Elvis Presley ([ˈɛlvɪs ˈpɹɛsli]a) (January 8, 1935 – August 16, 1977) was an American singer and actor. Nicknamed "The King of Rock and Roll" or simply "The King" because of his immense international success and for his role in the expansion of this musical style on a global scale, he is one of the major cultural icons of the twentieth century.

Elvis Presley began his musical career in 1954 at Sun Records, the record company of producer Sam Phillips. Accompanied by guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black, joined the following year by drummer D.J. Fontana, he helped popularize the nascent genre of rockabilly, an energetic blend of country music and rhythm and blues. In 1956, his impresario, "Colonel Parker", got his contract bought out by RCA Victor and he landed his first No. 1 with the song Heartbreak Hotel. From then on, he made a series of television appearances and hit singles. His talent as a singer and his provocative gestures make him the spearhead of nascent rock 'n' roll but also, in a predominantly puritanical and racially divided America, a subject of controversy.

In late 1956, Presley made his film debut with Love Me Tender. He began his military service in 1958. During his military period, Elvis Presley's life was affected by the death of his mother. He resumed his career in 1960 but devoted himself more to cinema than music in the years that followed: he abandoned concerts and shot many films whose quality and success decreased. He married Priscilla in 1967, and received his first Grammy Award for the 33-rpm gospel show How Great Thou Art. His daughter Lisa Marie was born the following year, on February 1.

While he had been absent from the stage for seven years, a television show produced by Steve Binder in 1968 revived Elvis Presley's musical career. He then returned to the stage and this return marked the beginning of a series of lucrative tours and numerous concerts in Las Vegas. In 1973, he gave the first concert broadcast worldwide by satellite, Aloha from Hawaii. Weakened by years of excessive drug use, he died in his Graceland mansion in 1977, at the age of 42.

Elvis Presley is the best-selling solo artist in the history of recorded music, with estimates ranging from 600 million to one billion in sales3,4,5. One of the most famous and influential musicians of the twentieth century, he has distinguished himself in many genres (country, blues, pop, rock, gospel...) and remains one of the biggest record sellers of all time.

Biography[edit| edit]

Early life (1935–1953)[edit| the code]

Tupelo[edit| edit]

The birthplace of Elvis Presley in Tupelo, Mississippi.

Elvis Aaron Presley ([ˈɛlvɪs ˈɛɹən ˈpɹɛsli]) was born on January 8, 1935 in Tupelo, Mississippi, in a small shotgun house built by his father, Vernon Elvis Presley (1916-1979), in anticipation of his birth6 (birthplace of Elvis Presley). His mother, Gladys Love Smith (1912-1958), had given birth 35 minutes earlier to a stillborn child, Jesse Garon Presley, Elvis' twin brother, who was buried in an unmarked grave in Priceville Cemetery, Tupelo.7

Elvis Presley's parents belonged to an Assembly of God, a Pentecostal Church, which was his first musical influence.8 His mother, with whom he is particularly close, is considered the dominant member of the family by their relatives, while his father does odd jobs without showing great ambition9,10. The Presleys were not wealthy and often had to rely on their neighbours or state aid to support themselves.11

At East Tupelo Consolidated School, where he entered in September 1941, Presley was considered an average student by teachers.12 He performed for the first time on stage on October 3, 1945 at a singing competition at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show. Dressed as a cowboy, he performed the country song Old Shep, a song he often sang to his classmates in the church choir,13 and placed fifth.14 A few months later, he received his first guitar as a birthday present.15,16 His first lessons were given to him by two of his uncles, as well as by the new pastor of the family church.17

Presley changed schools in September 1946 and entered Milam. The following year, he began taking his guitar with him every day to play music and sing at lunchtime. His family lived in a predominantly African-American neighborhood, and he was considered a lonely boy who played the music of.18 He listens religiously to Mississippi Slim's radio show and manages to meet him through one of his classmates, who is none other than Slim's brother. The latter taught Presley to play chords on the guitar19 and put it on his show when he was 12 years old.20

Memphis[edit| code edit]

The Presley family moved to Memphis in November 1948. They stayed in a boarding house for nearly a year before obtaining social housing in the Lauderdale Courts subdivision.21 At L. C. Humes High School, Elvis Presley was generally too shy to play music in public, and was sometimes bullied by other students.22 He took up guitar seriously in 1950 with the help of Jesse Lee Denson, a neighbor who was two years older than him. With three other boys, including brothers Dorsey and Johnny Burnette, they form a kind of group that performs regularly in the Courts23 district.

Over time, Presley became popular in his high school. He grows rouflaquettes, uses rose essential oil and petroleum jelly to style his hair and dresses at Lansky Brothers24. He began working as an opener at Loew's State Theater, the first of a series of odd jobs.25 In April 1953, he participated in his high school's annual music competition and distinguished himself with his rendition of Teresa Brewer's Till I Waltz Again with You.26 At the end of his schooling in June 1953, Presley was determined to pursue a career in music.27,28

Early recordings (1953–1955)[edit| code edit]

Sam Phillips and Sun Records[edit| code]

Elvis Presley in 1954 (promotional shot for Sun Records).

On July 18, 1953, Elvis (aged 18) recorded his first amateur 45 rpm record, for $3.9829, at Sun Studio in Memphis (the studio of Sam Phillips and Marion Keisker's Sun Records company, specializing in African-American music). On this disc in a single copy, which he gave to his mother for his birthday, he recorded two covers of hit songs from the time My Happiness (A-side) and That's When Your Heartaches Begin (B-side) (songs from his important repertoire later reissued). Marion Keisker then added a personal comment: "Good ballad singer, to keep"30.

Elvis recorded a second acetate for Sun in January 1954, consisting of the songs I'll Never Stand In Your Way and It Wouldn't Be the Same Without You31. Soon after, he auditioned to join a local vocal quartet, the Songfellows, but was not selected.32 In April, he found a job with the Crown Electric Company as a delivery driver, a job that did not suit him.33 A new audition, this time for Eddie Bond's group, ended in another failure, Bond even recommending the young man to abandon singing34.

For his part, Sam Phillips is looking for an artist who can introduce the general public to the black musicians of Sun Records35. He bought a demo of the ballad Without You in June 1954 and it seemed to him that Presley could do something with it. The young singer tries to record it, but he can't produce anything convincing. Phillips is not discouraged and asks him to sing all the songs he knows. Impressed, he called on two musicians, guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black, for a real recording session.36

This session took place on the evening of 5 July 1954. It remains unsuccessful until late hour.29 As everyone prepares to give up, Presley picks up his guitar and starts playing That's All Right, a 1946 Arthur Crudup blues. Moore recalls, "And suddenly Elvis started singing that song jumping around and doing the idiot, and then Bill took his bass and he started doing the idiot too, and I started following them. I think Sam had left the door to the control room open [...] he stuck his head through the yawn and asked, "What are you doing? And he was told: no idea. So he said stop for a second, try to find a starting point and start again. Phillips has just found the sound he was looking for.37 Three days later, Memphis radio host Dewey Phillips began playing That's All Right on his show.38 Listeners are quick to call in large numbers to find out the name of the singer; many of them believe that he is an African American.39 A few days later, the Presley-Moore-Black trio recorded Blue Moon of Kentucky, a bluegrass song by Bill Monroe, and a 45 rpm was pressed by Sun Records with That's All Right on the A-side and Blue Moon of Kentucky on the B40 side.

In May 1955, he attended the prom accompanied by his fifteen-year-old first love Dixie Locke, with whom the singer had been dating regularly since he graduated from Humes and during his stay at Sun Records41 studio.

First concerts and contract with RCA[edit| code]

The trio performed for the first time in public on July 17 at the Bon Air42 club. At the end of the month, they played at Overton Park Shell in support of Slim Whitman. On stage, Presley's sense of rhythm and stage fright make his legs tremble. With his wide trousers, which amplified his movements, he began to make young women scream in the audience43. Moore and Black soon left their former band to play regularly with Presley, and disc jockey Bob Neal became the trio's manager. They perform regularly on the Eagle Nest stage between August and October. During this period, Presley gained confidence and gradually developed his stage playing.44

Elvis Presley en 1955.

On October 2, Elvis Presley performed for the only time in his career in the Grand Ole Opry show in Nashville. The audience was not enthusiastic and producer Jim Denny explained to Sam Phillips that the singer was not suitable for his program45,46. Two weeks later, Presley appeared in Louisiana Hayride, the Opry's main competitor, which aired on 198 radio stations in 28 different states. Again seized by stage fright during the first half of the concert, he pulled himself together and the second half was very well received by the audience47. Lousiana Hayride's drummer, D. J. Fontana, joins the trio for this performance.48 It was such a success that Presley was hired to appear every Saturday in the program for a year. The singer sells his old guitar and buys himself a Martin for $175.49

In early 1955, thanks to his concerts throughout the Southwestern United States, his five 45s on Sun Records and his weekly appearances in Louisiana Hayride, Elvis Presley became a regional star, whose notoriety stretched from Tennessee to Texas. He signed a formal management contract with Bob Neal in January. It was through him that "Colonel" Tom Parker, the manager of country singer Hank Snow, discovered Presley and hired him for Snow's tour in February50,51. On March 3, Presley appeared on television for the first time during the broadcast of Louisiana Hayride on KSLA-TV. He then auditioned, unsuccessfully, for the CBS Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts. His music mixes blues and country, a fusion that later takes the name of rockabilly. As a result, it does not fit into a predefined box: radio stations devoted to country music refuse to broadcast him because he sings like an African-American, while those devoted to rhythm and blues reject him because he sings music of pequenauds52.

In August 1955, Presley renewed his contract with Bob Neal and hired Parker as a special adviser.53 The trio, which became a quartet with the definitive arrival of D. J. Fontana, continued to give concerts at a steady pace until the end of the year54. Presley has become a promising young artist who is of interest to several record companies. After three offers of up to $25,000, Parker and Phillips reached an agreement with RCA Victor, who bought Presley's contract from Sun Records for the unprecedented $40,000.55 Two new entities, Elvis Presley Music and Gladys Music, are created by Parker with the company Hill & Range to manage the singer's next recordings56. RCA quickly began promoting his new foal and reissued several songs released by Sun before the end of the year57.

Successes and controversies (1956–1958)[edit| amend the code]

First national television and first Nos. 1[edit| amend the code]

Ed Sullivan and Elvis Presley on October 26, 1956, during rehearsals for The Ed Sullivan Show.

Elvis Presley's first recording session for RCA took place on January 10, 1956 in Nashville.58 In addition to Scotty Moore, Bill Black and D. J. Fontana, several musicians accompany the singer: pianist Floyd Cramer, guitarist Chet Atkins and three backup singers, including Gordon Stoker of the Jordanaires59. The ballad Heartbreak Hotel, recorded on this occasion, was released in 45 rpm on 27 January58. Presley made his first appearance on national television the next day, on the New York-produced CBS show Stage Show. Once the show was shot, he went to RCA Studios in New York where he recorded eight songs on the same day, including a cover of Carl Perkins' Blue Suede Shoes.60 Bob Neal's contract was disbanded and Colonel Parker became Elvis Presley's manager on March 2. Elvis Presley, the singer's debut album, was released on March 23 by RCA. It includes five previously unreleased songs recorded for Sun Records and seven new songs. It was the first rock album to reach the top of Billboard magazine's sales chart, a position it held for ten weeks.58

On April 3, Presley performed on the deck of the USS Hancock in San Diego for The Milton Berle Show. The sailors and their girlfriends gave him a wild welcome.61 At the end of the month, Heartbreak Hotel became her first No. 1 on the pop charts. He performed for two weeks at the New Frontier Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, in front of a middle-aged audience that did not appreciate his music.62 It was in Vegas that he discovered Hound Dog, a song by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller popularized in 1953 by Big Mama Thornton, which then became the closing track of his concerts63. He then embarked on a tour of the Midwest during which he played in fifteen different cities in fifteen days64.

Presley appeared on the Milton Berle Show for the second time on June 5. He leaves his guitar backstage, on Berle's advice. During his performance of Hound Dog, he engaged in suggestive movements that gave rise to considerable media controversy.65,66 His hips earned him the nickname "Elvis the Pelvis", which he did not appreciate67. However, when he appeared on the Steve Allen Show on July 1, it was to sing Hound Dog to a basset hound wearing a top hat and tie, which he later considered the most ridiculous performance of his career.68 For the first time, Steve Allen's show performed better than Ed Sullivan's. Although Presley declared Presley "inappropriate for a family audience,"69 he paid him $50,000 for three appearances on his Ed Sullivan Show, something never seen before at the time.70 The first show, broadcast on September 9, was seen by approximately 60 million viewers, representing an 82.6% market share.71 Love Me Tender registered one million pre-orders after its performance72. This show was instrumental in propelling Presley to national superstar.69

At Presley's concerts, the audience reacted in increasingly inflammatory ways. During his visit to the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show in September, 50 members of the National Guard were dispatched to assist law enforcement.73

Film debut and collaboration with Leiber and Stoller[edit| code]

Elvis Presley and Dolores Hart in Bagarres au King Créole, his fourth film (1958).

Presley, who dreamed of a career in film, signed a seven-year contract with Paramount Pictures on April 25, 1956. His first film, The Twilight Rider, hits theaters on November 21. Although he only played a supporting role, the film's producers decided to add four of his songs and change its title to reference Love Me Tender, his most recent hit. The reviews were mediocre, but the public responded.74 Meanwhile, the singer's second album, Elvis, was released, which quickly topped the charts. It includes "Love Me", a song written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, the writers of Hound Dog75.

On December 4, Presley participated in a jam session at Sun Records studios with Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash. This impromptu session, which Sam Phillips took care to record, went down in legend as the Million Dollar Quartet76. By the end of the year, Presley was on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, which reported that the sale of the singer's merchandise had grossed $22 million.77 RCA may be one of the biggest American record labels, but it accounts for more than half of their 45 rpm sales in the 195672 year.

Presley appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show for the third and final time on January 6, 1957. On this occasion, the cameras frame only the upper part of his body: according to some authors, this quasi-censorship would be an idea of Colonel Parker to make talk about his foal78,79. Greil Marcus compares his appearance in this show to Rudolph Valentino's Sheik69. The singer concluded his performance by performing the gospel Peace in the Valley, and Ed Sullivan described him at the end of the show as "a good boy."80 In March, the singer buys for his parents and him a mansion located about fifteen kilometers south of Memphis: Graceland81.

Presley's three singles released in the first half of 1957 topped the charts: "Too Much" in February, "All Shook Up" in April and "Let Me Be Your" Teddy Bear in July. His second film, Amour frénétique, was released in theaters the same month and his soundtrack, Loving You, became the singer's third consecutive No. 1. The title track was written by Leiber and Stoller. The duo collaborated more closely with Presley on the soundtrack of his next film, Le Rock du bagne (November 1957), for which they wrote four of the six songs.82 The public is still wild during the three tours given by Presley during the year83. Students bombed him with eggs in Philadelphia,84 while in Vancouver, the audience destroyed the stage after the concert ended.85

Elvis Presley en 1958.

Released in October, Elvis' Christmas Album ranks at the top of the sales charts. It includes Santa Claus Is Back in Town, a blues with ambiguous lyrics written by Leiber and Stoller. It is the best-selling Christmas album of all time in the United States. Scotty Moore and Bill Black, who felt increasingly sidelined and did not benefit financially from their collaboration with Presley, announced their resignation. They were rehired a few weeks later, receiving daily allowances86.

In mid-January 1958, when Don't became Elvis Presley's tenth No. 1, the recording of the soundtrack of the film Bagarres au King Créole took place in Hollywood. This was the last time Leiber and Stoller, who wrote three songs, collaborated with the singer87. The February 1 session also marks Bill Black's final appearance alongside Elvis Presley. The bassist died of a brain tumor in 1965.

Military service and death of his mother (1958–1960)[edit| amend the code]

Elvis Presley and his BMW 507 during his U.S. Army service in Germany between 1958 and 1960.

Elvis Presley was called up for military service on December 20, 1957. He obtained an adjournment until mid-March in order to shoot Bagarres au King Créole. It was therefore on March 24, 1958 that he was conscripted at Fort Chaffee, near Fort Smith, Arkansas, registration number US-5331076188. The media followed the event closely, to the point where photographers accompanied him to the army buildings89. Presley said he did not want preferential treatment.90

In early August, Gladys fell ill in Texas.91 She had recently increased her alcohol intake to cope with her son's fame and obligations to the military, and had also started using diet pills in an attempt to lose weight. This, coupled with a poor diet, had led to the deterioration of his liver. One afternoon, after a quarrel with her husband Vernon, Gladys collapses from fatigue. Elvis arranged for Vernon and her to return to Memphis on August 8. The next day, while training in Fort Hood, Texas, Presley learned that his mother was in the hospital. On August 11, following calls from his doctor, Presley requested emergency leave to visit his mother. After initially being lanterned, Presley was finally allowed to leave his service on August 12 to visit her in Memphis. She died two days later, on August 14, of cirrhosis at the age of 46. The official cause of death was a heart attack, with the Presleys refusing an autopsy. The singer, very close to his mother, is devastated92. The funeral was held on August 15 and Presley collapsed several times before, during, and after the service. On August 18, Presley's leave was extended by five days.91

On 1 October, after completing his training, Presley joined the 3rd Armored Division in Friedberg, West Germany.93 A sergeant introduced him to amphetamines, of which he became a major consumer94. He is considered by his comrades as a soldier like any other, who does not boast of his celebrity and shows great generosity. He donated his pay to charities and bought television sets and spare fatigues for his peers.95 It was also during his stay in Friedberg that he met his future wife, Priscilla Beaulieu, then 14 years old96.

The singer was concerned about the consequences of military service on his career, but producer Steve Sholes and publisher Freddy Bienstock managed to continue to provide the public with new Elvis records on a regular basis, drawing on his unreleased recordings.97 He placed ten songs in the Top 40 during his two years in the army, including "Wear My Ring Around Your Neck", "Hard Headed Woman" and "One Night" in 1958, then (Now and Then There's) A Fool Such as I and the No. 1 A Big Hunk o' Love in 195998. RCA also released four 33 rpm records during this period, including the compilation Elvis' Golden Records, No. 3 in 195899 sales.

Hollywood career (1960–1968)[edit| code edit]

"Elvis is back"[edit| change code]

Returning to the United States on March 2, 1960, Elvis Presley was returned to civilian life on 5100. The train that brought him back to Tennessee from New Jersey was chased by his fans, and he had to stop several times so that the singer could make brief appearances.101 On the evening of March 20, he recorded new songs at RCA Studios in Nashville. The single "Stuck on You" quickly topped the charts102. Fifteen days later, a second session completed the recording of the album Elvis Is Back!, as well as the ballads It's Now or Never and Are You Lonesome Tonight?, which were released as singles. The album testifies to the versatility of the singer103.

Juliet Prowse, Elvis Presley and Arch Johnson in the trailer for the film Café Europa in uniform (1960).

In October, G.I. Blues, the soundtrack to Café Europa in uniform, Presley's first film since his return, reached No. 1 on the sales chart upon its release. Two months later, His Hand in Mine was released, the singer's first 33 rpm Christian music album, which was a significant success for a gospel album. At a charity concert in Memphis in February 1961, RCA presented the singer with a plaque certifying worldwide sales of more than 75 million records104. In March, a 12-hour session in Nashville canned the album Something for Everybody105, which drew on Nashville sound106 and became his sixth No. 1. On March 25, Presley gave a charity concert in Hawaii, the proceeds of which were to fund a memorial to the victims of the attack on Pearl Harbor. This was his last public performance until 1968107.

Movies follow one another[edit| change code]

Colonel Parker imposed a busy shooting schedule on Presley, who found himself headlining light musical films with modest budgets and predictable scripts. The singer tried to impose more serious roles, but the failure of Les Rôdeurs de la plaine (1960) and Amour sauvage (1961) convinced him not to deviate from the winning formula. Most of the 27 films he made up to 1969 fell into this category.108 Their critical reception was disastrous, but they almost all made it to the box office. As their producer Hal Wallis sums it up, "Nothing is certain in Hollywood except a Presley movie."109

Fifteen of Presley's films are accompanied by a 33-rpm soundtrack, and five others by an EP. His music suffers from their accelerated release rate (he frequently plays in three films a year). Jerry Leiber describes the formula followed by all these soundtracks: "three ballads, a medium-tempo piece, a fast song, and a blues boogie."110 Their quality decreased over the decade.111 Renowned authors, such as Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, continued to write for Presley, but the bulk of his songs during this period were the work of second-rate authors.112 The singer is aware of this evolution and hates many titles that he is forced to perform113,114. The world has changed, music too, new singers and groups have appeared, like the Beatles, whom Elvis Presley welcomes on August 27, 1965, in his home in Bel Air in Los Angeles.

Elvis Presley with his wife and daughter in February 1968.

During the first half of the 1960s, three Presley soundtracks topped the charts, and some songs from them became classics, such as Can't Help Falling in Love (1961) and Return to Sender (1962). Over time, however, their commercial success began to dry up. It was not until the end of 1967 that the poor results of the album Clambake made RCA's management aware of the problem. Between early 1967 and mid-1968, only two of the singer's eight singles charted in the Top 40115, and the Speedway soundtrack, released in May 1968, did not exceed number 82 on the album chart. At this point, Presley has become an object of ridicule for music lovers, which is now defended only by his fiercest admirers.116 He released only one non-non-soundtrack album during this period: his second 33 rpm of Christian music, How Great Thou Art (1967), which won the Grammy Award for Best Religious Performance.117

Seven years after they met, Presley proposed to Priscilla Beaulieu shortly before Christmas 1966. The bridal ceremony took place on May 1, 1967 in the couple's suite at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas118. Their only daughter, Lisa Marie, was born on February 1 of the following year.119

The Great Return (1968–1973)[edit| amend the code]

Elvis, the special[edit| change code]

Elvis Presley en 1968 (photo promotionnelle pour le film The Trouble with Girls.

The artistic decline of Elvis Presley's films and albums was accompanied by a commercial decline, so much so that in early 1968, Colonel Parker began to have difficulty finding producers willing to invest the usual million dollars for a new film of the singer. So he changed his strategy and struck a deal with NBC, which paid $1.25 million for a movie and a television special for Christmas120. Presley's last television appearance was on May 12, 1960, when The Frank Sinatra Timex Show: Welcome Home Elvis aired, hosted by Frank Sinatra and broadcast on ABC121.

The NBC special, simply titled Elvis, was picked up in Burbank in late June and aired on December 3, 1968. Produced by Steve Binder, it consists of several segments recorded in the studio in very elaborate sets, but also live takes during which Presley, anxious at the idea of singing in front of an audience, is accompanied by his former musicians Scotty Moore and D. J. Fontana, as well as his friends Alan Fortas, Charlie Hodge and Lance LeGault122. During this sequence that remains famous as the "Sit down show", Elvis wears a black leather suit reminiscent of his early days.123 The show was a success for NBC: it was the most watched of the season for the network, with a 42% market share.124,125

Memphis to Vegas[edit| code]

Angered by the success of his special, which marked his return to rock and revived his musical career,126 Presley entered the American Sound Studio in Memphis to prepare a new album, his first record that was neither a soundtrack nor a collection of Christian songs, in eight years. Recorded with the house band, the "Memphis Boys", under the guidance of producer Chips Moman, From Elvis in Memphis offers a sound influenced by the soul of Stax. It was released in June 1969, two months after the single "In the Ghetto". Critics and the public gave them a good reception; The album spent more than twenty weeks on the charts.

The singer also wants to give concerts again on a regular basis. Offers poured in from all over the world, but Colonel Parker struck a deal with the International Hotel in Las Vegas for 57 dates. As Moore, Fontana and the Jordanaires preferred to stay in Nashville, Presley formed a new backing band with guitarist James Burton and two gospel groups, The Imperials and The Sweet Inspirations.127 He was nervous, but his first night at the International, on July 31, was a triumph: the 2,200 spectators, including many celebrities, gave him three standing ovations128. The next day, Parker negotiated a new contract with the hotel: Presley performed there in February and August for five years for an annual salary of one million dollars.129

November saw the release of Presley's latest Hollywood film, L'habit ne fait pas la femme, and the double album From Memphis to Vegas / From Vegas to Memphis, composed half of songs recorded live at the International Hotel and half of songs from sessions at American Sound studios earlier this year. Suspicious Minds topped the singles charts: it was her first No. 1 in more than seven years, but also her last.

Resuming tours[edit| code]

Presley's first monthly engagement at the International Hotel, in February 1970, resulted in the live album On Stage, released in June.130 At the end of the month, the singer gave six concerts at the Houston Astrodome in front of a record number of spectators131. The single "The Wonder of You", released in April, topped the easy-listening charts. Returning to international sales in August, Presley was filmed by MGM for the documentary Elvis: That's the Way It Is. He then performed wearing a jumpsuit, a characteristic garment of his stage performances from then on. The documentary is accompanied by an album, also titled That's the Way It Is, which mixes studio takes and live recordings. He abandoned the roots sound of the previous year's Memphis sessions in favor of a more consensual music, where country and soul gave way to traditional pop more in line with the tastes of the Las Vegas audience132. Presley embarked on a week-long tour of the American South in September, his first since 1958, followed by another week of concerts on the West Coast in November.133

Presley and Richard Nixon at the White House on December 21, 1970.

On December 21, 1970, the singer met President Richard Nixon at the White House. It was an opportunity for him to affirm his patriotism and contempt for the counterculture of the 1960s, especially when it came to drugs, in the context of the War on Drugs. He asked the president to give him a badge from the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs and criticized the Beatles, whom he considered pro-drug and anti-American, although he performed some of their songs on stage.134

The year 1971 saw the release of three new albums. The most critically acclaimed was Elvis Country (I'm 10,000 Years Old), a record covering the range of variants of country music, from bluegrass to rockabilly,135 but the best-selling one was a new Christmas album, Elvis Sings the Wonderful World of Christmas.

Aloha from Hawaii[modifier | modifier le code]

In 1972, MGM produced a new documentary, Elvis on Tour. Filmed during several concerts of the tour from April 5 to 19, the documentary won the Golden Globe for Best Documentary. That same year, Presley won his second Grammy for the gospel album He Touched Me. He gave four sold-out concerts at Madison Square Garden in June. The one on the 10th is immortalized on the album Elvis: As Recorded at Madison Square Garden136. After this tour came the 45 rpm Burning Love, which marked the last appearance of the singer in the US Top 10.

The Presleys, who had been struggling for some time, separated on February 23, 1972 and began divorce proceedings on August 18, 137. The singer, who began a new relationship with model Linda Thompson, was depressed by the end of his marriage138. The divorce was pronounced on October 9, 1973139.

Elvis Presley en 1973.

In January 1973, Presley gave two charity concerts to benefit the Kui Lee Cancer Fund. The first serves as a rehearsal for the second, which takes place on 14 January and gives rise to the first global satellite broadcast. Aloha from Hawaii is watched by millions of viewers around the world.140,141,142 The singer appears in an iconic white suit, with a cape struck with an eagle symbolizing America143. The double album Aloha from Hawaii Via Satellite was released in February and sold more than five million copies in the United States.

Health problems and later years (1973–1977)[edit| amend Code]

A jumpsuit worn by Presley, kept at Graceland.

Excessive drug use begins to have effects on Presley's health. He overdosed on barbiturates twice in 1973 and ended up in hospital after the second. Yet he gives more and more concerts, up to 168 for the year 1973144 alone. His health deteriorated sharply in September 1974, which worried his collaborators145, but the public was kept in the dark and continued to attend his concerts en masse.

On the other hand, the singer spends less and less time in the studio, which worries RCA. After recording 18 songs in December 1973, he did not set foot in a recording studio for the entire year 1974146. A live album, Elvis Recorded Live on Stage in Memphis, was released in July by RCA147. It includes a version of How Great Thou Art that earned Presley his third and final Grammy Award148. He returned to the studios in March 1975, but a second session organized by Colonel Parker at the end of the year came to nothing149. RCA eventually sent a mobile studio to Graceland in 1976 to allow the singer to do two full sessions at home, but even then, studio work was painful.150

All these recording sessions provide enough tracks to fill six albums. Although Presley was no longer competitive on the general sales charts, his albums performed well in the country market: Promised Land (1975), From Elvis Presley Boulevard, Memphis, Tennessee (1976) and Moody Blue (1977) topped the country chart.151 His singles were also a hit on the country and adult contemporary charts152.

In November 1976, Presley ended his relationship with Linda Thompson and began dating Ginger Alden.153 His overweight and excessive consumption of medication have a disastrous effect on his concerts. He strives to honor his commitments, but his performances are shorter than before, sometimes he is completely incomprehensible. At the end of March 1977, he was unable to perform at Baton Rouge and had to cancel several concerts154. The public begins to express its discontent, but the singer does not seem to be aware of it, all to his passion for spiritualism155.

During a new tour in June, Presley was filmed by CBS for a special, Elvis in Concert, scheduled for October. He appears very weakened on the 19th at Omaha156, and sometimes forgets some words. He gave a better performance two days later at Rapid City157158 and gave his final concert at the Market Square Arena in Indianapolis on June 26, 1977159.

Elvis Presley's headstone at Graceland.

Red West, Sonny West and Dave Hebler, three of Presley's former bodyguards fired by his father Vernon in July 1976, reveal Presley's addictions in their book Elvis: What Happened?, published on August 1. Distraught, the singer tried in vain to prevent its publication by offering money to publishers160. The list of his health problems continues to grow: he suffers from glaucoma, high blood pressure, liver problems and colectasis, all of which are aggravated by drug abuse.161

Presley had to leave Memphis by plane on August 16, 1977 to embark on another tour. In the afternoon, Ginger Alden discovers him lying on the floor of his bathroom, victim of a heart attack162. Resuscitation attempts failed, and he was pronounced dead at 3:30 p.m. at Baptist Memorial Hospital.163 His funeral was held on August 18 at Graceland. 80,000 people attended the funeral procession to Forest Hill Cemetery, where the singer was buried next to his mother Gladys164.

Religion and spirituality[edit| code]

Elvis' taste for music originated in an Assemblies of God church in Tupelo, where his mother used to take him as a child, and then in a church in Memphis as a teenager, whose services were steeped in the African-American musical culture of spirituals.13 During his teenage years, he developed a passion for learning Christian songs.85

Later, it was his hairdresser Larry Geller who influenced him by lending him the books Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda and The Impersonal Life by Joseph Sieber Benner. He offered thousands of copies of Benner's book around him. Elvis spent a considerable amount of time reading and searching for "the reason for his birth."

During his career, he kept his Christian faith which he expressed in gospel albums165.

On the day of his death, Frank Adams' The Scientific Search for the Face of Jesus was found near him.166

Karate[edit| code]

Presley had been practicing karate (Shito-ryu style) since his military service (in Germany) in 1958. He earned his black belt in 1960 in Memphis. His Sensei was Hank Slemansky. At the time of his death, Presley was 7th dan.

Discography[edit| edit code]

Main article: Elvis Presley discography

Albums[edit| change code]

1956 : Elvis Presley (no 1)

1956 : Elvis (no 1)

1957 : Loving You (B.O., no 1)

1957 : Elvis' Christmas Album (no 1)

1958 : King Creole (B.O.)

1959 : For LP Fans Only

1959 : A Date with Elvis

1960 : Elvis Is Back!

1960 : G.I. Blues (B.O., no 1)

1960 : His Hand in Mine

1961 : Something for Everybody (no 1)

1961 : Blue Hawaii (B.O., no 1)

1962 : Pot Luck

1962 : Girls! Girls! Girls! (B.O.)

1963 : It Happened at the World's Fair (B.O.)

1963 : Fun in Acapulco (B.O.)

1964 : Kissin' Cousins (B.O.)

1964 : Roustabout (B.O.)

1965 : Girl Happy (B.O.)

1965 : Harum Scarum (B.O.)

1966 : Frankie and Johnny (B.O.)

1966 : Paradise, Hawaiian Style (B.O.)

1966 : Spinout (B.O.)

1967 : How Great Thou Art

1967 : Double Trouble (B.O.)

1967 : Clambake (B.O.)

1968 : Speedway (B.O.)

1969 : From Elvis in Memphis

1969 : From Memphis to Vegas / From Vegas to Memphis

1971 : Elvis Country (I'm 10,000 Years Old)

1971 : Love Letters from Elvis

1971 : Elvis Sings the Wonderful World of Christmas

1972 : Elvis Now

1972 : He Touched Me

1973 : Elvis

1973 : Raised on Rock

1974 : Good Times

1975 : Promised Land

1975 : Today

1976 : From Elvis Presley Boulevard, Memphis, Tennessee

1977 : Moody Blue

Main singles[edit| change code]

These singles charted in the Top 10 of sales in the United States.

1956 : Heartbreak Hotel (no 1)

1956 : I Want You, I Need You, I Love You (no 1)

1956 : Don't Be Cruel (no 1)

1956 : Hound Dog (no 1)

1956 : Love Me Tender (no 1)

1956 : Love Me

1957 : Too Much (no 1)

1957 : All Shook Up (no 1)

1957 : (Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear (no 1)

1957 : Jailhouse Rock (no 1)

1958 : Don't (no 1)

1958 : Wear My Ring Around Your Neck

1958 : Hard Headed Woman (no 1)

1958 : One Night

1958 : I Got Stung

1959 : (Now and Then There's) A Fool Such as I

1959 : I Need Your Love Tonight

1959 : A Big Hunk o' Love

1960 : Stuck on You (no 1)

1960 : It's Now or Never (no 1)

1960 : Are You Lonesome Tonight? (no 1)

1961 : Surrender (no 1)

1961 : I Feel So Bad

1961 : (Marie's the Name) His Latest Flame

1961 : Little Sister

1961 : Can't Help Falling in Love

1962 : Good Luck Charm (no 1)

1962 : She's Not You

1962 : Return to Sender

1963 : (You're the) Devil in Disguise

Bossa Nova Baby (1963)

1965 : Crying in the Chapel

1969 : In the Ghetto

1969 : Suspicious Minds (no 1)

1969 : Don't Cry Daddy

1970 : The Wonder of You

1972 : Burning Love

Disk sales[edit| change code]

L'étoile d'Elvis Presley au Hollywood Walk of Fame, Los Angeles.

At the time Presley debuted, the public bought few albums and it was mainly thanks to singles that Elvis became the singer who sold the most records in the world. The figure of one billion is commonly advanced, as is the case for The Beatles. However, if we consider only album sales, the British group is well ahead of Elvis Presley; no album by the American has sold well enough to appear in the charts listing the major best-selling albums of all time.

Elvis Presley got eighty-two gold records - at least five hundred thousand copies officially sold for each. In 2010, the organization that counts record sales in the United States, the RIAA, credits 176 million sales of Beatles albums and 120 million those of Elvis Presley. As for singles, if the British group places twenty in the first place of the American charts, against eighteen for Presley, on the contrary the American has thirty-eight in the first ten places against thirty-four for the Beatles. In the Top 40, Elvis Presley is still ahead with 114, while the group has 52. He also won in number of weeks spent in first place, with 80 to 59.

Elvis Presley and cinema[edit| edit]

Elvis actor[edit| code]

Main article: Elvis Presley filmography

As early as 1956, Hollywood became interested in Elvis. At the origin of the project, there was to be no song, but the producers added four and The Reno Brother's (original title) was renamed Love Me Tender, from the title of its hit of the moment. The film, which is about the Civil War, is badly perceived by Elvis' admirers, they are indignant to see their idol in a supporting role. Nevertheless, the film was a success. The next film, Loving You, again taking the title of his last success, is written and made to measure for him. He practically plays his own role, that of a little singer who becomes a superstar thanks to work and a business manager. Loving You is a huge success and Elvis becomes a movie star. In his third film, the archetype of the violent film, Elvis plays an employee who likes to sing, but who, following a fight, kills a guy and goes to jail. There, he sings, becomes the darling of his fellow inmates and, freed, becomes a star before experiencing the pangs of fame. The film, Jailhouse Rock, also the title of one of his standards, is a resounding success with young people.

Elvis Presley in 1966 (publicity photo for the film The Tombeur of these young ladies)

King Creole was his last film before he left for the army in 1958. The script was planned for James Dean and the character goes from boxer to singer. Once again, Elvis plays a simple boy who gets away with it thanks to the song.

From 1960, upon his return from the army, Elvis left the stage to devote himself to Hollywood, and for nine years, made 27 films including The Prowlers of the Plain (1960), Under the Blue Sky of Hawaii (1961), The Idol of Acapulco (1963) with Ursula Andress, Love in Fourth Gear (1964) with Ann-Margret, which is his biggest box office success (bringing in more than $ 9 million to MGM, for less than $1 million invested), Girl Happy (1965), Tickle Me (1965), Full Tube (1968) with Nancy Sinatra, The Great Thrill (1968). His record sales, taken solely from film soundtracks, fell, and Elvis no longer met with the same success. In addition, Elvis Presley gets tired of the eternal same roles that are offered to him and in front of the camera is bored ostentatiously. When his film contract ended in 1969, Elvis, tired and criticized, decided to end his career in Hollywood.

Elvis Presley and television[edit| code edit]

Elvis made three television specials: Elvis (often called the "come back special", 1968), Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii, via Satellite (1973), and Elvis in Concert (1977).

Influence and posterity[edit| editing code]

Elvis' influence in music[edit| code change]

Graceland.

Elvis Presley is considered the main icon of rock 'n' roll, although its drummer until 1968 felt that their music was not strictly speaking rock and could not be confined to any particular genre13. His voice, his music, his provocative gestures, his dress habits, his career (miserable childhood, dazzling celebrity, comeback, perseverance despite difficulties, descent into hell and premature death) have made him a popular idol and not only the symbol of a certain adolescent rebellion but also of almost every stage of the life of any individual. Elvis can be considered the main actor in the wide diffusion of rock 'n' roll among the general white American and then European public. Indeed, if jazz had already closely associated music and sexuality, and if several white performers were alongside Elvis in his role as a pioneer of rock (for example, Bill Haley), Presley is the first white to associate sex appeal (an advantageous physique, voice inflections and very suggestive pelvic movements) with this new form of music. while adding a more dynamic and impactful sound from Sun studios in Memphis. Although considered shocking by the American conservative fringe, it contributed greatly to popularizing the musical genre and thus paved the way for recognition to many black artists, such as Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley and Little Richard, as well as white rockers, such as Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Her popularity, especially among teenage girls, has reached unprecedented heights; His concerts and public appearances have resulted in crowd movements. Elvis' success with young people, whose purchasing power is growing, dictates fashion not only musical, but also hair or clothing. It is a real social phenomenon. It is mainly thanks to Elvis Presley that Europe discovers rock, even behind the Iron Curtain. Cliff Richard is inspired by it and becomes at the dawn of the sixties, one of the biggest stars of the United Kingdom. John Lennon acknowledged that "if there hadn't been an Elvis, there wouldn't have been the Beatles." Teenagers around the world began to copy Elvis' hairstyle and the demand for transistor radios increased dramatically, allowing Sony to grow from a small Japanese radio manufacturer to a multinational one.

Still today an icon of the twentieth century, countless artists of the second half of the century define themselves in relation to his influence, either by claiming his heritage or by rejecting him as a symbol of outdated music - especially from the punk movement. Elvis Costello borrowed the name Elvis to get his career off the ground. Pop crooner Chris Isaac copies it. Dire Straits wrote a tribute song, Calling Elvis. Frank Zappa also wrote a form of tribute song with his Elvis Has Just Left The Building. In France, rockabilly singer Jesse Garon borrowed his stage name from the names of Elvis' stillborn twin, Australian rocker Nick Cave dedicated his song Tupelo to the myth surrounding the singer. The Californian band Dread Zeppelin with its leader Greg Tortell (aka Tortelvis) parodied Elvis to the point of ridicule, handing out Hawaiian scarves and necklaces to the crowd at their concerts, and enjoyed a successful career during the 1980s. Finally, as a tribute, the group U2 recorded on the album The Unforgettable Fire, in 1984, the title Elvis Presley and America. There are also American impersonators (such as Jimmy "Orion" Ellis (1945-1998) or Doug Church), whose voices are very close to Elvis'.

The cinema has also paid tribute to Elvis Presley, in Ultimo Elvis (Armando Bo, 2012) where he is "embodied" by John McInerny, one of his impersonators.

Influences, tributes, winks, symbols related to Elvis Presley become in the years after his death omnipresent in American culture, the last part of his life becomes in particular an infinite source of borrowing.

Elvis The Concert and virtual concerts[edit| code]

In 1997, Elvis the Concert, Elvis' very first virtual concert, synchronized by computer, presented Elvis Presley on the big screen, with his musicians from the 1970s gathered on stage. They tour all over the world. The concert is conducted by Joe Guercio with the participation of the TCB Band, vocal groups The Sweet Inspirations and The Imperials. Elvis video footage comes from the NBC '68 Comeback Special, the Elvis satellite concert: Aloha from Hawaii, as well as MGM's filmed concerts, That's the Way It Is from 1970, and Elvis on Tour from 1972. The concert was tested in the United States in 1997 and 1998 before being presented in Europe in 1999.

In 2009, Cirque du Soleil took up this concept in Las Vegas with the show Viva Elvis.

In film and television[edit| edit code]

There is a category devoted to this topic: Actor who portrayed Elvis Presley.

The life of Elvis Presley has prompted four film adaptations167[insufficient source] and numerous documentaries. Many films and TV movies feature the singer, more or less close to his real character depending on the subject and genre of the work. Some appearances are brief, more like a wink, as in Forrest Gump.

Main article: List of films featuring Elvis Presley

Renewed popularity in the twenty-first century[edit| change code]

Elvis also enjoyed a resurgence in popularity during the 2002 FIFA World Cup, when Nike used Dutch DJ Junkie XL's remix of his song "A Little Less Conversation" as the background to a commercial featuring international soccer stars. This song reached number one in more than twenty countries, including the United States. Around the same time, a compilation, which ends in two parts, of Elvis' greatest songs: Elv1s 30 #1 Hits. The remix was added to the album as the 31st track, just before the CD was released in October 2002. Twenty-five years after his death, the album, which includes Presley's main hits and excellent sound restoration, reaches the first place of the charts.

As 2017 celebrates the 40th anniversary of the King's death, events are taking place all over the world, from Graceland for a commemorative concert in the middle of Elvis week168, with a symphony orchestra169, to Sydney and its dedicated Festival which is visited by the Elvis Express, to the Cambrai Museum, which replaces its guides with Presley lookalikes170. Inspired by the award-winning compilations, If I Can Dream (2015) and The Wonder of You (2016), the memorial concert gives fans the opportunity to hear the King's greatest hits performed by Elvis Presley himself on the big screen, accompanied by a live symphony orchestra. The concert includes an appearance by Priscilla Presley and other guests.171 An album containing 2 CDs named Elvis Symphonique was released on August 4, 2017 and contains many hits of Elvis Presley revisited on a symphonic accompaniment.

Among his many achievements, Elvis is one of two singers, along with Roy Orbison, to have simultaneously had two albums in the Top 5 of the album sales charts. He is inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.172

Popularity in France[edit| edit code]

In France, Dick Riversb, Johnny Hallyday and Eddy Mitchell discovered rock 'n' roll through Elvis Presley. They are inspired by it, and popularize in France this music from across the Atlantic. Presley paved the way for many American rockers to sell their records in Europe and tour there.

The image and influence of the "rebel with a big heart" singer is also found in Joe Dassin, Mike Brant, Renaud, and even in actors such as Alain Delon and Gérard Depardieu.

Elvis' look inspired several characters from Frank Margerin's comics such as Lucien and Manu.

Popularity in Japan[edit| edit code]

As in France, several musicians imitate Elvis' look to promote an image of "rock n' roll rebel". Elvis' look is a source of inspiration for young motorcycle enthusiasts, the banana hairstyle and jumpsuit are common sources of inspiration for the majority ceremony.

Popularity in Quebec[edit| code]

viewThis section does not sufficiently cite its sources (May 2017).

Singer Johnny Farago gave a series of concerts in tribute to Elvis in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The television station Télé-Métropole is launching a contest for imitators on the show Les Tannants. This contest tarnished Elvis' image in Quebec until the late 1980s, associating Elvis with an image in bad taste. In 1995, producer Jean Pilote and the Théâtre du Capitole de Québec restored Elvis Presley's image in Quebec by presenting, under license from EPE, a sophisticated summer musical production called Elvis Story, attended by hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world. The show is presented in Paris, Toronto, Gatineau, Biloxi, Mississippi, Atlantic City and Japan. Singers Martin Fontaine and Jamie Aaron Kelley played Elvis until 2007. In 2009, the show was improved and presented at the Théâtre du Palais Municipal de La Baie (Saguenay) and at the Salle L'Étoile DIX30 in Brossard. Brandon Bennett currently plays the role of Elvis.

Still in Quebec, where for some, Elvis personifies the excess of the American myth in the face of nationalist and cultural demands, the filmmaker Pierre Falardeau devotes to the legend a humorous trilogy entitled Elvis Gratton which is first a success of esteem in short film and twenty years later, in 2005, a vast public success in theaters. The comic character then had his television series entitled Bob Gratton: ma vie, my life, on the TQS network (renamed V in 2009), from 2007 to 2009. It is in the French-speaking province of Quebec that Elvis Presley's albums are the best-selling in Canada.

Influence in paleontology[edit| code edit]

The dinosaur named Cryolophosaurus was nicknamed Elvisaurus by paleontologists, because the crest of the carnivore reminded them of the singer's hairstyle173.

Parody[edit| edit code]

In season 2 of Epic Rap Battles of History, Elvis Presley confronts Michael Jackson to see who will take the nickname King.

Popular expression[edit| edit code]

The announcement "Elvis has left the building", sometimes uttered at the end of Elvis Presley concerts to dissuade his fans from waiting for a possible return to the stage, has become a popular expression used on various occasions.