Elvis at RCA

Elvis racked up an impressive string of #1 hits in two short years: "Heartbreak Hotel," "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You," "Don't Be Cruel," "Hound Dog," "Love Me Tender," "Too Much," "All Shook Up," "Teddy Bear," "Jailhouse Rock," "Don't," and "Hard Headed Woman." During that period Elvis held down the #1 position for a staggering 58 weeks. The statistics for his entire career are equally impressive: 41 gold albums, 18 #1 singles, 38 top ten and 107 top forty hits. Only the Beatles even came close to Elvis' domination of the charts.

Looking at the above list of songs, or any collection of Elvis songs, its hard not to be struck by the diversity and inconsistency of the material. "Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock" are as tough and exciting as rock & roll gets, while "Love Me Tender" and "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" are mawkish ballads that would have made Johnny Ray or Pat Boone proud; "Too Much" and "Hard Headed Woman" have a bluesy sexuality while "Teddy Bear" seems barely out of puberty; and the eerie sound and adult sensibilities of "Heartbreak Hotel" are a sharp contrast to the sock-hop pop of "Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up."

The true merits of Elvis Presley's music have always been the subject of some dispute. Elvis couldn't write songs or play the guitar like Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins and Buddy Holly, couldn't sustain the rock & roll fire of Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis, lacked the consistency of Fats Domino... But no one else could have appealed to such varied tastes and united a nation fans the way Elvis did. If you hated "Love Me Tender," then you probably loved "Hound Dog"; if not, then you *had* to love "Don't Be Cruel." From schmaltzy ballads through mainstream pop to hard-edged rock & roll, Elvis covered all the bases—and when he was at his best, he was indeed the King of rock & roll. At his worst, he was nearly unlistenable, and he was always capable of turning out mediocre, half-hearted material at RCA, where the pressures of sustaining his success and image inevitably had an effect on his music, especially with the added demands of the movies and the requisite soundtrack songs. Eventually he covered too many bases, and diluted his talent in his attempt to appeal to everyone, though it is also that grand, sweeping attempt to be all things to all people that makes Elvis Presley such a spectacular and uniquely American success story. In any case, that the same man could record "Hound Dog" and "Old Shep," with equal conviction, is just one of the many apparent contradictions that make Elvis so fascinating and so exasperating.

"Heartbreak Hotel"

Elvis got off to a great start at RCA with "**Heartbreak Hotel**," which started its steady climb up the charts in January 1956. The Elvis of "Heartbreak Hotel" sounds as if he's suffocating in some twisted after-hours club in the Twilight Zone, backed by a half-demented jazz bass and piano and a distorted guitar that rails against the desolation of the song's lyrics and mood. "Heartbreak Hotel" is unlike anything he recorded at Sun: big, spacious and massively reverberated where the Sun sound was lean and focused, set with an instrumental arrangement punctuated by stops, starts and dynamic subtleties that seem a world away from the full-speed-ahead feel of rockabilly, and sung with a brash, worldwise voice that already seems far removed from the innocence of his wide-eyed Memphis celebrations.

Scotty Moore and Bill Black made the dramatic change with Elvis and remained the core of his band at RCA, along with drummer **D. J. Fontana**, who had toured with Elvis since they met at the *Louisiana Hayride*. At RCA, the band was usually augmented to include a piano, an extra guitar and a gospel-style backing vocal group, the **Jordanaires**, who had a knack for adding ludicrously polite harmonies to even the hardest rock songs.[i] Still uncertain about Elvis' style and appeal, RCA first chose their Nashville studios as the logical place to tap his Memphis rockabilly. (Elvis continued to record in Nashville throughout his career, alternating with sessions in New York and Hollywood.) Nashville wasn't Memphis, however, and Elvis was no longer a "rockabilly," and the results were markedly different.

The Rockers

The songs Elvis chose to record ranged from hard-edged *rock* to catchy *pop* and sentimental *ballads*, and his overall output can be loosely divided into those three styles. He cut through the dense guitar and drums clatter of his hardest rockers with a raucous voice that he, and everyone else, borrowed from Little Richard. This hard rocking side of Elvis included most of his cover songs, such as "Hound Dog," "Blue Suede Shoes," "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," "Shake, Rattle and Roll" and his many Little Richard covers, and some of his most riveting original performances, including "Jailhouse Rock" and "A Big Hunk O' Love."

Elvis' version of "**Hound Dog**" serves as a good illustration of the difference between "rockabilly" and "rock & roll." Rockabilly was, of course, inseparable from—was a version of—rock & roll, and its influence is clearly felt in the instrumentation and the sheer energy and tough sound of "Hound Dog." On the other hand, the rough, aggressive vocals, the huge drum sound, added hand claps, distorted guitar, pop-styled vocal backing and big, slick production make the record very different from the lean minimalism of his Sun style, while the blues and country mixture that fueled rockabilly is only faintly audible, if at all. Rock & roll was developing a tradition of its own and, like Elvis, was already a giant step removed from its roots.

"Hound Dog" was originally recorded by Big Mama Thornton in 1952, though Elvis' version was actually based on a comic rendition by a Las Vegas lounge band—much of the humor derived from the male rendition of the song's female point of view, though this element of humor was vaporized in the ferocity of Elvis' attack. The song was written by the team of **Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller** (with uncredited help from Johnny Otis), who then began supplying Elvis with hits written specifically for him, including "Jailhouse Rock," "Loving You," "Love Me," "Don't," "Treat Me Nice" and "(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care." Elvis left the ancient blues and country behind at RCA, first turning to covers of more recent R&B and rock & roll songs, then to new material written for him as his popularity and appeal to songwriters grew.[ii]

Leiber and Stoller wrote "**Jailhouse Rock**" for the 1957 movie of the same name. Like the rest of his movie songs, it was written to order—the script called for a production number in a jail—in the manner that was largely responsible for the decline of Elvis' material in later years. In the hands of Leiber and Stoller, however, the song became an aural jail break that transcended the plot and inspired a full-throttle performance from Elvis, backed by a syncopated drum beat meant to sound like convicts busting rocks on a chain gang. Elvis also choreographed the song's production number

for the movie, and danced one of his best routines to its beat, happily mocking the outlaw role that much of America had hoisted upon him.

"**A Big Hunk O' Love**" was recorded in June 1956 during a leave of absence from the army shortly after Elvis' induction. (RCA was anxious, to say the least, about their star's departure, and wanted to make sure they had a supply of Elvis to release during his absence. "A Big Hunk O' Love" wasn't released until 1959.) The session featured new backing musicians, including guitarist Hank Garland, bassist Bob Moore, pianist Floyd Cramer and drummer Buddy Harman, who would continue with him upon his return from the service. (Scotty and Bill felt increasingly ignored and superfluous at RCA, and broke with Elvis shortly before his induction. Scotty returned to front his sixties bands, but Bill left for good and started his own Bill Black Combo. He died of a brain tumor in 1965.) Highlighted by stop-start guitar riffs and high, rapidfire piano runs, the full sound and streamlined energy of the arrangement prompted a great performance from Elvis, who made the most of the song's sexual undercurrent and bluesy feel. "A Big Hunk O' Love" is ample proof that Elvis had lost none of his taste and talent for pure rock & roll, and ample reason to lament the arrival of his draft notice.

The Pop Songs

"Hound Dog" was just one half of an amazing 1956 single: the flipside was "**Don't Be Cruel**," a pairing that resulted in the highest selling single record of the 1950's. The double-sided hit also offers a good comparison of Elvis' uptempo styles. While the straight rock of "Hound Dog" emphasizes a big beat and raucous sound over a 12-bar blues, the pop-oriented "Don't Be Cruel" has a lighter beat and gentler accompaniment that focuses attention on the clever melody and lyrics. Memorable melodies, catchy "hooks" and romantic lyrics have always been the hallmarks of pop, and the difference between the sexually aggressive "Hound Dog" and the playfully innocent "Don't Be Cruel" is roughly the difference between rock and pop, though not in any sense that Mom and Dad might have recognized. "Don't Be Cruel" is clearly more different from Perry Como or any other earlier pop style than it is from "Hound Dog." The immediacy of the Elvis' performance and the song's eminently danceable beat, teen-oriented lyrics and unadorned sound—no strings, horn section or heavenly choir—placed it squarely in the world of "Hound Dog" and Little Richard. "Don't Be Cruel" represented a new conception of "pop," redefined within the context of the rock audience and rock & roll aesthetics.

The pop-rock feel of "Don't Be Cruel" was echoed happily a year later in "All Shook Up." Both songs are propelled by a gently rolling boogie-bass line and an airy sound and infectious beat (which was actually created by Elvis tapping the back of his guitar while D. J. Fontana "played" a guitar case with his hands). The screaming guitars and drums of "Hound Dog" are nowhere to be found, and their absence left plenty of room for Elvis to glide, swoop, quaver, hiccup, stretch and clip his syllables and use all the signature effects from his Sun days to full advantage. The relatively sparse accompaniment also leaves more room for the ever-present Jordanaires, who actually make sense on a record like "Don't Be Cruel."

"Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up" were both written by **Otis Blackwell**, who also supplied Elvis with "Paralyzed" and "Return to Sender." Other standouts in Elvis' pop vein included "Treat Me Nice," "Teddy Bear," "I Got Stung" and "(You're So

Square) Baby I Don't Care." For many fans, and most Elvis imitators, this is the most distinctive Elvis style.

The Ballads

Elvis' ballads fit more easily within the "old" definition of "pop," though Elvis' vocal style and the sparse backing arrangements of the "rock-a-ballads" were still far removed from the syrupy strings-and-harp settings and vibrato-laden singing of earlier popular ballads. The songs range from the very touching and beautifully sung, such as "Love Me Tender," "I Was the One" and "Loving You," to schmaltzy melodramas like "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You," "Love Me," "That's When Your Heartaches Begin."

"**Love Me Tender**," the title song from Elvis' first movie, is backed by a gently strummed acoustic guitar and sentimental, humming-by-the-campfire background voices that fit the Western setting of the movie. Elvis sings the song in a sincere and fairly unadorned style, close-miked for an extra feeling of intimacy. Sung to the tune of "Aura Lee," an old folk ballad of the 1860's, "Love Me Tender" did much to broaden Elvis' appeal to both younger pre-teen fans and older listeners (much as the Beatles' "Yesterday" expanded their audience).

Elvis had always loved sentimental ballads and he sang them with the same conviction he brought to rock & roll. Still, it is in the ballads and some of the more lightweight up-tempo material that Elvis began to display questionable judgment, to put it kindly, and a loss of musical focus. Given good material, like "A Big Hunk O' Love," Elvis could always rise to the occasion and make a great record. But as the good material began to dry up, or be buried under the flood of demotapes from every hack writer around, so did Elvis' interest, and his recording sessions began to take on the feeling of perfunctory routine—a far cry from the thoroughly absorbed conviction of the Sun and early RCA days. The problem was certainly compounded by his manager, Col. Parker, who heard only the sound of cash registers in Elvis' music. He knew that the mainstream was where the money was, and he firmly pushed his impressionable and success-hungry young client in that direction.

But rock & roll defined itself *against* the mainstream, even while it was succeeding within it. That tension between acceptance and defiance gave (and continues to give) rock & roll much of its power to challenge and threaten, as well as its tendency, too often, to descend to mere product. That tension was always present at the heart of Elvis' image and music. His desire to appeal to everyone (he even released an album called *Something for Everybody*) was always at odds with his urge to throw off all constraints and get "real, real gone." Elvis had the mind of a polite entertainer and the soul of a true rocker, and these "two Elvises"—the polite southern boy who desperately craved respectability and the rebel who sneered at it—battled each other throughout his career.

In the end it was a draw: the distinctions were simply smoothed over and rendered meaningless in the last years of his life. In a sense, Elvis' career encapsulated the course of rock music itself through the decades. Rock has now been so absorbed into the mainstream that it has simply *become* the mainstream. If it can rebel at all, it can only rebel against itself, which is all Elvis could do in his last decades.

[i] The extra guitar at some of the first sessions was played by Scotty's hero, Chet Atkins; Nashville veteran Floyd Cramer played piano on "Heartbreak Hotel," and regularly recorded with Elvis through the sixties.

[ii] Although Elvis never actually wrote a song himself, his name mysteriously appeared as co-author on a number of songs. This partly reflected the fact that Elvis would often re-work the songs to fit his style and feel. Mainly, though, it reflects a type of "payola" that was rampant in the fifties; quite simply, co-authorship credit would bring more royalties to Elvis. The writers rarely complained, since half of the songwriting royalties from an Elvis hit was a *lot* better than full royalties from anyone else.