The Final, Sad Decline

The grand ballrooms of Las Vegas were the setting for Elvis' return to full-time performing. Elvis played 57 shows at the Las Vegas International Hotel in July and August of 1969, and made Las Vegas his performing home base through the early seventies. The decision says much about what had become of Elvis' image and audience. He was at the height of his rock & roll powers when he made his first appearance in Las Vegas in 1956, and he flopped. It was a disastrous case of bad booking: rock & roll flew in the face of the glitter and schlock that Las Vegas exemplified, and the high-rolling crowds were as foreign and threatening to Elvis as he was to them. Now, in 1969, he was perfectly at home with the glitzy neon settings, jeweled Liberace jumpsuits and all the other gaudy trappings of American success that so quickly replaced the leather jacket and raw intensity of the '68 special. The two sides of Elvis—the artist and the entertainer—were still battling, and the wrong one was winning again.

Elvis' return to the stage was initially a great triumph, supported by good new material, a good backup band (led by guitarist James Burton) and a renewed sense of musical direction. To his credit, Elvis re-established himself as a contemporary star, not a nostalgia act, singing new material alongside his old hits and performing concerts, not revival shows. Of all the surviving fifties giants, only Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis retained any real semblance of artistic vitality and growth, sporadic as it may have been.

It was certainly sporadic in Elvis' case, and depressingly short-lived. Soon enough it all became too easy and boring again. He toured constantly through the seventies, branching out from Las Vegas to giant arenas around the country, but the tours became yet another movie set and Elvis the man and artist became almost a bit player in the ongoing drama of his larger-than-life myth. He was eventually trapped by his consuming fame and by a mindlessly adoring public that was thrilled by a big belt buckle and a few half-hearted karate kicks, and would probably have cheered if he'd simply gotten onstage and gargled. As the atmosphere at his concerts, and in his personal life, became more surreal and circus-like, his commitment to his music faded into the background again. The great country-rocker "**Burning Love**," which hit #2 in 1972, was the last major hit of his life.

Elvis' last days were the sad final chapter of the most wildly successful—and the most tragic and lonely—American success story of them all. It is easy to judge the final period of Elvis' life too quickly and harshly. Watching video clips of a grotesquely obese and lethargic Elvis slurring his way through his last performances, it's hard to imagine how anyone, let alone anyone with his talent, could let himself slip so far. But it's even harder for anyone else to imagine the kind of claustrophobic life he lived and the pressure he felt in trying to live up to the idealized image of "Elvis" while the real-life man aged and crumbled. The abuse of prescription drugs that hastened his death began as a desperate attempt to lose weight and keep the image alive, and ended as an even more desperate attempt to block out the pain of having failed. Only the Beatles could possibly understand the type of maddening pressure Elvis lived with, and they, at least, had each other. Elvis didn't have a John or Paul to challenge his creativity or preserve his sanity. Apparently he didn't even have a friend compassionate or courageous enough to tell him he was killing himself or keep him from doing it. Elvis Presley died in Memphis on August 16, 1977.

Elvis Is Everywhere

The reaction worldwide was one of stunned disbelief: a mixture of empty numbness for all the years it had been since he'd really seemed to matter, and genuine shock and sorrow for the suddenly distant times when he had mattered most of all. The King of Rock & Roll—dead?! As several generations aged overnight, the King's passing became a metaphor for rock's lost innocence and Elvis became, once again, forever young. Bob Dylan: "I broke down... One of the few times. I went over my whole life. I went over my whole childhood. I didn't talk to anyone for a week after Elvis died. If it wasn't for Elvis and Hank Williams, I couldn't be doing what I do today."[i] That feeling of personal loss was shared by millions of fans and by millions of others who hadn't thought of Elvis for years but now felt as if they'd lost a part of themselves. The loss was echoed on a communal level as well, as the rock world said good-bye to one of the few forces that really had united it (as it would say a collective good-bye just three years later after the murder of John Lennon). As Lester Bangs so memorably put it, "I can guarantee you one thing: we will never again agree on anything as we agreed on Elvis. So I won't bother saying good-bye to his corpse. I will say good-bye to you."[ii]

Even in death, the two Elvises—the artist and the icon—battle it out, as reissuings of his great music alternate with "Elvis sightings" and endless tabloid articles. (When his image finally graced a United States postal stamp, even the government felt compelled to address the issue and ask the public to vote for *which Elvis*—young rocker or adult entertainer—would be depicted. In a rare display of good judgment, the young Elvis won out.) He finally did succeed in becoming all things to all people: everyone has their own unique image of Elvis, it seems, and the endless fascination with both the man and his myth shows no sign of abating. Ultimately, though, it is all a footnote to what really matters: that perfect image of young Elvis in the 1950's—the timeless music he made and the revolution he helped create. It is *that* Elvis who will matter as long as rock & roll matters, and it is that Elvis who will forever be the King.

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[i]Robert Sheldon, "No Direction Home," (New York: William Morrow, 1986), p. 480.
[ii]Lester Bangs, "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung," (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 216.