

Presley Becomes A Rock-And-Roll Sensation, 1956-1957

*Emerging from the American South with a voice that bridged black and white musical traditions, Elvis Presley became the supreme figure in **rock** and roll and one of the most famous **singers** of all time*

Principal Personages

Elvis Presley (1935-1977), a **rock** singer, actor, and virtual symbol of American culture in life and death Sam Phillips (1923-), the Memphis record producer who recognized Presley's talent, nurtured it, and then sold his contract to RCA records Tom Parker, Colonel , the manager who engineered unprecedented deals for Presley--and who took an unusually large percentage for himself.

Summary of Event

By the beginning of 1956, Elvis Presley had completed a musical apprenticeship that had him poised on the brink of superstardom. In 1953, the poor, white, Mississippi-born Presley had walked into Sam Phillips' Sun Records studio in Memphis, supposedly to make a vanity recording for his mother, and was noticed by secretary Marion Keisker. Keisker, in turn, brought Presley to the attention of Phillips, the producer for Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, and other early country and **rock** greats. The story goes that Phillips had claimed that if he could find a white boy who could sing black music, he would make a million dollars; Elvis was that boy. Yet it had taken months of practice before the dimensions of Presley's talent became clear, and when Phillips finally sold his contract to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), he received only forty thousand dollars (Phillips later made his million many times over by investing in a small company by the name of Holiday Inn).

Phillips decided to sell the contract because he feared--ironically--that his protégé's success would bankrupt his company. While Presley was building a large regional following making hit records for Sun in 1954 and 1955--including "That's All Right, Mama," "Good Rockin' Tonight," and "Mystery Train"--Sun lacked the credit and capacity to meet the demand for product generated by such a huge national star. RCA, like most major New York record companies, had largely ignored the groundswell of **rock** and roll emerging from the South and was now trying to acquire a bankable franchise. It was in this context that Presley recorded his first RCA single, "Heartbreak Hotel," which was released in early 1956. It quickly topped the pop charts and was followed in short order by "Don't Be Cruel" and "Hound Dog."

Events then moved rapidly. In January, Presley made the first of a series of appearances on national television, culminating with performances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Sullivan, who had sworn Presley would never appear on the program, ended up paying the then-vast sum of fifty thousand dollars for Presley's performance, though the overt sexuality of Presley's hip thrusts led

censors to show him only from the waist up by the time of his last Sullivan show appearance in January of 1957.

Meanwhile, Presley began pursuing his dream of becoming a movie star. In the summer of 1956, he went to Hollywood to film *Love Me Tender*, which created a sensation when released later that year. *Jailhouse Rock*, which followed in 1957, enjoyed similar success. Ironically, the one venue where Presley failed in his early career was in Las Vegas, where a two-week engagement in April of 1956 was canceled after one week because of poor ticket sales (Las Vegas audiences in the decades to follow would prove far more enthusiastic).

By the beginning of 1957, Elvis Presley had become one of the most familiar faces in the country, adored by teenage girls, emulated by teenage boys, and viewed with much consternation by the gatekeepers of the nation's morals. Though unfailingly polite and careful to avoid political controversies later **rock** stars would embrace, Presley's powerful sexuality, the clear influence of African-American musical styles in his music at a time of racial segregation, and his powerful grip on a widely distrusted popular culture made him an object of scorn and fear for many middle-class white Americans. In retrospect, the draft notice Presley received in 1957 (deferred until early 1958) seems as much a covert attempt to control him as an example of the blind justice of the military system.

Meanwhile, the records kept coming: chart-topping film songs such as "Love Me Tender" and "Jailhouse **Rock**" as well as "All Shook Up," "Treat Me Nice," and "Loving You." Presley began 1958 with "Don't/I Beg of You" at number one, and he probably would have kept right on going if his induction into the Army in March had not interrupted his career. He spent most of the next two years stationed in Germany, with only one opportunity to record; a song from that session, "Big Hunk of Love," reached the top of the charts in 1959.

Presley returned home from the Army in early 1960 and quickly resumed his career. In the opinion of many critics, however, he never recovered the early brilliance of his first RCA records--or, for that matter, of his Sun recordings. For most of the 1960's, he focused on his film career, releasing a string of relatively uninteresting sound tracks to go with them. This decline was interrupted in 1968, when a television special and some exciting new recordings made in Memphis recaptured his early energy and revived his musical career. By the mid-1970's, however, Presley had once again fallen into decline, a decline all the more dramatic and painful because he was physically deteriorating as well. By the time of his fatal drug overdose in 1977, he had become a symbol of lost hope and decadence. Yet such an image could never altogether erase the profoundly powerful, even inspiring, Elvis Presley of the mid-1950's, who seemed to embody an American dream come true.

Impact of Event

In his essay "Presliad," often cited as the best piece of writing on Elvis Presley, Greil Marcus aptly summarizes what the man has come to represent for millions of Americans: "Elvis has emerged as a great *artist*, a great *rocker*, a great *purveyor of schlock*, a great *heart throb*, a great *bore*, a great *symbol of potency*, a great *ham*, a great *nice person*, and yes, a great American." With an immense influence that extends far beyond popular music, and an iconography that extends far

beyond the nation's borders, Elvis Presley has come to represent the best and worst aspects of the United States' cultural dominance of the global village.

It is tempting to think that Presley entered the world stage fully formed, offering a dazzling vision of possibility in an era of unprecedented prosperity. For the many Americans chafing under the strictures of a generation gap and the stifling conformity of the 1950s, there was an irreducible reality to this view. Yet Presley was able to succeed to the extent that he did not only because he presented something new in American culture but also because he distilled some very old--and very powerful-- currents in that culture.

The most central of these currents was racial. Growing up as a poor white boy in Tupelo, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, during the Great Depression, Presley was in close contact with African-American culture and evangelical religion, two forces that were to exert a powerful influence on his musical development. By the time he walked into the Sun studios as a teenager, he had developed an almost effortless ability to evoke and manipulate a wide variety of musical styles--blues, gospel, bluegrass, country and western, and others. Presley's first record for Sun was an Arthur Crudup blues tune, "That's All Right, Mama" backed with Bill Monroe's bluegrass classic "Blue Moon of Kentucky." The selection was revealing; Presley took black and white music and made them two sides of the same record, etching each with a sense of style that was wholly his own.

Contrary to the popular myth, Presley did not invent **rock** and roll, a term that had begun circulating in the black community as early as the late 1940's. Chuck Berry possessed far greater songwriting gifts and a penchant for integrating racial styles; Jerry Lee Lewis may have had more raw performing talent. It was Presley, however, who synthesized a variety of strains and even contradictions: technology and tradition, the sacred and the profane, poverty and wealth, and, of course, black and white. Given the racism that pervaded so many aspects of American society in the 1950's, it was virtually inevitable that great wealth and fame would be conferred on a white **rock** star rather than a black one. No doubt other performers deserved more recognition than they received, and Presley himself might have had a longer, happier life if he had received less. Despite all this, Presley's signal achievement--obscured as it is amid all the hype, his mediocre acting performances, the laughable excess of his 1970's persona, and his pathetic addictions to drugs, alcohol, and other vices--remains his music. Over the course of two decades, he amassed a remarkably diverse body of work that has become a point of reference for generations of subsequent performers. He was a major inspiration to the Beatles, whose own success was measured by the yardstick Presley established. More recently, Bruce Springsteen has often named Presley as the central figure in his artistic development.

In the aftermath of his rise to national prominence in 1956 and 1957, Elvis Presley acquired an appellation that has stuck ever since: the King. There is a subtle irony in the bestowal of such a title in a nation presumably founded to resist royalty in all its forms. In any case, it is striking to consider that a poor boy with undistinguished lineage ascended to a cultural and commercial throne in the United States. Here is one more contradiction in a life full of them, and in the nation that produced him.

FURTHER READINGS

- Dundy, Elaine. *Elvis and Gladys*. Macmillan, 1985.

Chronicles Presley's relationship with perhaps the most important person in his life--his mother. With sensitivity and solid research, Dundy explores a major inspiration to Presley, and a major source of anguish following her death in 1958

- Garulnick, Peter. "Elvis Presley," Rolling Stone Press, *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*. Ed. Jim Miller. Rev. (1980)

A well-written analysis of Presley's life, focused on his formative years. Garulnick clearly favors the Sun material over anything that followed. See also (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), which includes a profile of Elvis along with other giants of early rock and roll

- Goldman, Albert. *Elvis*. Avon Books, 1981.

One of the best-known biographies of Elvis, and probably the worst, is both mean-spirited and scatological. Goldman's preoccupation with debunking Presley mythology precludes any serious engagement with his music. He later wrote (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) as a postscript for the book

- Hopkins, Jerry. *Elvis*. Simon & Schuster, 1971.

Dated, but a good source of factual material. In some ways, still the standard biography of Presley; remains widely cited. See also (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), which supplements the original book

- Marchback, Pearce, ed. *Elvis in His Own Words*. Compiled by Mick Farren. Omnibus Press, 1977.

A useful collection of interviews, fan-club material, and more. Presley was not always a candid or incisive evaluator of his life and work, but read with care, this material can be revealing. Many interesting photos

- Marcus, Greil. *Dead Elvis*. Anchor/Doubleday, 1991.

A loose collection of pieces on Presley's lasting influence on American culture, even in death. Some critics have considered the book too fragmented and excessive, but there are keen insights throughout

- Marcus, Greil. "Presliad," Plume, *Mystery Train : Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. Rev. (1990)

A classic in the field of rock criticism. The book's final chapter on Presley, first written in 1972, remains a landmark. Especially useful for appreciating Presley's cultural significance. Includes excellent bibliographic and discographic material

- Marsh, Dave. *Elvis*. Warner Books, 1982.

One of the better works on Presley's life and death. More an extended essay than a biography, the book features some good analysis and evocative photographs

- Ward, Ed; Geoffrey Stokes; Ken Tucker. "Don't Lose That Kid," Rolling Stone Press, *Rock of Ages : The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll*. (1986)

The former essay does an excellent job of placing Presley into the Memphis musical milieu; the latter chronicles the events of Presley's rise to stardom. Together, the two chapters offer perhaps the best brief narrative account of Presley's life in the years 1953-1956

- Wise, Sue. "Sexing Elvis," Pantheon Books, *On Record : Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. (1990)

A fascinating feminist reading of Presley by a lesbian critic who compellingly explores the varied ways popular cultural phenomena are apprehended and used by audiences. An unusual and important contribution to Presley literature

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