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Musicology 5: History of Rock & Roll

October 25, 2022

Song Analysis Paper #1: Elvis Presley’s “Hound Dog”

* Perfect example of the appropriation of black artists music done in the early days of rock n roll
* Change in the lyrics, singing to an actual dog late night ref almost making fun
* Reduces black artists crossover potential
* Hip thrusts older generation vs new but
* Which means that Rolling Stone got it only half right. "Hound Dog" may have initiated a wrestling match between one generation and another; it may have been the first shot in a battle between young and old that would continue through the 1950s and 1960s. But, at least in the beginning, the movement launched by white performers like Presley was less radical than it could have been. These early performers were stuck in sort of a tweener-zone, borrowing from R&B but unwilling to be limited to a narrow R&B market. They were determined to push the performance envelope, but only so far, and they were willing to prod conventional standards, but not at the risk of completely alienating the industry leaders that granted access to the mass market.
* This is a typical rock song with upbeat timbre and energetic vocal. It is aperfect arrangement of guitar, drum and Presley’s voice. It is hard to believethat one of most his popular songs is a cover song. I admire Big MamaThornton’s talent and effort that she put in the song, but in fact, there isquite of reasons why Elvis Presley’s version is more popular. First of all, it isthe lyric meaning. The song is jokingly making fun of a dog, and obviously, ayoung, “careless” man voice with fast tempo would be more suitable than anextreme emotional tone and soothing rhythm. Besides, this adaptableversion also draws a clear line of young versus old generation’s music gouts.The 1950s has a dramatic change in music industry with the exploding ofrock music. The young generation, who is coming of age, already grew out oflistening to the old, kind of “depressing” music of men and women dressingup in formal clothes and singing about life – which mostly sad. They needsomething brighter, more upbeat, to dance and sing aloud with, not justswing to it like Jazz or Blues.From above reasons, I personally think this version should not be consideredas a cover version since its totally different arrangement to its ability tochange people’s mood

Elvis Presley’s 1956 hit “Hound Dog” serves as a perfect example of the appropriation of black artists' music in the early days of Rock n Roll. The song, which peaked at #1 on all 3 charts and was recently inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, was originally released by Big Mama Thorton, a black singer-songwriter, in 1952 and was written by Lieber and Stoller. Big Mama’s version was a thunderous, raw, and sexually explicit song about a womanizing man that reached #1 on the Rhythm & Blues chart and was covered by multiple artists. Freddie Bell & The Bell Boys, one of them, except their version was completely decolorized. Where Big Mama sang this powerful song about a woman's fury to a man, this version was a song about a dog. Elvis’ cover was based on this version of the song and he once actually performed the song to a dog on live television on the Steve Allen show. This decolorization and appropriation of Rhythm and Blues artists’ music was not an uncommon occurrence in the 50s and 60s, white artists would often change the appeal and lyrics of R&B songs, as they usually contained double entendre and sexual meanings, to try and cater to a wider white audience as the original lyrics wouldn't get past censorship. Where Big Mama sang “Been snoopin' 'round my door, You can wag your tail but I ain’t going to feed you no more”, her essentially saying she’s not going to sleep with this man any longer, Elvis sang “Cryin' all the time, Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine”, basically chastising a dog for crying and not being able to catch animals. The song went from being about female empowerment to comic relief. *The original writers of the song, Lieber and Stroller, didn’t appreciate what had been done to the song either, Jerry Lieber said in an interview “It’s an angry song for a woman who is really pissed off at her man…He was the dog. Elvis is singing it to a real dog. Which is not right at all,” (Zollo).*

Elvis was called the “King of Rock n Roll” even though he didn't invent the genre as he played a key role in revolutionizing music by modernizing genres like contemporary, blues, and country (Hall of Fame Elvis Presley). The song has a quick tempo while the timbre of his voice is upbeat and his vocals are energetic as is typical with rock songs. The song has a 4/4 time signature follows a 12 bar blues, simple verse chorus structure. By having just one verse and chorus repeated throughout the song and a simple melody, Elvis makes it easy for the audience to learn the lyrics and join in, allowing the song to be more marketable on radio stations and live televison. Right off the bat, as soon as the song starts Elvis’ powerful vocals kick in accompanied by stereotypical rock n roll instruments: lead guitar, bass guitar, piano and drums. A snare roll announces the transition from chorus to verse and this is followed by a moment of just his vocals without any instrumentation that really spotlights his voice. This also further adds to the “catchy” feel of the song making it more easy to sing along to. The same clapping pattern can be heard throughout the verses giving the song a more groovy feel. The song has two guitar solos with backup vocals that have a country influence.

Elvis is known to be a performer more so than a songwritier and he always moved his hips in an almost sexual way when he performed this song, which wasnt not socially acceptable in the 50s. Thus, doing so created a controversy, so much so that once during a live television performance they filmed him only from the waist up. Only this controversy made him that much more famous. It's possible that "Hound Dog" served as the starting point for a changing of the guard from the older to younger generation throughout the 1950s and 1960s. A lot of early rock n roll performers were ”borrowing” from R&B but trying to still cater to the white audiences. They were adamant about pushing the performance boundaries, but not to the point where they risked alienating the mass market. Black artists’ and their music suffered as a result of this systemic racism but now we’ve started seeing artists reclaiming these songs and making them their own. For example, Doja Cat released a song called “Vegas” in which she sampled the original “Hound Dog” by Big Mama and made it a celebration of female empowerment once again. In the video of the song, she embraces her sexuality and performs in a way women would never have been allowed to at the time of the relese of the original song.

Therefore, we can see how this song has a long history relating to systemic oppresion and rasicm faced by black artists, all while also being one of the most important songs in the early days of rock n roll and crucial in Elvis’ rise to fame.