

ELVIS PRESLEY

1935-1977

Chronology

Born Elvis Aron Presley on January 8, 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi, the only surviving child (a twin brother, Jesse Garon, died a few hours after birth) of Gladys and Vernon Presley, laborers; *1946* sings "Old Shep" in Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show talent contest and wins second prize; *1948* family moves to Memphis, Tennessee; *1953* graduates from Humes High School; records two songs at the Memphis Recording Service; *1954* meets Sam Phillips of Sun Records and records "That's All Right Mama" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky," his first commercial releases; makes first concert appearance, in Memphis; *1954-1956* performs at concerts and shows throughout the southeast and southwest; *1955* RCA buys song rights from Sun Records; makes first television appearance on regional broadcast of "Louisiana Hayride"; *January 1956* appears on national television on Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey's "Stage Show"; appears later in the year on shows hosted by Milton Berle, Steve Allen, and Ed Sullivan; makes first recordings for RCA-Victor; has first number-one hit, "Heartbreak Hotel"; *March 1956* Colonel Tom Parker becomes his manager; records first album, *Elvis Presley*, which becomes history's first "gold" record; *April 1956* makes first appearance in Las Vegas, but show is not well received; *August 1956* begins filming *Love Me Tender*, first of over thirty motion pictures; *October 1956* receives draft notice; *1957* buys Graceland, his Memphis residence for the rest of his life; *March 1958* enters U.S. Army; *June 1958* "Hard Headed Woman" becomes first single to sell a million copies; *August 1958* mother dies; *October 1958* stationed in Germany where he meets his future wife, Priscilla Beaulieu; *1960* discharged from army as sergeant; *1961* performs in Hawaii in his last concert for seven years; *1961* Priscilla Beaulieu moves into Graceland; *1961-1968* makes motion pictures and records in studio; *1967* marries Priscilla; *1968* daughter is born; television "comeback special" broadcast; *1969-1977* tours frequently, with two engagements a year in Las Vegas; *1972* separated from wife; divorced in *1973*; *1977* dies August 16 at Graceland of cardiac arrhythmia brought on by heavy use of prescription drugs.

Activities of Historical Significance

Elvis Presley was one of the most influential singers and performers of the twentieth century. His thirty feature films, scores of gold albums, and tens of millions in record sales attest to his popularity, and even today his fans continue to draw inspiration from his life. While many fans have practically deified him, others maintain that Presley allowed himself to be manipulated by his manager, staff, and admirers into an artificial lifestyle that diluted his talents and eventually killed him. These contrary opinions also exist in the material written about him.

To understand Presley's importance and originality, it is necessary to place him within the context of the history of American popular music. From the 1920s through the early 1950s, American popular music was composed of three primary strains, that reflected the economic and social divisions in American society. Mainstream, or middle-class, popular music consisted primarily of dance tunes and songs derived from musical comedies. Rural America preferred the "hillbilly music" based on the ensemble sound of such Appalachian folk groups as the Carter Family or the individual approach of troubadours such as Mississippi Jimmie Rodgers and the then-current favorite, Hank Williams, who were heard at local dances or over the radio. Black music changed during this period from the rural blues sung by such singers and guitarists as Blind Lemon Jefferson to the classic, concert-like vocal performances of vocalists such as Bessie Smith, and finally into the more up-tempo, urban-oriented music of T-Bone Walker and Muddy Waters. A fourth, secondary strain, gospel, which emphasized ensemble singing, was based on the black spiritual. The popularity of gospel was confined for the most part to the churches—both black and white—of the South.

By the 1950s, mainstream American popular music, mostly sentimental ballads and novelty songs, was boring. The most vital and interesting kind of music was black urban blues, which had by then acquired the name rhythm and blues. Racial prejudice, however, made many whites uncomfortable listening to black music unless it was "covered," or re-recorded by a white performer or group. The early careers of singers such as Pat Boone, Georgia Gibbs, and the McGuire Sisters were launched by this "cover work."

Recognizing the absurdity of these conditions, Sam Phillips of the small Sun Record Company in Memphis, Tennessee, hoped to find a white performer who could sing black music without sounding pretentious or ridiculous. He found such a person in Presley, whose background enabled him to unite disparate musical strains. His boyhood in Mississippi and Tennessee had exposed him to hillbilly music; he had grown up listening to

rhythm and blues over black radio stations; and he knew gospel music from church services. Even more important, Presley had the talent to present the resulting musical fusion with unforgettable impact. Youngsters loved his wild, energetic performances; conservative adults regarded his style as vulgar and obscene; but few could ignore his stage presence and compelling voice.

Ironically, at the start of his career, Presley wanted to establish himself as a "straight" ballad singer. One of his early hits, "It's Now or Never" (a re-working of "O Sole Mio"), is performed in a style reminiscent of such mainstream singers as Tony Martin and Vic Damone. However, he balanced his mainstream ballads with many covers of songs written or performed by black musicians, among them Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup ("That's All Right, Mama") and Big Mama Thornton ("Hound Dog"). For the first time, however, the cover versions matched the originals in emotional intensity. Presley also drew on the gospel tradition from the start of his career, winning his only Grammy Award for one of several early albums of religious music. He later added gospel quartets—first the Jordanaires and then the Imperials and the Stamps—as backup groups for his secular records.

As a result of Presley's work in the mid-1950s, two new types of music emerged. The first, "rockabilly," was a mixture of hillbilly and rhythm and blues. Rockabilly infused the work of other Sun performers such as Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis. As a result, hillbilly was gradually transformed into "country and western," and acquired a much wider audience.

The second genre, rock-and-roll, also evolved out of rhythm and blues; as rock's popularity spread, mainstream white culture began to accept black performers, such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard, as well as gospel-influenced singers, such as Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin. Presley was not the only force behind these changes in popular music, but he certainly was the dominant one. Rock stars from Bob Dylan to the Beatles have cited Elvis as an early influence. Moreover, Presley was not merely a singer but a personality whose rise from obscurity while retaining the common touch uplifted many people. The singer had a genuinely spiritual side, as he investigated many kinds of religions and practiced faith healing. He regarded his talent and success as gifts from God which, if he were to keep them, had to be shared with others. He wanted to entertain as many people as possible and bring happiness into their lives; so he drove himself to perform, shared his wealth with strangers, and became a sacred figure to many people. Critics panned the concerts of his last years, but his fans did not care because they enjoyed simply being in his presence and bathing in his charisma. At his death, they apotheosized him like a Roman emperor, and there are those people who say that they pray to Elvis to intercede with God for them. Those critics who say that Presley could have been a better musician or actor ignore the fact that he became a figure of spiritual dimensions.

Overview of Biographical Sources

Biographical material on Presley falls into one of three categories. Most common are adulatory books written by uncritical admirers—often not biographies at all, but rather collections of pictures padded with a chronology, bibliography, or simple text. Sean Shaver's *Life of Elvis* (1979) fits this category, with Paul Lichter's *The Boy Who Dared to Rock* (1978) the best of the type.

Accounts of Elvis's life that attempt to debunk the performer's public image by revealing unpleasant details about his personal life are also common. Often openly biased, these books are usually as untrustworthy as the idolatory biographies of Presley. Albert Goldman's *Elvis* (1981) is the most famous, or infamous, representative of this approach, and several books by Elvis's close associates also attack the singer.

Fewest in number are books that attempt to view Elvis's life and contributions objectively. Jerry Hopkins's *Elvis: A Biography* (1971) and *Elvis: The Final Years* (1980), and Patsy Guy Hammontree's *Elvis Presley: A Bio-Bibliography* (1985) are the best of the more academically oriented works.

Evaluation of Principal Biographical Sources

Goldman, Albert. *Elvis*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981. (G) The author is a former university professor who also wrote rock music reviews for *Life* magazine. In his reviews he revealed an antipathy for rock music and its adherents, and in this book—based largely on the revelations of one of Elvis's inner circle of bodyguards and friends—Goldman attacks not only Presley but also his music and his fans. The material on Elvis's drug use is not new, and Goldman's information about Elvis's sex life seems more embarrassing than shocking. Neither scholarly nor objective.

Hammontree, Patsy Guy. *Elvis Presley: A Bio-Bibliography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985. (A, G) Part of a series of "bio-bibliographies" of popular culture figures. Hammontree covers all elements of the singer's career and is the first writer to attempt to define his effect on his fans beyond his music and films. The most-balanced

book written on Elvis since his death and a good reference source.

Hopkins, Jerry. *Elvis: A Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971. (A, G, Y) The first serious book written about Elvis, and still one of the best. Because this biography was written before Elvis's death, it lacks the moralizing and tendentious tone of later studies.

———. *Elvis: The Final Years*. New York: St. Martin's, 1980. (A, G, Y) Hopkins takes the story of Elvis to its conclusion. More sensational than his first book, this study is still more objective than most accounts written shortly after the singer's death.

Lichter, Paul. *The Boy Who Dared to Rock: The Definitive Elvis*. New York: Dolphin Books, 1978. (G, Y) Although this book by one of Elvis's most avid fans does contain a brief biographical section, its most important section is a discography of American records, foreign records, and bootlegs, with pictures of the record sleeves and album covers. Complete only to 1978.

Marsh, Dave. *Elvis*. New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1982. (A, G, Y) The author, one of the editors of *Rolling Stone* magazine, is a major rock critic who believes that the singer's career began to fade after he left Sun Records. More critical analysis than a biography.

Shaver, Sean, with Hal Noland. *The Life of Elvis*. Memphis, TN: Timur, 1979. (G, Y) Elvis as seen through the eyes of a devoted fan. Many photographs of Elvis on tour.

Vellenga, Dirk, with Mick Farren. *Elvis and the Colonel*. New York: Delacorte, 1988. (A, G) The author is a Dutch rock critic who focuses on Colonel Tom Parker's mysterious European origins. Not to be confused with another book by the same title by Elvis fan May Mann, which is of little interest to the researcher.

Overview and Evaluation of Primary Sources

Presley wrote no autobiography and gave very few interviews after his discharge from the army. Snippets from interviews have been collected in *Elvis Presley in His Own Words*, edited by Mick Farren and Pearce Marchbank (London and New York: Quick Brown Fox, 1977; G, Y). A better guide to this material is Patsy Guy Hammontree's chapter "Interviews" in *Elvis Presley: A Bio-Bibliography* (1985), which attempts to separate authentic comments from material that may have been paraphrased or fabricated by reporters.

Numerous family members and associates have written books that exploit their association with the singer. The most famous of these is *Elvis: What Happened?* by Red West, Sonny West and Dave Hebler, as told to Steve Dunleavy (New York: Ballantine, 1977; G). This book was the first to reveal the extent of the singer's drug use and to focus on the seamier side of his nature; it is worth noting that the authors had been fired from Presley's entourage, and the desire for revenge may have tainted their account.

Becky Yancey's *My Life With Elvis*, with Cliff Linedecker (New York: Warner Books, 1977; G), is the work of Vernon Presley's secretary, who had little to do with Elvis; Vester Presley, Elvis's uncle, does not reveal much more in the book he wrote with Deda Bonura, *A Presley Speaks* (Memphis, TN: Wimmer Brothers Books, 1978; G). Ed Parker, one of Presley's karate training friends, attempts to answer West, West, and Hebler in his *Inside Elvis* (Orange, CA: Rampart House, 1978; G). Elvis's stepmother Dee Stanley, who married Vernon shortly after the death of Gladys Presley, presents her side of the story in *Elvis, We Love You Tender* (New York: Delacorte, 1979; G), a book that is largely self-serving.

Elvis, Portrait of a Friend (New York: Bantam, 1979; G) has three sections—two written from the points of view of Presley's intimate friend, Marty Lacker, and his wife Patsy, and the third section written by the "as told to" author of the book, Leslie Smith. The Lackers' sections present an interesting and fairly balanced account of life at Graceland, as does Marian Cocke's *I Called Him Babe* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1979; G), written by Presley's nurse. Alfred Wertheimer's *Elvis '56: In the Beginning* (New York: Collier, 1979; G) is a collection of photographs that Wertheimer took of Presley at home and on tour just before the singer achieved national stardom. Larry Geller, Elvis's former hairdresser, gives his views in *The Truth About Elvis* (New York: Jove, 1980; G). Geller encouraged the singer's investigation of spiritualism and mysticism until other associates forced him to leave the singer's entourage.

Elvis's wife, Priscilla Beaulieu Presley, explores their marriage in *Elvis and Me* (New York: Putnam's, 1985; **G**). She is remarkably free of rancor and candidly discusses Elvis's drug use, which, she reveals, began quite early in his career. In *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* (New York; Villard, 1987; **G**), Lucy de Barbin (with Dary Matera) tells the story of her romance with the singer that began in 1953, resulted in the birth of a daughter, and lasted until Presley's death.

Fiction and Adaptations

Elvis himself wanted to be a successful film performer even more than he wanted fame as a singer. Unfortunately, the many films he appeared in merely exploited his popularity; critics agree that the movies mark the nadir of Elvis's career. *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), with an amusing screenplay and lively characterization, and *King Creole* (1958), adapted from a novel by Harold Robbins, are considered the best; the worst include at least twenty others, such as *Harum Scarum* (1965), with Elvis cavorting in a Hollywood Middle East, and the last, *Change of Habit* (1970), costarring Mary Tyler Moore as a nun. Two documentaries made after Elvis's acting career had ended—*Elvis: That's the Way It Is* (1970) and *Elvis on Tour* (1972)—are of greater interest than the films, as is the film biography *This Is Elvis* (1981) that was approved by his manager, Colonel Tom Parker.

Presley's life has proved a fertile subject for fictional portrayals. Perhaps the first was the satirical figure of Conrad Birdie in the Broadway musical "Bye, Bye Birdie" (1962), which was made into a film the following year. "Elvis Presley" appears as a character in the novels *Stark Raving Elvis* by William McCranor Henderson (1984) and *Elvis—the Novel* by Keith Baty and Robert Graham (1984); the play "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" by Alan Bleasdale (1985); and the film *Heartbreak Hotel* (1988). Presley is also the subject of three made-for-television movies: *Elvis and the Beauty Queen* (1981), an account of his relationship with girl friend Linda Thompson; *Elvis and Me* (1986), a dramatization of Priscilla Presley's book; and *Elvis* (1979), the story of the young, struggling Elvis, which led to a half-hour dramatic series, *Elvis*, on the ABC television network during the 1989-1990 season. Many popular songs, such as Don McLean's classic "American Pie," contain references or allusions to Presley. Also, hundreds of Elvis imitators continue to perform his songs as "tributes to the king."

Museums, Historical Landmarks, Societies

Birthplace (Tupelo, MS). Elvis's birthplace on Old Saltillo Road is now part of a city park that also contains an Elvis Presley Civic Center and Memorial Chapel.

Elvis Aron Presley Memorial Highway (Highway 78, TN). The Presley family traveled Highway 78 when moving from Tupelo to Memphis in 1948.

Fan Clubs. At least forty Elvis Presley fan clubs exist. Three of the largest are: Elvis Special Photo Association, founded in 1969, has about 1,000 members and is based in Pacifica, California; We Remember Elvis, founded in 1982, has 750 members and is located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; King of Our Hearts Elvis Presley Fan Club, founded in 1968 in San Jose, California, commemorates his life through charitable activities.

Graceland (Memphis, TN). Elvis's home at 3764 Elvis Presley Boulevard is one of the South's main tourist attractions. Visitors make a tour of the house, which is filled with Elvis memorabilia, and end in the meditation garden where Elvis is buried along with his father, mother, and paternal grandmother. Across the street is a shopping center where souvenirs include bottles of whiskey shaped like Elvis during various periods of his career.

Other Sources

Escott, Colin, and Martin Hawkins. *Catalyst: The Sun Records Story*. London: Aquarius Books, 1975. An account of the musical and social background that nurtured Elvis.

Harbinson, W. A. *The Illustrated Elvis*. New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1975. This discussion of Elvis's career by a British rock critic presents itself as a biography, but is really an extended meditation on the meaning of the singer's life. The many photographs are poorly reproduced.

Lichter, Paul. *Elvis in Hollywood*. New York: Fireside Books, 1975. A complete account of Elvis's films with many illustrations.

Marcus, Greil. "Elvis: Presliad." In *Mystery Train*. New York: Dutton, 1976. A careful analysis of Presley's career with emphasis on the early, "rockabilly" period by one of the most thoughtful and thorough rock critics.

Sauers, Wendy. *Elvis Presley: A Complete Reference*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1984. In addition to a complete discography, filmography, and bibliography, this book also includes an exhaustive chronology, an account of the singer's death and funeral, a list of all his concerts from 1969 to 1977, many photographs, and copies of his birth, marriage, and death certificates. Indispensable.

Tharpe, Jac. L., ed. *Elvis: Images and Fancies*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979. A collection of serious scholarly essays on all elements of the Presley phenomenon.

Whisler, John A. *Elvis Presley: Reference Guide and Discography*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981. Contains bibliographies, filmographies, and discographies. Two unusual features are a periodical index listed by subject and an index of song titles, helpful for locating items in the discography. Complete only to 1981, but valuable.

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