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Musicology 5: History of Rock & Roll

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

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 at that time, 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. When Big Mama sang “Been snoopin' 'round my door, …I ain’t going to feed you no more”, she was essentially saying she’s not going to sleep with this man any longer, whereas, Elvis sang “Cryin' all the time, Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit…”, basically chastising a dog for crying and not being able to catch animals. The song went from being about female empowerment to comic relief. Jerry Lieber, one of the original writers of the song said in an interview “It’s an angry song for a woman who’s 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 and 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 television. 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 easier 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 songwriter and he always moved his hips in an almost sexual way when he performed this song, which wasn't 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 the 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 release 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.