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Why Elvis?

Michael T. Bertrand

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

January/February 2007 Historically Speaking 17 Why Elvis? Michael T. Bertrand Elvis. A surname almost seems redundant. No one ever asks "Elvis who?" or "Who's Elvis?" Many, however, have persistently asked or wondered, "Why Elvis?" Or, intoned with a different emphasis, "Why Elvis?" On the surface, no matter what the intonation, it is a rather straightforward two-part question. The first component involves the social conditions responsible for Presley's emergence, and the second concerns the performer's historical relevance. Yet embedded within the inquiry are several issues tied to race, region, class, taste, gender, and generation that make the question a politically charged or loaded one. Responses to it reflect similar tensions. "Why Elvis?" at the top of this essay, for instance, may have elicited as much exasperation as it did delight. Several readers indeed may have turned back to the front page to make sure they had not mistakenly grabbed the *National Enquirer*, while others may have irritably shouted above the Beethoven booming from their office jam box, "Why not Chuck Berry?" Whatever the response, it is doubtful that the question provoked nothing. For, beginning with his arrival on the national scene in the mid-1950s, Presley

has maintained a constant, controversial presence in American life, a perseverance that even his dying could not defy. In 1958, for instance, two writers who surely did not anticipate the longevity of their counsel, fittingly proclaimed that "as a subject for polemic, Elvis Presley has few peers." Their assessment was not terribly immoderate; an earlier recommendation had advocated angrily that "Elvis the Pelvis belongs in the jungle." Many definitely agreed that he simply did not belong. Widely syndicated Chicago columnist Mike Royko's disapproving epitaph upon Presley's untimely death at 42 ultimately registered a widespread contempt and loathing for the southern white working-class culture the singer personified: "Elvis pulled off a marvelous con. There he was, a Depression-born, unread hillbilly, a marginally-talented pop singer" who "promoted a limited talent into a vast fortune I think what Presley's success really proves is that the majority of Americans, while fine, decent people, have lousy taste in music."¹ To many, Royko's inference that Elvis reigned as the "king of white-trash culture" merely stated the obvious. Two years following his death, one scholar noted that to appreciate or like Presley "was suspect, a lapse of taste. It put one in bee hives and leisure suits, in company with 'necrophiliacs' and other weird sorts." By the middle of the next decade, one of the biggest selling biographies in the history of publishing (Elvis by Albert Goldman) portrayed the ex-truck driver as a "redneck with savage appetites and [a] perverted mentality and of no musical significance to American culture." And as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the media transformed the former poster child Elvis Presley performing with Bill Black, January 1, 1955. © Sunset Boulevard/Corbis. for adolescent rebellion into a national joke, a cultureless icon whose cultural consequence had been reduced to an ironically flawed (not to mention tacky) exhibition pitting a "skinny Elvis" (likeness from the 1950s weighing approximately 175 pounds) against a "fat Elvis" (an image from a 1973 Hawaii satellite program in which a slimmed-down Presley tipped the scales at about 165—Elvis had apparently just gone on a "crash" diet) for the honor of gracing a decidedly non-iconoclastic commemorative postage stamp. Once likened to a "jug of corn liquor at a champagne party," the hip-swiveling "Hillbilly Cat"-turned-Bmovie star-turned-Las Vegas spectacle clearly never obtained the credentials necessary to attain legitimacy and rise above caricature. As Jon Wiener has noted: "To die mainstream, the culture Elvis came out of was dumb and degraded, and Elvis was a stupid hillbilly, a redneck who came from white trash." Indeed, according to Simon Frith, Presley "was not just working class but, worse, southern working class, [the object of] a class contempt which, among other things, assumed that someone like Elvis was incapable of artistry."² Historians have frequently assumed that "someone like Elvis" also proved incapable of achieving historical significance. After all, he was, as William Leuchtenburg once pronounced...

WHY ELVIS?

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Elvis. A surname almost seems redundant. No one ever asks "Who's who?" or "Who's Elvis?" Many, however, have persistently asked or wondered, "Why Elvis?" Or, instead with a different emphasis, "Why Elvis?"

On the surface, no matter what the question, it is a rather straightforward two-part question. The first component involves the social conditions responsible for Presley's emergence, and the second concerns the performer's historical relevance. Unembedded within the inquiry are several issues tied to race, region, class, taste, gender, and generation that make the question a politically charged or loaded one. Responses to it reflect similar tensions. "Why Elvis?" at the top of this issue, for instance, may have elicited as much exasperation as it did delight. Several readers asked may have turned back to the first page to make sure they had not mistakenly grabbed their *National Lampoon*, while others may have angrily sneered about the Brothers Beethoven fraying their collar-jam laws, "Why not Chuck Berry?"

Whatever the response, it is doubtful that the question posed itself. Not, beginning with his arrival on the national scene in the mid-1950s, Presley has maintained a constant, conspicuous presence in American life, a presence that even his dying made not dull. In 1958, for instance, 900 writers who surely did not anticipate the longevity of their counsel, frantically proclaimed that "as a subject for public life, Elvis Presley has few peers."¹ Their assessment was not terribly inaccurate; an earlier recommendation had advocated simply that "Elvis the Prince belongs in the jungle."² Many definitely agreed that he simply did not belong. Widely syndicated Chicago columnist Mike Royko's disapproving epitaph upon Presley's untimely death at 32 ultimately registered a wide spread contempt and warbling for the southern white working-class culture the singer personified: "He's pulled off a marvelous con. There he was, a Depression-born, actual hillbilly, a marginally-talented pop singer" who "promoted a limited talent into a vast fortune. . . . I think what Presley's success really proves is that the majority of Americans, white folk, decent people, have lousy taste in music."³

To many, Royko's inference that Elvis reigned as the "king of white trash culture" merely stated the obvious. Two years following his death, one scholar noted that in appreciation of the Presley "was suspect, a type of race. It put one in: hopholes and hickness, with its company with 'roughness' and other wild sorts" by the middle of the next decade, one of the biggest selling biographies in the history of publishing (like by Alton Goldman) portrayed the musician as a "troubled youth with vague appetites and [a] perceived femininity and of no musical significance to American culture." And as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the media sacralized the former power child



Elvis Presley performing with Bill Black, January 1, 1955. © Sam Donnell/Corbis.

for adolescent rebellion into a national joke, a cultureless icon whose cultural consequence had been reduced to an ironically flawed (not to mention tasteless) exhibition pitting a "stony Livia" (Liberia from the 1950s weighing approximately 175 pounds) against a "fat Elvis" (an image from a 1978 Hawaii satellite program in which a slimmed-down Presley ripped the scales at about 165—Elvis had apparently just gone on a "coach" diet) for the honor of granting a decidedly non-eclectic commemorative postage stamp. Once earned to a "jug of tom liquor as a cheap-pipe party," the tap-dancing "Hillbilly Cat" musical-B-movie star turned Van Viper spectacle clearly never missed the redemptive necessity to attain legitimacy and rise above caricature. As Jim Wester has noted: "In the excitement, the culture Elvis came out of was dumb and degraded, and Elvis was a stupid hillbilly, a rascal who came from white trash." Indeed, according to Simon Frith, Presley "was not just working class but, worse, underworking class, [the object of] a class contempt which, among other things, assumed that someone like Elvis was incapable of artistry."⁴

Historians have frequently assumed that "someone like Elvis" also proved incapable of achieving historical significance. After all, he was, as William Faulkner once pronounced, nothing more than a "consumer culture hero" who "lame notes that were instantly forgettable." Although ensuing generations

of scholars have adopted a more straitlaced approach to popular culture's presence (in fact, it has become somewhat chic at the postmodern moment to compare with nearly every pop phenomenon that bursts onto the scene), there still remains a distinct racialist disdain for certain popular manifestations. For those considered politically incorrect, such as Elvis, serious scholarly scrutiny is scarce. Granted, the late Presley did headline two academic conferences in the mid-1990s. Yet both quickly devolved into voyeuristic representations of the entertainer's purportedly frayed fender. Perhaps in all of the hoopla there was not much else to engage the academics and journalists who were in attendance. No matter. Most already had an explanation for the singer's seemingly tawdry appeal. Either the masses did not know any better, or they were too unenlightened to ward off a manipulative media. As for Presley's place within the pop music canon, historians generally have shunned the side burial Mississippi into a one-dimensional mirrored paradigm (skippin' in many and various incarnations), claiming that Elvis ushered in at least a rather pale version of an early 19th-century "Belgian delinquent," sans the blackface makeup and mask. Having solved the Presley puzzle, some even have insisted that the real story should focus on Elvis impersonators. Granting more credit to the imitator than to the original, of course, arguably takes the minstrel model to its ironic extreme. It usually turns the tables on the presumptive rock 'n' roll, subtly suggesting that Elvis should suffer a re-evaluation analogous to that endured by the uncredited and presumably forgotten African-American performers he had impersonated.

Exiling Elvis to history's hinterlands, however, will not make him go away. Nor would his expulsion shed any light on the rapidly changing societal conditions of a post-World War II South that made his emergence both historically possible and socially significant. The son of Mississippi sharecroppers, Presley symbolized a generation of working-class white Southerners who sought solace in the only port of entry. Accordingly, they witnessed a rural world of poverty, status, and racial segregation hastily yield to one of industrial nation, urbanization, affluence, and integration. These younger inhabitants came of age as the region came of age. Stung by older traditions, they had to adjust to the modern circumstances abruptly thrust before them. The process, of course, held a great deal of promise. Previously elusive middle-class dreams of material acquisition and upward mobility, for example, suddenly seemed within reach. Yet economic transformations did not necessarily guarantee cultural adjustments. Although many certainly achieved relative prosperity, their distinctive behaviors, dialects, tastes, and dispositions nevertheless ensured their alienation from the



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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