

The Elvis Spectacle and the Cultural Industries

By Douglas Kellner

Several decades after his death and almost fifty years after his period of what many believe to be his greatest creativity and significance, Elvis Presley is considered by many the King of Rock and Roll. Elvis is indeed a cultural icon of the highest order, a global popular who continues to attract adulation and fanatic devotion throughout the world. In the early 1990s, I went to a market in Guadalajara, Mexico and there was a stand selling garish knitted velvet portraits of Jesus Christ, Che Guevara, and -- Elvis Presley. Graceland continues to be a popular tourist site, a Mecca for Elvis devotees attracting over one-half million tourists each year, a mausoleum to celebrate and enshrine Elvis' pop divinity. Elvis fans continue to have yearly conventions and an International Elvis convention met for some years in Mississippi, bringing together academics and fans from all over the world to discuss the Elvis phenomenon. Rarely does a month go by in which there is not an article on Elvis, his former wife Priscilla, and daughter Lisa Marie in one of the tabloids that continue to circulate old stories and create new ones. Elvis products still proliferate and there are entire catalogues entirely dedicated to commodities ranging from Elvis telephones to giant Elvis dolls.

The Elvis industry carries on turning out book after book on Elvis with the list now in the hundreds of titles (over 500 at last count). Elvis Web-sites proliferate and are among the Internet's most popular attractions, while his movies frequently rerun on TV. Sirius satellite radio has a popular all-Elvis radio channel, and in May 2005 CBS centered a week's programming on a TV-bio Elvis and a two-hour special, featuring Priscilla and Lisa Marie.

And so the King continues to reign in a bizarre afterlife of popularity, commerce, and musical immortality. The question therefore arises: why of all the superstar musical performers of the post-World War II era is Elvis the Icon who just won't fade away? What made Elvis so distinctive and successful and why do fans today continue to idolize him? In the following study, I apply the methods of cultural studies to respond to the question of why Elvis Presley has played such a significant role in U.S. and even global culture, why he is a cultural icon of unparalleled importance, and why Elvis continues to have such a long shelf-life and afterlife.

My argument will be that Elvis was the most important single entertainer, or at least pop musical figure, of the second half of the twentieth century, that he was the major global popular icon of the era, and that it is a challenge to cultural studies to explain his popularity and continuing afterlife. I maintain that Elvis' claim to lasting fame resulted from his impressive musical accomplishments of the 1950s which produced a unique and distinctive blend of African-American-influenced rhythm and blues, traditional country and gospel music, classical pop, and the newly exploding supernova of rock and roll music, of which Elvis would soon become the first acclaimed royalty, the first and undisputed King. It was Elvis who most distinctively blended white and black musical traditions, who created the most special and singular music and personae of the decade and that therefore he deserves the serious attention from those of us engaged in the project of seeking a deeper understanding of the intersections of media culture and society.

I'll also show how the sonic synergies of new music technologies and the culture industries significantly contributed to his success and continuing power. Elvis began the rock music spectacle

in which a combination of performance, recording and media technology, and an omnipresent culture industry ready to assiduously market the newest product and hottest commodity used sonic synergies to produce popular stars and cultural icons. The Elvis phenomenon has roots in the spread of radio broadcasting, the rise of television, consolidations in the music and film industry, and development of a highly sophisticated marketing and publicity industry that found Elvis the perfect product to commodify and circulate. And yet something in Elvis's music and personality transcends the economic and commercial dimension, accounting for his intense popularity during his lifetime and continued popularity today.

Hence, another answer to the question why Elvis? will be that Elvis embodied in a particularly striking and dynamic way the key dramas of sex, race, and class which were central to the American experience, that Elvis represented the return of the repressed, of all of those bottled up instinctual and rebellious energies that had been suppressed in the conservative and conformist 1950s, and that therefore he anticipated the later sexual revolution and counterculture of the 1960s and was thus a highly dynamic cultural force whose effects surpassed those of his music alone. On the issue of race, Elvis rode the tide of the civil rights movement. By blending black and white music, he helped legitimate black culture during a time when African Americans were breaking into mainstream music and entertainment culture, sports, and more broadly U.S. society as a result of the civil rights movement. Without forcing the issue, Elvis just naturally sang black, blended black and white, and was thus a progressive force in advancing integration.

Moreover, as a working class figure from humble origins, he embodied the American dream of climbing up the class ladder, of transcending the limits of class, of realizing the fantasy of wealth and success, and thus showed that the American dream was possible -- at least for megastar entertainers. But more saliently to the music that was Elvis, Elvis lived the experience of his music, enduring the poverty, suffering, ostracism, and oppression that created the blues as an expression of human dignity and endurance in a mean world, one that Elvis experienced first hand. As a poor working class white southerner, Elvis grew up with blacks, absorbed their culture at first hand, attending black gospel services, listening to black musicians play right in his neighborhood, and listening to black music on the radio.

As a rebellious teenager who modeled himself on the Hollywood rebel image of the 1950s, with his long hair and side burns -- and black clothes and style -- Elvis was often ostracized in high school and since he was a poor white boy was also out of synch with middle class white culture. He was originally a country boy and often felt out of place in the city which was initially alien to him, but became a source of fascination. The young Elvis also apparently experienced the yearning for romance and love that he articulated in his songs which thus have the ring of authenticity, that Elvis felt and meant what he sang, that it was grounded in powerful and real experience.

Thus Elvis's synthesis of country, gospel, R&B, pop, and the emergent force of rock had the feel of the real thing, of authenticity, and it was Elvis' achievement to fuse these experiences and traditions into a unique musical form. Moreover, Elvis' musical synthesis of the 1950s anticipated the emerging multiracial and multicultural society that became evident by the 1960s. Hence, the young Elvis provides a new synthesis of the energies and experiences that would constitute the American drama of the decades to come -- a complicated passion play of culture, race, sexuality, and class that is still going on today.

Moreover, there was something in Elvis' music and figure that transcended the specific

dynamics of U.S. society at a particular moment, that rendered Elvis a global popular, that made him a significant figure all around the world. And that something has to do with the universal appeal of his best music, which dealt with basic emotions, yearnings, dreams, and desires of human beings all over the world. There is also a spiritual dimension in his most compelling music and his yearnings to communicate basic human emotions and needs, to tap into that mysterious region between desire and need, to fuse his own individual yearnings with universal experiences and aspirations, and, especially, in performance to fuse with his audience. In a somewhat paradoxical vein, Elvis' most resonant spirituality was in his earlier works precisely when he was most secular, creating the paradox, known to Georges Bataille (1985) and certain French thinkers, of a profane spirituality, a sacred secularity, thus deconstructing the opposition between sacred and profane, the spiritual and the material. To put my point more graphically, I would say that the spirit was most alive in Elvis when he was Elvis the Pelvis, when the spirit (literally) moved him, when he shook and gyrated almost unconsciously, when he was the most outrageously sexual and profane and when he was, figuratively speaking, the god Dionysius himself, as I argue later in the paper.

Finally, I want to argue that there are four distinct Elvises: 1) The Young Elvis, Elvis as Rebel, Elvis Dionysius, and the infamous Elvis the Pelvis. This is the young Elvis of the 1950s, who became the first global megastar of rock, and whose music continues to live and resonate today. The Dionysian Elvis is to be distinguished from 2) the Hollywood Elvis, the Elvis of the 1960s who I would argue is the Elvis of the counter-1960s, of the counter-counterculture, the Elvis cut off from his communal and Dionysian roots who played the paradoxical role of validating precisely the mainstream culture which his performances and personae repudiated in the 1950s and who distanced himself from the 60s counterculture that his own work prefigured and articulated in the previous decade. This is the Elvis of unspeakable Hollywood movies, of undistinguished RCA records, of Colonel Parker, the Elvis of the culture industries who was a mere money machine, and something of a major disappointment to those of us who idolized Elvis in the 1950s.

But the boring Elvis of much of the 1960s should be distinguished from 3) the complex and ultimately tragic Elvis of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Elvis of an attempted comeback TV special in 1968 and a Las Vegas live performance comeback special in 1971, after years of losing himself in mediocre Hollywood films. This transitional Elvis returned to performance, to his musical roots, to try to become truly Elvis again, but he ended up the Vegas Elvis, a mere simulation of his former self, a postmodern Elvis who pastiched his earlier work and traditions, an Elvis sacrificed to the gods of mammon and his personal demons, an Elvis who ultimately became a figure of a genuine American tragedy. In fact, one can see Elvis' life story as one of great pathos, of tremendous tragedy, of the loss and dissipation of a great talent. Yet even this great talent tragically squandered projected an aura that occasionally radiated in the Hollywood and Late Elvises, investing all things Elvis with an aura of transcendence and reverence, for his devoted fandom at least.¹

My focus in this study will be on the young Elvis and the origins of the rock musical spectacle, although I'll touch on the other Elvises as well. I should also come out -- cards on the table -- as a partisan of the Young Elvis, my Elvis, the Elvis of my generation, the Elvis whose every record I bought in the 1950s, whose every film I saw, and whose career I closely followed on television, radio, and the other flora and fauna of media culture. I'll focus on the Young Elvis and how cultural studies provides access to the phenomenon of Elvis Presley, providing us with the

tools and resources to make sense of the Elvis mystique, to situate Elvis contextually, to analyze the production of Elvis as superstar, to unpack the multiple meanings of the various Elvises, and to discuss his effects and impact on U.S. and even global culture.²

The Young Elvis

"When the mode of the music changes, the wall of the city shake," Plato, The Republic

"Ya gotta shake, rattle and roll!" Little Richard/Elvis Presley

A cultural studies approach reads a phenomenon like Elvis Presley in terms of his emergence, reception, and effects in a specific culture in a particular historical period. Cultural studies is oriented toward a contextualizing mode of inquiry that reads texts and cultural phenomena in terms of their context and that uses texts to in turn illuminate the context (see Kellner 1995). In my own model, it focuses on the production of the text, engages in textual analysis, and studies the effects, the cultural influences, of the artifact under scrutiny, as I will of course with Elvis today. It looks for the politics of the text, is interested in gender, sexuality, race, class, but is also interested in the formal qualities of the text, of how the works function aesthetically, of how they produce meanings, and of what specifically they signify -- precisely our challenge today in reading Elvis contextually.

To understand Elvis in terms of his life and times, I would suggest that the emergence of rock culture and new recording, broadcasting, and music-reception technologies, including radio, television, and inexpensive home music record players were among the most significant cultural developments in post-World War Two U.S. society, and that Elvis is a significant player in both. In this section, I want to discuss the intersection of Elvis, an emergent rock music culture, and television to discuss the initial rise to superstardom of Elvis Presley. My thesis is that Elvis was the first white male superstar rock hero to mobilize the affective economy of repressed sexuality and youth revolt that was a central feature of the emergent rock culture, and it was the culture industry, the media of radio, television, and later film who made Elvis palatable and acceptable to mainstream audiences who also ended up defusing and destroying his Dionysian energies and creativity. The early Elvis on this reading was a subversive character who incarnated rebellious energies and thus was a progressive figure in the conservative and conformist 1950s who prefigured and helped prepare the ground for the culture of the 1960s. But I want to suggest that Elvis' interaction with the culture industries was complex and perhaps ultimately fatal (i.e. to his body and soul and cultural promise).

But the origins of Elvis's phenomenal popularity has to do with rock music and youth culture. The rock music of the 1950s was arguably the voice of youth culture and Elvis became the voice of youth, the first musical icon of the rock and roll youth culture, the voice of his generation who expressed its longing for freedom and individuality, romance and love, erotic gratification, and acceptance and belonging. These themes were, of course, the heart and soul of the blues which were especially vitally articulated in the R&B tradition. Sam Phillips, the head of Sun Records, where Elvis recorded his first songs, has often said in interviews that the music industry was looking for a white boy who sang black, who had the rhyming and soul to do R&B, and that Elvis was this boy-- who had the musical background, experience, and talent to fulfill this role (Guralnick 1994 xx).

In understanding Presley's quick rise to the top, let us recall that Elvis began outside of mainstream culture, that young Elvis was a truck driver who cut a record in Sam Phillips Memphis studio and then released some records on Phillips' Sun label in 1954-1955, that Elvis performed in honky tonks, fair grounds, country music venues, seedy clubs, and other sites of alternative music culture. Through the radio and through his dynamic live performances, Elvis became first a regional star and by 1956 had become a national phenomenon, mainly through television and RCA records. But before I discuss how the culture industries absorbed Elvis I want us to reflect on the roots of Elvis' music, on his early music, as the key to why Elvis really was the greatest pop music performer of his place and time.

Already in his first recordings Elvis was synthesizing different styles of country, rhythm and blues, and pop, and was moving toward rock. One can hear at least echoes of a wide range of standard and emerging musical genres on the Sun Sessions including pop ballads, classic blues, boogie woogie, bluegrass, rockabilly (before the term had even been coined), deep country, and, of course, rock and roll, but it was all pure Elvis, every song sounds like Elvis and nothing else. Each has a distinctive feel and tone to it that we can now identify as classic Elvis. Hence, Elvis is already fully present on his first records pressed when he was barely twenty-one (compare the first albums of any number of other people, including my main man Bob Dylan, to see how the classic Presley style was already there from the beginning).

Presley seemed to have a wide-ranging musical background, or range of musical interests, he was able to go for the core feeling and meaning of each song and was able easily to cross musical boundaries and synthesize musical styles, previously rather rigidly separated, into something new and different. In the world of 1950s pop music, musical genres were almost totally distinctive because of the structure of the music industry with record companies specializing in a genre of music, or having separate divisions, as in the case of RCA and other big companies. Moreover, radio programming was highly structured with different DJs and programs specializing in specific genres of music. Hence, it was quite unusual for someone to cross musical boundaries as naturally as Elvis, who did it spontaneously and easily, thus producing something new and distinctive in the history of popular music.

The Sun Sessions

"I can't describe to this day what Presley did. But he had it in abundance," Sam Phillips

Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun records, who recorded the first Presley sides, was himself always pursuing a singular sound and unique voices, seeking individual artists who expressed genuine feeling and emotions, who could enter the realm "where the soul of man never dies." He saw it as his mission to "open up an area of freedom within the artist himself, to help him to express what he believed his message to be" and in Elvis Sam found his man (Guralnick 1994). The Sun recordings are simpler and more rooted in country and blues than the harder rocking songs later recorded with RCA. But here too there are anticipations of the rocking Elvis as in "Good Rocking Tonight" where Elvis declares that "Tonight I'm going to rock away all my blues." Then he invites the audience to join him in a communal invitation for everyone to rock, empathetically intoning: "We're going to rock, let's rock, we're going to rock all of our blues away," repeating "rock" over and over, anticipating the rock and roll that would soon emerge as the distinctive music of his generation.

Presley's accompaniment on the Sun Records included the Starlite Wranglers he had been playing with, featuring Scotty Moore on guitar and Bill Black on bass. Sam Phillips wanted simplicity, went for what he called a "total rhythm feeling" where the musical sound and lyrics fused, creating an affective environment for the musical meaning. Phillips also believed in the spontaneous and loved those accidental and unexpected moments of which the Sun Sessions are full: the way Elvis blurted out "need your loving" on "That's All Right "; the bubbling and unnerving laugh with which "Mystery Train" trails off in the yonder; the false start in "Milkcow Blues Boogie" where Elvis tells his group, "Now wait a minute fellows, that don't move!" and then breaks into a faster beat.

Yet there is also something mysterious about Elvis' songs, they convey more than a simple summary could possibly indicate, they are polysemic and full of depths of emotion, even if the lyrics are rather simple and straight forward. Elvis' songs live on in that realm between need and desire, out of which they emerged, articulating basic human needs -- for love, for sexuality, for understanding, for a good time, or for ending that pain and misery of the moment -- and desires for that something more that transcended need -- real and lasting love, sexual union and fusion, total understanding and acceptance, or moving on to something new after one has suffered heartbreak and rejection. For instance, on "That's All Right," his first released single, Elvis defiantly affirms his love even when mama and papa tell him that gal's going to break his heart. Realizing his rejection, and mistake, he declares he's leaving town, exuberantly breaking into a declaration of his independence, but then confesses "need your loving," a striking confession bringing to his surface his contradictory feelings, the acceptance of failure of the relationship and a cry of his need.

While Elvis' blending of musical genres is perhaps the distinctive feature of his '50s music as a whole, in the Sun Sessions, it is those poignant love songs and blues that are most striking. Indeed, even with these relatively simple early songs Elvis sounds like no one else and there are utterly original intonations, emphases, and variations on his blues and country material. The songs are marked by a utopia of love, a yearning for true love as in the haunting "I Love You Because" where Elvis dreams of true love, pure love, perfect love, a love where the beloved will stand beside him right or wrong. Or the celebration of eroticism in "I Don't Care if the Sun don't Shine" where he announces that:

Well's that's when we're going to kiss and kiss and kiss and we're going kiss some more
who cares how many times we kiss
and at a time like this who keeps score!

Or:

well one kiss from my baby doll makes me holler more more more!

Presley really could articulate sexual desire and it was not an accident that a sexually repressed generation took to him as an emancipatory figure. Just listen to "Baby, Let's Play House, where Elvis sings: "Baby, Baby, Baby, Come back baby, I want to play house with you." His way of murmuring "baby, baby, baby" with his distinctive intonation promises erotic bliss, that playing house will be something special this time, and that he really wants to play!

But many songs sing of loss, of imperfect love, of the blues, of loneliness and rejection, as in "Milkcow Blues Boogie." Full of sexual double entendre, the song "You're a heartbreaker," where Elvis declares: "I just found someone else who's sure to take your place. Someone I can always trust and fill this empty space," and that thus you "can't break my heart anymore." Or

"You're Right, I'm Left, She's Gone," where again Elvis is "left all alone," but the blues motif is overturned as he declares "she's gone, I know not where, but baby I just don't care, because i've fallen now for you" -- perhaps setting up another disappointment and potential tragedy. Or:

I forgot to remember to forget her
I can't seem to get her off my mind
I thought I'd never miss her but I found out somehow
I think about her almost all the time

Relistening to the early Elvis, to the Sun recordings and the first RCA Victor album Elvis Presley, one is struck by the recurrent motifs of yearning for love, of transcendence through love, of loss and emptiness, punctuated by sexual and rebellious exuberance of life affirmation and throughout a wild romanticism. No one sings "Blue Moon" quite like Elvis, with an incredible plaintive wailing, punctuating the description of standing underneath the Blue Moon "without a love of my own" "saying a prayer for, someone I could really care for." "Without a love of my own," the singer is lost, empty, yearning for transcendence. Perhaps this is the high moment of spirituality in the young Elvis and when he breaks into the second phasing of his indescribable crooning the otherworldliness of earthly love, the need for the salvation of love has perhaps never been so poignantly expressed and who could not be deeply moved?

His pace and phrasing was probably never better than in "Tomorrow night," a deliriously romantic affirmation of erotic love and longing for its continuance. "Harbor Lights" also articulates a pure longing, a yearning for reunite with the object of his love. And so when love is achieved, "I'll Never Let you go little darlin'" because in a fallen world only love provides salvation, only love can fill the emptiness, the yearning, the need -- or so I read the Gospel of Love According to the Early Elvis.

If it doesn't work out, its time to split up, as Elvis defiantly affirms in "Just Because" ("Well I'm telling you, baby I'm through with you, because, well, just because"). But it's mostly the blues and romantic yearnings and celebration that distinguishes the work of the early Elvis. It should indeed be noted that Elvis was one of the few white artists who could cover black music, and that in general Elvis could make all of the music he covered sound good and sound like his own music. The Sun Sessions were almost all covers and range from blues to country to pop, including covers of blues legend Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's All Right," Bill Monroe's bluegrass classic "Blue Moon of Kentucky," Billy Eckstine's "Tomorrow Night," Bing Crosby's "Harbor Lights," the Rogers and Hart classic "Blue Moon," the R&B standard "Good Rockin' Tonight," Jimmy Wakely's "I'll Never Let You Go," and others.

But the covers were entirely Elvis' own sound, he transformed the material into his distinctive musical idiom, he made the songs his own and they emerged as something fresh and original. He penetrated to the emotional core of each song, felt it deeply and brought out its universal significance and affect, highlighting the universal situations of the uncertainty and pathos of taking your loved one to a train, not knowing if she'd ever be back or if the relation would survive ("Mystery Train"); singing of the desire to rock away all your blues in "Good Rockin' Tonight"; or the way he says "you're going to Need your daddy someday" in "Milkcow Blues Boogie."

There was a certain magical alchemy at work whereby Elvis could make other people's material his own and take previous work to a higher or different level that was his own. Elvis was

not a songwriter or poet, but an extremely gifted performer who could make everything he sang distinctive, his own, unique and compelling. His early alchemy involved the transformation of country and blues songs into something new and different, something approaching rock but really sui generis, something distinctive to Elvis, a unique fusion of country, blues, and rock. It had to do with the delivery and singing, but also the feeling and spontaneity. The musical accompaniment on the early Elvis songs was extremely simple with basic guitar riffs, minimal bass accompaniment, and some drums on one of the cuts, and Elvis later complained to the echoes in his early Sun sessions. In fact, Phillips' echo-effect was created "by placing a mike and an amp at opposite ends of the long hallways at the front of the building and feeding that back into the man room" (Guralnick 1994: 238). Yet it is clearly Elvis' voice that dominates, that carries the message, that transports the listener.

Anticipating my later discussion of the RCA recordings, I would suggest comparing Elvis as an accomplished cover artist of black artists by listening to his versions of Little Richard songs like "Tutti Frutti" with Pat Boone's feeble efforts at covering Little Richard show how Elvis had deeply assimilated R&B and the emergent rock and roll music culture.³ A revealing impromptu recording session in the Sun studios in the mid-1950s, released in 1999 in England as The Million Dollar Quartet, captures the first meeting and a jam session of Elvis, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash. Elvis completely dominates the session, performing spontaneously in pop, country, R&B, gospel, and traditional music. Elvis seemed to know the words of songs from all of these genres and when any of the quartet fumbled, forgetting lyrics, Elvis kicked in with a clear and confident voice. This session reveals Elvis' mastery of a number of genres and ability to spontaneously perform a wide range of songs.

Elvis Dionysius

"Artists, if they are any good, are (physically as well) strong, full of surplus energy, powerful animals, sensual; without a certain overheating of the sexual system a Raphael is unthinkable—Making music is another way of making children...--Artists should see nothing as it is, but fuller, simpler, stronger: to that end, their lives must contain a kind of youth and spring, a kind of habitual intoxication," Friedrich Nietzsche

The early Elvis was thus a natural with deep musical roots in blues, gospel, country, and the emergent rock and roll/rhythm and blues music that he would eventually become a significant force within. Elvis sang from the heart and when he performed he could not help shaking, the spirit moved him, the energies of rock surged forth and Elvis the Pelvis became legend. Indeed, one cannot begin to comprehend the Elvis Presley phenomenon through the music alone, for Elvis was one of the great music performers of all time. Those of us who never saw him live in the 1950s will have to depend on the video and film renditions of his performances, and, more important, documentary of his live performances, but from this evidence it is clear that Elvis was a rocker, that he drove audiences wild, that he was a tremendous performer. I would suggest that it was pre-eminently in his live concert performances that he expressed the rebellious erotic energies that had been bottled up during the repressive and conformist 1950s, that while performing Elvis fused with his audiences, who appeared to be completely orgasmic, that he tapped into the erotic energies of R&B, that he powerfully expressed the desires for erotic gratification and release in a culture of conformity where one just didn't go these things in public.

In addition, Elvis' very look and image contributed to his cultural power. With his long hair,

his trademark sideburns, his soulful eyes, his sly smile and sneer, his outré clothes, Elvis was a non-conformist, an individualist, a rather distinctive personality. He thus represented a desire for individuality, for personal authenticity, as a reaction against the conformity and homogenization of the 1950s and this impulse too, deeply felt in his audience, contributed to his cultural power and popularity.

But Elvis was not just a good singer, he was a charismatic performer. To borrow from Nietzsche's categories in *The Birth of Tragedy*, (1972) Elvis was a Dionysian artist who put on the most electrifying and erotic performances that anyone had ever seen -- at least in white culture. Dionysius was, recalling Nietzsche, the Greek God of Ecstasy, of bacchanalian ritual, the god of wine, intoxication and sexual ecstasy. The Dionysius cult, evident in several Greek classical plays and analyzed by Nietzsche and others, combined religious ceremonies with an orgiastic frenzy of dancing and copulating, ceremonies appropriately. For Nietzsche, Dionysian culture combined a fusing of the erotic-physical and bodily energies of the Dionysian cult with creative form, thus producing a fuse of mind and body, of the Apollonian and the Dionysian which for Nietzsche was the key to Greek culture (the Apollonian being the form).

What images and accounts we have of Elvis Presley's life performances in the 1950s suggest that he drove his audience to frenzy, that he fused with his audiences, and that he elicited Dionysian forms of collective behavior. There were legendary accounts of the riots at Presley concerts, of fans rushing the stage and his dressing room and ripping off his clothes and wildly tearing at him, and one witness recalls after a Jacksonville, Florida concert in 1955:

I heard feet like a thundering herd, and the next thing I knew I heard this voice from the shower area. I started running, and three or four policeman started running, too, and by the time we got there several hundred must have crawled in-- ... and Elvis was on top of one of the showers looking sheepish and scared, like 'What'd I do?' and his shirt was shredded and his coat was torn to pieces. Somebody had even gotten the belt and his socks and these cute little boots—they were not cowboy boots, he was up there with nothing but his pants on and they were trying to pull at them up on the shower (Guralnick 1994: 190; see also 266, 303, 318, 342f and 374 for accounts of Dionysian hysteria at Elvis performances).

Every Elvis documentary and much footage shows teenage girls screaming with ecstasy at the site of Elvis and by the late 1950s the continuous screaming at Elvis conferences made it impossible to hear the lyrics and music. At the Second International Elvis Conference in 1996, historian Joel Williamson delivered a paper on the importance of Elvis for awakening the sexuality of Southern youth, especially women who were able in a Elvis concert to experience their erotic needs and hungers, who were able to release their bottled-up sexual energies, who were able to undergo at least a modicum of sexual desublimation.

The same could be said, of course, of Elvis himself and perhaps that is part of the secret of Elvis' almost mystical fusion with his audience. Elvis himself was obviously sexually repressed, longing for romance and love, and these needs and energies came out bursting in his stage performances. Elvis tells of how he was once in front of an audience singing and just started shaking and twitching, involuntarily expressing his erotic longings. He claims that his famous moves and gyrations just naturally happened, were not planned and contrived, and that so, like his fusion of country, black, and pop, Elvis' performance was a natural mode of self-expression, a natural release of natural energies, and so Elvis was able to articulate those inchoate needs and

longings which tormented himself and his audiences.

In a sense, Elvis was a singular universal, a figure who represented in his very individuality the desire for personal expression and liberation in the 1950s. Elvis was both the return of the repressed, the figure incarnating the repressed energies and impulses of the 1950s and a dynamically individual figure, who represented both himself and his generation. Like James Dean and Marlon Brando, Elvis had something of the aura of the outsider, of the threatening non-conformist, though upon closer inspection, like the Dean and Brando cinematic figures, he just wanted to be loved, to be accepted, and to be himself. But while Dean and Brando smoldered in cinematic images, confined to the darkened movie theaters, Elvis rocked in public, he set in motion erotic and rebellious energies in public spaces, he created cultural pandemonium and thus was a real threat to the protectors of the existing morality and order.

A curious contradiction emerges at this point: the site of Elvis's quasi-spiritual energies and the almost religious response of his followers was arguably precisely during the stage when Elvis was most sexual, subversive, and a figure of rebellion. Elvis to some extent was an example of what Bataille theorized as the sacred profane, who sacral zed the body, sexuality, the earth, people, love, family, and the everyday, the ordinary pleasures of life. Elvis thus represented at once a profane spirituality and a sacred secularity, celebrating the body and instinctual life-energies, synthesizing mind and body, lyrics and music, medium and message, thus deconstructing the opposition between sacred and profane, the spiritual and the material. It is no exaggeration to say that Elvis was the vehicle through which the Dionysian spirit that animated Greek culture was expressed and this spirit was most alive in Elvis when he was Elvis the Pelvis, when the spirit (literally) moved him, when he shook and gyrated almost unconsciously, when he was the most outrageously sexual and profane.

To be sure, gospel music was a part of Elvis' early and formative musical experience and a quest for spirituality played an enduring, if sporadic, role in Elvis' life. It is noteworthy that there was no gospel in the Sun sessions and I am suggesting that Elvis' spiritual powers were not a conventional Christian otherworldliness and renunciation of the world, or proclamation of Christian theology, but was rather a Nietzschean and Dionysian affirmation and deification of life-energies and a Batailleian synthesis of the sacred and the profane. But the sacramental site of Presleyean spirituality was the performance itself, the interaction between Elvis and the audiences, the mystical bonds that bound them together and that continued to make him an almost godlike figure of devotion. Indeed, the bond that continued between Elvis and his audiences is a transcendent one that defies understanding ultimately, making the sacrament of Elvis a mystery, a profane illumination as to the power of the spirit of music.

And so Elvis the Pelvis was Elvis Dionysius, an icon of the Greek god of ecstasy and release, and the early rock concert thus provided a cultural space for the expression and celebration of energies and yearnings that were generally bottled up and repressed in the conformist 1950s. The rock concert performance space was thus a forum for a Dionysian celebration of youth, a mystical fusion of minds and bodies in a collective experience of ecstasy and, not surprisingly, those participants in the ritual of Rock-Dionysius made the singers, the pop performers, their gods.

Elvis with his good looks, his expressive performance, and distinctive music was thus the first Dionysian god of the white youth culture, the first iconic idol of Rock. This role would later be played out by Mick Jagger, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and others in the 1960s and 1970s and in

the 1980s to the present by Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and a variety of hip hop artists. Yet Elvis created the archetype of the Dionysian rock icon who would be such a potent figure in later rock culture and spectacle. He was an energetic performer who drove audiences into ecstasies and through the promotion of the culture industries became a music superstar and romantic idol. Yet there were other preconditions of Elvis' success which have to do with the technologies of media culture and sonic synergies produced by the Elvis phenomenon.

Elvis' Sonic Synergies

“The Colonel's vision of the future centered on mass exposure... television was the key to the deal. The Colonel realized it... How many people could you reach with one national appearance as opposed to all the one-night stands, the endless promotions and exploitations, that you did before picking up stakes and moving on to the next town” (Guralnick 1994: 240-1).

In addition to live musical performance, there are other cultural spaces that were central to the emerging rock youth culture, including the expansion of radio broadcasting and wide-spread circulation of radios in the home and other sites of youth culture. As far as I know, no one has yet theorized the relationship between radio and youth culture, articulating the role of the radio in not only disseminating rock and roll, but providing an autonomous space for youth where they could hear their own voices, their own generation, and participate in their own culture, independent of their parents' world. In the 1950s, and to some extent, up to today, adults controlled the cultural spaces of U.S. society: school, work, church, and even such things as sports and youth organizations (such as boy and girl scouts, church fellowship groups, after-school clubs, and other organizations). Even these supposedly youth organizations were controlled by adults who used them to instill their values and indoctrinate youth into the hegemonic values and behavior of the mainstream conservative U.S. society of the 1950s.

The radio was, then, an autonomous cultural space for youth which could be listened to in the privacy of their rooms, their automobiles in the exploding automotive culture of the 1950s, in juke joints, and other youth sites where youth gathered together, they turned on the radio to listen to rock. Indeed, rock music on the radio was one of the favorite cultural forms for 1950s youth and was an undeniable force in generating the emerging rock culture. Elvis himself got much of his musical education in Memphis and elsewhere from the radio and the Presley family would sit for hours listening to the Grand Ole Opry, The Louisiana Hayride, one of Elvis' first successful sites of performance, and other shows such as the blues and R&B stations which Elvis particularly liked.

Elvis immediately scored big on the radio and once he started making his records he was a favorite attraction on first local and then national radio stations. His first song “That's Alright Mama” was played repeatedly on his home-town Memphis station and quickly became a regional and national hit (Guralnick 1994: 115f.). Elvis loved the radio and was always happy to talk live on the radio with disk jockeys and fans. His voice lent itself to the sonic tonality of radio which became a major force in making him a megastar and became a privileged site of bonding between Elvis and his fans.

Another site of youth culture where Elvis became a cultural icon, already alluded to, was the dance floor, teen parties, juke box and cafe scenes, and other social spaces where youth congregated to listen to music, dance, and connect with members of the opposite sex. These spaces are visible in

some of the first Elvis movies and Alan Freed movies like Johnny Be Good (1955), and one imagines indeed that dance sites, or cafes, were electrified with the playing of Presley songs which invited one to get up and dance.

But it was television that was the center of the media culture of the 1950s and many believe that television played a crucial role in the Elvis saga. Elvis' legendary manager Col. Tom Parker saw from the beginning that television was the crucial medium to sell Presley to a broader public and shrewdly managed his television career. Elvis was booked on national TV shows like The Tommy Dorsey Show, Milton Berle, Steve Allen, and Ed Sullivan that exposed him to a national audience. Let us recall that before Elvis, 50s TV and popular music was pretty mundane and conformist: Your Hit Parade, musical shows like The Perry Como and Dinah Shore show, variety shows like Milton Berle and Ed Sullivan played only the tamest and for the most part whitest varieties of pop music.⁴ American Bandstand began to introduce black music and rock, but within the confines of a studio system where performers for the most part lip-synched to their hit records and the teenage audiences danced within well-established limits. Hence, the appearance of Elvis, especially the relatively unrestrained Elvis on the Milton Berle Show was something of a cultural revelation. Elvis shook, gyrated, and felt and expressed the primal rhythms of rock, he showed TV nation Elvis the Pelvis and many were, unsurprisingly, shocked (Guralnick 1994, 262ff.).

When Elvis appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show he was ordered not to gyrate and the cameras were ordered to frame him from the waste up, just in case. Henceforth, with these pressures, Presley was naturally self-conscious in especially his film and TV performances and merely quoted or hinted at his earlier gestures.⁵ Eventually, Presley's on-stage gestures arguably became mere quotations and pastiches of his earlier spontaneous body language, a sad reflection of the dynamic and spontaneous performer who drove live audiences to Dionysian frenzies and electrified national TV audiences.

Yet precisely by appearing on national TV shows, in however constrained a form, Elvis contributed to the mainstreamization of rock by appearing on the Milton Berle, Steve Allen, Ed Sullivan, and other TV shows of the 1950s. Ed Sullivan's acceptance and affirmation of Elvis was in effect an acceptance and cultural validation of rock, recognition that rock and roll was here to stay, at least for the moment, and that it must be contained and accommodated within the existing system. The relation of Elvis and the culture industries was thus a dual edge sword: On one hand, the culture industries circulated and disseminated the rebellious, subversive energies of rock, but also attempted to contain them, to absorb them, and defuse them of their raw power (and promiscuous Dionysian subtext). While the figure of Elvis legitimated and disseminated rock music to a mainstream audience and established Elvis as the superstar of the 1950s, but the culture industries transformed Elvis himself, absorbing him into their system, and robbing him of his individuality, vitality, and creativity.

This is evident in Elvis' first film Love Me Tender (1956). While Elvis auditioned in a film in which he would play with Burt Lancaster and Katherine Hepburn, Col. Parker nixed the deal and negotiated for him to play in a film in which he would be center of attention, if not the actual star of the film. Whereas Elvis wanted to do serious dramatic performances and did not want to sing in his initial film, Col. Parker made sure that the film featured Elvis songs and indeed it was renamed after one of Elvis new ballads "Love Me Tender."

This pattern was repeated throughout Elvis' Hollywood career: He was offered the lead role

in West Side Story, A Star is Born, and other large-scale serious Hollywood films, but Col. Parker rejected the offers and made Elvis appear in formulaic pot-boilers, often as many as three a year, preventing him from taking serious roles. This absorption and diminution of his musical talent was often reflected in RCA recordings of the 1960s which marketed the mediocre songs from his films in sound-track albums, although Elvis did manage to produce some more serious musical work, and carried out what many consider a successful TV comeback in a 1968 special, still treasured by fans, and his first major live performance in years in a 1971 Las Vegas special.

Thus, on one hand, Elvis' successful use of the mass media of communication of the era -- radio, television, and film -- circulated and legitimated rock culture, and a rebellious youth counterculture, though it attempted to tame its rebellious energies, absorbed it into mainstream culture and fatally absorbed Elvis Presley, at least the rebel Elvis of the 1950s, the Dionysian Elvis, and arguably destroyed him.

Elvis Descendent: Dionysius Sacrificed

“The story of Elvis’ inexorable decline—what could almost be called the vanishing of Elvis Presley over a period of time--... may have no greater moral than the story of Job or Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex: Count no man lucky until he has reached his journey’s end... The last few years of his life amounted to little more than a sad diminution” (Guralnick 1999: xiv).

In 1958, Elvis joined the Army, had his haircut, disappeared from the public and any stage whatsoever for two years, and he returned a changed figure: more subdued, more docile, and more boring. For years, I always saw the footage of Elvis getting his haircut as a symbolic castration and John Lennon is famous for claiming that Elvis died when he joined the army. In retrospect, the footage of the Welcome Back Elvis TV-special in Miami Beach with Frank Sinatra also signals a mainstreaming of Elvis, absorption of Elvis into the culture industry, a transformation of Elvis into a banal pop phenomenon, roughly similar to Frank Sinatra and the rat pack who clowned in a banal way for a mainstream TV audience. Frank, Elvis, and the rat pack represented.

In retrospect, Elvis is a unique figure in the history of the culture industries, for no one achieved superstar status faster as in his meteoric rise to fame and adulation. This rise to mega stardom attests to the incredible power that the culture industries were achieving; i.e. the power to create a national and even international superstar almost overnight. But in a sense, and tragically, Elvis was simply not part of the '60s. The cutting-edge Elvis, the cool Elvis, who worked his magic in the 1950s, was a prefigurative anticipation of the 1960s. The rocking Dionysian Elvis was indeed a cultural force who helped make the '60s possible. He was idolized by Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other white male groups of the 1960s and legitimated white male singers going into black blues culture, folk culture, and other disparate musical sources. Moreover, Elvis anticipated the rebellious energies of the 1960s, the extreme individualism and non-conformity, the emphasis on authenticity and doing your own thing. Elvis could have easily entered into the 1960s cultural revolution, he could have been part of the cutting-edge '60s culture and counterculture, and he could have fit in just fine. The top music figures of the epoch idolized Elvis, my generation which were participants in the 1960s counterculture grew up with Elvis and venerated him, and he obviously had access to any cultural medium or venue that he wanted to perform and participate in, but instead he made formulaic movies and music, endlessly repeating the same genres and formulas

without trying anything new.

But imagine what Elvis could have been and done in the 1960s: Elvis could have played in '60s type films, been a major player on the concert circuit, created music that would have advanced '60s cultural innovation, and have generally been a key figure. But Elvis just wasn't part of the real 1960s. Although I was a devoted Elvis fan of the 1950s, buying every record, seeing every movie, following every move, I lost interest in him completely during this decade. Indeed, I would claim that he just wasn't part of the cultural creativity of the decade, and that Elvis did not make one album, movie, performance, or event that was part of '60s counterculture. Instead, he stood outside the decade, he was not really part of it, and he just wasn't a player. There is a poignant moment in the NBC TV-movie Elvis and the Colonel (1991?) where Elvis wistfully remarks: "I'm just not part of what's happening anymore. Jimmie Hendricks, Janet Joplin, the Jefferson Airplane, Dylan, that's what's happening."

Elvis' banality in the 1960s raises the question: What happened to Elvis? How do you explain his regression? Was it, as John Lennon suggested, his years in the army? Was it, as many have argued, Colonel Parker who is to blame, his Svengali-like manager, who according to some accounts had a master plan for Elvis, wanting him to go into the military to get discipline, to clean up his image, to create an absence that would soon be filled, who had a plan for his mainstreaming and marketing via Hollywood and high-paying movies, record contracts, and a safe career without performance, controversy or any risks. Or was it the broader phenomenon of the culture industries power of absorption that defanged and contained Elvis through money, fame, and all of the trappings of celebrity success? Or was Elvis himself just too greedy, too weak to resist the machinations of Col. Parker and the culture industry, or too drugged out to resist these machinations?

Probably Elvis' regression can be explained by a combination of these features. The many books and films on the Elvis phenomenon put blame on one factor or another and Elvis' fall from grace was indeed probably overdetermined. Yet by all accounts he himself was unhappy with his movies and records, wanted to return to his audiences, knew that he had a talent and potential that he was wasting, wanted to make a come back and be Elvis again, and so the last decade of Elvis' life is characterized by his uneven attempts at comeback and return.

In a sense, the Dionysian Elvis was first sacrificed to TV, with the television industry carrying out the first symbolic castration of Elvis the Pelvis -- to be followed by the military castration, the Hollywood castration, and, more generally, castration on the part of Col. Parker and the culture industries. Comparing Elvis's 1950s vitality with most of his 1960s Hollywood movies and RCA recordings is a sad exercise in decline. While Elvis's 1968 TV come-back special was generally seen as a success, demonstrating that Elvis could still electrify audiences and achieve charismatic musical performances, his later tours and Vegas concert performances were largely a pastiche of his former self, failing to break new musical ground and largely imitating his own songs, gestures, and performance style. The saga of Elvis's decline and fall, as he became increasingly bloated, dazed by prescription drugs, erratic in behavior, and eventually dying at the age of 42 is a dispiriting cautionary tale of how the culture industry can consume its own.

Yet after his death, Elvis has undergone multiple resurrections with scores of Elvis impersonators, TV and other movies, documentaries, TV specials, and the never-ending recycling of his music and films in videotapes, CDs, DVDs, and Elvis memorabilia of diverse sorts. As the

sonic synergies of the culture industries develop, the Presley industry continues to recycle and circulate his works. Elvis thus continues to be a billion-dollar plus a year commodity and his fateful merger with the music technologies of the day continues to advance and in some ways diminish the Elvis phenomenon as Elvis Dionysius gave way to the Hollywood/RCA Elvis, the bloated Vegas Elvis, and the resurrection of the Dead Elvis into the technologies and sonic synergies of the culture industries.

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Notes

¹ Obviously, my four Elvis model is an oversimplification and an ideal types analysis. There were overlaps between the stages, continuities from beginning to end, and complexities within each stage -- as within every human being. Yet there were also significant differences in the various stages of Elvis Presley's career and I think that these categories capture these differences. As noted, I spent decades closely following Elvis and have a large collection of Elvis literature and primary materials to draw upon. Of the stacks of books on Elvis, I found the studies by Marcus (19xx), Goldman (19xx) and two volumes by Guralnick (1994 and 1999) to be of most use.

² It is curious that the mainstream of cultural studies has yet to engage Elvis. The exception is John Fiske's (1993) study of the dead Elvis in Power Plays. But Fiske studies the afterlife of Elvis, the continued adulation and creation of myths that Elvis is still alive, that he continues to be an animating force for a vibrant subculture of fans. Although Larry Grossberg has written an entire book on rock and roll and many articles, he has not engaged Elvis in any significant way (check refs in Gotta...). The neglect of Elvis, in comparison, for example, with the investigations within cultural studies of Madonna, MTV, rap, metal, grunge, or other forms of popular music may reflect the thrust toward the contemporary in cultural studies, toward understanding contemporary culture, society, and politics. It may also reflect the age and generational biases of cultural studies. The overwhelming majority of people who do cultural studies are of the younger generation, they did not experience Elvis in the 1950s, he is not part of their musical culture, and is seen as a relict of the past. An article in the New York Times described the differences in musical tastes between baby boomers and Generation X, noting how Generation Xers hate the idealizations of the music past and prefer their own music. And many boomers probably missed Elvis in the 1950s and did not experience him in the 1960s as a vital cultural force.

³ There have been critiques by Hip Hip groups like Public Enemy (on "Fight the Power") and

other critics that Elvis exploited black musicians, getting rich off of their labor. It's true in many cases that writers of songs Elvis used from many genres and social groups were woefully underpaid, but this is more a function of the culture industry than Elvis himself. One could also argue that Elvis assimilated African American culture better than any white singer of the period and did much to mainstream R&B and the emerging rock and roll.

4. The story of The Nat King Cole show is a sad one; although the show and singer were popular, boycotts by southern stations cut back on the advertising base and eventually led his networks to cancel the series.

5. For an amusing example of how unique and inimitable Presley's spontaneous gestures were, look at the problematic attempt at imitation of his gyrations during the TV-series Elvis-- The Early Years by Michael St. Gerard, the young actor who played Elvis, or Kurt Russell's embarrassing performance in the 1979 TV-Movie Elvis where the Elvis Presley figure just looks like Kurt Russell. In the 2005 TV-movie Elvis, Jonathan Rhys-Meyer, by contrast, looked uncannily like Elvis, the soundtrack used Elvis's recordings, and there were moments where it appeared Elvis was indeed resurrected. Unfortunately, the 2005 TV-movie itself broke little new ground and recycled the previous well-known stories of Elvis' life in a version controlled by the Presley estate that circumscribed what could be shown.