

Proud East Tennessee native Levi Kreis plans 'Million Dollar' homecoming

[Amy McRary, Knoxville News Sentinel | Aug. 21, 2019](#)



Singer-songwriter-actor and Oliver Springs native Levi Kreis is back home to perform in the Clarence Brown Theatre season opener "Million Dollar Quartet." But first, just for a minute, let's talk about kindergarten.

Is that story true? The one that he could play "Pomp and Circumstance" perfectly by ear as a 5-year-old?

"Oh, that story," Kreis says. Yes, he says, it's true. He obligingly repeats the anecdote he's told before.

He heard the song at his kindergarten graduation. "I realized I knew how to play it." Back home he sat at the family piano.

"And I played it with both hands. My brother worked the pedals because my legs were too short to reach them."

The result: piano lessons — and a growing love and talent for music. "I could listen to what my teacher played me and just play it."

Then there's now

Today, Kreis is a singer-songwriter-actor with a Tony Award, a new album out in January and a deep, never-left love for family and East Tennessee. He brings his music home each Christmas, playing his holiday show at the Oak Ridge Playhouse.

"The truth is I take a lot of pride in where I'm from, and people have been really supportive of me. A lot can't get to New York, travel to Chicago. It's the highlight of my year to bring my music here and share with my home folk."

This fall, he's on stage as Sun Records producer Sam Phillips in the University of Tennessee Clarence Brown Theatre Aug. 28-Sept. 22 production of "Million Dollar Quartet." (Tickets and show times are available at [clarencbrowntheatre.com](#).)

"Million Dollar Quartet" tells the story of the Dec. 4, 1956, impromptu jam session Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash held at Phillips' Sun Studio in Memphis.

The actors in the four main roles — Kavan Hashemian (Presley), Sean McGibbon (Lewis), Peter Oyloe (Cash) and Chance Wall (Perkins) — have played those parts in other productions. Oyloe may be familiar to Knoxville theatergoers; he was Hank Williams in the Carousel Theatre's 2014 "Lost Highway."

"It's super exciting to have guys already living in the skins of these legends," Kreis said.

He sees Phillips as a father figure to the young, not-yet-superstar musicians. His non-singing role also serves as the play's narrator. "We are investing in the father dynamic of this story and you can see it; he kind of helped make these guys."

But he will sing too

Kreis (pronounced Krice) won't sing in "Million Dollar Quartet," but he will sing at Clarence Brown. He's performing two "Broadway at the Keys" concerts at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 22 and Sept. 23 at the theater. The first show is sold out; general admission \$25 tickets for the 90-minute Sept. 23 concert are at [clarencbrowntheatre.com](#).

"There's a lot of music and storytelling and how a kid from Oliver Springs gets to Time Square and Broadway," Kreis said of the concert. "I try to put my own spin on some of Broadway's favorites with my story."



SEPTEMBER 23 CONCERT ON THE CBT MAINSTAGE 7:30 PM (General Admission)

Listen to this boy



Sam Phillips and Elvis Presley on Dec. 4, 1956, when Sam Phillips and Elvis Presley on Dec. 4, 1956, when Elvis dropped by Phillips' studio and joined Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis for an impromptu jam that would become known as "The Million Dollar Quartet" session. (Photo: Phillips Family Archive)

His story also means talking about his mother, Connie Lee Kreis. Connie was

president of the Brenda Lee fan club; Levi grew up listening to lots of music. "Playing 'Great Balls of Fire' was a family reunion party trick at 12," he said.

Southern gospel and rhythm and blues also helped comprise much of his musical core. "As a kid," he also began composing classical music.

Connie decided her ninth-grade son needed in-depth musical instruction. She began dialing Vanderbilt University's School of Music. When she got a classical piano professor on the telephone, Kreis remembers, "She held the phone over my piano and made me play an original classical composition."

The result was a full musical scholarship in classical piano to Vanderbilt as a high schooler. Each Monday and Thursday for the next three years, he went to Vanderbilt for a day of classes. His maternal grandfather, the late Leroy Copeland, would finish his early-start job at the post office, then drive Kreis from Oliver Springs to Vanderbilt.

"I would take my classes and then he would pick me up at 5:30 and we'd stop at Cracker Barrel for dinner and come home. Every Monday, every Thursday."

Back to 'Quartet'

Kreis is no stranger to "Million Dollar Quartet." This is his first time playing Phillips, but he originated the Jerry Lee Lewis role on Broadway. "It is the sweetest thing — it's been nine years since I've touched this story," he said.

His Lewis portrayal won him the 2010 Tony Award for best featured actor in a musical, a 2010 Outer Critics Circle Award and a 2010 Drama League nomination. "Playing Jerry Lee Lewis gave me a sense of power and personal confidence that I can trust what I do and I can know it has a place in the world. I can trust that and not doubt myself."

He got the Phillips role after a fellow East Tennessean, actress and friend Dale Dickey, introduced him to CBT Producing Artistic Director Cal MacLean. "At some point, I met Cal and the conversation started."

He was also no stranger to Sam Phillips. "As a singer-songwriter, when I create music I go back and think about what Sam Phillips is all about — that if it ain't different, it ain't nothing at all."

'Bad Habit'

Before he got the CBT part, Kreis was already diving into Phillips' life, but as an inspiration for new music. After seven albums, he needed self-reflection.

"I was at a point where (I thought), 'I got to dig a little deeper and find out who I am musically. I need to rebirth, get back to roots, to the gospel-infused and church-inspired piano gifts.' I had fallen out of love with music; I really had.

"Not to sound dramatic, but Sam Phillips sort of was a lighthouse for me this past year. I had already gone back to him and dived into his philosophy ... That's part of why I really I wanted to do this play."

His new album, "Bad Habit," comes out in January. The first single, "Three Words," drops Sept. 20. A second single will be released in November. "It's super fun, everything on it."



Levi Kreis (Photo: Rachel Love Photography)

He wanted to be inspired, he said, "to make the best music I ever made. By God, I think I made it." He's played the songs for his mother.

"She said, 'Son, this is the best thing you have ever put out.'"

"If I got Mama's approval, I'm good."