He may not have turned the piano bench into kindling with a swift back kick, but Levi Kreis was channeling “The Killer” long before he inhabited the role for the Broadway run of “Million Dollar Quartet.”

As Jerry Lee Lewis, Kreis garnered a Tony Award for his part in the original musical, and next week, the Oliver Springs native will be a member of the cast when it opens the 2019-20 season at the University of Tennessee’s Clarence Brown Theatre. And although this time around he’s playing the part of producer extraordinaire Sam Phillips — the Sun Records studio executive who made household names of Lewis, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley — his early rock ‘n’ roll roots go back to age 12, he told The Daily Times recently.

“Jerry Lee playing ‘Great Balls of Fire’ was a family reunion party trick I did at 12 years old, and my mom was president of the Brenda Lee fan club,” Kreis said. “She actually became a friend of the family, and I had the opportunity to be able to be with her on her tour bus for a couple of summers, and I got to watch her on stage and off. She and Elvis were in top rotation in my house with my mom and dad.

“All of that genre was part of my DNA growing up: Brenda Lee led me to Jerry, and Jerry led me to Sun Records. From there, I just learned about it all. I would sit with a boombox, and it would be Jerry or Harry Connick Jr., whatever mood I was in that day, and I would just play the boombox and learn their licks. I don’t know that I really had the opportunity to look into the genius of Sam Phillips until later on, but I was just influenced by the music he helped make and the artists that were making it.”

The musical is built around an actual meeting of four Sun Records icons that took place on Dec. 4, 1956, at Sun studios in Memphis. Perkins, who had enjoyed success thanks to “Blue Suede Shoes,” was in the studio to record, and to beef up the sound of the band, Phillips brought in Lewis, who was just starting out. Presley dropped by, as did Cash, and at one point, all four men started jamming together in the same studio. The Memphis Press-Scimitar was called and a photo of the four men ran in the next day’s edition with the title that was later used to christen the musical.

That took place 17 years before Kreis was born to Ronnie and Connie Kreis. He started playing piano when he was 5, and after graduating from Mount Pisgah Academy in Oliver Springs, he moved to Nashville to attend Vanderbilt and Belmont before heading west to Los Angeles, where he was cast in films like “Frailty,” opposite Matthew McConaughey, and “Don’t Let Go,” as well as in the 1997 national tour of “Rent.”

In 2000, he began work on a musical called “One Red Flower,” based on letters home by five combat veterans deployed to Vietnam.

“I love new works, and I love starting with the table read, where all of the actors are reading from the script, all the way through developing the characters and the storyline to the workshops to the first time you get it on stage,” Kreis said. “I love working with musicals from the ground up, and with ‘One Red Flower,’ every word we spoke and sang was lifted out of real live letters written by these guys. So we workshopped it and put it up on stage in a couple of theaters and were working toward Broadway, and in August...
2001, we got word that we were going to Broadway. But then 9/11 happened, and the producers pulled out.”

The national tragedy made them squeamish about staging a production based on a violent conflict, but they mentioned to Kreis that they had another project in the works: “Million Dollar Quartet.”

“Having gone through the other experience with me, they knew I was good at creating Southern characters, so they said, ‘Hey, come in and do a table read,’” he said. “We were all just sitting around the table, and I said, ‘I’ll take Jerry Lee!’ And then, when they found out I could play piano a little bit, I never even auditioned for the role. I was there at the beginning, and when I walked over to the piano and did what I do, there was no more discussion about who was going to play Jerry Lee.”

After premiering in Florida and enjoying sold-out runs in Washington state, “Million Dollar Quartet” premiered on Broadway in April 2010 and was promptly given three Tony nominations. (Kreis won for Best Featured Actor in a Musical.) It closed in 2011, and Kreis, who had broadened his appeal with albums and television appearances during the musical’s run, continued to make records and secure television and film placement deals for his music. He eventually moved back to East Tennessee, and it was a visit from an old show business friend — Dale Dickey, herself a Knoxville girl — that got him involved in the Clarence Brown production.

“She was in town a little while ago and reached out so we could grab lunch and hang out, and it occurred to her during lunch: ‘I know you just moved here, and you spend a lot of time in New York, but if you’re ever in town for an extended period of time, you should reach out to the Clarence Brown Theatre,’” Kreis recalled. “She set up a casual coffee meeting with the artistic director, and that’s when I found out they were thinking of doing ‘Million Dollar Quartet.’ So kind of give Dale the credit for me being in the company of the Clarence Brown Theatre right now.

“She’s always loved her experiences there, and she supports the home folk theater people. And for me, it’s great to bring something so intimate to my experience, as someone who helped create it from the ground floor up, and do the same in my hometown. It’s really special to me.”

While his original role was as Lewis, that was almost two decades ago. A 45-year-old playing a 20-year-old singer could be pulled off, but Kreis found himself more drawn to the “father figure” of the quartet: Phillips, who was the visionary behind so many of rock ‘n’ roll’s earliest hits.

“I’m excited, because Sam Phillips has been a lighthouse for me recently in finding my way back to what my own musical roots are,” he said. “One of the things we like to drive home about ‘Million Dollar Quartet’ is how prominent the dynamic between Sam and the boys was. He was sort of a father figure to these guys. In some ways, I like to feel like it’s almost like a father-son relationship as I walk through this storyline, because there are moments when it really was that dynamic.”

Joining Kreis as members of the quartet are Kavan Hashemian as Elvis, who started doing his Elvis tribute when he was 3 and has been in eight previous productions of the musical; Sean McGibbon as Jerry Lee Lewis, a Texas native who was part of the musical’s first national tour; Peter Oyloe as Johnny Cash, having previously starred at Hank Williams in the theater’s production of “Lost Highway;” and Chance Wall, a regional theater actor whose part of “Million Dollar Quartet” on Norwegian Cruise Lines, as Carl Perkins.

“They’re coming in so earnest and so dedicated and doing such great work, and on top of that, they’re such talented musicians,” Kreis said. “It’s exciting for me, because I get to sit back and be a proud papa in a way and watch these guys kill it. I’m loving this cast, because they’re really inspiring to me, and I really believe in this combination.

“I think it’s important for people to know that when they come to hear this, they’re obviously going to love the music, but they’re going to discover a story that’s going to be really touching to them. I think we’re all excited to share that and kind of illuminate those relationships more intentionally and allow the storyline to feel rich and be a great experience for people to watch.”