

**MAE
BOREN
AXTON**
1914-1997



**QUEEN
MOTHER
OF
NASHVILLE**

In the mid-1950s, a 40-year-old English teacher in Jacksonville was trying to be a country music songwriter. She was a publicist for singer Hank Snow, a partner of music promoter Colonel Tom Parker, when she was introduced to 19-year-old Elvis Presley. Mae had a keen eye for talent and saw something special in Presley. She felt he had everything – except a hit song. “I am going to write one for you,” she promised.

Mae Boren was born in September 1914 in Bardwell, Texas. When she was two years old, the family moved to Oklahoma. She earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism at the University of Oklahoma, taught English and journalism throughout Oklahoma and worked as a reporter for Life Magazine. In the 1930s, she married US naval officer John Axton. One of her sons was future songwriter Hoyt Axton. She continued to teach English while writing for country artists like Ernest Tubb and Perry Como.

In 1955, songwriter Thomas Durden read a newspaper story about a man who jumped out of a hotel window, leaving a suicide note that read, “I walk a lonely street.” Mae suggested that they could turn the story into a song – a ‘heartbreak hotel’ at the end of the lonely street.

Painting a picture of a place where “broken-hearted lovers cry away their gloom”, they finished the song in an hour. Mae insisted that Heartbreak Hotel was perfect for Elvis Presley, as he moved from Sun Records to RCA.

In November, Mae played Presley the demo at a Nashville radio convention. He loved it! Sun Records’ Sam Phillips pronounced it a “morbid mess” and RCA brass were not happy either but begrudgingly agreed to release it. Elvis was unfazed, certain that the song would catapult him into the big time.

The song was released in January 1956, selling a million copies in a few weeks and becoming number one by April. Elvis Presley soon became “The King” and Mae was financially secure for life.

Mae continued to write songs – and help aspiring musicians like Reba McEntire, Tanya Tucker and Willie Nelson believe in themselves. Over the next two decades, she wrote over 200 songs as the ‘Queen Mother of Nashville’. In 1985, Mae was elected to the Oklahoma Women’s Hall of Fame.

In the 1990s, a film entitled “Mama Mae: The Life and Music of Mae Boren Axton”, told her story through interviews with major country stars like Blake Shelton, Dolly Parton, and Loretta Lynn that she called “her kids” and helped along the way. In April 1997 Mae died near Nashville in her hot tub after an apparent heart attack. She was 82.

Mae Boren’s life will always be linked to her greatest song Heartbreak Hotel, which became part of pop culture. During his first presidential campaign, Bill Clinton boosted his popularity by playing it on the saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show. Elvis Presley owes much of his success to Heartbreak Hotel – and Mae’s early vision for his career.