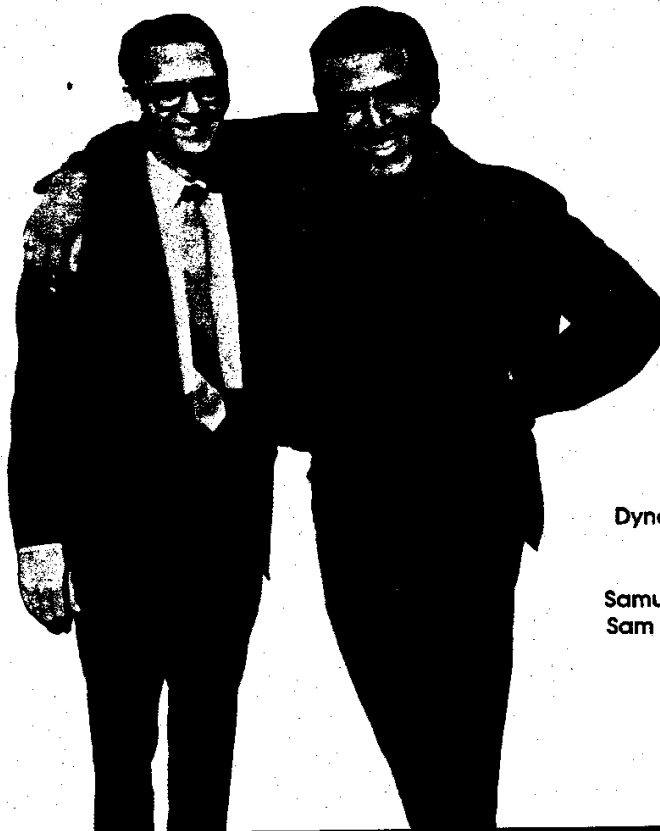
Right, take the loss and go home. And, man, when they got that thing out, it was really happening around Memphis. It was really picking up.

It was cut in what—late '64, early '65?

Yeah, late '64 we cut it and we released it in early '65. I'd say the middle of January, the first of February, in there.

And the national hit was the summer of '65.

They picked it up along I'd say in April. It was out a long time before anybody would touch it. It was slow



**Dynamic duo:
Stan with
Domingo
Samudio, a.k.a.
Sam the Sham.**

because radio people didn't want to play it.

Well, that's not so surprising. As we were saying earlier, not too many people would even release it. I'm sure it was just too left of center for most record company and radio people.

It was the #1 record of 1965. Then we came back. We did the impossible. We came back with another one in 1966, "Li'l Red Riding Hood," which was a bigger record in the States than "Woolly Bully," believe it or not. But world-wide "Woolly Bully" sold a lot more records. Little kids liked "Li'l Red Riding Hood." Boy, they heard that "Howoo." That's what did it.

Whose idea was it to record "Li'l Red Riding Hood"?

Well, Jim Vienneau, who was the head of MGM Nashville—I think he cut Conway Twitty's "Only Make Believe" and Connie Francis [*He did—Ed.*]—he was the guy that I answered to, took my stuff to. He sent me several things that people had pitched to him up there and he sent me this dub that he marked "Might be good for Sam the Sham." So I got Sam to learn it and cut

it. [Shortly afterwards] Sam was in New York. He was playing up there somewhere and he went over to MGM and they said, "Man, why you want to come out with this shit? What is this, 'Li'l Red Riding Hood'? Are you kidding?"

Sam came back to Memphis; we was fixing to do another session. I came to the studio just before Sam got here and I called Johnny Dark at WMPS and he said, "Man, let me tell you: they jammed the phones asking for 'Li'l Red Riding Hood.' You have got another smash hit." I said, "No kidding?" He said, "Yessir." So Sam come in and Sam was dragging. He said, "Stan, we have messed up." I said, "What's the matter, Sam?" "Man, MGM doesn't like that record. Those promotion people up there are really down. We need to pull that thing back in and put out something else." I said, "Are you crazy? These people don't have sense enough to get out of the rain." So I told him what Johnny had told me and that perked him up a little bit. They had him down so much he was ready to pull the record. He was ready to tell MGM to pull it off and put out something else.

These were all cut at Phillips. I've

heard before that Sam Phillips did not lease out 706 Union, but when he moved the studio over to Madison, did that policy change?

Yeah. The studio on Madison was built to handle leasing. See, he had two studios here actually, the little studio was never finished. That policy changed when he got here.

I guess by the time that Sam Phillips moved the studio he was not so interested in putting out his own records.

Yeah, that's right. And he had more room here. I guess he intended to organize it a little better. See, over there it was a small place to start with and he only had the front office and he had two girls up there and he didn't even have a desk himself. I've seen him a lot of times squat down beside the girls' desks and talk to the distributors on the phone and conduct business like that. I guess he didn't want anything to interfere with productions that he was doing.

We need to speak a little bit about the Penn and XL labels. Why two labels at one time and what were the differences between them?

Sam the Sham & the Pharaohs strike gold, ca. 1965: drummer Jerry Patterson, saxophonist Butch Gibson, Stan Kesler, Sam the Sham, Gene Luchessi, guitarist Ray Stinner, and bassist David Martin.



I don't even remember what the reason was. One reason is that I didn't like the Penn logo.

Garish pink! Wasn't the wrestler Jackie Fargo on that label?

We also had Bobby Wood's group called the Sunlighters. It was an instrumental that we later leased to Challenge Records or somebody. There was probably another reason for having two labels in getting a different kind of music probably on XL. The name was a pun on the word "excel."

It's been written a few times that you were instrumental in putting together the Tommy Cogbill, Mike Leech, Bobby Wood, Gene Chrisman, and Reggie Young ensemble that became the house band at American Studios.

Actually, I didn't put that band together. But Gene Chrisman probably played the first session he ever played for me. Bobby Wood I know did. They were more or less my house band at Echo. Bobby Wood and Gene and Bobby's brother Billy played guitar and another guy named Ebb Adair played guitar. They and Reggie Young played on Jean Kelly's "Cotton Patch Cinderella" record on Crystal. The thing of it was, before Chips, see, there was really no band. But Tommy played for me, Reggie played for me, Bobby Wood played for me and Gene Chrisman. The only guy that I never used is Bobby Emmons. He played on the road with Bill Black. He did a lot of work at Hi. Of course, Reggie did too but Reggie did work all over town. He did a lot of work for me. I can't say that I put them together, but I do know that every one of the guys played sessions for me before they did Chips, but that didn't make me the creator, so to speak.

Would you say that they were a unit prior to going to Chips?

No. Wood and Chrisman worked a lot together. Reggie kind of worked all over town. Reggie Young created the Bill Black sound if you want to know the truth. He's the originator of it. He tuned his guitar down and took a pencil and played it.

Anyway I have to give Chips credit. He really put the band together as a unit. But I feel Chips hurt Memphis more than he helped by tying those people down. Chips knows how to say, "Look, if you leave that chair and you come back, somebody'll be sitting in

it," and you'll believe it. That's all she wrote. See, those guys they were going to New York and they were doing sessions for Atlantic, going to Muscle Shoals, and doing sessions for Rick Hall. It was good for Chips to bring them back here but see then he said, "You'll cut only here." That went fine for a long time but finally Chips got to gouging people so bad that Atlantic Records said, "I don't give a damn what you got; I ain't coming back." Jerry Wexler told me out of his own mouth, "I cut records before there ever was a Chips Moman. I'll be cutting hit records when there ain't no more Chips Moman. I ain't going down there. They ain't ripping me off." But Chips got the band, so what does Wexler do? Wexler starts cutting in Muscle Shoals and he cuts in New York. In the meantime, I'm working on a band, the Dixie Flyers. I'm bringing them in and cutting them on demos and building them up.

Were they a unit when you found them?

No, I put them together as session musicians.

You were going to use them for the XL and Penn labels?

No, for rental sessions. I was figuring on a rental studio plus my other things. In fact, I'd let anybody use them.

What period was this?

This started out I'd say in '68 or the latter part of '67.

So you were going to open up another studio similar to Echo and this was going to be your house band?

Right. See, this was a long time after Echo. I decided I was going to put myself in a temporary place, a warehouse. Just threw up some walls and moved into the warehouse and started cultivating the Dixie Flyers. We were there about two years before we moved into a much bigger studio [Sounds of Memphis]. It took two years to get the big studio together. So finally we moved into that studio. We were there it seems like about a year and the band came in one day and they said, "Well, we need to talk to you about something." I said, "OK, what is it?" They said, "Well, Jerry Wexler has made us an offer to go to Miami." So I said, "Well, hell, that figures." He was guaranteeing them, I think, fifteen thousand a year.

Let me tell you what brought them to

his attention. I cut an album on the Memphis Horns — Wayne Jackson and Andrew Love and all them — and Atlantic picked it up. They liked the band and we cut some other stuff with the Dixie Flyers backing the Memphis Horns up. And they liked what they heard so they decided they'd take the band and take them to Miami. See, the thing of it is, what these stupid musicians don't know is they could stay right here at home and those people would have come in here, because they had been coming. The only reason they quit coming was because Chips didn't do them good. He didn't treat them right. He wanted a percentage of just coming in to rent his studio. He wanted the [renter to] pay the band scale, pay the studio rental, and give him a cut off of it too. It's greedy, and so Jerry Wexler says, "Uh-uh. I'm not going to do that."

There was another band that you formed that Seymour Rosenberg took away from you.

Absolutely. That was after the Dixie Flyers at the same studio. I had a guy named George Dogins on piano, the guy that played guitar with the Box Tops, a boy named Roy played drums, and I forget the name of the bass player. Anyway, just some guys I picked off the street. I brought them in and started working with them and I worked for about six or eight months and they were getting to where they could cut a decent demo. That's about where they were. Seymour Rosenberg was in the studio here, and he offers them a deal. So I just said, "What am I doing? All I am is a stepping stone or a damn training ground." See, this is three bands that I had put all this time and effort into and completely lost.

What studio did Seymour open up?

It was a studio over there, Mark IV maybe he called it. It was over at Chelsea and Second. The first guy dropped out about a month later. It just fell apart.

So what did you do then?

Threw up my hands. I called Gene [Luchessi] and Paul [Bomarito] and said, "Look, I just can't seem to make this thing work. I'm burned out. They've got me whipped. I can't build nothing." Gene said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "I would just like to sell out, I'd just like to get out of

it." So they made me a deal and I walked out of it. I went to work with Chips. Of course, that's when he went to Atlanta. I started over at Onyx, they had that studio. I started over there and then he and Don Crews split, and Don took that studio, so Chips said just come on over to American.

Why did you leave Memphis in May of 1972?

Chips drove me off to Atlanta. He had left Memphis and I was working with him.

His brief Atlanta period?

Yeah, I didn't want to do that, but he talked me into it. He said, "Just come and help me get the studio together. Then you can come back." It turned out I was the last one to leave Atlanta, because he sold the studio to Web IV Productions. They wanted me to stay there with them to get them acclimated to the studio and everything. I stayed there two weeks beyond anybody else.

Then I went to work at the Sound Shop [in Nashville]. I worked there for the rest of that year. This was about the first of November, I guess. Then I went to work with Pete Drake over there at his studio. He'd just put that studio in. I stayed up there about three and a half years.

Were you mainly engineering?

Yeah, I was. I did a little producing. While I was there, I did two albums on Jerry Lee Lewis on Mercury [*Sometimes a Memory Ain't Enough* in 1973 and *I-40 Country* in 1974]. And I did a few of what they call "Tex" sessions with guys that would come in with \$3,000 who wanted to cut a record.

Why'd they call them Tex sessions?

You'd meet a guy on the street and he'd say, "Are you working tonight?"

You'd say, "Yeah, I'm working at six o'clock."

"Who are you cutting?"

"Tex."

"Tex who?"

[Laughing] "Tex nobody."

You came back from Nashville in 1976. Have you been working at Phillips since then?

No, actually I laid around a couple of years and I didn't do anything because I was burned out. Actually, I went into the flower business as a florist. Me and my wife started a little flower shop in

east Memphis. We kept that for a couple of years and we sold it and I laid around for a little while. But I started it before I left Nashville. I only had it about a year after I came back. Then I laid around for about a year and then I came down here [Phillips]. When I went to work back here I went to work as a secretary. I was answering the phone. I knew that Jean was leaving; she was going to Nashville. I told Knox [Phillips] I'd like to have her job and just answer the phone and take care of things because I know everything here inside and out, and he said, "Great." So he hired me. Then I gradually got into doing a few sessions. People that knew me would come in and ask me to do stuff for them and I would do them and I gradually got into doing stuff. I've been here ever since. I'm an engineer and more or less studio manager.

Overall your track record has been very successful.

Yeah, I'm not bitter about anything.

And I'm just tickled to death about this Sun Rhythm Section thing. I don't get no big head or nothing, but I'm just having fun. We just love to do it. The thing is, we just go up there and play. We're not trying to impress anybody. I'm not trying to impress anybody with my bass playing, because I'm probably the world's worst. If a real bass player come along he'd probably laugh.

You hold your own. You do what you need to do up there.

Yeah, for that it's probably OK, but I like to say I'm not trying to be and I don't even care. I play what I feel and I think that's what happens with all the rest of the guys and it just comes off that way. It's loose. I tell you, there's a lot of people who still like that music. I had no idea. The amazing thing is when we play we get new people that never knew. Like we had a guy in Philadelphia who came up to me. He said, "Man, I really didn't know what to expect yesterday when I came out here." He was prob-

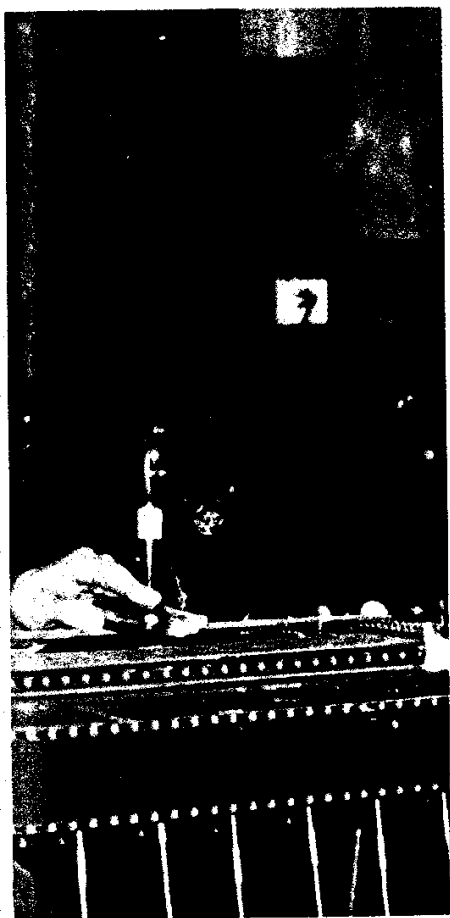


ably about 30 and he said, "I came out here yesterday and I had to come back today." He didn't know Paul Burlison from nothing.

That must have brought a smile to your face when you heard that.

Oh man, it's fantastic. I'm just overwhelmed. We all are. We're humble about it. See, we're past that big-headed stuff. As Sam the Sham says, "I've already been up the glass mountain."

All the way from Memphis: Stan shows how it's done on Pete Drake's pedal steel, Nashville, 1973.



"I'M JUST TICKLED TO DEATH ABOUT THIS SUN RHYTHM SECTION THING. ... I'M JUST OVERWHELMED. WE ALL ARE. WE'RE HUMBLE ABOUT IT. SEE, WE'RE PAST THAT BIG-HEADED STUFF."

▼ Rob Bowman and Ross Johnson have contributed interviews with rockabilly musicians Roland Janes and Paul Burlison to previous issues of the *Journal of Country Music*.