

# *Elvis*: A film biography of the legendary musical artist

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*Directed by Baz Luhrmann; written by Luhrmann, Sam Bromell, Craig Pearce and Jeremy Doner*

Baz Luhrmann's film *Elvis* is a musical biography of legendary rock and roll performer Elvis Presley (ably played by Austin Butler in the film). It attempts to treat the whole of Presley's life, including his hardscrabble childhood in Mississippi, his ascent to international music stardom and his personal and artistic decline, culminating in an early death.

The filmmakers have made the unusual choice of telling Presley's story largely through the eyes of "Colonel" Tom Parker (born Andreas Cornelis van Kuijk), the Dutch music manager and one-time carnival huckster who managed (and mismanaged) Presley's career. Parker (Tom Hanks) serves as the film's narrator, and the stormy relationship between the musician and the businessman is one of the film's central concerns.

*Elvis* covers a number of episodes. As a youth, Presley's family struggles to make ends meet during the Great Depression and takes up residence in a neighborhood of mostly poor African Americans. A young Presley is profoundly impacted by the music of Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, as well as a chance encounter with spirited gospel music. As a young man, he spends his free time listening to the music played by African American performers on Memphis, Tennessee's famous Beale Street which earns him the scorn of white racists in his neighborhood.

Parker sees Presley perform at a Louisiana Hayride event and immediately recognizes his potential as a musical act. He convinces Presley to hire him as his manager and sole representative. Presley's rousing early performances draw raucous crowds and make him the target of racist attacks by segregationist forces, including Democratic Mississippi Senator James Eastland, who accuses Presley of being part of a plot to "spread Africanized culture" and "influence your children to accept the Negroes." In one pivotal scene, Presley's energetic performance prompts a racially segregated audience to tear down the barriers separating them and mingle together in the crowd.

At Parker's behest, Presley enters the army in order to avoid legal persecution by reactionary elements. When he re-emerges, he embarks on a new stage in his personal and artistic life, one marked by new complications. He has lost his beloved mother to alcoholism. He begins a relationship with Priscilla Beaulieu (Olivia DeJonge), who will become his wife. Professionally, Parker insists that Elvis take on a new, "family-friendly" image and forces him to star in a slew of empty-headed films.

Presley grows hungry for more artistically fulfilling endeavors, especially in the wake of the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Democratic presidential candidate Robert Kennedy. He collaborates with young producer Steve Binder (Dacre Montgomery) to produce the successful 1968 television special that would come to be known as Presley's "comeback" show. Plans are made for an international tour, but Parker convinces Presley to take up residence in a Las Vegas showroom. It is later revealed that Parker is unable to leave the country due to his status as a "stateless" immigrant, who fled his Dutch homeland for unspecified reasons.

Parker, whose treatment of Presley becomes increasingly abusive and parasitic, forces him to continue to perform even as Presley's health and mental well-being decline. The outcome is well known and tragic.

Elvis Presley has been a figure of mass admiration and fascination for nearly three-quarters of a century. His dynamic musical talents, his ability to both bring down the house with rock and roll power, as well as touch the heart with a sensitive ballad, has had a major impact on generations of musical artists, as evidenced by the number of contemporary rock, country and hip-hop artists who contributed songs to the film's soundtrack.

At the same time, like so many popular musical artists who reach the heights of stardom in the United States, Presley's life ended in tragedy, as a victim of the immense pressures placed on sensitive artists by the grueling and rapacious entertainment industry. A small selection of figures who have met similar fates would include Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, Whitney Houston, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Michael Jackson and many, many others.

The question of what historical, social and psychological processes ultimately found expression in a figure like Elvis Presley is a complex one. Certainly Presley's own early experiences played a role. His father, Vernon, was a self-described "common laborer" in poverty-stricken East Tupelo, Mississippi, and his mother, Gladys, worked at the Tupelo Garment Plant for \$2 a day working 12-hour days, the strain of which likely contributed to the stillbirth of Presley's twin brother Jesse. The immense poverty experienced by the family no doubt instilled in Presley a feeling for the poor and downtrodden, which would later find expression in songs like "In the Ghetto."

In spite of Jim Crow segregation, the young Presley fraternized with his black peers, particularly when the family moved to a largely African American section of Tupelo. The spirited gospel

music of the local black church that Presley would frequent made an indelible impression on the youth. As a teenager, Presley immersed himself in the music he heard on the radio and on records: blues, country, gospel, and rhythm and blues—influences which formed the basis of the rock and roll music that he would later come to popularize.

Presley's own talents were well-complemented by those of his bandmates, including guitarist Scotty Moore and bass player Bill Black. At the time of their first recordings, Elvis was a truck driver, Moore worked at a dry cleaner's, and Black was a Firestone tire factory worker. As the WSWWS noted in an appreciation of Moore, "the music the trio made for Sun Records and later for RCA, where they were joined by drummer D. J. Fontana, deserves to be heard again and again. These recordings, among the finest examples of rock 'n' roll ever committed to tape, were something new and electrifying."

There is also the question of the period itself. The beginnings of rock and roll were rooted in the profound social changes of the postwar era. A generation of young workers who had lived through the horrors of economic depression and war were determined not to return to the deprivations of that period. With newfound confidence, energy and even a little money in their pockets, the youth looked to enjoy a richer experience of life than their parents or grandparents had known. Rock and roll expressed the spirit and optimism of that young generation, which was rapidly eroding traditional norms and would, within a few years, erupt into mass movements and struggles for social and democratic rights.

To its credit, Luhrmann's film attempts to wrestle with some of these issues. This is not a film that fixates solely on the personal demons of its subject nor does it ignore them. A number of the early scenes, in particular, with Presley's rowdy performances intercut with racist invective against him from Southern Democrats, capture something of the genuine rebellious energy of early rock and roll. Butler gives a moving and sensitive performance as Presley (and contributes much of his own singing to the soundtrack).

The film falls short in a number of key areas. In the first place, Luhrmann has simply bitten off far more than he can chew. *Elvis* attempts to cram a great deal of material into its runtime, such that many important events and episodes hardly have time to make an impact. One gets the sense that Luhrmann is rushing through a "greatest hits" list of well known events from Presley's life, without stopping long enough to draw out any individual event's larger social or psychological significance.

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There is also the issue of Luhrmann's filmmaking style, which can perhaps be described as the visual equivalent of having a confetti-and-glitter-filled pie thrown repeatedly in one's face. While *Elvis* isn't quite as shallow as some of Luhrmann's other efforts (*Moulin Rouge*, the awful *Great Gatsby*, etc.), the director spends far too much effort striving to be visually impressive and not enough on ensuring that every scene is dramatically necessary and compelling.

The director's gaudy visual style is at its worst during the scenes set in Las Vegas. Luhrmann seems to use the setting as an excuse

to fill the screen with sequins and sparkles, without stopping to realize that the ridiculous productions and costumes that Presley was forced into at the end of his life *diminished* his work, rather than enhanced it. For that matter, the presentation also diminishes Butler's performance. The young actor's quiet and understated portrayal often struggles to be heard above all of the director's excesses, which are a constant distraction.

Still, the filmmakers must be credited for one point in particular, that they generally did not accede to modern-day racist condemnations of Presley for "stealing" the music of African American artists. Such accusations, which are a favorite smear of those obsessed with identity politics and "cultural appropriation," distort Presley's history and the history of popular music generally.

The film makes clear that Presley had sincere love and admiration for the music of figures like Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Big Mama Thornton and the legendary B.B. King, with whom Presley had a lifelong friendship. Presley's music, in turn, was greatly admired by listeners both black and white. He was not making cheap knockoff songs aimed at cashing in on other artists' popularity, a charge that could, perhaps, legitimately be leveled, for example, at Pat Boone and his lifeless renditions of Little Richard's songs.

Presley's fiery, impassioned recordings of songs that had been performed by his biggest musical influences demonstrate not only reverence for the source material but also Presley's skill as a musical interpreter. In Presley's hands, a familiar song could become something new, with layers of emotional depth and surging power that had previously been unexplored. Songs like "Blue Suede Shoes" or "Hound Dog," while ostensibly "cover" songs, were utterly transformed by Presley's artistry. Far from "stealing" these songs, he brought something new, and necessary, to them.

It is, of course, a travesty that artists like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Big Mama Thornton did not receive the recognition or commercial success they deserved, and the racist bigotry of the Jim Crow era played a major role in that. But the attempt to lay that injustice at Presley's feet is dishonest and reactionary. In fact, Presley came under fire by racial segregationists because his music reflected (to a degree that Presley himself may never have fully understood) a new current in American society, one that was undermining color barriers and preparing a new wave of social struggles.

For all its other faults, the film is a sympathetic portrayal of Presley in this regard.



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