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Why Elvis?

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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 widi 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 die question a politically charged or loaded one. Responses to it reflect similar tensions. "Why Elvis?" at die 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 their NationalEnquirer, 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 widi 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 die 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 soudiern 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 diat to appreciate or like Presley "was suspect, a lapse of taste. It put one in beehives and leisure suits, in company with 'necrophiliacs' and odier 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 apparendy 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...

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