

ELVIS PRESLEY

Sunrise

If one *really* had to pick a single place and date as the Birth of Rock & Roll, it might as well be a Memphis, Tennessee, on July 5, 1954. That hot summer night found Elvis Presley, Scotty Moore and Bill Black recording at Sam Phillips' Sun Records studio, struggling through a country ballad and trying to figure out why nothing seemed to be coming together. Tense and frustrated, the band took a break from recording and launched into a frenzied, clowning rave up of an old blues song to let off steam. Elvis threw off his inhibitions and tore into Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "**That's All Right**" like a schoolboy smashing a window. Following his lead, Bill slapped and jumped all over his standup bass while Scotty fired off lowdown blues guitar licks that would have gotten him fired from the country band he and Bill played in. Sam burst through the control room door, asked what they were doing and told the slightly embarrassed trio to "do whatever it was again" so they could put it on tape.

To his great credit, Sam Phillips recognized the future when he heard it. For years he had recorded some of the great Memphis bluesmen, and for years he had repeated what is now rock's most famous line: "If only I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a million dollars." Suddenly there He was, that "white man with a Negro feel," and suddenly it seemed so obvious and natural. The fusion of white and black—country and blues—that had seemed impossibly remote just a few minutes earlier was now standing right in front of him having the time of his life. It is wonderfully appropriate that this crucial version of rock & roll was born in the spirit of fun and letting loose. In one spontaneous, unconscious moment Elvis reached into his soul and musical heritage and turned the old into the stunningly new. While the East Coast version of rock & roll developed gradually and with some discernible logic out of rhythm & blues, the sprawling, diverse musical traditions of the South exploded into rock & roll in one fiery blast.

Not that it was a Shot Heard 'round the World. It would be 18 months before mainstream America surrendered to Elvis, but it was all there that day in July—all the urgency, excitement and liberating freedom of rock & roll. Had that strange boy with the pink pants and sideburns simply gone back to driving a truck, "That's All Right" would still be a remarkable, revelatory record. Instead, he became the King of Rock & Roll, and the record was nothing less than revolutionary.

Elvis and Us

Young Elvis Presley remains rock's most indelible image, eternally young, hip and inspiring despite the tragic mess he made of his later life. The appearance of Elvis was *the* Moment for the rock era, perfectly timed, now timeless. Rock & roll would have happened—was already happening—without him, but it would have been very different and would never have reached the spectacular heights and had the sweeping impact that it did. Elvis was far greater than the sum of his singles: he was rock's first larger-than-life Hero, and with him began the shared dreams and personal identification that have shaped pop culture ever since. The message of Elvis was It's the Singer, not the Song. To dress

like Elvis or affect his sneering self-confidence or hang his poster in your bedroom meant more than "I like his music." In Elvis millions of young people found more than a new entertainer: they found themselves, or at least an idealized image of themselves that stood in stark, liberating contrast to the repressed atmosphere of 1950's America. Bob Dylan recalled that hearing Elvis for the first time "was like busting out of jail."ⁱ Or as fellow fan Springsteen put it, "It was like he came along and whispered a dream in everybody's ear and then we dreamed it."ⁱⁱ

Elvis gave rock's first generation a standard-bearer in the battle against the mainstream—against Perry Como, Doris Day and Mom & Dad's other favorites, and against Pat Boone, the Crew Cuts and the rest of the clean-cut covers crowd passing itself off as "rock & roll." Had America lived up to its own ideals, of course, it would not have taken a white performer to lead the charge, but the stark realities of the 1950's assured that no black artist could have the wide appeal, music industry support and access to the media that Elvis enjoyed. That blunt fact is cause for both condemnation and celebration—condemnation of the *need* for an "Elvis," and celebration that one appeared.

The sheer force of Elvis' popularity and talent broke through previously impenetrable barriers and forced rock & roll down the mainstream's throat. He gave rock a center of gravity and source of momentum and single-handedly created the context that made it possible to talk about rock as something more than a "passing fad for rhythm & blues." While he was at his peak rock exploded with and around him. When he "retired" to the army and the movies, it started to wither: without an overriding force like Elvis to keep things moving in the early sixties, rock was at the mercy of *American Bandstand* and the "teen idol" pretenders to the throne. The audience scattered, waiting, as it turned out, for the Beatles to shape rock's second generation as Elvis had the first.

Elvis never really reclaimed his throne after leaving for the army, but he never relinquished it either. Through all the passing years and changing times, a central fact remains unchanged: there's only one King of Rock & Roll, and that's Elvis.

ⁱDylan quote from August, 1987 *US* magazine.

ⁱⁱGreil Marcus, "Dead Elvis, " (1991; New York: Doubleday), pg. 129.