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Remember Elvis

Thirty years after his death, the Memphis misfit defies explanation

by Martha Bayles

The sideburns and ducktail haircut, the flashy clothes, the curled lip, the unnerving body language--the deathless image of Elvis Presley in the 1950s was no public relations stunt.

On the contrary, it was his own eccentric creation, based partly on Hollywood movies (he called his hairstyle "a Tony Curtis") and partly on the sartorial panache of the black musicians who played blues and R&B in the nightclubs of Memphis and bought their sharp threads at Lansky Brothers on Beale Street. In 1948, when the Presleys moved from Tupelo, Mississippi, to Memphis, the 13-year-old Elvis had nothing to gain by adopting such an outlandish persona. The men and boys of his social milieu dressed square and paid frequent visits to the barber, so for making himself look like a weirdo, young Elvis got mostly taunts and jeers.

Why did he persist? Why does any high school weirdo persist? Usually because he can't help it. The offspring of a hardworking but ineffectual father and an uneducated but fanciful mother with no other children (Elvis's twin brother was stillborn) who made her surviving son the center of her universe, Elvis was encouraged, even before his fame, to inhabit a dreamworld where everything revolved around his charms and his wishes. The Presleys were dirt poor, moving so often from shack to boardinghouse to rented room, that when they finally got an apartment in Memphis public housing they felt (quoting a neighbor) "like we'd come into the money." In the process, Elvis developed a classic performer's personality: Introverted and shy but also desperate to connect with others. At a tender age he taught himself how to mesmerize an audience.

Between July 1954, when Elvis recorded an ear-catching cover of a mediocre blues called "That's All Right (Mama)" at the Sun Record Company, to September 1956, when he appeared before an audience of 50 million on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, he didn't just come into the money, he became postwar America's first mega-celebrity. And while billions of words have been spewed about why that happened, it is still hard to fathom. One hostile biographer, Albert Goldman, poses the question this way:

Instead of characterizing Elvis's triumph in conventional metaphors, . . . you are obliged to seek images that suggest speed, violence and, above all, the sheer inadvertence of the man who walks into a room filled with volatile gases, lights a match--and is blown through the ceiling! Clearly, if you want to understand the phenomenon of Elvis Presley or how he 'did it,' you have to start with the powerfully explosive vapors and not with the puny little match.

Three of those vapors can be easily identified: race, sex, and religion. Americans feel quite comfortable discussing these topics, as long as they are kept in separate mental compartments. When they get mixed, though, we feel uneasy--and mix them is

exactly what Elvis did. Not only that, but he did so at a time of maximum tension regarding the first two.

The cliché about 1950s rock 'n' roll is that (in a typical formulation from *Rolling Stone*) it "blew away, in one mighty, concentrated blast, the accumulated racial and social proprieties of centuries." This is absurd--not least because it implies that Elvis was the first white person to perform African-American music. Sticking with Memphis for a minute, that city's musical hybridization dates back at least as far as its founding in 1819, when the white inhabitants were reported to take pleasure in the singing and banjo-playing of slave musicians. The blues historian Robert Palmer reports that, in 1838, white Memphis gave a chilly reception to the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull because he couldn't manage the "nigger fiddle." And throughout its subsequent history, Memphis was a prime venue for minstrel shows, dance orchestras, ragtime pianists, riverboat jazz bands, blues singers, and gospel quartets of every stripe and color.

So it wasn't musical hybridization *per se* that caused the explosion. It was musical hybridization of a particular kind, in a particular time and place. In the 1950s, proper white southerners condemned blues and R&B (which they called "nigger music") because they associated it with the custom of some white men to go "slipping around" with black women. Often this led to bitter, stoic, or neurotic reactions among white women, who felt painfully excluded from this erotic ritual.

Now consider how those same white women would react if a white man appeared who could not only sing as seductively as a black R&B star, but who also made it clear (as no black star could, or would) that his singing was directed at them? Wouldn't they relish turning the tables and reducing their men to passive onlookers, while they screamed in ecstasy? One of the biggest problems on Elvis's early southern tours was security. According to Bob Neal, who served as his booking agent at the time, "The boys reacted very violently in many areas because, I suppose, of the way the girls acted."

Up North, the Elvis explosion had little to do with race and everything to do with sex. By the time of his third appearance on *Ed Sullivan*, the singer's trademark leg-shaking had become such fodder for the chattering classes, the CBS Department of Standards and Practices decided to film him from the waist up. The intention of this crude censorship was to shift the audience's attention away from Elvis's rubbery legs and toward his velvety voice. But of course, it had the opposite effect: One twitch, and the girls screamed, just as sure as Pavlov's bell made the puppies slobber.

It is no accident that these events transpired during the heyday of Freud in American intellectual life. As sketched here by Jacques Barzun, the impact of Freudian thought was not enriching: "Freud happened to be encumbered with a materialistic notion of science, which gave added color to the crude supposition that . . . a man's artistic creations, political opinions, and individual tastes are the direct, fated outcome of his sexual temperament. There followed the pseudo-psychoanalysis of everyone whose name could be read in the small print of a biographical dictionary."

Elvis wasn't listed in any biographical dictionaries at the time, but it's easy to see how educated types accustomed to reducing Shakespeare to an exercise in sublimation might do the same to Elvis (only skipping the sublimation part). A further boost was provided by Alfred Kinsey, whose tendentious reports on the sexual behavior of his fellow Americans were published in 1948 and 1953. As historian William O'Neill explains, "Kinsey's report on males was controversial but did him little harm. It had long been suspected that men were lustful, and proof of this, however unwelcome, did not shake the moral order. But his report on women made Kinsey notorious."

What did Elvis think was going on? The best source is Peter Guralnick's superb two-volume biography, in which Scotty Moore, Elvis's guitarist, recalls their first big show, at the Overton Park Shell in Memphis:

We were all scared to death. Here we come with two little funky instruments and a whole park full of people, and Elvis, instead of just standing flat-footed and tapping his foot, well, he was kind of jiggling. That was just his way of tapping his foot. Plus I think with those old loose britches that we wore--they weren't pegged, they had lots of material and pleated fronts--you shook your leg, and it made it look as though all hell was going on under there.

Elvis himself later recalled: "I came offstage and my manager told me they was hollering because I was wiggling my legs. I went back out for an encore, and I did a little more, and the more I did, the wilder they got."

How quaint this seems in today's media environment, which urges everyone 24-7 to picture all sorts of hell going on under all sorts of britches. Is Elvis to blame for this commercialized shamelessness? Of course not. All he did was put a little sex into his act, as opposed to puritanically excluding it, or prudently exaggerating it. This is the most sensible course, when you think about it. Certainly it was the one taken by most blues, R&B, and hillbilly performers, to say nothing of gospel.

Indeed, the most likely source of Elvis's leg shake is Jim Wetherington, who sang bass for a white gospel quartet called the Statesmen, a favorite of Elvis's father. Describing the Statesmen's act as "thrillingly emotive" and "daringly unconventional," Guralnick mentions without comment Wetherington's habit of "ceaselessly jiggling his left leg, then his right, with the material of the pants leg ballooning out and shimmering." The group's lead singer, Jake Hess, could have been talking about Elvis when he said of Wetherington, "He went about as far as you could go in gospel music."

That's what Elvis did: He went about as far as you could go in rock 'n' roll, and then he stopped.

It is ironic that people remain so obsessed with Elvis's movements, because in that realm he really is just a pale imitation of R&B. The black R&B singers who couldn't dance, didn't. But the ones who could were fluent, graceful, and rarely vulgar. Elvis got better at moving on stage, but he was always self-conscious about his body--and to judge by Guralnick's account, nowhere near as interested in sex as his fans liked to think. (In this respect he bears a strange resemblance to Marilyn Monroe, who positively disliked sex.) But none of this matters, because Elvis was not a dancer, or, after Hollywood got through with him, an actor. He was a singer. The first time his voice went out on the radio airwaves, people turned up the volume for a reason.

The music critic Henry Pleasants, whose first love was bel canto, does a better job than anyone of describing Elvis's peculiar gift: "Elvis has been described variously as a baritone and a tenor. An extraordinary compass and a very wide range of vocal color have something to do with this divergence of opinion. The voice covers about two octaves and a third, from the baritone's low G to the tenor's high B, with an upward extension of falsetto to at least a D flat."

The goal of a classical singer so endowed, Pleasants continues, would be "to achieve a uniform sound as the voice moves up and down the scale." But Elvis didn't do that. Untrained, but an avid listener and mimic, he developed "a multiplicity of voices" to handle a multiplicity of styles. Sometimes he used the wrong voice, or combined two voices badly. And as Pleasants observes, he never "learned to sing predictably and comfortably in the 'passage'" between baritone and tenor. But there's no denying it:

Elvis had great pipes.

He also had that intangible quality of feeling, emotion, that cannot be faked. Of course, he did fake it, especially when made to sing ridiculous material for the movies. On those all-too-frequent occasions, he would introduce a note of self-parody, as if confiding in his audience: "This is total crap, and we both know it." Of course, there's good money to be made from Elvis crap. For instance, right now you can buy the WowWee Alive Elvis, an animatronic bust of the singer in a black leather jacket and pliable plastic skin, beneath which 10 electric motors work to roll the infrared eyes, cock the pompadoured head, and raise the upper lip "for that signature sneer." (Only \$300 at the Sharper Image and, needless to say, Graceland.)

If you are more saddened than amused by this, or if you are sometimes annoyed that so few Elvis effigies and impersonators look anything like him, then congratulations--and condolences. You belong to a dwindling breed: people who can see through the endlessly proliferating schlock to the human being underneath. Elvis wasted whole chunks of his life doing worthless things, and when that made him miserable, he drugged himself into the pathetic condition that people still mock and that he hated. But therein lies the secret of his enduring fascination: He really did hate the sorry state he got into, and for a while, he fought against it.

In 1964, when Elvis was living in Los Angeles and making crummy movies, he hired a new hairdresser named Larry Geller who, at age 24, was an avid reader of the spiritual, and spiritualist, literature later stirred into New Age stew: Hinduism, theosophy, numerology, Christian Science, freemasonry, yoga (just the digestible bits, of course). Asked by Elvis--"What are you into?"--Geller began to feed this gallimaufry to his new client, who soon forgot about everything else, so starved was he for sustenance beyond the joys of owning 10 Cadillacs.

An unappreciated fact about Elvis, and his fellow rock 'n' rollers Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard, is that they were raised as Pentecostals: Elvis and Jerry Lee in predominantly white Assemblies of God, Little Richard in black Holiness churches. This upbringing not only grounded them in the powerful rhythms of (white and black) Pentecostal worship, it also made them acutely aware of what master their talents were serving.

Sophisticates who dislike rock 'n' roll may be amused by the spectacle of Elvis's untutored mind trying to digest works like Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. But he was struggling with something real. An older and wiser observer, an American follower of Yogananda named Sri Daya Mata, agreed to meet Elvis and later offered this account:

He was a naive, somewhat childlike individual who was caught up in the adulation of the world and enjoyed it, but, more than that, he felt a deep bond with his public; he was carried away by them and didn't want ever to disappoint them . . . Then we proceeded to talk about matters that were of great concern to him. He had done some reading. He was sinking. Here was someone who had everything the world could offer, [but] it didn't satisfy him. There was still an emptiness . . . He was nourished in every other way, *but where was the nourishment for his soul?*

Elvis was not "nourished in every other way," of course. Anyone who has ever dealt with an alcoholic or drug addict will read with pain the eyewitness testimony of those (Geller included, by his account) who tried to get Elvis off drugs. The poignancy of their failure is captured in Guralnick's description of a concert Elvis gave in Rapid City, South Dakota, in February 1977, six months before his death:

Elvis sat down at the piano and . . . launched into *Unchained Melody*, the Roy Hamilton

number in which he so often seemed to invest every fiber of his being. Hunched over the piano, his face framed in a helmet of blue-black hair from which sweat sheets down over pale, swollen cheeks, Elvis looks like nothing so much as a creature out of a Hollywood monster film--and yet we are with him all the way as he struggles to achieve grace. It is a moment of what can only be described as grotesque transcendence.

True, but recall the lyrics: "Time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much." Is any mortal creature capable of transcendence that is not, in some sense, grotesque?

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