

Hollywood: 1960-68

By the time Elvis emerged from the army, and at least partly because of his absence, rock & roll had gone into a tailspin. The rough edges and raw nerve that had made it so exciting were being smoothed over and softened in an attempt by the music industry to make rock & roll safe and controllable. Rock had dissolved back into harmless pop and the airwaves were dominated by cleancut, watered-down, sexless Elvises who seemed to have forgotten—if they ever knew—that rock & roll came from the blues.

Unfortunately, Elvis seemed to have forgotten as well, though he once knew it better than anyone. More to the point, he no longer saw himself as a "rock & roll star" and was now intent on pursuing a career as a movie star and "all-around entertainer." A strong desire for mainstream acceptance and respectability had always been the flipside of his rebelliousness—that tension is part of what made him so exciting—and in moving away from rock & roll he was simply adapting to the changes that had happened in his absence and to his own view of himself as a "maturing" artist. In any case, it's too bad. Elvis still had the talent, power and popularity to rally the rock troops for a second time, and he could have single-handedly kicked rock & roll back into gear by exchanging his army uniform for a leather jacket and rocking back onto the charts.

Instead he opted out and became, irony of ironies, essentially a watered-down Elvis imitator himself, turning out harmless ballads and an unending stream of forgettable movies. His looks and his voice were still beautiful, but the sex, threat and energy were nearly gone. Jerry Lee Lewis, himself a casualty of the teen idol trend, held Elvis largely responsible for leaving rock's direction in the hands of Dick Clark and the teen idol machines: "We kept cutting rock & roll records, though nobody would play them. Elvis started singing like Bing Crosby. Don't get me wrong, I love Elvis and he's a great talent, but I think he let us down."¹ After his release from the army, Elvis performed at a couple of charity benefits and made a TV appearance on a Frank Sinatra special, eyes firmly fixed on the middle of the road. He then abandoned live appearances altogether and spent the next eight years buried in Hollywood while the music world changed dramatically.

Even the movie years need not have been so dismal. Elvis could actually act quite well, given a good director and a believable script (as *Flaming Star* and handful—a small handful—of other movies proved). Similarly, he could still, given good material, make a great record. Unfortunately he rarely had the chance to live up to his talents in either endeavor. Songwriters Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman provided "Little Sister," "(Marie's the Name) His Latest Flame," "Surrender," "Mess of the Blues," "She's Not You" and other sixties standouts, but most of his post-army hits were ballads like "Are You Lonesome Tonight," "Can't Help Falling in Love" and the operatic "It's Now or Never": huge hits, beautifully sung, but a long way from rock & roll. Things got progressively worse as he descended further into Hollywood and soundtrack albums filled with trivial songs that were embarrassing enough in the movie. Only the gospel songs from this period were of consistent quality and sung with real conviction. In any case, it's more than a little painful to hear the King of Rock & Roll reduced to singing "Do the Clam" or "Old MacDonald," and one can only wonder at the monumental lapse of pride that could lead Elvis to record a piece of drivel like "Rock-a-hula Baby" at the same session that produced a classic like "Little Sister." Col. Parker and the movie studios aside, Elvis

could still have taken control of his musical direction, but he simply didn't seem to have one, and worse, he didn't really seem to care.

ⁱTony Palmer, "All You Need Is Love," (1976; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 229.