Elvis and the South

Elvis Aron Presley was born on January 8, 1935 in Tupelo, Mississippi. (Elvis later added an extra "a" to his middle name. His twin brother, Jessie Garon, died at birth.) Elvis grew up an only child, surrounded by as much love and pampering as the family's resources would allow, which wasn't much—Vernon and Gladys Presley were desperately poor. In 1948, tired of barely scraping by in Tupelo, the family moved to Memphis and settled into the dreary Lauderdale Courts public housing project. They did not find much of the better life they'd sought in the city, however, and by the time he finished high school Elvis had already begun a series of dead-end jobs and was settling into a life that seemed to offer little beyond more hard times with some fun along the way.

Elvis was, by all accounts, a painfully shy and introverted youth who revered his mother and treated his elders with humble deference. He was also a high school rebel who wore long sideburns, slicked-back hair and outrageous, hepcat clothes from the black stores on Beale Street that made him stand out like the sore thumb he already felt he was. Years before he made his first record, Elvis was already creating the image that would both project him to and protect him from the world. First as a poor rural kid in the big city and later as a hillbilly southerner trying to make it in mainstream America, Elvis' basic stance—which became rock & roll's basic stance—was that of the Outsider, a little awkward and out of place, desperately wanting acceptance but determined to win that acceptance on his own terms.

Looking back, it seems almost inevitable that so many of rock's Founding Fathers came from the South, with its rich legacy of contrasting cultures and musical styles. Country music was everywhere, of course, and all roads and all the dreams of young white musicians led to Nashville and the *Grand Ole Opry*. The South was also home to the blues, however, and to a fringe element of crazed rednecks who were fascinated by the blues and bold enough to try creating their own version. Although it is certainly true that the South of the fifties was severely segregated and rife with racial hatred, on a practical day-to-day level, southerners—especially *poor* southerners—of both races intermingled much more closely and with a much deeper awareness of each other than their counterparts in the North. That awareness extended to the music, and a good many white southerners of Elvis' generation felt that the emotional depth and earthy sensuality of the blues and R&B spoke more directly to their youthful energy and frustrations than the traditional values and emotional restraints of country music. The fact that, given the racial climate, it was "forbidden fruit" made it all the more exciting. Adopting black musical styles and other aspects of black culture, such as wild "cat clothes" and jive slang ("Go cat go!"), helped to give expression to their own feelings of alienation and their own desire to be different. Although rockabilly is often called—and was—a fusion of blues and country, the "country" part of the equation was simply a reflection of the rockabillies' heritage and natural musical accents. What made it different and exciting was their attempt to mimic the blues and sound "black": the defining musical traits, image and outsider stance of rockabilly drew heavily from black music and culture.[i]

Gospel music, black and white, was also a big part of the South's musical spectrum and an important influence on Elvis and rockabilly. Gospel styles ranged from quietly devotional to joyous and celebratory, but fast or slow, quiet or loud, the crucial ingredient was a heartfelt emotion—singing as if your very life and immortal soul

depended on it. Singing in church was Elvis' first musical memory, and gospel music remained a part of his repertoire throughout his career. For poor southerners like Elvis, church was a place to let your feelings out, to escape your troubles for an hour or two and sing of a promised land where all your sufferings will be rewarded—to sing with exactly the sense of release and liberation that Elvis brought to his Sun recordings.

The native blues, gospel and country music of the South spoke with a direct honesty and real-life authenticity that was lacking in the pop music or even the more sophisticated rhythm & blues from the North. There was a strong regional identity in the music that found its way into rock & roll as well ("rockabillies" were "rockin' hillbillies," after all). Inasmuch as early rock & roll was an emotionally direct and authentic "folk" music, it owes much to its southern roots. The raw, rough-edged music of Elvis, Jerry Lee, Carl Perkins, Little Richard, Buddy Holly and other giants of rock's first wave simply could not have come from the North.

With all this in mind, we find young Elvis walking into Sam Phillips' studio in the summer of 1953 to make a record as a present for his mother. On that day, Elvis chose to record two Ink Spots ballads in the style of his idol—that epitome of the pop establishment, Dean Martin(!) For all his southern roots, it's important to note that unlike, say, Carl Perkins or Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis also loved mainstream popular music and dreamed of crooning like Dean Martin and becoming a movie star, and that his Sun recordings include versions of pop chestnuts like "Blue Moon," "I Love You Because" and "I'll Never Let You Go" side-by-side with the blues and country songs. In essence, Elvis had a pop voice and a pop musical sensibility that drew on his love of country, blues and gospel to form an entirely new conception of "pop." And for all his celebrated shyness and self-deprecating manner, he had grand pop dreams and ambitions that heightened his impatience with lesser classifications ("C&W," "R&B") and fueled his—and rock's—triumphant assault on the pop charts and popular culture. By the time he first set foot in a studio, Elvis was a uniquely balanced bundle of contradictions, and a musical time bomb waiting to explode.

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[i]The 1960's rock "counterculture" employed an equally spirited appropriation of black culture to articulate its stance as Outsiders oppressed by the Establishment. Much of the language and imagery ("brother," soul handshakes, power salutes, etc.) were borrowed from the black community and civil rights movement (with a dose of American Indian imagery—love beads, hippie "tribes"—thrown in for good measure).