The Glory Years: 1956-58

One night in 1957, Elvis took the stage at a large outdoor concert and asked the audience to rise with him and "sing our national anthem." As hats came off and hands went over hearts, he knelt solemnly, eyed the crowd, took a deep breath and tore into "Hound Dog!" Perfect! And he was right—as far as teenage America was concerned, it WAS our national anthem.

Elvis made his first television appearance on the Dorsey Brothers' *Stage Show* on January 28, 1956 His performance—his hips and "suggestive movements"—caused a storm of controversy and prompted a rash of angry calls from parents shocked at the display of unchecked emotion. If this sort of thing caught on, could rampant juvenile delinquency be far behind?

Elvis' appearance also sent shock waves through Young America. This wasn't some anonymous R&B vocal group or a middle-aged Bill Haley presenting rock & roll as "entertainment for the kids." This guy was one of *us*, young and bristling with energy, and he seemed to *live* rock & roll, not just perform it. To the horrified parents and delighted teenagers alike, Elvis seemed like James Dean incarnate—a rebel, though With a Cause this time: the raucous new rhythms of rock & roll.

50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong

Elvis took over where Frank Sinatra left off, then kept going up into uncharted realms of success. The Gold Record award for sales, for example, was essentially invented for Elvis (the mind-numbing hallway of gold records at Graceland, Elvis' Memphis home, is the high point of a tour there and a pertinent reminder of why Elvis continues to matter so much). The army of Elvis fans multiplied as rock & roll spread and grew to a point where RCA could release an album entitled *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong* without risking any accusations of exaggerated hype.

For the fans and for the flood of new singers who followed in his wake, Elvis completely defined what it meant to be a rocker, or at least a white rocker. When Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran and Ricky Nelson, for example, came out looking and sounding like Elvis clones, it was no more a matter of "ripping off" Elvis than to say the Rolling Stones or the Byrds were "copying the Beatles" by growing their hair. Elvis simply defined the fifties rock image. His southern brand of rock & roll became the dominant style and that impossible little curl in his lip, a harmless natural trait present even in his baby pictures, became the defiant sneer of an entire generation. His aura of bored but polite disdain for the adult world, and his ability to laugh at it and at himself with equal ease, gave rock & roll a model of both driving ambition and free-spirited fun. Most of all, his brooding sensuality defined the male ideal for both the swooning girls and their envious boyfriends, who tried their hardest to create that look of moody magnificence in themselves.

The visual image was a key ingredient in Elvis' popularity, and has been a central aspect of rock's appeal ever since. To feel Elvis' full impact you had to *see* him sway and shake and work himself into a seemingly uncontrollable frenzy. That image of wild, passionate abandon was then etched in the listener's mind, inseparable from the music itself. Elvis' explosion in the national consciousness was the first fully-televised ascent to stardom, and his arrival forever linked rock and television, the two beacons of popular

culture. The visual flash and excitement of rock & roll was perfectly suited for the camera, and no one was more perfectly suited than Elvis, who attracted cameras like a magnet and repaid the interest with an ever-fascinating and evolving image of perfection.

Elvis dominated the fifties as the Beatles would the sixties, giving rock & roll a broad appeal and opening up the turf for others to follow or create their own niche in. Elvis' success showed white singers that they, too, could rock out—that they didn't have to become Pat Boone to have a hit. And contradictory as it may seem, his success gave a big boost to the black artists as well. Elvis certainly covered black artists, but he sang the songs because he loved the music and never tried to steal a hit or compete with a song that was currently on the charts (a number of his covers were even big hits on the R&B charts). His covers naturally created interest in the original artists, giving them a wider audience as well: having Elvis wail "Tutti Frutti" on national TV was almost as much a victory for Little Richard as for Elvis. Soul singer and Sun veteran Rufus Thomas says that despite the resentment his success generated, "Elvis created an acceptance for black music that had never been there before—he opened a lot of doors."[i]

Still, the racism lurking beneath the surface of Elvis' coronation as the "King" of rock & roll remains a sad indictment of America's social attitudes. It should have been an easy matter for black artists to break through on their own, but it wasn't, and it is very obviously true that the black artists received less—and Elvis and his peers more—credit than they were due. Although black music was the main impetus for rock & roll, a white singer became the "King of Rock & Roll," just as Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman became the "Kings" of Jazz and Swing. In spite of this blatant injustice, rock & roll did bring black performers into the mainstream to a far greater extent than ever before, and its role in breaking down the racial barriers in our society is one of its happier legacies. At the very least it brought white and black kids together on the same dance floor, something years of court rulings and good intentions had failed to do.

Rebel in the Mainstream

1956 and 1957 were the glory years for Elvis Presley. After signing with RCA, his career spiraled upward with dizzying speed: by April of 1956, "Heartbreak Hotel" was at the top of all three charts (Pop, C&W and R&B), beginning a string of #1 hits that continued through Elvis' induction into the army in 1958. By then, though, things were already changing and the rough edges of his image and music—and of rock & roll in general—had begun to soften. In an effort to broaden his appeal and fulfill his most cherished dream, Elvis began work on his first movie, *Love Me Tender*, in August of 1956. The movie and its saccharine title song did broaden his appeal, but at the expense of his rebel image and commitment to rock & roll. Elvis made four movies in the fifties: *Love Me Tender*, *Loving You*, *King Creol*e and *Jailhouse Rock*. They weren't bad—the latter two were surprisingly good—but they distracted him from his recording and performing career and were, in retrospect, warning signs of the dismal decade to come.

There were other signs as well. Elvis made his last televised appearance of the fifties at the end of 1957 on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Disturbed by the complaints (those hips again) that followed his previous appearances, Sullivan decided to blunt the criticism by only filming Elvis from the waist up. (The last song Elvis sang that night was the Thomas Dorsey gospel classic "Peace in the Valley"—from the waist up!) To cap it off, Sullivan appeared at the end of the show to tell the country that Elvis was a "real decent, fine boy," giving him, in effect, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. A short time later he was in the army. The battle was lost.

Elvis' transformation from rebel hoodlum to decent all-American boy was remarkably swift. You can follow the changes in his TV clips, as his southern accent fades and the jeans and oversized hepcat suits give way to gold jackets and plugs for his latest movie. But along the way he made some great music and won a great victory for rock & roll. At least he was *on* national TV, shaking his hips (when they showed them), singing rock & roll and bringing an exuberant sexuality right into America's living rooms. And he was now on RCA, bringing huge profits to the label and sending the other majors scurrying to sign their own authentic rockers. After years of countering with covers and hoping that it would simply go away, Elvis' success at RCA forced the music industry to concede defeat and surrender to rock & roll.

---

[i]In conversation with the author. The blues and R&B artists on the Sun roster had a particularly immediate reason for resenting Elvis, since his success led Sam Phillips into rockabilly and away from the black music that had started it all.