

# A Chance Meeting With The Legendary Otis Blackwell

As I'm sure you know by now, songwriting legend Otis Blackwell died in early May in about one thing. On the wall was the sheet Nashville, Tennessee. I met him once, and music of some of his biggest Elvis hits, and while my experience will probably shed little light on this giant of pop music, I thought I would share it with you anyway as it has always stuck in my mind.

It was the mid 1970s, and I was working for a New Jersey-based music publisher. I was a songplugger for the company, and my boss was anxious for me to audition songs in our catalogue, which included the Kalin Twins' hit "When" (Paul Evans-Jack Reardon) as well as a bunch of other rock and country successes. I didn't really know anything about the music business at the time as I had only recently graduated from college (as a biology/pre-med major), but my boss gave me the address of several music buildings in Manhattan and told me to take the elevator to the top floor of each building, knock on the door of every music business company, and work my way down to the first floor. In these buildings at the time were the offices of lots of producers, managers, artists, and labels. I never knew whose door I was knocking on, but I was to introduce myself and ask if I could play the acetates in my knapsack. Bless youth, ignorance, and inexperience!

Anyway, one of the buildings I was to solicit was 1619 Broadway, the famous Brill Building which at the time was in its last glory days as the original Rock 'n Roll Tin Pan Alley. Eager to please my boss and keep my job, I literally knocked on every music door, and met lots of entertainers and industry folk, although indeed not all were so thrilled to meet or greet me.

One day I knocked on a music company door, and the proprietor himself, Otis Blackwell, opened the door. I didn't know who he was then, and as there was no one else in the office we had an opportunity to chat a while without interruption. He told me about himself and the hits he wrote. Even though he wrote some of the greatest hits of early rock 'n roll, and arguably was a major catalyst in its birth and popularity, he was completely down-to-earth and I even detected a bit of sadness about him.

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they all said words and music by Elvis Presley and Otis Blackwell. I asked him why he shared the writing credits of his songs with Elvis.

I remember him telling me that he never even met "Mr. Presley", but that it was the practice that if Elvis was going to record your song, he'd be credited as a cowriter. Otis didn't make a big deal out of this, so if it bothered him he didn't let on. I thought he was a good sport about it, even though he didn't receive the remuneration (and recognition) he clearly deserved.

On that memorable day, Otis Blackwell gave me his business card, which I still have. On the card is his photograph with his name under it, as well as the names of seven of his songs: "All Shook Up," "Don't Be Cruel," "Return to Sender," "One Broken Heart," "Great Balls of Fire," "Breathless," and "Fever." It's the kind of card in which you can feel the great pride of its namesake and in fact I cherish it, but I've always wondered why out of his tremendous catalogue of more than 1,000 songs, he listed these seven songs in particular. Were they his favourite songs he wrote? I never got a chance to follow up on my curiosity and I guess now I'll never know.

I even have an amusing postscript to the story. After I had written the above words, I was in a nostalgic mood and picked up an old scrapbook. Amazingly, I found a few other business cards that Otis Blackwell had given me that I didn't know I had.

Well, on one of the cards he gave me he had written in an eighth song at the bottom! It was "Heartbreak Hotel". So maybe this Elvis-monster hit and seminal rock 'n roll song was also one of his favourites.

Otis was a songwriter of incredible talent and his catalogue was stupendous but the more I think about it I believe these "eight" songs listed were his favourites. That would be my deduction in the mysterious case of Otis Blackwell's favourite songs.

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