The 1968 Comeback

After sleepwalking through Hollywood for eight years, Elvis' following had dwindled to a still large but rapidly shrinking and aging group of die-hard fans. Meanwhile, Elvis Presley was little more than a joke, and a bad one at that, to the new generation of rock fans. In the era of the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan, his movies and music seemed to epitomize exactly the type of showbiz sellout that the sixties rockers scorned. With the exception of 1965's "Crying in the Chapel," Elvis hadn't scored a Top Ten hit since 1963—since the arrival of the Beatles and a new rock era.

Painfully aware of his diminishing stature, Elvis decided it was time to get in front of an audience again and prove, to himself as much as anyone else, that he was still the King. An hour of prime time was booked on NBC for a Christmas special to be aired on December 3, 1968. Col. Parker envisioned a wholesome hour of Christmas songs and family entertainment, which would have been perfectly in keeping with Elvis' image at that point. For once in his life Elvis put his foot down, overruled the Colonel and came out rocking, determined not to go down without a fight.

He fought hard—and he won, maybe because for the first time in over a decade he *had* to fight. Elvis was, by his own admission, terrified of facing a live crowd after such a long absence from the stage. For the first time since he walked into Sun Studios or onto *Stage Show*, he was an Outsider again, with a lot to lose and a victory he would have to *win*, not merely act out. To the delight of his old fans and the astonishment of all those who had given up on him, he did it: for one last time, Elvis was really ELVIS again.

The Christmas special had its share of corny production numbers, but the centerpiece of the show featured a leather-clad Elvis, slimmed to perfection, singing his heart out in an informal jam session with a small circle of old friends, including Scotty Moore and D. J. Fontana. It was the very essence of rockabilly again: everything on the line, with no big bands or background singers, no theatrics and no movie script or anything else to hide behind. Elvis reached into himself in a way he hadn't since those distant Sun days, and blasted through his old hits with exactly the passion and urgency that had been missing in all the years that had come in-between. In his excellent book, "Mystery Train," Greil Marcus summed up the unexpected power of Elvis' performance this way: "It was the finest music of his life. If ever there was music that bleeds, this was it. Nothing came easy that night, and he gave everything he had—more than anyone knew was there."[i] Including, no doubt, Elvis.

The *Memphis Record*

Fueled by the success of the show and his own renewed confidence, Elvis decided to ease out of the movies and concentrate again on live performances. He also went through a long overdue recording renaissance. In January and February, 1969, Elvis recorded two albums worth of material, now known as *The Memphis Record*, at Chips Moman's American Studios in Memphis—his first recordings in Memphis since leaving Sun. (Though he recorded and made movies elsewhere, his Graceland mansion in Memphis remained his home until his death, and is now his burial site.)

Recording on home turf once again, Elvis seemed to rediscover his musical heritage. Backed by veteran Memphis session players with roots similar to his own, Elvis again infused his pop style with the expressive immediacy of the blues, country and

gospel music. It was not really a "return" to his old style but an updating of it, from a new, mature vantage point. The blues and country songs were now full and modern sounding with big, contemporary arrangements, while the gospel elements—now called "soul"— were more prominent than ever. Above all, the songs reflected adult sensibilities and adult realities; Elvis was finally taking care to choose songs that struck a personal chord with him—songs that inspired and deserved the passion of his voice. Having reclaimed and redeemed his past with the TV special, it seemed that Elvis was finally free to grow up and move on to the next stage of his career and life.

The *Memphis Record* material sealed Elvis' comeback and his claim to artistic vitality, and yielded a number of hits, including the socially-conscious "In the Ghetto" and "**Suspicious Minds**," his first #1 hit since 1962's "Good Luck Charm." "Suspicious Minds" serves as a good example of Elvis' mature style: the emotionally direct lyrics are supported by a country-rock guitar and rhythm section, gospel-styled backup singers, and a big pop string and brass arrangement, and are sung with grand drama and utter conviction. Elvis' changing personal life surely contributed to the soulful depth of his new music. He married Priscilla Ann Beaulieu in 1967, longing for the security and sense of family he had missed since his mother's death. Instead, the troubled marriage ended in divorce in 1973 (a daughter, Lisa Marie, was born in 1968), and the emotional turmoil is felt in the emotion of his best recordings from that era. "Suspicious Minds," "Any Day Now," "Kentucky Rain," "Only the Strong Survive," "Long Black Limousine" and other standouts from the 1969 sessions are sung with a deeply resonant adult voice that would have been far beyond the emotional and physical grasp of the 19-year-old at Sun.

The triumphant return to form revealed in the Memphis recordings became the basis for Elvis' return to the stage. Unfortunately, they didn't always translate well to his elaborate live shows, where the size and spectacle of the show often overshadowed the music. The emotional power of the new material was quickly lost in the giant halls while his old rock & roll hits suffocated under the glossy new big band arrangements. Elvis had won another great victory at the end of the sixties. In depressingly familiar fashion, he then began throwing it away. Instead of the army, this time he went to Las Vegas.

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[i] Marcus, "Mystery Train," p. 149.