

Michael Chaney

English 2367 W17

November 18, 2013

Elvis Presley: Visions of America

On a hot Memphis Saturday night on July 5, 1954, a nineteen-year-old truck driver named Elvis Presley walked into a tiny recording studio called Sun Records and recorded a song called “That’s Alright Mama” (Presley). That seemingly banal event was anything but ordinary. It was in fact the Big Bang of rock ‘n’ roll—a tiny explosion that sent pop culture in an outward expanse that soon reached all of America, and shortly after, the rest of the world. With that record and the subsequent recordings and live performances that followed, the singer was able to regurgitate the America that he had spent his youth devouring into the open mouths of an eagerly waiting society that was desperate for cultural sustenance. The young Elvis was like a prism that took in the light from the diverse American music and culture of the time (“hillbilly” country, “black” blues, gospel, jazz and crooner music) and sent it out the other side in a wave of blinding color onto the black and white America of the nineteen fifties. Elvis Presley reflected a hopeful and beautiful American culture back to the people who were desperately searching for a new identity, and in doing so, became a mythic American figure whose shadow looms larger than Paul Bunyan's and whose life has come to represent the diverse and dynamic American identity itself.

To appreciate how Elvis came to personify the American identity you must first understand the character of America—a nation discovered by adventurers and invented by philosophers. The United States of America is unlike any other country. You could

say that each nation of the world has its own qualities that make it different from all other countries, but the United States has many distinctions that make it truly unique and are important to note. First, and most importantly, America is an ideal not a landmass. The United States, unlike any other country, was born from the idea that people had the ability to govern themselves. The early conceivers of the nation, John Locke being one, believed that people had the ability and the right to govern themselves and that people did not need a king to govern them (Locke). This notion of self-governance threw aside centuries of reliance on the feudal system—a system in which everyone had their place in society and could not budge from their class and rank—and embraced a new democratic system in which people had basic rights (the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness). These rights were written into America's Declaration of Independence from Great Britain in 1776 (US 1776). The founders called them inalienable rights, which meant they could not be taken away from anyone, by anyone—not even a King.

If ever an artist personified these ideas of American Exceptionalism, freedom, and autonomy, it was Elvis Presley. Born in 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi to young, poor, uneducated parent, the road ahead of him looked as rocky and treacherous as the dirt road that ran past his two-room shotgun shack. In most countries this is where the story would end; in America this is where every good story begins. In no other country, before the birth of the United States, could Elvis exist. Where you were born is where you would stay. In a free democratic society, like the one invented by America's founding fathers, a person of value and dedication can climb the rungs of the social ladder. In dedicating the small log cabin Abraham Lincoln was born in, President Woodrow Wilson mused this about the humble beginnings of Lincoln, "This is the sacred mystery of democracy, that

its richest fruits spring up out of soils which no man has prepared and in circumstances amidst which they are the least expected.” Wilson could have just as convincingly been speaking of Elvis in that speech. Like Lincoln, what made Elvis Presley an icon was not his heritage or his wealth, but his value to the public, and that value was his ability to convey a liberated and boundless vision of America to the people that so desperately needed it at the time. One of the most admired and respected artists of this—or any—century, Bob Dylan, said this about Presley, “When I first heard Elvis’ voice I just knew that I wasn’t going to work for anybody; and nobody was going to be my boss...Hearing him for the first time was like busting out of jail” (qtd. in Egan, 21). In the late fifties, Elvis Presley, a truck driver from Mississippi, drove his big rig through a penitentiary of conformity and a million twentieth century jailbirds busted out.

In 1954, America was less than a decade out of the destituteness and horror of the Great Depression and World War II. Americans had learned to keep their heads down and expect little. In an article written for *History Today*, the authors Glen Jeansonne, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and David Luhrssen, arts editor of the *Shepherd Express* echoed this sentiment, “In the lower-class society of Presley’s origins, men never spoke of their dreams, even if their heads ached with them” (32). This demeanor however, was not part of the true American persona; it was not in the DNA of the nation when it was formed. What Elvis did in the late fifties was remind the nation that it was time to put their heads up and take a look around at what could be seen from what the early settlers of the new world and John F. Kennedy would remind the nation in 1961 was the “City upon a Hill.”

Another key characteristic of the United States is that it is a nation made up of many different races, people and cultures. It is a country that celebrates its diversity and treasures its multiculturalism. It is a melting pot where cultures mingle and breed, and new traditions are born. These different cultures form one country where, although the people have different histories and beliefs, they believe in the right of people to express and practice their own traditions—and to form new ones. Elvis exemplifies this model of a culturally rich and diverse America like no other artist in history. Presley, like no other musician before him, was able to take in all the cultures he was exposed to and turn them into something fresh and liberating. Rock critic, journalist, and biographer Greil Marcus, in comparing Elvis to other musicians he has written about, in his book *Mystery Train* said, “If they [other American artists] define different versions of America, Presley’s career almost has the scope to take America in” (121).

Elvis, like any entertainer, is known for what he created, but before you can create you must first experience, and Elvis got a wealth of experience in Memphis. Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi but spent his formative years in Memphis, Tennessee where he was exposed to many different cultures and musical styles growing up. Elvis’ very DNA is a cornucopia of American diversity. Presley’s mother was Scots-Irish, French Norman, and Cherokee Indian, and his father was German and Scottish. The ethnicities that he was lacking in his blood, Elvis found on the streets of Memphis—a city situated nearly right in the middle of the United States and whose culture reflects that location. Memphis is a metropolis that sits on the Mississippi River, which put it in the perfect spot for soaking up American—via the world—culture from the dawn of the nation. For centuries, travelers from the world over have ventured up and down the Mississippi, this

mighty American artery, and if the Mississippi River is an artery then Memphis is the heart. It's a place where various travelers of European and African decent shared music and culture. Memphis is a supernatural place where European instruments and arrangements and African drums and rhythms found themselves together, and the result was as raucous, spirited, and sexual as America itself. Elvis was a young voyeur that took in all Memphis' musical fornications until he was mature enough to explode them onto a desperate nineteen-fifties America.

Young Elvis Presley soaked in more than his fair share of music and American culture, but his true talent was in the way he delivered his vision of America back to the people. On September 9, 1956 Elvis appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, and 82% of the television viewing audience, nearly 60 million people, tuned in (Presley). What many older viewers saw as an abomination of conservative America, most young viewers saw as a vision of the future, one they wanted in on. An exceptionally good-looking young man was gyrating, thrusting, and wailing on their dads' TV sets, in their dads' living rooms without a care in the world. In that moment, a new, fresh vision of America was planted in the minds of young Americans—a vision that could not be rooted out by parents or torn out by politicians. From that moment on, anyone that had any hopes of appealing to that generation would have to add to that romantic vision of America and keep the promise that Elvis had made to them in their childhood living rooms—the promise of a new America.

The politicians and leaders that came after Elvis expanded on his vision and took it even further. On September 12, 1962 John F. Kennedy announced that America would go to the moon, “not because it was easy, but because it was hard” and added that “we

have vowed that we shall not see space filled with weapons of mass destruction, but with instruments of knowledge and understanding.” Nearly a year later Martin Luther King Jr. reminded the country that all men were created equal at the Lincoln Memorial where he gave his “I have a dream” speech. But before these men could deliver these influential messages, the country would have to be ready for such radical change. Elvis woke the nation up from a slumber that had left them groggy and forgetful of the promise of America, and broke-in the ears of Americans for these powerful messages from politicians and leaders that were more articulate but no less important than the guttural shouts that came years earlier from the truck driver from Memphis. President Jimmy Carter acknowledged the influence of Elvis Presley on America in an official White House statement released on August 17, 1977, upon the death of Presley. Carter, addressing the nation, said

Elvis Presley's death deprives our country of a part of itself. He was unique, irreplaceable. More than twenty years ago, he burst upon the scene with an impact that was unprecedented and will probably never be equaled. His music and his personality, fusing the styles of white country and black rhythm and blues, permanently changed the face of American popular culture. His following was immense. And he was a symbol to people the world over of the vitality, rebelliousness and good humor of this country.

Oscar Wilde was said to have once joked that, “America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between” (qtd. in O’Toole). Although this is not really accurate—and most likely meant to disparage—Wilde’s quip still speaks to the perception of America as a place where rebellion and transcendence are

valued more than the rank of a person in a status quo civilization. Elvis Presley was born in 1935 to a poor young couple from Tupelo, Mississippi. He learned to walk, talk and sing in a house smaller than most modern two-car garages. When he was thirteen years old, his family moved to public housing in West Memphis where poverty and violence were the norm. Elvis Presley died in his multi-million dollar mansion, surrounded by riches from around the world, after executing a blitzkrieg on American culture that would change the way the nation and the world viewed America. Elvis exemplified the boundless, diverse, and transcendent American identity. If Oscar Wilde was right about America, then the Elvis Presley anthology could easily be titled, *Elvis Presley: From Barbarism to Decadence*.

Works Cited

- Carter, Jimmy. "Statement by the President on the Death of Elvis Presley." 17 Aug. 1977. Ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley. *The American Presidency Project*. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.
- Declaration of Independence*. US: 1776.
- Egan, Sean. *Mammoth Book of Bob Dylan*. London: Robinson, 2011. Print.
- Jeanson, Glen and David Luhrssen. "Elvis: Rock'N'Roll's Reluctant Rebel." *History Today* 57.8 (August 2007): 30-37. EBSCO. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.
- Locke, John. "Two Treatises on Government." *The Works of John Locke*. Vol. 5. London: Printed for Thomas Tegg, etc., 1823. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.
- Marcus, Greil. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. 4th ed. New York: Plume, 1997. Print.
- O'Toole, Garson. "America Is the Only Country that Went from Barbarism to Decadence without Civilization In Between." *Quote Investigator*. 7 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.
- Presley, Elvis. *Ed Sullivan Show*. CBS. 9 Sept. 1956. Television.
- Presley, Elvis. *That's Alright Mama b/w Blue Moon of Kentucky*. Sun, 1954. Single 7" 45 rpm.
- Wilson, Woodrow. "Address at Hodgenville, Kentucky: 'Lincoln's Beginnings'." Lincoln Farm Association. Hodgenville, KY. 4 Sept. 1916. Ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley. *The American Presidency Project*. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.