

# CHAPTER THREE

## THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY FORMED MIDGET WRESTLER

The link between the expanse of the delta and the twelve-inch pieces of black vinyl that recorded the region's sound is peanuts. Beale Street would have drawn Howlin' Wolf from the country, smelling like a mule and covered in mud. Wolf might have established himself as a performer in the clubs and enjoyed a career, in Memphis or Chicago, thrilling audiences with his powerful persona. But getting that power onto vinyl, and getting the vinyl to places where people could hear it and buy it, was the direct result of what easy listening, big band fan Buster Williams learned as a young man selling peanuts.

In 1949, the same year Dewey Phillips went on the air, Williams established Plastic Products, Inc., an independent, non-affiliated record pressing plant. Just two weeks earlier, a plant on Long Island, New York, became the first independent. Williams was the second, but in Memphis he was far from the controlling influence of the major labels on either coast. His empire already included jukeboxes (Williams Distributors) and record distribution (Music Sales). The Quonset hut called Plastic Products completed the system that would lay the physical groundwork for the growth of rock and roll.

"What it boils down to," says the soft-spoken Leon "Mack" McLemore, who, as manager of the record distributorship, was at the nucleus of Williams's web, "is that Buster knew that through Music Sales putting the records out on our jukeboxes, we could sell enough to get our money back for pressing costs. We

had all these machines and routes spanning three or four states, and if a record was playing in one jukebox, another guy would want that record too and he would have to get it from us. A thousand was easy, and if you sold that thousand, the label got a little money, Buster got paid, and they could press another thousand. He could gamble on a thousand records, extending credit, and not stand the chance of losing any money.” Buster helped Sun Records, Chess Records in Chicago, and later Stax in Memphis, and a host of other independent labels across the country realize their ultimate fruition: getting their music on vinyl, their vinyl into customers’ hands.

Buster Williams was born January 14, 1909, in the appropriately-named city of Enterprise, Mississippi. At age twelve, he began selling peanuts at high school football games. The business drained his mother, who was slave to the roaster the day of the event. His first innovation was to replace the paper bag with wax paper, sealing a piece of string along the edge to create an easy open pull-tab. It kept the peanuts fresher, allowing his mother to spread the roasting over a couple days. At sixteen, he had made enough money from peanuts to buy a drugstore, and the profit he made from the store’s coin-operated machines led him to jukeboxes and Williams Distributors. “There were some snack machines and several slot machines in that drugstore,” says Robert Williams, Buster’s son. “He saw what kind of profits those slot machines turned, and soon he had a route for those all over this four-state area. Jukeboxes were a natural thing from the coin machines.”

Before the prevalence of radio, jukeboxes were the primary outlet for exploiting a record. Wherever there was a jukebox, there was a crowd. And there was money. After the war, Williams could afford to establish the Music Sales record distributorship and pay himself, essentially, to move records from the wholesale side of the warehouse to the retail side. Independent labels could now get their record in a store as well as on a jukebox. “When he opened the record distribution, it wasn’t for local artists or local labels,” says his son. “At that time there wasn’t anything happening in Memphis. He was looking at a much wider geographic scope. He soon had offices in New Orleans, Shreveport, St. Louis, and Chicago, and was shipping independent records all over the country.”

The majors also controlled the pressing plants. Independents could bring them work, but outside jobs received lower priority than the in-house jobs; subject to the whims of the factory, it was impossible for a small label to plan a release date and maintain stability. Plastic Products was the next logical step for Williams, completing his control of manufacturing, distribution, and the means of consumption.

As Chess Records in Chicago was developing, Leonard Chess realized the importance of dependable pressing. He came to Memphis on a bus—“Dad picked him up at the bus station”—and after a meeting with Williams, left with a

credit line and the understanding that when Chess could pay, Plastic Products would be at the top of the list. According to Robert Williams, there was no contract, nothing written on paper. And that became the standard. As their business relationship blossomed, the Williams family and the Chess family became close-knit. “The first time I ever had gone to Chicago, I must have been eight or nine years old,” remembers Robert. “Leonard had his offices in a rough area but, as you can imagine, he was well connected. The cab pulled up and dropped us off in front of the offices there. Dad put the bags out and turned around to pay and when he turned back, the bags were gone. He walked in and told Leonard, and we had the bags back in about twenty minutes. I mean, they were delivered back with apologies.”

The Chess account became a bedrock for the pressing plant, which fed Williams’s record distribution and jukebox companies. “Once Music Sales got established in retail stores, we did a whale of a business,” says McLemore. “One thing that helped establish us was acquiring MGM as a client. People had to have Hank Williams. We’d tell ‘em, ‘You buy some of my records, I’ll sell you some Hank Williams.’ Aside from just the popular stuff, the shops had a section on R&B music and country music. We handled all that.”

“These record distributors supported a lot of us little guys,” says Roland Janes, whose labels included Rolando, Renay, and Rita Records (the original “Mountain of Love”). “They could almost assure us to break even on our little releases, which would give us an opportunity to work the radio stations and try to get some recognition there. Buster Williams helped everybody, and not just locally.” On a runaway hit, Mack McLemore says they could unload fifty thousand singles between their jukeboxes and retail shops.

In 1961, Williams outgrew the Memphis plant and opened a much larger one in Coldwater, Mississippi. By 1973, he had reopened in Memphis and was running both with three shifts, twenty-four hours a day to meet the demand. (He also bought into Eastern Manufacturing, a pressing plant in Philadelphia.) When they were at their peak, Plastic Products’ southern plants could press over 150,000 singles a day; they also pressed twelve-inch albums. By the early 1970s, the pressing plant’s major clients included Stax, Atlantic, Chess, ABC-Paramount, and MGM. “We shipped a lot a lot of records by air back then,” says McLemore. “Tonnage-wise, Coldwater was the largest shipper that Delta Airlines had for a couple of years. We’d send a truckload of records into the airport every night. We had ninety-seven presses at one time down there. Sure it’s incredible.”

One day in 1966, Buster phoned Mack and told him that he was shutting down the Music Sales distributorship. “I was kind of taken by surprise. We had a real steady business going. But Buster owned the company and if he decided he wanted to close, he’d just close.” Thirty years later, McLemore still says with

pride that he was able to find new distributors for nearly all the labels they handled. He stayed with Williams as manager of the pressing plant operations until the proliferation of cassettes and the demise of the seven-inch forced them out of business. By that time, Williams had become attracted by a larger hustle, establishing himself as a major wildcatter in the oil business. He rigged a motor vehicle with multiple phone lines and rode throughout the South, checking on his sites and making deals. Oil remained his primary interest until his death in 1992. Buster Williams's Quonset hut stands today as a memorial to the era of vinyl records, and now with an historical marker out front. Surrounded by the industrial decay of decades, the location is quiet, haunted by what remains of the original equipment.



In 1949, RCA Records introduced the seven-inch 45 RPM record. It was to compete with the 33 1/3 long player successfully marketed the previous year by Columbia. The improved fidelity of the faster record was not enough to overcome the LP's advantage: symphonies only had to be flipped once, while the 45s spread them over several discs. RCA was ceding the race when they realized the smaller discs were perfect for the youth market's three-minute rock and roll song. The parent's disavowal of the format made it even more attractive. Here kids, identify with these—and collect them all.

The growth of seven-inch 45 RPM records was directly related to the era of the Saturday matinees, when sending kids to the movies was cheaper than hiring a babysitter and it occupied them all day. (TV was not yet firmly established, and owning a set was a luxury.) The serials, in which a story was continued week after week, established the rhythms of consumption that would later drive the rock and roll habit. Once the witnesses perceived that rock and roll 45s were going to keep coming out, it made it easier to part with that much silver. You had to get the next installment.

Saturdays at the cinema also produced the original rock and roll screen star. In 1953, the year before Elvis was unleashed, Marlon Brando's character in *The Wild One* summarized the burgeoning youth culture philosophy. He was asked, "What are you rebelling against?" Brando's character answers, "Whattaya got?" But Brando was spilling popcorn in the movie palace aisles when cowboy Lash LaRue premiered in 1945.

Unlike the clean and handsome cowboy stars Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, Lash LaRue was not so obviously a good guy. He brazenly wore black, and though he always performed the hero's duties, it was only after he was mistaken for the bad guy. Teen angst, western style! His cape further distinguished him, and this wild one of his day even had the equivalent of a motorcycle: his

bullwhip. Lash could shoot a gun with the best of them, but he achieved his individuality with the leather whip. His rebellious nature defined cool for the future rock and rollers. Writer Stanley Booth says, “I idolized Lash to the point I didn’t just want to be like Lash, I became convinced I was Lash!” Mary Lindsay Dickinson, an early participant in the scene and Jim’s wife, sums it up, “Roy Rogers was a wimp, Gene Autry could sing, but Lash LaRue was different. As children, millions of my generation looked up to Lash LaRue as a role model. We memorized his movies, never missed him on television, pored over his comic books, worshipped him at state fairs and tried to be cool—like him.”



*Lash with the lash.*

The depth of his film character was evident in his first movie, *The Song of Old Wyoming*, in 1945. “They let me pick out my wardrobe,” LaRue told me in 1993 while in Memphis for a western film convention, “and I selected a black outfit. I liked black. In the picture, I was the bad guy turned good. The picture closed on my gravestone and it said, ‘In the worst of us, there is some good.’ I think that sums it up.”

Lash had a few interesting encounters during his visits to Memphis. When his movie career began winding down, he led an exhibition rodeo at touring fairs. His name was huge on the banners, and the show featured something for everyone: fancy riding, a comedy mule, pretty women, and the whip. (At one time, Sun’s only female recording artist, Barbara Pittman, was a member of his troupe.) While performing in Memphis in 1956, the cowboy, then in his late-30s, lived out a modern interpretation of his films. The evening paper’s front-page headline read, “Lash LaRue Arrested At Fair—Charged With Buying Loot.” The article begins, “Police cracked the whip on Lash LaRue last night...” In his possession was a stolen adding machine and two hot sewing machines pilfered from the parked cars attending his rodeo. His cohort Fuzzy St. John was also



Lash returns to Memphis, 1956. "The bad jazz a man blows wails long after he's cut out."

arrested, along with a showgirl who tried to strangle herself with a scarf during her night in jail.

"I was crushed when he got arrested," recalls Wayne Jackson, later a member of the Stax house band. "I couldn't believe he might steal. I didn't know why he wasn't just rich, why he and his guys were stealing typewriters." Jackson's sentiments are uniformly echoed by his peers. Elvis Presley, by then the world's highest paid recording star, sent word to Lash that he could help. "I told him to let it go," LaRue says about Presley. "I didn't want anybody getting messed up in it because it was a stinking lousy thing."

At the arraignment, Lash followed his old movie scripts and pleaded innocent. He claimed he'd purchased the goods, valued at \$1200, from a salesman for \$105. And from the same script, a four-day trial commenced, at the end of which our hero in black was exonerated. But unlike his old films, many of his fans forgot the hero's ending, for the shock of the headline still weighed heavily. Typically hip, Lash summed up the incident to me with a quote from Lord Buckley, the British hepster comedian of the 1950s: "The bad jazz a man blows wails long after he's cut out."

But his exploits over the years kept him endeared to the rock and rollers. In the 1960s, he was reportedly pulled over in Hollywood while driving a red convertible and wearing scuba gear. His car was searched and he went down as an early marijuana bust. When he was in Memphis with another convention in the mid-1970s, several local musicians introduced themselves, explained their longtime admiration of him, and invited him to a party. Intrigued by the company, Lash accepted. He drove from the downtown Peabody Hotel to rural east Memphis to pass an evening. Mary Lindsay Dickinson recounts, "Lash drove through the city, from the Mississippi River past Germantown at literally 110 miles per hour. He had just one finger on the steering wheel of the Red Sled, his Cadillac convertible. We passed many cars and several police cars who completely ignored us. It seemed we were invisible to the rest of the world." The party lasted all night, during which time Lash told of his visits to the planet Jupiter. He produced some pot which he claimed was a gift from God himself. "Lash leaned back for a thoughtful moment," continues Mary Lindsay.

“We sorcerer’s apprentices sat at the master’s feet, hostages for the night to the world’s most unique cosmic cowboy. When Lash opened his mouth again, he spoke quietly. ‘I have no home in the universe. I am hunted by the police of Jupiter and the police of Earth. My great fear is that they will arrest me at the same moment in each place. That would be more pain than I could bear.’”



Lash LaRue had prepared the witnesses for Dewey Phillips, and although they thought they were just having fun, they unwittingly became students of Dewey’s ideas on racial equality and social freedom. For years to come, they would realize the depth of his lessons. One of their earliest chances to test their education was at the wrestling matches, held every Monday night at Ellis Auditorium. In the mid-1950s, a new champion came to town and he had a gimmick unlike anyone else’s.

Sputnik Monroe arrived in Memphis in 1957, “220 pounds of twisted steel and sex appeal.” He had been garnering acclaim in Mobile, Alabama, and the Memphis promoter, whose receipts had been slipping, was looking for a new draw. Wrestling had been like the movies: either you stood for Good or for Bad. Monroe wrestled hard and played fair—unless he was losing and then he cheated. He described himself as neither good nor bad, but “scientifically rough.” His philosophy was, “Win if you can, lose if you must, always cheat, and if they take you out, leave tearing down the ring.”

Sputnik Monroe now in his sixties lives in obscurity in Houston, where he works as a security guard. Although flesh has settled in places where there once was muscle, he is still a large man, powerful and agile. He used to boast, “I’ll jump in the air and shit in your hair,” and you wouldn’t want to dare him today. His ears are cauliflowered, his face battered. As I pass a day with him in an anonymous Houston hotel room, he smokes cigarettes constantly, picking his ears with a toothpick he also chews, speaking in a voice that would carry easily to the cheap seats.

“I started in the carnival athletic show, meeting all comers,” he explains. It was nearly half a century ago, when half a sawbuck and plenty of machismo could get you five minutes in the ring with the strong man and a chance at fifty bucks. “Whoever wants to do their thing, however they want to do it,” he says. “I had shovel fights, rope fights, pick axe handle fights, wrestled, boxed, one hand tied down, whatever their specialty was. One time I had a guy turn his back to me and hook me by the head, and I realized he’d seen something on TV and wanted to flip me over his back. So I let him flying mare me. I got up and staggered around, and let him do it to me again. The people cheered and he did it again. And he did it again and he did it again and then he puked and fell over. I never let anybody get out of there a winner.”

In addition to brute strength and a consummate understanding of the sport, Monroe had an instinctual mastery of crowd psychology. He would damage or destroy his opponent and then, like the other wrestlers, turn to the audience for approbation and praise. But Sputnik Monroe did not turn to the box seats down front, not to the women in the audience, not to the first balcony, not the second or third balcony. After each triumphant trick, Sputnik Monroe would turn his back on the vanquished, strut like a barnyard rooster and then fling his hands high above his head, asking for, and receiving, respect and adulation from the African-American audience, segregated and confined to the crow's nest, the small balcony at the very top of the hall.

“When I arrived in Memphis, I went straight to Beale Street where the blacks hung out and from there straight to jail and got Sugarmon, the black attorney, to defend me in court. They charged me with ‘mopery and attempted gawk,’ that’s an old southern vagrancy thing they made up. I was on Beale Street every night for the first six months. I got arrested three or four times until that didn’t work anymore and then the cops left me alone.”

Ellis Auditorium, where the big musical acts played and the same site that Elvis had aspired to, began selling out for Monroe’s matches. “There got to be a couple thousand blacks outside wanting to get in,” he recalls. “So I told the management I’d be cutting out if they don’t let my black friends in. I had power because I’m selling out the place, the first guy that ever did it, and they damn sure wanted the revenue.”

“I remember one time Sputnik was wrassling in Louisville,” says Johnny Dark, now a Memphis sportscaster but then the president and founder of the Sputnik Monroe Fan Club. “In the dressing room, this little black lady came up to Sputnik, she had tears in her eyes, she said, ‘You don’t remember me, you never met me, but I used to live in Memphis when they made us sit upstairs



Photograph © the Sam Phillips family

in those buzzard seats.’ She said, ‘You’re the one who got them to change that.’ That was the first time I saw Sputnik with tears in his eyes.”

Jim Dickinson was another Sputnik Monroe worshipper. “The way they would cut off the black audience,” he explains, “they had a guy counting the white door and a guy on the black door. And they knew how many blacks the section could hold. Sputnik paid the guy who counted the blacks to say a low number every time he was asked, so when the boss said, ‘How many have you let in?’ he would say ‘Twenty-five,’ or whatever, and there was five hundred people up there. Finally the audience got so big and so heavily black that they had to integrate the seating. That really is how integration in Memphis started. There’s no other single event that integrated the audience other than the wrassling matches and Sputnik paying the guy to lie.”

Jim Crow laws were outlawed in 1954, though little practical effect was felt until Lyndon Johnson pushed the Civil Rights Act through Congress in 1964. In Memphis, as in much of the nation, another decade would pass before there was any attempt at mass integration, usually in the form of busing. At the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers’ strike, during which Reverend Martin Luther King was assassinated, the placards carried by African-American workers had to convey the simplest of ideas to the non-comprehending white majority: “I Am a Man.”



*Among the sanitation workers’ strike demands were tubs that would not leak maggots onto their heads.  
Photograph © Preservation and Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis*

“You’re talking about separate water fountains, you’re talking about back of the bus,” says Jim Blake, who managed wrestler Jerry Lawler in the 1970s, and whose Barbarian Records recorded several heroes of the ring. “I went through

my whole twelve years at school having never been able to share an experience with a black, and I was starting to resent this because I was also listening to radio and Dewey Phillips and hearing all these great black records and realizing that these were some talented artists, this was another culture. Where at first we'd gone to the matches hoping to see Sputnik get beat, we started to realize that he was pretty fucking cool. He had his audience and he never played down to 'em, never talked down to 'em. He became a role model."

Monroe had size, demeanor, sharp costumes, good looks, and certainly a boisterous attitude—even without a trademark he would have been conspicuous. Early in his career, however, he was beamed with a wooden chair. After a large splinter was removed from the crown of his forehead, a patch of hair grew in white. Perusing Memphis high-school yearbooks from the late-1950s, it's easy to spot the members of his fan club: Johnny Dark is one among many who sported a white streak in his annual photograph. In an early promotional photo, Jerry Lawler, whose career began well after Sputnik's and continues today, also has a white streak.

"If you would have had some kind of election about who was the best-known face in Memphis at the time—Sputnik, Elvis, and the mayor—Sputnik would have been real close to Elvis," says Johnny Dark.

By bonding himself to the tension of the era, Sputnik Monroe became a hero to the rebellious white youth culture. Wrestling, like rock and roll, thrives on the energy of a crowd gone wild. By the end of the decade, Sputnik had become friendly with Sam Phillips, and a hero to Sam's children, Knox

and Jerry. Jerry Phillips was an athletic twelve-year-old who despite his diminutive stature wanted to get into wrestling. Sputnik was a muscle of a man who could have flossed his teeth with Phillips, but the young lad's desire gave him an idea. It might not make a main event, but midget wrestling had its possibilities.

That Phillips wasn't a midget was no problem. For Sputnik, in fact, it was the heart of his scheme. Professional wrestling is about frustrating the audience. In a humid and smelly high school gymnasium, there's a great potential for aggression, the thick smoke and bad lighting, the rage to be roused amongst a mob of tanked up hicks—"Get him



*Jerry "DeLayne" Phillips struts his stuff. That Phillips wasn't a midget was, for Sputnik, the heart of his scheme. Photograph © the Sam Phillips family*

outta there! He ain't a midget!"—the frustration waiting to be vented by an audience who spent their days and weeks and years beating the earth, powerless against the elements—"That one don't belong! He ain't no midget!" A fan that felt a blue vein popping out of his neck would return week after week.

Sputnik was friendly with Fabulous Frankie Thumb, a midget legit, and he put both Jerry and Frankie in training. He enjoyed Jerry's attitude, and soon was taking him to bars and nightclubs, sticking a cigar in Jerry's mouth and lifting him onto the bar. "The bartender would say, 'How old is that guy?'" says Phillips. "And Sputnik would say, 'He's twenty-one. He's with me.' Who's going to argue with Sputnik Monroe? Anywhere that he went, he was king."

They set up matches on the circuit all around Memphis. More midgets came forward and soon there were tag teams. Phillips remembers, "The announcer would say, 'He doesn't have short legs, his arms appear normal...,' that sort of talk. If I had been twenty-five and the size of a midget, it might have been believable, but I was obviously a kid, twelve or thirteen. They'd have me walk through the crowd, chewing a big cigar, taunting the people. Sputnik had taught me pretty good how to pull my pants down and tell 'em to kiss my ass. The audience knew I wasn't real and I just made 'em madder."

The act's run came to a close after a couple short years in a small Arkansas town around 1962. An angry fan— a deranged wrestling zealot caught up in the believability of that which was so plainly not believable—pulled a knife and tried to stab Sputnik Monroe's most inspired idea. Phillips's parents said he could no longer continue the act: "DeLayne" Phillips, the World's Most Perfectly Formed Midget Wrestler, was officially retired.



While white parents hated Sputnik Monroe, the kids loved him. "There was a group of wealthy white kids that dug me because I was a rebel. I'm saying what they wanted to say, only they were too young or inexperienced or afraid to say it. You have a black maid raising your kids and she's talking about me all the time, so I may not be in the front living room, but I'm going in the back door of your goddamn house, feeding your kids on Monday morning and sending 'em to school. And meeting the bus when they come home. Pretty powerful thing."

Sputnik created a life of altruism built on self-promotion. After he integrated Ellis Auditorium, his power within the black community caused fear among the city fathers. While the black leaders were arguing about how to protest the segregation of an automobile show, Sputnik called the sponsoring dealership and threatened to open a car lot in a black neighborhood; that night's evening news announced the changed admission policy.

“Another time I give away a hundred watermelons—Sputnik melons, they had white stripes—and announced that I was gonna run for sheriff. People thought prostitution and incest would flourish, ‘motherfucker’ would be a household word. I could have run for mayor and made it, I could have blackmailed the city, I could have done any goddamn thing I wanted. I was general of a little black army.”



The Commercial Appeal, September 29, 1959.

By 1960, Monroe couldn't get any bigger in the mid-South. Wrestling has always been regional. Outside his region, his stature was not the same. He wanted to go national. “Before I left Memphis, I read in the paper where Gene Barry was coming to the Mid South Fair and I went out there to hit him in the nose for copying the way I dress. I was born and raised in Dodge City, Kansas, which is the cowboy town of the world. Gene Barry was the star on *Bat Masterson* and dressed like I dressed, with a Homburg and a vest. I figured if I jerked him off a horse and hit him in the nose for dressing Dodge City style, I'd get a national reputation.”

Police protection kept Gene Barry's nose from its appointment with Sputnik's fist, though the wrestler did manage to pick a fight that night with a cowboy and make the front page of the local paper, his picture as large as President Eisenhower's. After that, Monroe tried becoming a national star by racing from territory to territory, but the lapses between appearances were too great; he couldn't rally the support.

Despite his popularity with the fans, Monroe had always frightened promoters; in wrestling, he was known as a “charger,” someone who could lose control. He was not averse to hurting his opponent, nor to being hurt himself. This attitude gave promoters ulcers, because they usually had the same card booked the whole week in different cities and couldn’t afford an injury.

The 1960s found Monroe travelling again, but his magic didn’t click in other territories. He made occasional returns to Memphis to boost his morale. A bitter divorce led to a drinking binge that spilled from months to years. In the early 1970s, Sputnik wore the Junior Heavyweight Champion belt, and in 1972 was back in Memphis and back on top.

Randy Haspel, whose band the Radiants was one of the first post-Beatles Memphis bands and one of the last recording acts on the original Sun Records, remembers an encounter with Sputnik in the early 1970s. “I was sitting around Phillips Studio with Skip Owsley, this black conga drummer from my band, and Sputnik came in. He wasn’t as active in wrestling as he had been, and he was saying, ‘I don’t know what to do anymore. I used to be able to tell ‘em their wimmin were trash, or I’d shake my ass and them broads would flip out and the guys would want to fight. I can’t get these people to hate me like they used to!’ This was during the hippie heyday, and we said, ‘What people hate now are longhairs. If you talked about love, Sputnik, they’d probably hate you.’ Skip, the black guy, said, ‘You need to find you a black wrestler and tag team with him.’ So two weeks later Sputnik appears on TV with Norvell Austin, and he’s dyed a blonde streak in *his* hair. They’re beating up some designated opponents, and they tied up one guy’s arms in the ropes. Sputnik goes over to the corner and gets a bucket, and pours it over this guy’s head. It’s a bucket of black paint. And then Sputnik and Norvell go over to the announcer and Sputnik says, ‘Black is beautiful!’ and Norvell says, ‘White is beautiful!’ and Sputnik held up his arm with Norvell’s and he said, ‘Black and white together is beautiful.’ Next time I saw Sputnik he’s real excited and says, ‘They hate me again!’”

The interracial tag team thrived in Memphis. After he cloned the white streak, the younger Norvell was rumored to be Sputnik’s son. The partnership lasted three years, and Norvell, who had never travelled, celebrated his twenty-first birthday while on a Japanese tour. Monroe was left untethered when Austin decided to go solo. After a car wreck in 1978, he recuperated in a Texas beer joint, holding court from a recliner on stacked Coke crates. Since his heyday, he has owned bars and restaurants, sold turquoise jewelry, had a wrecker service, a transmission shop, and taught at wrestling schools. Recently, he has considered becoming a standup comedian. Monroe has not wrestled since 1991, but wouldn’t decline a challenge. His son Bubba “The Brawler” Monroe, Texas All-Pro in Houston, has been under his father’s tutelage for nearly a decade, slowly climbing professional wrestling’s ranks.



*Norvell Austin, left, and Sputnik Monroe. "They hate me again!"*

Despite its popularity, the World Wrestling Federation gets little respect from Sputnik. "My business is dead," he says. "There are no tough guys left in wrestling." The sport of body manipulation has been replaced by acrobats on steroids. Tumbling makes for good television, but the science of the sport has been replaced by pantomime and buffoonery. "Wherever I put your head, your body's gonna follow. Wrestling amounts to one thing: A fulcrum and a lever. Long enough lever, big enough fulcrum, you can pick anything up."

Whatever else the WWF has done, it has finally made wrestling the popular means of expression it had the potential for back in the 1950s. It may be bereft of the social value it toyed with, but it is able to tour like rock bands, packing arenas and selling T-shirts and videos. Albums, even.

Sputnik was in the right place to be a societal influence, but his timing was a little late. American youth culture in the 1950s was a whitewall tire about to blow. Major cities were too self-reflexive for this explosion, it needed innocence. A place where racial tensions had been so deeply repressed that society was about to choke on its own sweetness, where urban civilization could obstruct all hopes but a short drive out of town declared the possibilities endless: It was Memphis and it was rock and roll. But had Sputnik Monroe come along a few years earlier, we might all be products of sex, drugs, and wrestling. He is the guy who did not become Elvis Presley.

Sputnik Monroe summed up the common attitude between wrestling and rock and roll one afternoon in a Memphis studio. This was 1972, at the Sam Phillips Recording Service. Jim Dickinson was just off the road from a tour, and he was showing off his recently-purchased red, white, and blue leather boots, emblazoned with tri-colored double eagles. These were boots that would turn heads, boots that would be the envy of any self-respecting biker and most corrupt sheriff's deputies. If you didn't speak the language in a foreign country, these boots could get you around.

Sputnik Monroe was singularly unimpressed. Perhaps because his feet were not breaking them in. Perhaps because the boots were the center of attention and not him. The reasoning only obscures the facts: These double eagle boots were so engrossing that none of the admirers noticed his eyes impatiently darting.

The compliments continued.

"Those goddamn boots ain't shit," Sputnik finally growled. And before anyone could beg to differ, he continued. "I know a place in Mexico where you can get boots with big dicks and balls on 'em."

The laughter in the room died like a suffocated fire as everyone became aware of Sputnik's smoldering anger. People got fidgety trying to think of what to say. The obvious dawned on someone: "What're you gonna do with boots that have big dicks and balls on 'em, Sputnik?"

Sputnik, like anyone whose work involves shouting over the din of an outraged crowd, has always had a gruff voice, but maybe he plucked a little extra coarseness for this answer. A real attitude is one you can feel. "You go into a bar with them on," he said, "You can get into a fight in fifteen minutes."