

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

GRACELAND

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Graceland

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 3764 Elvis Presley Boulevard (Highway 51 South)

Not for publication:___

City/Town: Memphis

Vicinity:___

State: Tennessee

County: Shelby

Code: 157

Zip Code: 38115

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: X
Public-Local: ___
Public-State: ___
Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property
Building(s): ___
District: X
Site: ___
Structure: ___
Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

11

2

5

18

Noncontributing

1 buildings

___ sites

1 structures

___ objects

2 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register:___

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic:	Domestic	Sub:	Single dwelling
Current:	Recreation and Culture	Sub:	Museum (house museum)



7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Late 19th & Early 20th Century Revivals: Classical Revival

MATERIALS:

Foundation:	Stone
Walls:	Stone, Stucco
Roof:	Asphalt
Other:	

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The house and farm that became Elvis Presley's Graceland predated his purchase and residence by almost two decades. In 1939, Ruth Brown Moore and her husband, Dr. Thomas D. Moore, built a two-story Classical Revival residence and outbuildings on land that had been in her family for almost 100 years. Mrs. Moore, the granddaughter of Stephen C. Toof, inherited Toof's farm from his daughter, her aunt Grace, who gave the property her name. The Moores had a daughter, Ruth Marie, a musical prodigy who played the piano and the harp at age four. A prominent Memphis architectural firm, Furbringer and Erhman, designed the house to showcase Ruth Marie's talent, and the large rooms across the front of the house "could be opened up to seat five hundred people for a musical event."¹

Graceland is about ten miles south of downtown Memphis, Tennessee, on Elvis Presley Boulevard (Highway 51 South). The property includes a large house with later additions, a number of outbuildings, ancillary structures, and landscape features. The house and original outbuildings were constructed in 1939 by the original owner. Elvis Presley added buildings, structures, and other additions to the property after his purchase in March 1957, and there has been some limited construction to accommodate visitors since the site opened to the public in 1982. The property includes twelve buildings, six structures, and two sites, and it has a high degree of integrity; 18 of these resources contribute to the character of the property and two resources are non-contributing. Graceland's period of significance is 1957 to 1977.

The house (1939, No. 1 on site plan) was constructed at the top of a hill, almost at the center of the property in a grove of oaks, with rolling pastures in front and behind it, and a western exposure towards the Mississippi River. A curving driveway, bordered by a six-inch concrete curb lined with small electric lights along the outside edge, approaches from the state highway at the foot of the hill and forms a large loop that passes in front of the house and returns back down the hill. A wall constructed of pink Alabama fieldstone bounds the highway frontage on the west side, and runs along the side property lines almost to the site of the residence at the top of the hill. A tall, wooden fence abuts the ends of the stone wall and surrounds the remainder of the grounds. The entrance to the property at the northwest corner has brick walls on both sides of the driveway, and a pair of large, curved, wrought iron gates, decorated with guitar players and musical notes, that form an open music book when closed. There is a small brick guard house (1971, No. 2 on site plan) just inside the large gates on the right side of the entrance, and a shuttle bus stop (No. 3 on site plan) near the top of the driveway with a small shelter and adjacent building.

Contributing resources include the Graceland grounds and driveway with curb and lights (one site, one structure), the wall along the front and side property lines with a pair of wrought iron gates (one structure), and the guard house (one building). Non-contributing new construction on the grounds to accommodate visitors includes a shelter at the shuttle bus stop (1983) and an adjacent building for employees (1983). The open shelter has a gabled roof supported on four columns to protect visitors from the elements, and the adjacent small wood-sided building has a hipped roof (one non-contributing structure, one non-contributing building).

¹ Joel Williamson, "Graceland," in *American Places, Encounters with History - A Celebration of Sheldon Meyer*, William E. Leuchtenburg, ed. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 332.

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The house is a two-story, five bay residence in the Classical Revival style with a side-facing gabled roof covered in asphalt shingles, a central two-story projecting pedimented portico, and one-story wings on its north and south sides. There are two chimneys; one on the north exterior side wall, and a second chimney that rises through the roof ridge on the south side of house. The front and side facades of the central block are veneered with Tishomingo limestone from Mississippi, and its rear wall is stuccoed, as are the one-story wings. Front facade fenestration at the first floor includes 12-over-12 double-hung windows set in arched openings with wooden panels above the windows, and six-over-six double-hung windows at the second floor. Four stone steps ascend from the driveway to the two-story central projecting portico. Its pediment has dentils, a central, small, leaded oval window, and rests on a full entablature supported by pairs of columns with Tower of the Winds capitals. The columns at the corners of the portico are matched by pilasters on the front facade. The doorway has a broken arched pediment, full entablature (including triglyphs and metopes), and engaged columns. Its transom and sidelights contain elaborate, colorful stained glass, a 1974 addition. Above the main entrance is a window with a shallow iron balcony.

The one-story wing on the north end of the main block of the house is stuccoed and has two six-over-six windows on its front (west) facade. Attached to this wing is an additional one-story stuccoed wing that originally housed a four-car garage. This section was remodeled as an apartment in the mid-1960s. The one-story wing on the south end is also stuccoed with a large four-part, multi-paned window at the center of the front (west) facade, and two multi-paned glass doors on the east facade.

The floor plan of the original building was basically in the shape of a cross, although the horizontal cross element is longer and wider than the vertical element of the plan. The entrance door opens into a wide and long central hall with a stair that rises to the second floor at the back, left (north) end of the hall. There are tall, wide, elliptical-arched openings from the center hall into the living room on its right (south) side and the dining room on its left (north) side. The arches are ornamented with keystones and paneled reveals, and carried on fluted pilasters. The width of these arched openings creates an open horizontal space across the front of the house. The hall, living room, and dining room have classical moldings, including a course of dentil blocks. Custom mirrors were added to the walls along the stair in 1974.

Custom mirrors were also added to the entire east wall of the living room in 1974, including the fireplace on this wall. There is a large, rectangular opening between the living room and the music room in the one-story wing to the south. Its transom and sidelights contain custom-made stained glass by Laukuff Stained Glass of Memphis, another 1974 addition. The large sidelights feature matching blue peacocks. The dining room has rounded curio cabinets in both corners at the north end of the room, and black marble flooring in the center of the room, which is carpeted around the perimeter.

There is a bedroom behind the living room, and the kitchen is located behind the dining room. The original one-story wing on the north end of the residence includes a mechanical room, bedroom, and bath. In the mid-1960s, Presley constructed a substantial addition (14 by 40 feet) on the rear (east) facade of the house to serve as a den. It became known as the Jungle Room because of its furnishings, as well as the built-in waterfall of cut fieldstone on its north wall. The one-story section at the house's north end was constructed as a four-car garage. It was remodeled as an apartment in the mid-1960s, later used as offices, and currently provides

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additional exhibit space for the house museum.

Presley remodeled two of the rooms in the basement in 1974, the TV room in the southwest corner, and the pool room in the northwest corner. The TV room's west wall is painted with a lightning bolt and cloud motif in reference to the personal logo Elvis adopted in the 1970s, the initials TCB, and a lightning bolt, for "taking care of business in a flash." The south wall has three built-in television sets, a stereo, and cabinets for Presley's record collection. The walls and ceiling of the pool room are covered with 350-400 yards of pleated cotton fabric.

Graceland's second floor is still maintained as a private residence and is not open to the public. It includes Presley's bedroom at the southwest corner; his dressing room and bath room at the northwest corner; his daughter, Lisa Marie's bedroom in the northeast corner; and a bedroom in the southeast corner that was Presley's private personal office (one contributing building - the house with original wings, garage, and mid-1960s den [Jungle Room] addition).

In the mid-1960s, Presley constructed a large building, or wing, on the south side of the main house, between the music room in the original one-story wing and the swimming pool area. A small "breezeway" (which is enclosed, not open to the elements) was constructed to connect the main house to the new wing on the south side of the music room. The new wing initially housed a slot car track but was later remodeled to house Elvis's many awards, trophies, and other honors, as well as memorabilia, guitars, jewelry, and stage costumes. It is now known as the Trophy Building (No. 4 on site plan) and a new entrance with plate-glass double doors was constructed at the northeast corner of the wing to provide better access for visitors. The Trophy Building includes the Hall of Gold, an 80-foot-long room that showcases Elvis's original gold and platinum albums and singles in cases that line both sides of the Hall. There are also a number of display cases that exhibit Presley's many other awards, plaques, and proclamations, including his three Grammy Awards and Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy for the Recording Arts and Sciences (counted as one contributing building, due to size, name, date, and location).

A kidney-shaped swimming pool and cut-stone patio, constructed in 1957, are adjacent to the south side of the Trophy Building (No. 5 on site plan, one contributing structure). Before the site opened to the public, there was a small bath house just north of the pool, at the southeast corner of the Trophy Building. The bath house was remodeled to provide public restrooms with handicapped access.

The Meditation Garden, just south of the swimming pool area, was constructed 1964-1965 (No. 6 on site plan). It includes a circular pool containing circular fountain jets, and a semi-circular pergola of Ionic columns on the south side of the pool with fountains. A stepped brick wall with four arched openings containing stained-glass panels curves to follow the pergola and encloses the Meditation Garden's south end. Presley planned this garden as a private retreat. After his death, security issues at Forest Hill Cemetery, his original burial site, led to his reburial in October 1977 on the south side of the pool with fountains. An eternal flame encased in a hexagonal glass container sits at the head of Presley's grave. Presley's mother Gladys was also reburied in the Meditation Garden, and the large marble monument from the Presley family plot at Forest Hill was relocated as well. Presley's father Vernon was buried here in 1979, and his grandmother Minnie May Presley followed in 1980 (garden, pool with fountains, pergola, brick wall, cemetery, family monument - one contributing site).

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There are two small contributing buildings in this area of the grounds; a pump house for the pool (1957, No. 7 on site plan) located between the Meditation Garden (No. 6) and the Racquetball Building (No. 8), and a building now used for storage that was constructed as a barn (1939, No. 13 on site plan). It is located between the Racquetball Building and the horse barn (No. 14).

The Racquetball Building (1975, No. 8) is a large, two-story rectangular building (2,200 square feet) with Dryvit walls and minimal, irregular fenestration. The interior includes a lounge area and former racquetball court on the first floor, with dressing rooms and bathrooms on the second floor. The racquetball court now serves as an additional exhibit area for Presley's many awards, as well as his stage costumes. The court's entire north and east walls are covered in gold and platinum records presented to the Elvis Presley Estate in August 1992 by RCA executives and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the largest single presentation of gold and platinum awards ever made (one contributing building).

In the early 1960s, a carport (No. 9 on site plan) was constructed to shelter Presley's many classic cars and other vehicles (one contributing structure). The cars were relocated across the street to Graceland Plaza in 1989 for display in the Elvis Presley Automobile Museum. A small, one-story wood-framed building (No. 10), constructed in 1939, probably housed servants originally. Presley's father Vernon served as his business manager, and this building became his office after Elvis bought Graceland (one contributing building). The smokehouse (1939, No. 11) is a one-story, two-room brick structure with two heavy wooden doors on its front facade. Presley used it for target practice and storage (one contributing structure).

There are three trailers (No. 12 on site plan) at the back of the property in the northeast corner. The two double-wides and one regular sized trailer (late 1960s, 1974) provided housing for friends and employees, and are currently used by Graceland employees (three contributing buildings). The barn (1939, No. 14) is located near the rear property line in the southeast corner. It is a wood-sided structure with gambrel roof, and still serves as a stable for the horses at Graceland, which has several pastures bordered by white wooden fences in front of and behind the residence (one contributing building).

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.*INTRO TO ELVIS*

Elvis Presley is widely regarded as one of the most culturally significant figures of the twentieth century. A number of respected institutions, critics, and scholars simply consider him to be one of the twentieth century's most important Americans. Elvis Presley's significance in American history is unique and multifaceted, with a national and global range that clearly meets the requirements of National Historic Landmark Criteria 1 and 2, as well as Exception 8. The unique association between Presley and Graceland, his home in Memphis, Tennessee, for more than 20 years (1957-1977), is so powerful that Elvis and Graceland are essentially interchangeable. Presley's outstanding career took off in 1954. It spanned more than 20 years, crossed three pivotal decades, and encompassed three separate phases, but they were all variations on a lifelong theme of music. Early on, Elvis became known around the world by his first name alone, a universal recognition that still prevails in the twenty-first century.

Along the way, the image of Elvis Presley—as a hillbilly² rube, notorious rock 'n' roll rebel, American movie idol, and international superstar—completely overwhelmed any true or common understanding of the man himself. And that was how things stood before his premature death in August 1977 at age 42. “When Elvis died, it was as if all perspective on his musical career was somehow lost. From the utter ridicule of the tabloids to the almost religious dedication of the most ardent fans, any wish to understand Elvis Presley the singer seemed almost totally obscured.”³ Since his death, that image has expanded to mythic proportions—Elvis Presley has become a pervasive twenty-first century American cultural icon.

*Among the countless cliches Elvis embodied, “living legend” is the most perfectly realized. There is no “real” Elvis. That man, whoever he may have been, disappeared long ago into the mists of legend.*⁴

Research conducted for this study examined many aspects of Presley's historic significance. Although not totally unexpected, its key finding was surprising; many, and maybe most, common perceptions of Elvis Presley are not true at all, or have little basis in fact. As a result, the study itself focuses on the documentation of three real areas of accomplishment that best support his national significance in American history—Elvis Presley's extraordinary talent as a musical artist, often underrated or dismissed; his unprecedented achievements as a singer and performer, unparalleled in U.S. and world history; and Presley's role as the leader of the cultural revolution that reinvented America at mid-twentieth century, deconstructing barriers of race, class, region, and gender that had defined American values and confined American society for generations.

² The term “hillbilly” is viewed by some as pejorative. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was widely used to describe poor, rural Southerners, especially those from Appalachia. Hillbilly was also widely used in music circles to describe many genres of traditional American country music. The term is used here to reflect the attitudes and usages of the historic period.

³ Ernst Jorgensen, *Elvis Presley: A Life in Music* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 4.

⁴ Dave Marsh, *Elvis* (New York: A Rolling Stone Press Book, 1982), vii.

ELVIS PRESLEY, 1935-1977, A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

On January 8, 1935, not long before dawn, Elvis Aron (Aaron) Presley was born in East Tupelo, Mississippi, a small community on the outskirts of Tupelo, a small town in the northeast corner of the state. His mother Gladys delivered a second son that morning, a stillborn identical twin named Jesse Garon. Shortly before the birth, Presley's father Vernon built a small two-room wood-sided dwelling for his family. It had no electricity or indoor plumbing, and was similar to housing constructed for mill villages around that time. East Tupelo included five dirt roads above and below the state highway into town, and most residents were poor factory workers or sharecroppers.⁵

In 1938, hard times caused the family to lose this house, and for the next 10 years they relocated routinely, moving to Tupelo proper in 1946. During these years, the Presleys' social life centered on their church, the Pentecostal First Assembly of God, and they listened to the *Grand Ole Opry* on the radio every Saturday night. Elvis began to sing at an early age in church, and later at school and on an amateur hour/talent show sponsored by the local radio station, WELO, on Saturday afternoons. He got his first guitar for his 11th birthday. A number of years later, Vernon Presley recalled their time in Mississippi: "There were times we had nothing to eat but cornbread and water . . . but we always had compassion for people. Poor we were, I'll never deny that. But trash we weren't . . . We never had any prejudice. We never put anybody down. Neither did Elvis."⁶

In the fall of 1948 when Elvis was in the 8th grade, the Presleys moved to Memphis, Tennessee, about 80 miles northwest of Tupelo, and lived in downtown boarding houses for most of the next year. In September 1949, they received approval to live at Lauderdale Courts, a 66-building, 433-unit public housing project on the north end of downtown Memphis. Elvis's musical horizons broadened during his high school years. He took advantage of the many ways to hear music in Memphis—radio, church, record stores, night clubs, and more, and also played in a band with four other boys from Lauderdale Courts. During his junior year at Humes High School, Elvis also began to focus on his appearance. He let his hair and sideburns grow longer, and dressed in wild, flashy clothes that made him stand out, especially in the conservative, conformist Deep South of the 1950s. "He would wear dress pants to school every day—everybody else wore jeans, but he wore dress pants. And he would wear a coat and fashion a scarf like an ascot tie, as if he were a movie star. Of course he got a lot of flak for this, because he stood out like a sore thumb. People thought, 'That's really weird.' It was like he was already portraying something that he wanted to be."⁷ He performed in the "Annual Minstrel Show" sponsored by the Humes High Band near the end of his senior year, and the audience's enthusiastic applause won him an encore.

After graduation on June 3, 1953, Presley went to work at M. B. Parker Machinists in July. Later that summer, he paid \$3.98 to record an acetate with two sides, both ballads, at the Memphis Recording Service at 706 Union Avenue, also the home of the Sun Record Company.

⁵ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

He made a strong impression on Marion Keisker, a long-time Memphis radio personality who helped Sam Phillips run his recording businesses at 706 Union. When she asked Elvis which hillbilly singer he sounded like, she later recalled that he answered, “I don’t sound like nobody.”⁸

Presley dropped by 706 Union a number of times after that initial meeting to ask Ms. Keisker if she had heard of a band that needed a singer. In January 1954, he paid for a second personal record at the Memphis Recording Service.

There is little question that he stepped through the doorway [at 706 Union] with the idea, if not of stardom . . . at the very least of being discovered. In later years he would always say that he wanted to make a personal record “to surprise my mother.” Or “I just wanted to hear what I sounded like.” But, of course, if he had simply wanted to record his voice, he could have paid twenty-five cents at W. T. Grant’s on Main Street . . . Instead, Elvis went to a professional facility, where a man who had been written up in the papers would hear him sing.⁹

In the spring he tried out for an amateur gospel quartet, the Songfellows, and a professional band. Both groups turned him down, and Eddie Bond, the band leader, told him to keep driving a truck because he would never make it as a singer. Presley later revealed that Bond’s rejection “broke my heart.”¹⁰

In late June, Keisker finally called Presley to set up an appointment, almost a year after he recorded his first personal disc. On a recent trip to Nashville, Phillips had heard a song that reminded him of Presley’s voice, and they worked on “Without You” for several hours. Phillips had Presley sing a number of other songs during the appointment, and set him up with two members of the Starlite Wranglers, Scotty Moore (guitar) and Bill Black (bass). The three of them went to the Sun studio on Monday, July 5, because Phillips wanted to hear them on tape. Nothing special happened at the session until Presley began fooling around and playing an obscure 1946 blues song, “That’s All Right,” [Mama] during a break.

Sam recognized it right away. He was amazed that the boy even knew Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup—nothing in any of the songs he had tried so far gave any indication that he was drawn to this kind of music at all. But this was the sort of music that Sam had long ago wholeheartedly embraced . . . And the way the boy performed it, it came across with a freshness and an exuberance, it came across with the kind of clear-eyed, unabashed originality that Sam sought in all the music that he recorded—it was “different,” it was itself.¹¹

Later that week, Phillips got WHBQ disc jockey Dewey Phillips to play “That’s All Right” [Mama] on his ground-breaking Memphis radio show, “Red Hot and Blue,” then near the height of its popularity. The response was immediate—hundreds of phone calls and telegrams. Dewey played the song a number of times that night and also interviewed Presley during the show. By the time the record was pressed and ready for release, there were 6,000 orders for it locally.¹²

⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹ Ibid., 62-63.

¹⁰ Ibid., 83.

¹¹ Ibid., 95.

¹² Ibid., 104.

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Sun record number 209 was released on Monday, July 19, 1954. Phillips had been “looking for something that nobody could categorize,”¹³ and this song did not sound exclusively black or white or country or pop. Initially, many people who heard the song thought that Presley was a black man.

Elvis Presley made his first big public appearance with Scotty and Bill, the Blue Moon Boys, on Friday, July 30, at Memphis’s outdoor amphitheater in Overton Park. The show featured Slim Whitman, a star on the Louisiana Hayride, which some considered to be the Grand Ole Opry’s “farm club.” Whitman drew a hillbilly crowd, but they went wild during Elvis’s performance when he wiggled his legs, which was his natural, spontaneous way of dancing. “That’s All Right” [Mama] made *Billboard*’s regional charts by the end of August, but the flip side was even more popular. Phillips backed it with an unorthodox version of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” a waltz that was a hit in 1946 for Bill Monroe, country music’s elder statesman and the father of bluegrass music. By early September, “Blue Moon” was No. 1 on the Memphis Country and Western chart and “That’s All Right” [Mama] was No. 7.¹⁴

Sun released Presley’s second record in late September. “It was . . . an even bolder declaration of intent than the first, especially the strident blues number ‘Good Rockin’ Tonight,’ which rocked more confidently than anything they could have imagined in those first, uncertain days in the studio.”¹⁵ Presley’s growing popularity enabled Phillips to arrange a guest appearance on the Grand Ole Opry for October 2, even though the Opry had never before scheduled a performer at such an early stage in his career. The performance of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” received a “polite, but somewhat tepid, reception,” and the Opry’s manager told Phillips that Presley “just did not fit the Opry mold.”¹⁶ It was a big disappointment for Elvis, but the band’s first appearance two weeks later on the Louisiana Hayride, “the Opry’s more innovative rival in Shreveport,”¹⁷ was well received. The Hayride had a show every Saturday night, and shows on the third Saturday of each month were broadcast with a 50,000 watt signal that reached up to 28 states.¹⁸ After only one guest appearance, Presley signed a standard one-year contract to be one of the Hayride’s regular members, and he, Scotty, and Bill quit their day jobs.

For the next year, Elvis Presley and the Blue Moon Boys toured almost constantly. They started out at civic clubs and school functions in Mississippi and Arkansas, in addition to their weekly performances on the Louisiana Hayride. In November and December, they also played in Houston, adding spots in West Texas, East Texas, and Missouri in January. By the time Presley performed for the first time at Memphis’s Ellis Auditorium on February 6, he and the Blue Moon Boys were working almost every night. In mid-February they were booked as part of a Hank Snow/Jamboree Attractions package tour that began in Roswell, New Mexico. Presley took his

¹³ Ibid., 106.

¹⁴ Ibid., 123.

¹⁵ Ibid., 130-131.

¹⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹⁷ Ibid., 127.

¹⁸ Ibid., 136.

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first airplane flight and first trip to New York City on March 23, 1955, to try out for *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*, a weekly television program, but he did not pass the audition. Another tour with Hank Snow/Jamboree Attractions began on May 1 in New Orleans, with 20 cities in three weeks, including a number of stops in Florida. There was a "riot" backstage after the concert in Jacksonville. In July, Presley took a vacation and was back on the road again for the rest of the summer and fall.

The audiences had never before heard music like Presley played, and they had never before seen anyone who performed like Presley either. The shy, polite, mumbling boy gained self-confidence with every appearance, which soon led to a transformation on stage. People watching the show were astounded and shocked, both by the "ferocity of his performance,"¹⁹ and the crowd's reaction to it. Even in the early days, Elvis almost always stole the show from the headliners, and concert lineups were rearranged accordingly. Nobody followed Elvis. Roy Orbison saw Presley for the first time in Odessa, Texas: "His energy was incredible, his instinct was just amazing . . . I just didn't know what to make of it. There was just no reference point in the culture to compare it."²⁰ "He's the new rage," said a Louisiana radio executive . . . 'Sings hillbilly in R&B time. Can you figure that out. He wears pink pants and a black coat.'²¹ Elvis caused a great commotion wherever he went, with girls screaming and fainting and chasing after him throughout the South.

Sam Phillips was also on the road constantly after the Overton Park performance in July 1954, promoting the new records to distributors, disc jockeys, record store owners, and jukebox operators. His experiences, however, were entirely different. Time and again, disc jockeys who were old friends and/or long-standing business associates told Phillips they could not play the Presley records. A country deejay told Sam, "they'll run me out of town," while rhythm and blues deejays considered "That's All Right" [Mama] to be a country song. A disc jockey at a major pop station told Phillips, "your music is just so ragged. I just can't handle it right now. Maybe later on."²² WELO in Tupelo, Mississippi, Presley's hometown, would not even play the record, in spite of many requests from teenagers, because the deejay did not like the new music.²³

Presley was still a regional sensation and unknown to the national market when he got the attention of record industry executives. By the summer of 1955, almost all the major and independent record labels were inquiring about him. Sam Phillips had mixed feelings about selling Presley's contract, but his record company could not accommodate such a phenomenon, his finances were very tight, and he had other artists who needed his attention. Presley's parents signed a contract on Elvis's behalf in August (he was not yet 21), making Colonel Tom Parker "special adviser to Elvis Presley," which soon forced the issue. Parker was the head of Jamboree Attractions, one of the major promoters and bookers of country and western talent, and had

¹⁹ Ibid., 191.

²⁰ Ibid., 171.

²¹ Ibid., 182.

²² Ibid., 112.

²³ Ibid., 114.

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booked Presley on the Hank Snow package tours earlier that year. At that time, Parker was known as the best promoter in the business, and soon asked Phillips to name his price for Presley's contract. On November 21, 1955, RCA Victor bought Elvis Presley's contract from Sun Records for \$35,000, plus \$5,000 in back royalties owed to Presley. The *Memphis Press-Scimitar* ran the story the next day:

*Elvis Presley, 20, Memphis recording star and entertainer who zoomed into bigtime and the big money almost overnight, has been released from his contract with Sun Record Co. of Memphis . . . Phillips and RCA officials did not reveal terms but said the money involved is probably the highest ever paid for a contract release for a country-western recording artist. "I feel Elvis is one of the most talented youngsters today," Phillips said, "and by releasing his contract to RCA-Victor we will give him the opportunity of entering the largest organization of its kind in the world, so his talents can be given the fullest opportunity."*²⁴

For Elvis Presley, 1956 was a year like no other. In January, he was a regional sensation, but by year's end he had become a national and international phenomenon. He made his first two albums for RCA (both million sellers), appeared on national television 11 times, signed a seven-year contract with Paramount Pictures, and starred in his first movie, "Love Me Tender." Elvis's appearances on national television were pivotal events for America because his unconventional appearance and performing style caused nationwide controversy. Presley outraged adults, mesmerized the teenagers of the new youth generation, and soon became the leader of the cultural revolution sweeping across the country.

The Presleys bought their first house in 1956, a modest three-bedroom ranch-style house on Audubon Drive in east Memphis, but it did not meet their needs for very long. In March 1957, they purchased Graceland, a 13.8-acre "farm" about 10 miles south of downtown Memphis in Whitehaven, an area that was still largely rural at that time. The property included a large, two-story house, a barn, and rolling pastures. In April 1957, the Presleys moved in—Elvis, his parents, and his grandmother, Minnie May Presley.

Elvis made two movies in 1957, "Loving You" and "Jailhouse Rock," and also recorded soundtracks for both. "Jailhouse Rock" included a production number of the title song that was the prototype for the music video, a recording industry format that became a standard feature with the advent of MTV (Music Television) in the early 1980s. He also recorded his first gospel album, "Peace in the Valley," and continued to perform live, making his first concert appearances in Canada and Hawaii that year. Presley's popularity had reached unprecedented heights when his draft notice arrived in December 1957.

Before his induction into the U.S. Army, Elvis filmed his fourth movie, "King Creole," and recorded the soundtrack. Private Presley reported to Fort Hood, Texas, in March 1958 for six months of basic training. During this time, Elvis's mother Gladys was hospitalized in Memphis. He returned home on emergency leave shortly before she died in August, a devastating experience for him. In September, Presley was reassigned to the 3rd Armored Division's 32nd Tank Battalion in Friedberg, West Germany, for 18 months. He met his future wife, Priscilla Beaulieu, whose stepfather was a captain in the U.S. Air Force, shortly before completion of his duty in West Germany. Elvis was promoted to Sergeant in January 1960 and discharged in

²⁴ Robert Johnson, "Memphis Singer Presley Signed by RCA-Victor for Recording Work," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, November 22, 1955, quoted in Guralnick, *Last Train*, 233.

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March.

There was much concern that Presley's popularity would wane during his two-year military service, but great anticipation and large crowds greeted his return. (Elvis's Army induction was the inspiration for "Bye, Bye, Birdie," a Broadway musical that became a movie in 1963). A new, more mature career direction began with his appearance on Frank Sinatra's variety show on ABC. This special, *Welcome Home, Elvis*, aired in May 1960, attracting 67.7 per cent of the national viewing audience.²⁵ Presley made three movies in 1960: "G.I. Blues," "Flaming Star," and "Wild in the Country." "G.I. Blues" featured Elvis singing a number of songs and became one of the year's top-grossing films. The movie soundtrack hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* album chart, held the top spot for 10 weeks, and remained on the charts for 111 weeks. In contrast to "G.I. Blues," "Flaming Star" and "Wild in the Country" were dramatic movies with few Elvis songs and box office sales that were less than impressive.

Presley went to Hawaii in the spring of 1961 to film "Blue Hawaii." On March 25, he performed a benefit concert at the Bloch Arena in Honolulu to raise funds for construction of the World War II USS *Arizona* Memorial at Pearl Harbor. This was only Elvis's third live performance since his discharge from the U.S. Army, and it was his last concert until 1968. "Blue Hawaii" was a box office hit, his top-grossing film to date, and the movie soundtrack also hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* album chart. It remained at No. 1 for 20 weeks and on the charts for 79 weeks, becoming Presley's most popular album ever. "Blue Hawaii's" huge success established a pattern for the future—light plot, lots of songs, pretty girls, beautiful locations—that produced a new type of Hollywood film, the Elvis movie. It also thwarted Elvis's dream to be a serious actor.

Presley made 27 movies in the 1960s, including "Kid Galahad" and "Girls, Girls, Girls" in 1962; "Viva Las Vegas" with Ann-Margaret and "Fun in Acapulco" in 1963; and "Roustabout" with Barbara Stanwyck in 1964. As the years passed, Elvis grew frustrated with his formula movies and the public tired of them as well. "Change of Habit" with Mary Tyler Moore in 1969 was the last movie in this phase of his career.

Most Presley albums in the 1960s were movie soundtracks, but he recorded his second gospel album in 1966. Elvis often said and constantly demonstrated that gospel was his favorite music, and he won his first Grammy Award in 1967 for Best Sacred Performance of "How Great Thou Art." On May 1, 1967, Elvis married Priscilla Beaulieu in Las Vegas. Their daughter and only child, Lisa Marie, was born in 1968.

Elvis finally returned to live performing in late 1968. Initially, the Singer Sewing Machine Company planned to sponsor a Christmas television special, *Singer Presents Elvis*, but these plans were revised in favor of a different concept. Presley made it clear to the special's executive producer that he was not interested in a show that would be business as usual, and that he wanted to demonstrate that he was still a vital performer.²⁶ Elvis saw this as his chance "to

²⁵ Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 63.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

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proclaim, through his music, *who he really was*.²⁷ Highlights of the special included a jam session (a prototype for MTV's *Unplugged* series in the 1990s) with Scotty Moore and D. J. Fontana (original members of Presley's first band) and a new song written just for Elvis to perform on this show, "If I Can Dream" (his first "message" song). Featured performances showcased Elvis's ability to sing all kinds of American music. The special aired in December 1968, and Presley's "thoroughly masterful" performance made the show an "astonishing triumph."²⁸ It received high ratings, critical acclaim, and produced a new hit single, "If I Can Dream," his biggest hit since 1965.

The success of the television special, eventually retitled *Elvis—The '68 Comeback Special*, led to a major change of direction that became the third phase of Presley's long career. In 1969, he recorded his first studio album (that was not a soundtrack or gospel music) at American Studios in Memphis, a "hit factory" run by Chips Moman in the 1960s. These sessions produced some of the best songs of Presley's career, including four hit singles; "In the Ghetto," "Kentucky Rain," "Don't Cry Daddy," and "Suspicious Minds," his first No. 1 single since 1962.

In the summer of 1969, Elvis began a month-long series of concerts at the International Hotel in Las Vegas, the city's newest hotel with the largest showroom in town. He wanted his show to showcase all kinds of American music, and the elaborate production included a rock 'n' roll band, an orchestra, and two quartets, the Imperials (white men) and the Sweet Inspirations (black women). According to Elvis, "every type of music that he enjoyed was now in his show. The front men did country or rock 'n' roll, there was the gospel sound with the quartet and the soul sound with the Sweet Inspirations, and together you had a beautiful choir. Then a big band sound [from the showroom orchestra] with things that swung and dramatic things that had a symphonic sound."²⁹ Presley's engagement broke all existing attendance records for Las Vegas shows and received outstanding reviews from critics and fans. He returned to the International just five months later for another four weeks of sold-out shows, breaking his own attendance records. A documentary film for MGM, "Elvis—That's the Way It Is," recorded his next Las Vegas shows in August and September 1970, as well as the concert tour that followed in the fall, his first since 1957. He played Phoenix, St. Louis, Detroit, Miami, Tampa, and Mobile, with more than 100,000 people in attendance.

Presley received several exceptional honors and awards in 1971. In January he was honored by the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce (the Jaycees) as one of Ten Outstanding Young Men of 1970, an award presented to distinguished young men since 1940. That summer, the City of Memphis changed the name of the section of Highway 51 South in front of Graceland to Elvis Presley Boulevard, and he also received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, home of the Grammys. Month-long engagements in Las Vegas continued that summer and winter, as did recording sessions and concert tours. Presley maintained a similar schedule for the next several years, performing more than 1,000 concerts from 1969 to 1977.

²⁷ Ibid., 295.

²⁸ Ibid., 315.

²⁹ Ibid., 344.

Highlights of 1972 included a film of his 15-city tour in March and April, “Elvis on Tour,” which won a Golden Globe Award as the year’s “Best Documentary;” a second Grammy Award for “He Touched Me” (Best Inspirational Performance), a song on his third gospel album; and Elvis’s debut in New York City—four sold-out shows attended by John Lennon, George Harrison, Bob Dylan, David Bowie, Art Garfunkel, and other musical luminaries.

The year 1973 began with another Presley milestone. His concert at the Honolulu International Center Arena on January 14 was beamed live via satellite to a worldwide audience in 40 countries estimated at 1-1.5 billion viewers. The soundtrack for the concert, “Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii, via Satellite,” hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* album chart and stayed on the album charts for 52 weeks. This was Elvis’s first No. 1 album since 1965 and his last No. 1 album during his lifetime. In March, Presley sold all his royalty rights on his recording catalog to RCA for \$5.4 million. Elvis and his wife Priscilla divorced in October, and he was hospitalized almost immediately after with serious health problems, including pneumonia, pleurisy, hepatitis, and prescription drug dependency. Extended hospitalizations followed in 1975, 1976, and 1977.

From 1974 to 1977, Elvis continued his Las Vegas engagements and concert tours. The final highlight of his career was a third Grammy Award in 1974 for Best Inspirational Performance of “How Great Thou Art,” recorded live in Memphis. Elvis Presley performed his last concert in Indianapolis, Indiana, at the Market Square Arena on June 26, 1977. He died suddenly and unexpectedly on the morning of August 16, 1977, at Graceland at the age of 42. The entire world noted and mourned his passing, which began an unprecedented posthumous career that continues into the twenty-first century.

ELVIS PRESLEY, MUSICAL ARTIST

Presley’s talent as a musical artist was double-barreled and more; he was an exceptional vocalist and a unique stage performer with instinctive, natural ability in both areas. It appears from available recollections that Presley was born with a love of music. In his birthplace of East Tupelo, Mississippi, his first musical influence and musical foundation came from a Pentecostal church, the First Assembly of God, where he tried to sing before he could talk, sang hymns “with abandon” as a small child,³⁰ and performed solo at Sunday services during the “special singing” after he got a guitar at age 11.³¹ A neighbor remembers that Elvis used to hang on to the posts of his front porch and “sing all the time as loud as he could.”³² From the 5th through the 8th grades, he often sang and played at morning “chapel,” assembly programs, and during recess.³³

Elvis made his first “official” public appearance when he was 10, before he got a guitar. He sang without accompaniment to a large crowd at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show at the Tupelo fairgrounds. The principal of his school entered Elvis in the talent show on

³⁰ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³² Rose Clayton and Dick Heard, eds., *Elvis Up Close, In the Words of Those Who Knew Him Best* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, Inc., 1994), 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 24.

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Children's Day at the fair because his singing impressed Elvis's teacher and the principal.

Presley's first musical hero was Mississippi Slim, also known as Carvel Lee Ausborn, a hillbilly singer with a radio show on Tupelo's WELO. Elvis sang and played occasionally on Slim's Saturday morning show, *Singin' and Pickin' Hillbilly*, that aired right before the WELO *Jamboree* on Saturday afternoons, broadcast live from the Lee County courthouse. Elvis and many others lined up to perform on this local "amateur hour." "He was crazy about music . . . That's all he talked about," recalled his 6th grade friend, James Ausborn, Mississippi Slim's younger brother. "I think gospel sort of inspired [sic] him to be in music, but then my brother helped carry it on."³⁴ Before he was a teenager, music was the young Elvis Presley's "consuming passion."³⁵

Presley's musical horizons broadened and his musical education began in earnest after his family's 1948 move to Memphis, Tennessee, a place where there was "a meeting of the musics;" blues from the Mississippi Delta to the south; honky-tonk/hillbilly boogie from Louisiana and Texas to the southwest, traditional country music from the Appalachian Mountains in east Tennessee, and gospel from above. In Memphis, Presley's passion for music became somewhat of a scholarly study, albeit informal, alternative, and self-taught. As a young teenager, he listened constantly to the radio, and the Memphis area was renowned for its unique, pioneering radio broadcasts; the first radio station for African Americans, WDIA, "Mother Station of the Negroes," featured live performances by B. B. King and Rufus Thomas; Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson played live on KWEM across the Mississippi River in West Memphis, Arkansas; and the ground-breaking show "Red, Hot, and Blue" with Dewey Phillips, a white radio announcer from rural Tennessee, could be heard every night on WHBQ. The show was "an eclectic mix of blues, hillbilly, and pop that would become an institution in Memphis, and [Phillips'] importance to the cross-cultural miscegenation that became Rock 'n' Roll is incalculable."³⁶

Presley was a regular at downtown record stores that had jukeboxes and listening booths where he played old records and new releases for hours on end. As he got older, Elvis ventured to Beale Street and to the East Trigg Baptist Church, a black congregation in south Memphis. The pastor, the Reverend Herbert W. Brewster, was a composer of numerous gospel songs including "Move On Up a Little Higher." Sunday services featured soloist Queen C. Anderson and a live Sunday night broadcast on WHBQ, "Camp Meeting of the Air."

He went often to the WMPS studio for the *High Noon Round-Up*, a live broadcast with the Blackwood Brothers, a prominent white gospel quartet, and every month he attended All-Night Sings with top white gospel quartets at the Ellis Auditorium. "Quartet music was the center of his musical universe. Gospel music combined the spiritual force that he felt in all music with the

³⁴ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Colin Escott with Martin Hawkins, *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 5.

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sense of physical release and exaltation for which, it seemed, he was casting about.”³⁷ Presley’s favorite quartet was the Statesmen,

*an electric combination featuring some of the most thrillingly emotive singing and daringly unconventional showmanship in the entertainment world . . . Preachers frequently objected to the lewd movements, racial fundamentalists decried the debt to Negro spirituals (particularly in the overt emotionalism of the delivery), but audiences reacted with screams and swoons. It was a different kind of spirituality, but spirituality nonetheless.*³⁸

Memphis Symphony Orchestra concerts at Overton Park were another Elvis favorite, as was the Metropolitan Opera, and his small record collection included Mario Lanza and Dean Martin. Presley put it this way: “I just loved music. Music period.”³⁹

The many types of music heard in Memphis were not simply entertainment for Presley. He studied them meticulously and absorbed them all. In addition to a song’s words and music, he also knew performers, songwriters, and musicians. It appears that his knowledge of gospel/religious, country, and blues songs was encyclopedic. His knowledge of rhythm and blues and popular songs was extensive, at a minimum. Sam Phillips, founder of Sun Records and a self-taught blues scholar himself, was surprised that 19-year old Presley even knew the words and music to “That’s All Right” [Mama], a 1946 blues song by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup that became Elvis Presley’s first recording in 1954.

According to Sam Phillips, Presley “had the “most intuitive ability to hear songs without ever having to classify them . . . It seemed like he had a photographic memory for every damn song he ever heard.”⁴⁰ J. R. Snow, son of 1940s country superstar Hank Snow, recalled that Elvis knew all of Hank Snow’s songs, “even the most obscure.”⁴¹ There were comparable reports from other performers who met Elvis in the early years of his career, including Bill Haley, Pat Boone, and gospel singers Martha Carson and Hovie Lister of the Statesmen quartet.⁴² At a press conference in 1957, Presley said he knew “practically every religious song that’s ever been written,”⁴³ and he repeated that statement over the years. Presley served as a driver for his platoon sergeant, Ira Jones, while he was in the U.S. Army in West Germany (1958-1960). Jones recalled the following about their time together:

I whistle and hum whatever I’m doing, and Elvis said one day as we were driving along, “Sergeant Jones, I know that song you’re whistling.” He said, “In fact, I know every song there

³⁷ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 163, 177, 219.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 430.

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is.” I kinda laughed and said, “That’s pretty hard to believe, Elvis. I’m older than you and I know a whole lot of old songs.” He said, “Try me.” We had this kind of a game; we done it all the time. Sure enough, I don’t think I ever stumped him at all.”⁴⁴

Presley’s comprehensive musical knowledge and talent also surprised and impressed Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, the premier rock ‘n’ roll songwriting duo before the Bob Dylan/Beatles era (“Hound Dog,” “Jailhouse Rock,” “Love Potion No. 9,” “Poison Ivy,” “Stand By Me”), and the “true architects of pop rock . . . their signal achievement was the marriage of rhythm and blues to pop.”⁴⁵ Leiber and Stoller considered Presley to be an “idiot savant”⁴⁶ because he knew so many songs. His knowledge of the blues especially impressed them. Leiber remembers that Presley “could imitate anything he heard. He had a perfect ear,”⁴⁷ and he also described Elvis’s ear as “uncanny.”⁴⁸ In addition, Presley could sing and/or play a song on the piano after hearing it only once or twice. His natural ear for music, ability to play by ear, and to improvise were well known to his friends and musical associates.

Vocal Ability

Elvis Presley’s voice was extraordinary for its quality, range, and power. Although he burst onto the American stage singing rock ‘n’ roll, Presley’s powerful gospel songs and ballads were his personal favorites (he won three Grammy Awards for recordings of sacred songs). The quality of his voice is most often described as soulful. It had an “aching sincerity . . . and an indefinable quality of yearning . . . virtually impossible to pigeonhole.”⁴⁹

Presley’s three-octave vocal range was exceptional, “very narrowly all at once a tenor, baritone, and bass.” A 1987 article in the *Village Voice* included an assessment of his voice in classical terms, categorizing it as a “lyric baritone . . . [but with] unexpectedly rich low [notes] . . . and astounding high notes.” It also discussed the power of Presley’s voice, which it termed “microphone singing,” while also noting that it was “hard to think of an opera singer who could match it.”⁵⁰ According to Jerry Leiber, “He had an incredible, attractive, instrument that worked in many registers. He could falsetto like Little Richard. He could sing. The equipment was outstanding . . . His sense of timing and rhythm was second to none.”⁵¹ Presley was “the master of a wide and diverse range of vocal stylings and ventriloquistic effects, from the clear tenor of his country-western heroes (Roy Acuff, Eddy Arnold, Jimmie Rodgers) to the exaggerated

⁴⁴ Clayton, *Elvis Up Close*, 58-59.

⁴⁵ Greg Shaw, “Brill Building Pop,” in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* (New York: A Random House/Rolling Stone Press Book, 1980), 125.

⁴⁶ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 406.

⁴⁷ *Elvis, Then and Now, Official Graceland 25th Anniversary Collector’s Edition* (New York: Gruner+Jahr USA Publishing, 2002), 115.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁹ Peter Guralnick, *Elvis, The King of Rock ‘n’ Roll - The Complete 50’s Masters*, companion booklet, 1992, n.p.

⁵⁰ Gregory Sandow, “Rhythm and Ooze,” *Village Voice* (August 18, 1987): 75-76.

⁵¹ *Elvis, Then and Now*, 116.

vibrato of the gospel singers he loved (Jake Hess, Jim Wetherington, J. D. Sumner).⁵²

The following assessment comes from Myrna Smith, member of the vocal group the Sweet Inspirations, who performed with Presley for a number of years during the last phase of his career. Smith has also performed with Aretha Franklin and other exceptional vocalists.

*When Elvis was in true form, he was fabulous. He had so much energy. His voice was a lot more remarkable than it ever came off on record, and his vocal pitch was much better than it came off on record. He was just a much better singer than could ever be captured. There are a lot of singers like that: You can't capture truly what they sound like. Some great singers' voices are just too big. Elvis was like that.*⁵³

RCA Records released “Elvis 30 #1 Hits” in 2002, the first authorized adjustment (remastering and remixing) of RCA’s original master tape recordings. The remastering team’s goal was to provide the full range of base and treble and optimize the sound for playback on current audio equipment, while also maintaining the sound and integrity of the original tapes. David Bendeth, a member of the remastering team, was not really an Elvis fan prior to this project, but his work on the tapes gave him a different perspective.

*Getting that up close and personal to an artist is something that has really humbled me musically. . . . just witnessing the incredible musicianship and singing ability. Today you just don't hear things like that. The ability to listen to the tracks that closely is intense. I've listened to so many records in my career and I've never been this close to almost greatness - to genius before Just the power of his voice.*⁵⁴

Stage Performance

As a performer, Elvis also had extraordinary natural talent. He truly loved his audiences and intuitively knew how to connect with them, but Presley studied performers just as seriously as he studied music to improve his own performances throughout his life.

*He studied each performer—he watched carefully from backstage with much the same appreciation as the audience, but with a keen sense of what they were doing, what really knocked the fans out, and how each performer achieved it . . . He could read every audience; it was, evidently, an innate skill . . . Even if they didn't respond at first he could always get to them. “He would study a crowd,” said Tillman Franks of the [Louisiana] Hayride tours. “He would look at them, see that he'd gotten through to them, then give them a little bit more. He had electricity between him and that audience, same as Hank Williams did. Hank just give [sic] everything he had—he didn't worry about it, he just did it. But Elvis masterminded the situation. He was a genius at it.”*⁵⁵

Presley performances were legendary for their intensity. “He seemed to practically explode, coming out onstage like a sprinter out of the starting blocks, with an energy and a crackling

⁵² Vernon Chadwick, ed., *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), xv.

⁵³ Clayton, *Elvis Up Close*, 245.

⁵⁴ David Bendeth, interview by Richard Sanders, “Remastering for Elvis 30 #1 Hits,” news release by RCA Records/BMG Music, July 26, 2002, on www.Elvis.com/news.

⁵⁵ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 174.

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enthusiasm that could barely be contained.”⁵⁶ According to Sam Phillips, Elvis “put every ounce of emotion . . . into every song, almost as if he was incapable of holding back.”⁵⁷ When he collapsed after a concert in Jacksonville, Florida, in February 1956, the emergency room doctor warned him to slow down because he worked as hard in twenty minutes as the average laborer did in eight hours.⁵⁸

During this same period of his career, Presley was part of an Opry tour troupe. According to honky-tonk legend Ernest Tubb’s son, Justin, also a performer on the tour,

*he was happening and you could feel it. He was like a diamond in the rough. When he walked offstage, he would be just soaked, just dripping. He worked hard, and he put everything he had into it, and everything he did worked . . . we had never seen anything like it before. My feeling was that they didn’t capture him on the television show [the Dorsey Brothers’ Stage Show] . . . they didn’t seem to get his magnetism or charisma.*⁵⁹

Even before Elvis was well known, show headliners like Slim Whitman, Hank Snow, and Faron Young learned the hard way that a Presley performance had no rivals. “Word spread pretty quickly that no one could follow him onstage. Once he hit that stage, he did what he did naturally and no one could follow him.” “When Elvis finished, the audience just all left! They didn’t even want to see the star.”⁶⁰

Presley focused on his movie career for most of the 1960s. He finally returned to the concert stage in December 1968 for his first television special, a Christmas show that has come to be known as *Elvis—The ‘68 Comeback Special*.

Save for those first Tennessee records . . . that night, late in 1968, when his comeback was uncertain . . . he put a searing, desperate kind of life into a few songs that cannot be found in any of his other music.

It was a staggering moment . . . So there Elvis was, standing in an auditorium, facing television cameras and a live audience for the first time in nearly a decade, finally stepping out from behind the wall of retainers and sycophants he had paid to hide him. And everyone was watching . . . Now he was putting everything on the line, risking his comforts and his ease for the chance to start over. He had been a bad joke for a long time; if this show died, little more would be heard from Elvis Presley. Did he still have an audience? Did he still have anything to offer them? He had raised the stakes himself, but he probably had no idea.

Sitting on the stage in black leather, surrounded by friends and a rough little combo, the crowd buzzing, he sang and talked and joked . . . He jibed at the Beatles, denying that the heroes who had replaced him had produced anything he could not match, and then he proved it . . . No one has ever heard him sing like this; not even his best records suggest the depth of passion in this music. One line from Howlin’ Wolf tells the tale: “When you see me runnin’, you know my life is at stake.” That’s what it sounds like.

Shouting, crying, growling, lusting, Elvis takes his stand and the crowd takes theirs with him,

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁷ Guralnick, *Complete 50’s Masters*, n.p.

⁵⁸ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 254.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

⁶⁰ Clayton, *Elvis Up Close*, 70, 83.

no longer reaching for the past they had been brought to the studio to reenact, but responding to something completely new. The crowd is cheering for what they had only hoped for; Elvis has gone beyond all their expectations, and his, and they don't believe it. The guitar cuts in high and slams down and Elvis is roaring. Every line is a thunderbolt . . .

And Elvis floats like the master he is back into "One night, with you" . . .

It was the finest music of his life. If ever there was music that bleeds, this was it. Nothing came easy that night, and he gave everything he had—more than anyone knew was there.⁶¹

The '68 Comeback Special inspired Presley to return to live performances and touring, beginning in Las Vegas in 1969. In June 1972, he played New York City for the first time, debuting at Madison Square Garden with four sold-out shows. This event warranted three articles in the *New York Times*, including this review:

At 9:15, Elvis appeared, materialized, in a white suit of lights, shining with golden appliques, the shirt front slashed to show his chest. Around his shoulders was a cape lined in cloth of gold, its collar faced with scarlet. It was anything you wanted to call it, gaudy, vulgar, magnificent. He looked like a prince from another planet . . . Time stopped, and everyone in the place was 17 again . . .

He used the stage, he worked to the people. The ones in front, in the best seats, the ones in back, and up in the peanut galleries. He turned, he moved . . .

The music was mixed, old rock with new . . . but it was when he'd get to one of the old Elvis numbers, "That's All Right, Mama," or "Love Me Tender," that the Garden came unglued.

Once in a great while . . . a special champion comes along, a Joe Louis, a Jose Capablanca, a Joe DiMaggio, someone in whose hands the way a thing is done becomes more important than the thing itself. When DiMaggio hit a baseball, his grace made the act look easy and inevitable; whether it turned into a pop fly or a home run, it was beautiful, because he did what he did so well.

Friday night, at Madison Square Garden, Elvis was like that. He stood there at the end, his arms stretched out, the great gold cloak giving him wings, a champion, the only one in his class.⁶²

Musical Prodigy

Musical prodigies are most often associated with classical music, but by definition, such prodigies are natural talents and not restricted to one musical genre. Musical prodigies usually have several of the following characteristics: exceptional talent and/or interest in music at an early age; the ability to identify the specific pitch of sounds, i.e., perfect pitch, also known as a natural ear for music, or a good ear; ability to play by ear and/or to improvise; long-term memory for elements of music—melody, harmony, rhythm, time, and/or lyrics; and creative performance abilities (emotional and/or dynamic delivery, improvisation).⁶³ "The one element that truly defines a musical prodigy is the ability to create a performance dynamic with the audience that is captivating and, at times, overwhelming."⁶⁴ As discussed above, Elvis Presley's musical talent clearly encompassed all of these characteristics and more.

⁶¹ Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train, Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1982), 147-149.

⁶² Chris Chase, "Like a Prince From Another Planet," *The New York Times* (June 18, 1972), D-14.

⁶³ Joanne Haroutounian, *Kindling the Spark, Recognizing and Developing Musical Talent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Rosamund Shuter, *The Psychology of Musical Ability* (London: Methuen & Co., 1968); Leon Miller, *Musical Savants* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 1989).

⁶⁴ Haroutounian, *Kindling the Spark*, 87.

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Presley's roots in the Deep South, his love of all kinds of music, and his extraordinary talent as a gifted musician were key elements in the birth of the new music eventually known as rock 'n' roll, a gumbo of southern musical styles. His unique contribution was to unite and fuse all kinds of musical influences—gospel, country, blues, honky-tonk, rhythm and blues, and popular—in the creation of a new American music. From romantic, sentimental ballads and religious songs to blistering rock 'n' roll, Elvis Presley could make any kind of song his own.

Although few and far between, there were instances in the 1950s when authoritative voices sang the praises of Elvis Presley. *The New York Times* jazz and pop music critic, John S. Wilson, who also conducted the program "World of Jazz" for radio station WQXR, devoted most of his January 1957 column to Presley.

The overwhelming nature of the arrival of Elvis Presley as a national figure, and particularly the sociological furor that has been stirred up in his wake, has tended to overshadow what should be the heart of the matter—his music. Although Mr. Presley is frequently viewed as a frantic, footless phenomenon, his recordings, "Elvis" and "Elvis Presley" (Victor)—which allow him to be heard without consideration for such controversial side elements as his appearance or his physical activities—reveal not only that he draws effectively on some valid aspects of American folk music, but also that he has an impressive, if sometimes distorted talent.

There are several sides to Mr. Presley. He is a blues singer who is imbued with the spirit and style of those Negro country blues singers represented at the peak, by Big Bill Broonzy . . . He has also absorbed that straight-forward, unhokumed part of country singing that runs from Jimmie Rodgers to Eddy Arnold. But he is not averse to shifting to the nasal bathos of some country balladeers or to crossing this style with that of more sophisticated crooners.

His outright rock 'n' roll efforts generally are based on an exaggeration of his blues roots . . . combined with further exaggerations of the less-palatable elements of his country influences, all amplified to brain-shattering proportions by doom-filled echo chambers.

Mr. Presley's projection of these vocal exaggerations is so forthright and, one gathers, natural, that one can assume that the same impulses might lead him to some measure of the physical exhibitionism which has aroused so much comment . . .

But the fact that Mr. Presley has chosen to express himself in the particular way that he does—mixing a genuine musical heritage with a musical fad that was well under way long before he gained any prominence—suggests essentially that he is tuned to his times with that same catalytic precision that Frank Sinatra, in the Forties, and Benny Goodman, in the Thirties, were tuned to theirs . . .

Mr. Presley is completely at home with the shouts, the whoops, the hoarse zest and the plaintive cry of the country blues singer. When he is using these devices with artless skill, he is a genuinely exciting performer.

And on the artful side, Mr. Presley should not be underestimated. Between his first disk, "Elvis Presley," and his second, "Elvis," the improvement in his diction, in the use he makes of his strong natural voice, and in the thoughtfulness of his presentations is very marked. All these suggest that his horizons are far from limited. He implements this thought on "Elvis" by turning almost as far from the generally held picture of him as it is possible to get with a tear-stained rendition of "Old Shep" that might give Ted Lewis pause.⁶⁵

Art that truly connects with its place of origin is a powerful method of communication, and Elvis Presley's music exemplifies just such a connection.

It seems that the art that speaks most clearly, explicitly, directly, and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood. It is through place that we put our roots, wherever birth, chance, fate, or our traveling selves set us down, but where those roots reach toward -

⁶⁵ John S. Wilson, "Elvis Presley: Rocking Blues Shouter," *The New York Times* (January 13, 1957), X-16.

*whether America, England, or Timbuktu - is the deep and running vein, eternal and consistent and everywhere purely itself - that feeds and is fed by the human understanding . . . Whatever our theme . . . , it is old and tired. Whatever our place, it has been visited by the stranger, it will never be new again. It is only the vision that can be new; but that is enough.*⁶⁶

It has taken the passage of time for Elvis Presley's extraordinary musical talent, long undervalued, dismissed, and/or ignored, to be more widely regarded in the United States. Rock journalists and critics, however lamented this lack of appreciation for decades. In the introduction to an article in the 1985 compilation *Fortunate Son - Criticism and Journalism by America's Best Known Rock Writer*, Dave Marsh observes:

*After editing The Rolling Stone Record Guide, I found myself frequently asked who I considered the most underrated performer in the book. Upon reflection, I was able to honestly answer that Elvis Presley was probably the most underrated singer of all. Elvis suffered from celebrity in many ways, and not the least of these was his inability to be clearly seen as the innovative and startlingly original vocalist that he was.*⁶⁷

In addition to celebrity and worldwide popularity, a number of more recent scholarly studies attribute the widespread dismissal of Presley's musical talent to regional and class-based prejudice. According to this view, his "hillbilly" roots and impoverished background could not have provided an environment conducive to artistic talent, "or the sort of art valued as cultural capital."⁶⁸

*While Elvis's success as a singer and movie star dramatically increased his economic capital, his cultural capital never expanded enough for him to transcend the stigma of his background as a truck driver from the rural South . . . Elvis's inability to escape his lower/working-class image had profound repercussions on the way he and his contributions to US culture were perceived: "No matter how successful Elvis became in terms of fame and money, he remained fundamentally disreputable in the minds of many Americans . . . He was the sharecropper's son in the big house, and it always showed."*⁶⁹

In addition, conflicting definitions of art and culture—the superiority of high culture versus the inferiority of low (or popular) culture—have compounded the failure to recognize Presley as an important artist because of his background. "Even critics and scholars who take Elvis seriously (as a singer, as an artist, or as a figure of historical and cultural importance) are subject to scorn and derision—perhaps even more so than 'ordinary' fans, as these critics have accumulated enough cultural capital 'to know better.'"⁷⁰ Rock 'n' roll music, "grassroots culture arising from

⁶⁶ Eudora Welty, *Place in Fiction*, quoted in Neal and Janice Gregory, *When Elvis Died* (Washington, DC: Communications Press, 1980), 125.

⁶⁷ Dave Marsh, *Fortunate Son, The Best of Dave Marsh - Criticism and Journalism by America's Best Known Rock Writer* (New York: Random House, 1985), 78.

⁶⁸ Gilbert Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis, The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (London: Routledge, 1996), 78.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 72, and quoting Linda Ray Pratt, "Elvis, or the Ironies of a Southern Identity," in *Elvis: Images and Fancies* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979), 43, 45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

the people”⁷¹ in the 1950s, did not meet conventional artistic standards for high culture and real art. The emotional delivery and release characteristic of working-class music were key elements of early rock ‘n’ roll, a music that glorified self-expression and communication rather than musical technique.

The types of music traditionally celebrated by elite cultural institutions (opera houses, symphony orchestras, conservatories, etc.) are primarily music for the mind, not the body . . . Elvis’s early music, on the other hand, ran directly contrary to this aesthetic: the first thing it changed was your body. Like most rock ‘n’ roll prior to the arrival of Dylan and the Beatles, this was not music for sitting and thinking; this was music for dancing and partying and making out (and so on). It is thus not surprising that, over the years, intellectuals have generally only embraced popular music as an art form worthy of critical commentary in precisely those instances where they have been able to describe the music and the artists in question according to aesthetic principles similar to those that govern classical music.⁷²

Bono, the lead singer for the Irish rock supergroup U2, explains why the “consistent refusal to see Elvis as a serious artist is a blindspot rooted in classist assumptions about art and creativity.”⁷³

I believe that Elvis Presley was a genius. He didn’t express himself the way the middle classes do, which is with wordplay and being able to explain his actions and reactions. He acted on gut instinct and expressed himself by the way he held the microphone, by the way he moved his hips, by the way that he sang down the microphone. That was his genius . . . I believe the essence of any performer is gut instinct . . . Because it’s all in you, it’s instinct. That’s what Elvis Presley’s about . . . and Elvis Presley could say more in somebody else’s song than Albert Goldman could say in any book.

And this is the thing about rock & roll music, this is what music has that makes it better than all that: it is instinctive . . . And isn’t that the way it should be? Elvis had the wisdom that makes wise men look foolish.⁷⁴

The death of Elvis Presley in 1977 spread grief the world over, and he was “heralded, in obituaries and memorials around the world, as a great American artist.”⁷⁵ His own country did not grant such recognition, then or now, even though celebration of the common man and innovative, cowboy individualism and achievement are cornerstones of America. Elvis Presley was an extraordinary American original, and “unless we can somehow recycle the concept of the great artist so that it supports Chuck Berry [or Elvis Presley] as well as it does Marcel Proust, we might as well trash it altogether.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ Chadwick, *In Search of Elvis*, 243.

⁷² Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis*, 79-80.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷⁴ Bill Flanagan, *Written in My Soul, Rock’s Great Songwriters Talk About Creating Their Music* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1987), 415-416.

⁷⁵ Dave Marsh and John Swenson, eds., *The New Rolling Stone Record Guide*, rev. ed. (New York: A Random House/Rolling Stone Press Book, 1983), 398.

⁷⁶ Robert Christgau, “Chuck Berry,” in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, 54.

ELVIS PRESLEY'S ACHIEVEMENTS

Elvis Presley's record of unprecedented achievements as an American recording and performing artist began shortly after RCA Victor bought his recording contract in November 1955 from Sam Phillips, founder of Sun Records. In just one year, 1956, the Deep South's "Hillbilly Cat" skyrocketed to become a global rock 'n' roll phenomenon. His talent as a recording artist began the surprising ascent, but his talent and skill as a performer propelled his popularity to unprecedented levels. Contrary to widespread expectations, rock 'n' roll music was not a short-lived fad and Elvis Presley was not a supernova. His achievements eventually spanned the entire length of a 20-plus year career, and they have continued into an unprecedented posthumous career, now at 27 years and counting. The following sections are a compilation of highlights of Presley's achievements in a variety of categories, not a comprehensive account.

Recording Artist Achievements

A number of records continue to vie for the title "first rock 'n' roll song," and two Elvis Presley recordings are contenders: "That's All Right" [Mama] (1954) and "Heartbreak Hotel" (1956). In 2003, a panel of top music journalists and experts ranked "That's All Right" [Mama] at No. 1 of "100 Songs that Changed the World"—"ground-breaking, world-altering songs that changed music and the world forever"—topping such pivotal songs as "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" by the Beatles and Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone."

Billboard Magazine's Singles Charts

The *Billboard* music charts have documented the popularity of America's favorite records for almost six decades, and are considered to be the most authoritative source of ranking. *Billboard* began to publish charts for pop singles on a weekly basis in 1955, the year that rock 'n' roll music charted its first No. 1 hit. From 1955 to 1958, there were four different weekly *Billboard* charts that ranked sales and radio airplay of the hottest pop singles in a variety of ways. The *Top 100*, introduced in November 1955, was one of the four charts.⁷⁷ The *Hot 100* chart, first published on August 4, 1958, integrated information from all four charts and "has been widely recognized as the definitive source for the weekly ratings of America's most popular [singles]"⁷⁸ since that time.

*The ranking methodology used . . . is a logical and simple one based on the principle that the highest position at which a record peaks is the single most important factor during its chart life. Climbing its way to the upper echelons of the chart is a battle each hit record wages in the never-ending race for chart superiority. And when its chart life is over, the position at which it peaked is the key statistic reflected upon by music professionals.*⁷⁹

The *Hot 100* rankings combine record sales and radio airplay, and topping the *Hot 100* is a pinnacle of success for recording artists. For many years, the single was "the ultimate form of

⁷⁷ Joel Whitburn, *Top Pop Singles, 1955-1996, Chart Data Compiled from Billboard's Pop Singles Charts, 1955-1996* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, Inc., 1997), ix.

⁷⁸ Joel Whitburn, *Top Pop Singles, 1955-1986* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, Inc., 1987), 6.

⁷⁹ Joel Whitburn, *Billboard Top 1000 Singles, 1955-1990* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1991), 5.

artistic expression in popular music.”⁸⁰

Elvis Presley’s first No. 1 hit single on a national music chart was “I Forgot to Remember to Forget,” the flip side of “Mystery Train.” It was Presley’s last record on the Sun label, re-released in December 1955 after RCA Victor bought his contract. It reached No. 1 on *Billboard*’s Country and Western singles chart in the fall of 1955, and Presley was *Billboard*’s “Most Promising C&W Artist” that year. In January 1956, Elvis recorded “Heartbreak Hotel” at his first RCA recording session. It hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* Pop chart and held the position for eight weeks. “Heartbreak Hotel” peaked in April 1956, but remained in the Top 10 for 15 weeks and the Top 40 for 22 weeks. It also hit No. 1 on Country and Western charts, and reached No. 5 on Rhythm and Blues. Sun Records released Carl Perkins’s “Blue Suede Shoes” in December 1955, shortly before “Heartbreak Hotel.” These two songs were the first recordings by a single artist to reach high positions on all three charts, and they battled for the top of the charts for weeks.

The smash hit “Hound Dog,” also backed with “Don’t Be Cruel,” was the biggest single of 1956. Its 11-week reign at No. 1 made it the “biggest charted single of the rock era” (1955-1992).⁸¹ Both sides of the record were huge hits, ranking in the Top 10 for 21 weeks, and Top 40 for 24 weeks. It still remains the “biggest 2-sided single in history.”⁸² “Hound Dog”/“Don’t Be Cruel” was also a No. 1 hit on Rhythm and Blues and Country and Western charts, making it the first record by a single artist to reach No. 1 on all three charts. Presley had two more No. 1 singles in 1956, “Love Me Tender” and “I Want You, I Need You, I Love You,” also a No. 1 Country and Western hit. Traditional popular recording artists, including Dean Martin, Kay Starr, Perry Como, Doris Day, and Nelson Riddle, still dominated Pop music charts in 1956, but the change-over had begun; the Top 20 hits of 1956 included five No. 1 records by Elvis Presley.

In 1957, Presley’s No. 1 hits on *Billboard* Pop charts included “Too Much;” “All Shook Up” (No. 1 for 9 weeks); “(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear;” and “Jailhouse Rock.” “All Shook Up,” “Teddy Bear,” and “Jailhouse Rock” were also No. 1 Country and Western and Rhythm and Blues hits. There were two more No. 1s in 1958 and one in 1959, during Presley’s service in the U.S. Army. Presley records were extremely popular around the world, especially in Great Britain. In the 1950s, his No. 1 singles in the UK included “All Shook Up,” “Jailhouse Rock,” “One Night,” and “(Now and Then There’s) A Fool Such as I.”⁸³ At the end of 2003, Presley was still the “King of the Singles” in Britain, with 1,193 weeks on the British Hit Singles charts. A 2002 remix of 1968’s “A Little Less Conversation” gave Presley his 18th No. 1 single in Britain, breaking a tie with the Beatles for most No. 1 hit singles.

In the 1960s, Elvis had six more No. 1 singles on the Pop charts, from “Stuck on You,” “It’s

⁸⁰ Craig Rosen, *The Billboard Book of Number One Albums, The Inside Story Behind Pop Music’s Blockbuster Records* (New York: Billboard Books, 1996), xiv.

⁸¹ Whitburn, *Billboard Top 1000 Singles*, 7.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Guralnick, *Elvis, The Complete 50’s Masters*, n.p.

Now or Never,” and “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” in 1960 to “Suspicious Minds” in November 1969. His last No. 1 singles were hits on Country charts in the 1970s; “Moody Blue” (1976) and “Way Down” (1977).

Between 1956 and 1996, Elvis Presley charted 151 singles.⁸⁴ He ranks No. 1 on all the following Top Artist Achievements lists: “Most Chart Hits;” “Most Top 10 Hits;” “Most Top 40 Hits;” “Most No. 2 Hits” (the Beatles have the “Most No. 1 Hits,” 20 to 18); “Most Weeks at the No. 1 Position;” “Most Consecutive No. 1 Hits;” “Most Consecutive Top 10 Hits;” “Most 2-Sided Hits;” and “Most Gold and Platinum Hits.”⁸⁵

Billboard Magazine’s Album Charts

Billboard published its first weekly album chart, “Best Selling Pop Albums,” on March 24, 1956. The top of the album chart is a coveted position, and album charts are considered to represent the public’s true favorites since they are based on sales figures, not radio airplay. Presley’s debut album, “Elvis Presley,” hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* Pop album chart in May 1956. It held the position for 10 weeks and remained in the Top 10 for 43 weeks. It was the first rock ‘n’ roll LP to top the *Billboard* album chart. (It was only the second album to reach No. 1 after *Billboard* began publishing weekly LP charts in March 1956). His second album, “Elvis,” was No. 1 for five weeks in late 1956, putting Elvis at the top of the album chart for 15 weeks in 1956. In 1957, there were two more No. 1 albums. “Loving You” held the top spot for 10 weeks, ranked in the Top 10 for 19 weeks,⁸⁶ and “Elvis’ Christmas Album” was No. 1 for four weeks. All four of these No. 1 albums were Top 25 Albums of the Decade, even though more traditional recording artists (Doris Day, Mitch Miller, Harry Belafonte, Johnny Mathis, Frank Sinatra. Movie soundtracks (South Pacific, My Fair Lady, Music Man, Gigi) still dominated the album charts in these years.⁸⁷

In the 1960s, most of Presley’s No. 1 albums on *Billboard* charts were movie soundtracks. “G.I. Blues” was No. 1 for 10 weeks in 1960, Top 10 for 29 weeks, and Top 40 for 46 weeks.⁸⁸ The “Blue Hawaii” soundtrack was the most popular Presley album ever. In 1961, it held the No. 1 position for 20 weeks, spent 39 weeks in the Top 10, and 53 weeks in the Top 40. “Blue Hawaii” was the No. 2 album of the decade (“West Side Story” was No. 1, “Sound of Music,” No. 4) and No. 9 of the Top 100 Albums of the rock era, 1955-1990.⁸⁹ “Something for Everybody” (1961) and “Roustabout” (1965) were also No. 1 albums in the 1960s. “Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii, via Satellite” (a two-disc set) hit No. 1 in May, 1973. It was Presley’s last No. 1 album until 2002, when “Elvis 30 #1 Hits” debuted at No. 1 in 17 countries around the world (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Australia, Brazil, Spain, Belgium, Argentina, New Zealand, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Chile, Switzerland, Austria, United Arab

⁸⁴ Whitburn, *Top Pop Singles, 1955-1996*, 487.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 852-853.

⁸⁶ Joel Whitburn, *Top Pop Albums, 1955-1996* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, Inc. 1996), 1037.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Whitburn, *Billboard Top 1000 Singles*, 79.

Emirates). This was the first Elvis Presley album to debut at the top of the *Billboard* album chart, and it held the top spot for three weeks. “Elvis 30 #1 Hits” also hit No. 1 on the Top Country Albums chart. Presley’s No. 1 album in 2002 came 46 years after his first No. 1 album in 1956, resulting in another remarkable achievement—longest interval between No. 1 albums, from 1956 to 2002.

Gold and Platinum Record Certification Awards

Since 1958, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the trade group that represents the U.S. recording industry, has certified record sales and presented awards honoring recording artists who achieve extraordinary success. Record companies report sales figures for official certification by the RIAA, which presents recording artists with Gold, Platinum, Multi-Platinum, and Diamond Awards that are considered to be the “objective measure of achievement for sound recordings in the U.S.” As the music industry expanded and recording formats changed (45s/singles, LPs/albums, 8-track and cassette tapes, compact discs/CDs), sales requirements for awards adapted over the years. The current sales requirements are: Gold record awards for singles and album sales of 500,000; Platinum record awards (introduced in 1976) for singles and album sales of one million; Multi-Platinum awards (1984) for sales of two million; and the Diamond Award, introduced in 1999, for sales of 10 million.

Elvis Presley began his recording career when singles (45s) dominated the music business, and he sold millions of records from 1955 to 1958 before the RIAA’s first official certification of record sales. During these years, he was the hottest artist on RCA Victor, one of three major record companies in the United States. In May 1956, RCA reported that Elvis Presley’s records accounted for half of their pop sales,⁹⁰ and advance sales that summer for “Hound Dog” backed with “Don’t Be Cruel” approached one million. By the fall, sales of Presley singles topped 10 million, approximately two-thirds of RCA’s singles business.⁹¹

Sales requirements for the first RIAA awards in 1958 were quite different from current standards. The Gold record was the only award at that time, and the RIAA presented Gold awards for \$1 million or more in sales, rather than number of records/units sold. RCA did not request retroactive certifications for Presley’s pre-1958 sales, or request updated certifications for records that eventually went Platinum and Multi-Platinum after introduction of those new awards in the 1970s and 80s. In 1973 Presley sold the royalty rights to his entire recording catalog to RCA for \$5 million, and in 1986, BMG acquired RCA Records. (BMG, Bertelsmann Music Group, owns more than 200 record labels in 41 countries, and is the global music division of Bertelsmann AG, one of the world’s leading media companies). This change in ownership eventually brought a new appreciation for the Presley catalog; BMG began to document and restore the master recordings, and also conducted extensive sales research to permit certification of past sales according to current RIAA standards.

In August 1992, RCA Records and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) posthumously awarded to Elvis 110 gold, platinum and multi-platinum albums and singles, the largest presentation of gold and platinum record awards in history. The idea was to present all at once Elvis’ entire American record sales achievement from the start of his career to the present

⁹⁰ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 274.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 353.

day - recognizing again all the certifications that had ever been made up to that time, recognizing sales during Elvis' lifetime that had not been properly certified, and recognizing sales since his death that had not yet been certified. It was determined that Elvis had, by that date, 110 different albums and singles that had earned gold, platinum or multi-platinum status. One award was presented for each of the 110 titles, with an indication on the award whether the title was gold or platinum or how many times platinum. RCA also presented a 9-foot glass sculpture proclaiming Elvis the greatest recording artist of all time.⁹²

On January 8, 2004, Elvis Presley was officially certified as the No. 1 Solo Artist in U.S. history with documented album sales topping 120 million, more than any other solo artist. (The top-selling artists are the Beatles, a four-member British group with sales of 165.5 million albums). Presley's awards include 97 Gold albums, 55 albums certified Platinum, and 25 Multi-Platinum albums. He also has more Gold and Platinum singles than any artist or group in recording history: 51 Gold singles, 27 certified Platinum, 7 Multi-Platinum singles.

These awards required specific documentation of record sales in the United States. All of Presley's American sales are still not documented, including the early years of his career and the entire year after his death in August 1977. By September of that year, RCA was shipping 20 million Presley records a week, had 40 plants around the world pressing records, and postponed the label's new releases to meet the huge demand.⁹³ In addition, certified sales figures ranking Elvis Presley as the No. 1 Solo Artist are for album sales only; they do not include the tens of millions of Presley singles. Documentation of foreign sales is even more deficient. Estimates of Elvis Presley's worldwide sales top one billion, with approximately 60 per cent being U.S. sales and 40 percent foreign sales.

Elvis Presley's combination of awards for Gold albums (97) and Gold singles (51), a total of 148 different record certifications, makes Presley the top certified artist in American history; he has more RIAA awards than any other artist or group in the world.

In addition to recognizing extraordinary sales achievements, Presley's first Gold record awards were also landmarks in the history of American music. "Hard-Headed Woman," his first Gold single, was the first rock 'n' roll record certified Gold. It was only the fourth record to receive the Gold award after RIAA certifications began in 1958 (Perry Como received the first Gold award for "Catch a Falling Star," the second Gold record went to Laurie London for "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," the soundtrack for "Oklahoma!" was third). The RIAA awards program began two years after the beginning of Presley's domination of the record charts and reign as RCA's hottest artist. Even so, five of the first ten rock 'n' roll records certified Gold were Elvis Presley recordings: 1. "Hard Headed Woman" (1958); 3. "Elvis" (1960); 4. "Elvis' Golden Records" (1961); 6. "Blue Hawaii" (1961); 7. "Can't Help Falling in Love" (1962).

Performing Artist Achievements

Over three decades, the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, Elvis Presley performed for record-breaking audiences in a variety of venues: concerts on tour; entertainment variety shows on television; network television specials; Las Vegas stage shows, and via worldwide satellite broadcast.

⁹² The Official Elvis Presley Website, "Billboard Chart Statistics," <http://www.Elvis.com/faq/status> of record sales.

⁹³ The Official Elvis Presley Website, "Is Elvis the Biggest Selling Recording Artist?" http://www.elvis.com/news/full_story.asp?id=131, Feb. 12, 2001.

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

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Performances on network television contributed to Presley's skyrocketing popularity in 1956, and his relationship with the young broadcast medium was symbiotic. Presley made his television debut in January 1956, as a guest on *Stage Show*, starring Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. Although it attracted little notice, an audience of 40 million watched his June appearance on *The Milton Berle Show*, which beat Phil Silver's *Sergeant Bilko* in the ratings for the first time that season.⁹⁴ Ratings for Presley's next television appearance, *The Steve Allen Show* in July, threatened the era's reigning television variety show, *The Ed Sullivan Show*. As a result, Presley was hired for Sullivan's season premiere in September, even though Sullivan had publicly vowed not to have Presley on his show. On September 9, 1956, 54 million Americans, 82.6 percent of the viewing audience, watched Elvis Presley on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. These were the highest ratings ever in television history at that time, and they were not topped until 1964 when the Beatles appeared on Sullivan's show. In May 1960, *The Frank Sinatra Timex Special*, also called *Welcome Home, Elvis*, was Presley's first television appearance after his service in the U.S. Army. This special captured another huge audience, a 67.7 percent share.⁹⁵ Presley did not appear on television again until 1968. *Singer Presents Elvis*, a program better known and retitled as *Elvis—The '68 Comeback Special*, aired on NBC in December. The huge expansion of the television market during Presley's years of absence made an 80 percent audience share infeasible, but the special received a sizable 42 percent, giving NBC its biggest overall ratings victory of the year.⁹⁶

Presley concerts were also record-setting events. In October 1956, before the advent of large stadium concerts, Presley performed for 26,500 people at the Cotton Bowl, the "largest paying crowd ever to see an entertainer perform in Dallas."⁹⁷ In March 1958, Presley's U.S. Army service began an 11-year concert hiatus with just two exceptions—benefit concerts in 1961 for charities in the Memphis area, and to raise funds for construction of the USS *Arizona* Memorial at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In July 1969, Presley opened a month-long series of concerts at the newest and biggest hotel in Las Vegas, the International, which also had the city's largest showroom—2,000 seats. Barbra Streisand opened the new showroom immediately before Presley, but her shows did not sell out. Presley's engagement, however, set attendance records for the new hotel and for the desert entertainment capital—sold out performances for four straight weeks, two shows a night, 101,500 tickets sold, \$1.5 million gross receipts—an achievement that established Elvis Presley as the "most successful act in Las Vegas history."⁹⁸ (Vegas pros Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin usually performed in 1,200-seat showrooms; Martin sold 50,000 tickets during a three-week engagement that same summer). Presley returned to Las Vegas in January 1970, just five months later. He performed for four more weeks, breaking his own attendance records and setting new ones. After Vegas, Presley did several shows the next weekend at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo at the Astrodome. The Saturday night performance, before a crowd of 43,614, set a new "world record for indoor rodeo

⁹⁴ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 283.

⁹⁵ Guralnick, *Careless Love*, 63.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

performances.”⁹⁹

On January 14, 1973, “Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii, via Satellite” was the “first time that a full-fledged entertainment special [was] beamed worldwide via satellite,” attracting the largest viewing audience to date for a television show, estimated at 1 to 1.5 billion people.¹⁰⁰ Presley’s concert at the Honolulu International Center Arena began at 12:30 a.m. Hawaii time and was broadcast live via satellite to the Far East, including Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and South Viet Nam, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and several other countries. Two days later, there was a taped replay for 28 European countries, followed by the United States broadcast on April 4. It was a worldwide ratings hit—91.8 percent of viewers in the Philippines, 70-80 percent in South Korea, 70 percent in Hong Kong, a 57 percent share of the American viewing audience, and 37.8 percent of Japanese viewers, the “highest rating ever registered in Japan, . . . a highly competitive six-network market.”¹⁰¹

National Awards

Elvis Presley is the only artist to be inducted into three music halls of fame: Rock ‘n’ Roll (1986, the inaugural year), Country (1998), and Gospel (2001). In 1984, he received the W. C. Handy Award from the Blues Foundation and the Academy of Country Music’s first Golden Hat Award, and in 1987, the American Music Awards’ first posthumous presentation of the Award of Merit.

Presley was nominated for 14 Grammy Awards, the recording industry’s most prestigious award, presented annually by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. He won three, all for his recordings of gospel music: Best Sacred Performance (1967, “How Great Thou Art”); Best Inspirational Performance (1972, “He Touched Me”); and Best Inspirational Performance (Non-Classical) (1974, “How Great Thou Art”). The Recording Academy’s Lifetime Achievement Award is a special honor recognizing “creative contributions of outstanding artistic significance to the field of recording.” Presley received this award in 1971, when he was 36 years old, “in recognition of his artistic creativity and his influence in the field of recorded music upon a generation of performers and listeners whose lives and musical horizons have been enriched and expanded by his unique contributions.” The Lifetime Achievement Award (originally named the Bing Crosby Award, its first recipient) honors exceptional performers on occasion; it is not an annual award. There were only five recipients prior to Elvis Presley: Bing Crosby (1962); Frank Sinatra (1965); Duke Ellington (1966); Ella Fitzgerald (1967); and Irving Berlin (1968).

There are five Elvis Presley recordings in the Recording Academy’s Hall of Fame, established in 1973 to honor “recordings of lasting qualitative or historical significance” at least 25 years old: “Hound Dog” (1956, inducted 1988); “Heartbreak Hotel” (1956, inducted 1995); “That’s All Right” (1954, inducted 1998); “Suspicious Minds” (1969, inducted 1999); and “Don’t Be Cruel” (1956, inducted 2002).

⁹⁹ Ibid., 372.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 475.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 484.

The U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce (the Jaycees) recognized Elvis Presley as one of 1970's Ten Outstanding Young Men, an award presented annually to young men of achievement since 1940 (women became eligible to join the Junior Chamber in 1984, and in 1985 the program was retitled Ten Outstanding Young Americans). Presley attended the presentation ceremony in Memphis on January 16, 1971, and it was the only time he ever appeared in public to accept one of his many awards. On that special occasion, he also made a short speech that concluded with lines from a favorite song: "I'd like to say that I learned very early in life that: 'Without a song the day would never end/ Without a song a man ain't got no friend/ Without a song the road would never bend/ Without a song . . .' So I keep singing a song. Good night. Thank you."¹⁰²

Elvis Presley and the Business of Music

Elvis Presley's impact on the recording industry, a major American business, was profound. He brought fundamental change to the industry, revolutionizing the way record companies did business in the short range and in the long run.

The first shock for the industry occurred in 1955 when Presley was still a southern regional sensation. The year after he made his first record for the Sun Record Company in Memphis, and before he received any national media exposure, several major record labels were interested in buying his contract from Sun Records, a small, independent record company owned by Sam Phillips. Presley signed with RCA Victor in November 1955 for \$40,000, a figure that astounded the industry because it was the highest price ever paid for a popular recording artist up to that time. As a result, the entire industry was watching Elvis Presley and RCA to see if the huge investment would be justified. The common perception at that time was that rock 'n' roll was just a fad, and that RCA was going to be "stuck" with the contract. Instead, Elvis Presley was the musical artist who broke the recording industry wide open.

Presley's first recording sessions for RCA were in January 1956, and RCA released "Heartbreak Hotel" at the end of the month. By May, Elvis Presley records were 50 percent of RCA's total pop sales, even though RCA was already one of the biggest record companies in the United States. By the fall, Presley had sold more than 10 million singles, two thirds of RCA's singles business, and his first album, at No.1 for 10 weeks, became RCA's first million dollar pop album. Elvis sang "Love Me Tender" on the Ed Sullivan Show in September before the record was released. Advance orders for one million copies was "another first that left the industry gasping." According to an RCA executive at the time, the company "was turned upside down almost immediately, his records were so incredibly successful, and RCA was a well-oiled machine."¹⁰³

Before Elvis, American popular music was dominated for several decades by the song writers and music publishers of Tin Pan Alley in New York City. The music business primarily revolved around songs, not singers, and sales of sheet music drove the business. But Presley broke the hold that Tin Pan Alley had on the industry—it changed course, and the new focus was the singer, not the song.

Presley's success in the mid-1950s opened the door to the music business for a number of new

¹⁰² Ibid., 429.

¹⁰³ Clayton, *Elvis Up Close*, 88.

artists, black and white. Initially, the sale of Presley's contract to RCA gave Sam Phillips the money to promote other musical artists who first recorded for Sun Records, including Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Roy Orbison, all pivotal figures in the history of American rock 'n' roll. As Cash recalled years later, "Elvis was the beacon who brought us all there."

Presley's recording of "Hound Dog" and its flip side, "Don't Be Cruel," was No.1 on the Pop chart for 11 weeks, the biggest single of 1956. It is still the biggest charted single of the rock era (1954-1992), and the biggest two-sided single ever. It was the first record by a single artist to hit No.1 on all three major music charts: Pop, Country and Western, and Rhythm and Blues. Presley's recording of "Hound Dog," and "Blue Suede Shoes" by Carl Perkins, were the first real crossover records. These records got large numbers of white people to listen to black music, and black people to listen to the new white artists.

Before Presley's success, major record labels ignored working-class music; the so-called fringe markets were left to small, independent companies like Sun Records in Memphis, Specialty in New Orleans, and Chess Records in Chicago. But Elvis Presley made major record labels change course, and they began to seek out new artists and new markets. According to Richard Penniman of Macon, Georgia—"Little Richard"—the first African American musical artist to break through on the pop charts: "He was an integrator. Elvis was a blessing. They wouldn't let black music through. He opened the door for black music."

Elvis didn't just blaze a trail for new recording artists in the 1950s, but he also inspired future giants in the music business to pursue musical careers—superstars like Bob Dylan, The Beatles, and Bruce Springsteen. Bob Dylan has said that "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." John Lennon made a similar observation: "Nothing really affected me until I heard Elvis. If there hadn't been an Elvis, there wouldn't have been the Beatles."

ELVIS PRESLEY, LEADER OF AN AMERICAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Elvis Presley was the leader of the cultural revolution that transformed American society and values at mid-twentieth century. His unique talent and style propelled the reinvention of America in the 1950s and 1960s on the homefront and internationally, and assured the breakdown of traditional barriers of race, class, region, and gender that had defined and maintained the social order for generations. In 1971, when Presley was 36 years old, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences honored him with its Lifetime Achievement Award. In addition to recognizing Presley's artistic creativity, this exceptional award specifically cited the importance of his influence: "In recognition of his artistic creativity and his influence in the field of recorded music upon a generation of performers and listeners whose lives and musical horizons have been enriched and expanded by his unique contributions."

In the beginning, however, Elvis Presley's introduction to the nation in 1956 brought shock, outrage, and nationwide controversy. Newspaper articles most often characterized his performances as appalling, lewd, or nasty, and the following description was typical: "Presley is

mostly nightmare. On-stage his gyrations, his nose-wiping, his leers are vulgar.”¹⁰⁴ Frank Sinatra himself had this to say: “Rock ‘n’ roll smells phony and false. It is sung, played, and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiteration, and sly, lewd, in plain fact, dirty lyrics . . . it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth.”¹⁰⁵

It has taken almost 50 years from the time Elvis Presley first sang “Hound Dog” to national television audiences for a different understanding and appreciation for the man and his exceptional contributions to American culture to emerge. On the 25th anniversary of Elvis Presley’s death, *The New York Times* editorial page ran “Long Live the King.”

For those too young to have experienced Elvis Presley in his prime, today’s celebration of the 25th anniversary of his death must seem peculiar. All the talentless impersonators and appalling black velvet paintings on display can make him seem little more than a perverse and distant memory. But before Elvis was camp, he was its opposite: a genuine cultural force . . . Elvis’s breakthroughs are underappreciated because in this rock-and-roll age, his hard-rocking music and sultry style have triumphed so completely.

*There are, of course, those who won’t be marking today’s anniversary because they don’t believe Elvis is dead . . . But the best evidence that Elvis lives is that, in an era of disposable celebrities, his legend survives.*¹⁰⁶

When Elvis died in 1977, *Rolling Stone* magazine devoted an entire issue to Elvis Presley (RS 248). Dave Marsh’s contribution made clear just what Elvis meant to America:

But if any individual of our time can be said to have changed the world, Elvis Presley is the one. In his wake, more than music is different. Nothing and no one looks or sounds the same. His music was the most liberating event of our era because it taught us new possibilities of feeling and perception, new modes of action and appearance, and because it reminded us not only of his greatness but also of our own potential. If those things were not already so well integrated into our lives that they have become commonplace, it would be simpler to explain how astonishing a feat Elvis Presley’s advent really was.

*Of course it’s unquestionable that there would have been rock and roll music without Elvis Presley. But it’s just as unquestionable that the kind of rock and roll we have—a music of dreams and visions, not just facts and figures or even songs and singers—was shaped by him in its most fundamental features.*¹⁰⁷

Rock ‘n’ Roll as American Culture

Post World War II America was a land in transition, and the 1950s were a time when American values and social order experienced dramatic change. “An irresistible cultural upheaval . . . cut across lines of class and race . . . , and most crucially, divided society itself by age . . . [with] broad shifts in sexual behavior, economic aspirations, and political beliefs.”¹⁰⁸ American

¹⁰⁴ Look, August 7, 1956, facsimile in *Elvis, Commemorative Edition* (Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, Ltd., 2001), 53.

¹⁰⁵ Gertrude Samuels, “Why They Rock,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1958: SM-16.

¹⁰⁶ “Long Live the King,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2002.

¹⁰⁷ Dave Marsh, “How Great Thou Art, Elvis in the Promised Land,” *Rolling Stone* 248 (September 22, 1977): 58.

¹⁰⁸ Greil Marcus, “The Beatles,” in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History*, 181.

popular culture clearly reflected these changing times and brought forth a new music—rock ‘n’ roll—a certain harbinger of the sea change in America.¹⁰⁹ The new youth generation embraced the new music because it moved them and they loved it, but also because it symbolized freedom and defiance of the status quo. In the early 1950s, however, the new music was missing a critical element. “What rock ‘n’ roll lacked was a leader, a voice, a personification of the entire movement. Elvis Presley put his blue suede shoes squarely in the void.”¹¹⁰

It was his perfect symbolism as the triumphant voice of the unprivileged, a hillbilly cat with his own kind of grace who had outdone countless city slickers . . . Elvis didn't invent rock 'n' roll. That was a collective creation, one he shared with Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis and countless rhythm-and-blues singers and honky-tonkers who never escaped the club circuit. But it was Elvis who made the music larger than life. He set off rock 'n' roll's conquest of popular culture, supercharging his synthesis of blues and country, gospel and pop with star presence and a jolt of sexuality.¹¹¹

In the beginning, Elvis Presley had a unique, transcendental appeal that trumped the traditional boundaries that defined and confined America; “his popularity transcended divisions, not only between blacks and whites, but also between North and South, teens and adults, and urban and rural populations.”¹¹² It was his music, a unique fusion uniting all kinds of American roots (folk) music, that fostered such appeal and bridged the chasms separating American society. Careful analysis of Presley’s musical influences shows that he absorbed all kinds of American roots music to create something altogether new.

“That’s All Right,” [Mama] a song written and first recorded by Arthur Crudup, was Elvis Presley’s first recording.

Elvis reduces the bluesman's original to a footnote. He takes over the music, changing words and tightening verses to suit himself . . . Elvis sounds very young, sure of himself, ready to win; he turns Crudup's lament for a lost love into a satisfied declaration of independence, the personal statement of a boy claiming his manhood. His girl may have left him, but nothing she can do can dent the pleasure that radiated from his heart. It's the blues, but free of all worry, all sin; a simple joy with no price to pay.¹¹³

Elvis’s version of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” the flip side of “That’s All Right,” [Mama] was another innovative interpretation.

When Elvis sings Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" as if he's going to jump right over it, he isn't, as has always been said, singing the blues on a country song, any more than he was really singing hillbilly on a blues with "That's All Right." What Elvis is doing is both more complex and more coherent . . . Elvis was celebrating a classic piece of white country music, but more than that he was celebrating himself. He was keeping the old song alive by bringing something new to it,

¹⁰⁹ The role of music as an agent of social and political change was recognized as long ago as the time of Plato.

¹¹⁰ *New York Mirror*, September 1956, quoted in Mike Jahn, *Rock, From Elvis Presley to the Rolling Stones* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1973), 43.

¹¹¹ Jon Pareles, “25 Years Later, Elvis Rolls On,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2002.

¹¹² Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis*, 53.

¹¹³ Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 174.

*putting some life back into his community by telling an old story in a way that no one had heard before—and he was reaching beyond his community, with the “pop song” Sam Phillips knew he had to make.*¹¹⁴

Sun Records released only five Elvis Presley records while he was under contract to Sam Phillips. They were all singles/45s with a country song on one side and rhythm and blues on the other.

*As many commentators since the 1950s have noted, what was new about Elvis wasn't so much that he was a white boy singin' the blues, but that he refused to separate black music from white music in his recordings and performances. Not only did all of Elvis's Sun releases involve the “unusual pairing” of a country song on the flip side of a rhythm ‘n’ blues tune, but these records all involved a blurring of these generic boundaries within individual songs.*¹¹⁵

Elvis Presley was influenced by all kinds of American music: gospel, blues, rhythm and blues, country, and pop, at a minimum. He clearly embraced African American music and culture and did so at a pivotal point of cultural change in American history. Similarities between Presley and rhythm and blues singers of the early 1950s have often been noted, but Presley's true roots in black culture go much deeper. Gospel music was his primary musical influence. In the early years of the twentieth century, the evangelical Pentecostal movement with its “vibrant worship style” became extremely popular with working-class Christians, black and white. The Presley family belonged to the Assembly of God, a Pentecostal Holiness church.

*The Holiness-Pentecostal connection to southern gospel is particularly important because it is precisely that wing of the white Protestant world that has generally been overlooked and misunderstood by music historians. Convinced that white Protestants displayed little emotion in their services, writers have stereotyped black gospel as expressive while stereotyping white gospel as staid. The fact is that both white and black Christians affiliated with the Holiness-Pentecostal wing of Protestantism found much to shout about in their worship services and those emotions logically spilled over into their singing. The roots of gospel music are found in the rural churches that routinely failed to conform to the more sophisticated style of their urban counterparts.”*¹¹⁶

*In the 1890s . . . white and black Pentecostal congregations sprang up all over America, especially wherever the people were poor and depressed. Because the Holiness people jumped, shouted, danced, and fell out for Jesus, because, in a word, they acted “crazy,” they became a national laughingstock, the Holy Rollers of fable and cliché . . . At least twenty million Americans have had long and deep exposure to Holiness. There are easily as many white Sanctified as black, and their behavior may be even more frenzied.*¹¹⁷

James Blackwood of the Blackwood Brothers (the most popular white gospel quartet during their heyday in the early 1950s) remembers that “the Pentecostals were the first denomination to use our type of Gospel music. They were more given to singing songs with a beat. They weren't

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 195-196.

¹¹⁵ Gilbert Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (London: Routledge, 1996), 52.

¹¹⁶ James R. Goff, Jr., *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 6.

¹¹⁷ Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound, Good News and Bad Times* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985) 174-175.

afraid to clap their hands and pat their feet.”¹¹⁸

The Assembly of God and its emotional music were very important to the Presleys while they lived in Tupelo, Mississippi, until Elvis was 13. In addition, the family loved to listen to music on the radio. Local station WELO often featured Sister Rosetta Tharpe, one of the “greatest Sanctified singers,”¹¹⁹ on its weekday black gospel show. Elvis rushed home from school every day to hear Sister Rosetta, an exceptional singer, guitar player, and flamboyant entertainer who took black gospel music out of the church to clubs and theaters in the United States, and eventually to Europe. During Presley’s first live performance after a long hiatus, *The ‘68 Comeback Special*, he sang one of Sister Rosetta’s biggest songs, “Up Above My Head.”

The Presleys’ relocation to Memphis in 1948 expanded Elvis’s musical horizons. He spent hours in local record shops listening to new releases and older records, primarily blues and rhythm and blues. After he was old enough to drive, Presley began to attend Sunday services at the East Trigg Baptist Church, a black congregation in south Memphis. Its minister, the Reverend W. Herbert Brewster, was one of the country’s greatest black gospel songwriters. “East Trigg was not just another black gospel church. Its leading soloist, Queen C. Anderson, is by legend the greatest gospel singer the South has produced. And its preacher, Reverend W. Herbert Brewster, is a magnificent songwriter, at the very least a Milton to Thomas A. Dorsey’s Shakespeare.”¹²⁰

After he became famous, Presley often cited his debt to African American music, pointing to artists such as B. B. King, Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup, Jackie Wilson, Ivory Joe Hunter, and Fats Domino. The reporter who conducted Presley’s first interview in New York City in 1956 noted that he named blues singers who “obviously meant a lot to him. I was very surprised to hear him talk about the black performers down there and about how he tried to carry on their music.”¹²¹ Later that year in Charlotte, North Carolina, Presley was quoted more specifically:

*The colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I’m doin’ now, man, for more years than I know. They played it like that in their shanties and in their juke joints and nobody paid it no mind ‘til I goosed it up. I got it from them. Down in Tupelo, Mississippi, I used to hear old Arthur Crudup bang his box the way I do now and I said if I ever got to a place I could feel all old Arthur felt, I’d be a music man like nobody ever saw.*¹²²

Elvis Presley never liked his title, “the king of rock and roll.” At a 1969 press conference after his first opening in Las Vegas, when a reporter referred to him as the king, Presley pointed to Fats Domino, standing at the back of the room. “No,” he said, “that’s the real king of rock and roll.”¹²³

¹¹⁸ Goff, *Close Harmony*, 162.

¹¹⁹ Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 187.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹²¹ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 248.

¹²² Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 103.

¹²³ Guralnick, *Careless Love*, 53; Peter Guralnick, letter to author, April 20, 2005.

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Presley has been accused of “stealing” black rhythm and blues, but such accusations indicate little knowledge of his many musical influences. “However much Elvis may have ‘borrowed’ from black blues performers (e.g., ‘Big Boy’ Crudup, ‘Big Mama’ Thornton), he borrowed no less from white country stars (e.g., Ernest Tubb, Bill Monroe) and white pop singers (e.g., Mario Lanza, Dean Martin),”¹²⁴ and most of his borrowings came from the church; its gospel music was his primary musical influence and foundation, especially the close harmony of the gospel quartet. Accusations of stealing also reflect a basic misunderstanding of the art of making music, because collaboration and sharing are essential components, borrowing and appropriation are expected, and theft is simply not an option. According to Miles Davis, ground-breaking jazz musician, composer, and band leader, the creation of music happens like this: “He influenced me and I influenced him [Jimi Hendrix], and that’s the way great music is always made. Everybody’s showing somebody else something and then moving on from there.”¹²⁵

*There was nothing shameful about appropriating the work of black people, anyway. If Elvis had simply stolen rhythm & blues from Negro culture, as pop music ignoramuses have for years maintained, there would have been no reason for Southern outrage over his new music . . . But Elvis did something more daring and dangerous: . . . The crime of Elvis’ rock & roll was that he proved that black and white tendencies could coexist and that the product of their coexistence was not just palatable but thrilling.*¹²⁶

Elvis Presley’s music was not the only way he failed to acknowledge or respect traditional boundaries of American society. He mixed things up across the board because he could not or would not recognize long-standing barriers that confined Americans in the 1950s. From his place at the bottom of the lower class, and in the face of desperate poverty, he dreamed of and reached for a better life for himself and his family. “The first thing Elvis had to learn to transcend, after all, was the failure and obscurity he was born to; he had to find some way to set himself apart, to escape the limits that could well have given his story a very different ending.”¹²⁷ In spite of his roots in rural Mississippi and being raised in the Deep South with Jim Crow during and after the Great Depression, Presley harbored no racial prejudice towards African Americans. He also had a different take on traditional gender roles. A polite, sensitive, and well-mannered man, Presley did not regard such qualities as threats to his masculinity, and in the early days of his career, he wore frilly shirts, pink clothes, and styled his hair. Another exceptional attribute was that Elvis was not afraid to show his emotions, expressing himself through his music especially. His emotional song interpretations and uninhibited way of dancing made him a global male sex symbol of a higher order of magnitude than ever seen before or since.

Elvis Presley heard the beat of a different drummer. He was an American original who first set America on its ear but came eventually to be recognized as the leader of a new kind of band. He did not set out to challenge the status quo or rebel against authority, and seemed genuinely bewildered by the controversy he fueled initially across the nation. But simply by being himself,

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Jimi Hendrix, “Electric Ladyland,” liner notes by Derek Taylor, n.p.

¹²⁶ March, *Elvis*, 38, 47.

¹²⁷ Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 150.

he illustrated a new kind of man for America, a man who “turns revolt into a style.”¹²⁸

Presley debuted on national television in 1956 with six appearances on *Stage Show*, starring Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey.

Consider American popular culture in the moments just after 8:00 P.M. on January 28, 1956, as represented (quite accurately) by “The Dorsey Brothers Stage Show.” The theme music is a large, bland wad of strings and brass without discernible rhythmic accent. The male entertainers are decked out in tuxedos; suits and ties constitute casual wear except in the odd comedy skit. The only women are skimpily clad dancers. Everyone is white; no one speaks with an accent (except, perhaps, in an ethnic comedy sketch). The atmosphere is polished, sophisticated, slick, easy—nothing is difficult or challenging because there’s nothing at stake. Everyone has a role to play, entertainer and audience, assigned at birth and kept for life.

Enter Elvis, the living antithesis of this culture. Not unkempt but unruly, fresh, arrogant, surly, raw and powerful, his lip curling, hips shaking, knees swiveling. The music is streamlined and defined, his small band louder than the Dorseys’ huge orchestra. Elvis snaps into “Heartbreak Hotel.” He owns the song and the crowd immediately; the audience is stunned . . . In the process of watching him, lives are changed.¹²⁹

Presley’s appearances on *Stage Show* went largely unnoticed, but by summertime America was watching. His second appearance on *The Milton Berle Show* in June was a pivotal, momentous performance—for Elvis and for America. It “pushed him over the top to national stardom and notoriety.”¹³⁰

Berle begins to introduce Elvis, but the young man from Memphis isn’t content to wait for the formalities to end before claiming center stage for himself. Berle is still reading his cue cards when Scotty Moore chimes in from offscreen with a short burst of sound from his guitar and the band leaps into the song at full speed . . . Wearing dark, baggy pants, an oversized, light-colored jacket . . . , and a two-tone, wide-collared, open-necked shirt, Elvis is in constant motion, as if his very existence depends on his refusal to stand still. No matter what claims Elvis may make about his musical influences, the performance he gives tonight is totally incommensurable with the examples of staid calmness provided by Eddie Fisher, Perry Como, or the other pop crooners (Dean Martin, Mario Lanza, etc.) that he speaks of with so much respect and reverence. Those singers dress conservatively, stand stiffly before their microphones, and are seemingly unable (or perhaps merely unwilling) to move any part of their bodies that doesn’t directly contribute to the production of the musical sounds from their vocal cords. At their most energetic, they might snap their fingers or sway back and forth ever so slightly in time to the music, but never to such an extent that the words “dignified,” “respectable,” and “reserved” could not be safely used to describe their performances.

Elvis, on the other hand, shakes and shimmies more in the first verse of “Hound Dog” alone than an entire army of Como-esque crooners could manage over the course of a year-long concert tour.¹³¹

This was the first time that Presley ever performed “Hound Dog” on national television. It was also the first time he performed without his guitar, which previously had limited his dancing as

¹²⁸ Marcus, “The Beatles,” 181.

¹²⁹ Marsh, *Elvis*, 94-95.

¹³⁰ Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis*, 153.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

well as hidden his body to some degree. After this performance, controversy erupted across the nation with Elvis condemned throughout the land.

This is [not] the first public outcry against the alleged decadence and depravity of rock 'n' roll: dozens of newspaper columnists have previously responded to Elvis's concert appearances in their own localities with similarly vitriolic prose, while rock 'n' roll has been the target of numerous regional campaigns to restore moral decency to neighborhood juke boxes and dance halls. Nevertheless, it is only after Elvis forces his way into living rooms nationwide via The Milton Berle Show that these relatively isolated complaints are stitched together into a full-fledged, nationwide moral panic over the damage that Elvis and rock 'n' roll will supposedly do to the very fabric of U.S. society.

If this isn't the precise moment when Elvis and rock 'n' roll first stake their claim to something more than just the margins of the cultural terrain, then it's at least the moment when they are first recognized as a threat to mainstream U.S. culture that is too significant simply to be brushed aside or ignored.¹³²

Steve Allen considered cancelling Presley's next television appearance scheduled for July 1 on *The Steve Allen Show*, but opted for another (condescending) way to diffuse the controversy (and the performer). Allen dressed Presley in a tuxedo, surrounded him on a stage decorated with classical columns, and made him sing "Hound Dog" to a basset hound perched on a classical pedestal—lowbrow culture set amidst the sophisticated trappings of high culture. High ratings for this *The Steve Allen Show* forced Ed Sullivan to hire Presley for the season premiere of *The Ed Sullivan Show* in September, a show that attracted the largest viewing audience ever—54 million people, 82.6 per cent of the viewing audience—an all-time high not surpassed until 1964 when *The Ed Sullivan Show* presented the first American television performance by the Beatles.

Elvis's early appearances on national television, once America tuned in, are now considered by scholars to be "ground-breaking, culture-shattering events."¹³³ His performance of "Hound Dog" on *The Milton Berle Show* in particular was a "cultural epiphany (the point in time when an entire culture undergoes a major transformation of some sort) that he triggered in the U.S. in the 1950s."¹³⁴

From this moment forward, while Elvis's personal future as an entertainer may still have been filled with its fair share of uncertainty, he had nevertheless altered the shape of US culture in a profound and lasting fashion . . .

What matters about these performances is not so much that they popularized a new sound (i.e., rock 'n' roll), but that they introduced audiences to a new attitude and a new style, one that carried with it a new way for Elvis's audiences to view their world and their place in it. Elvis may not have successfully precipitated a full-scale revolution - in his wake, governments did not topple, capitalism did not falter (much less fall), social injustice did not disappear from the face of the Earth, etc. - but . . . in the beginning, Elvis successfully convinced a generation that they didn't have to dream the same dreams - which is to say they didn't have to live the same lives - that their parents had settled for . . . the actual process of millions of people trying to follow that dream and make it a reality was enough to transform U.S. culture in untold ways.¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., 152.

¹³³ Ibid., 153.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 154.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 155, 164.

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If Elvis Presley is the rightful King of Rock ‘n’ Roll, then American rock ‘n’ roll culture is his true domain. The musical kingdom of rock ‘n’ roll has a stellar line of claimants to the crown, and it has been contested widely since the 1950s. But these are really two separate kingdoms.

Elvis is the figure most responsible for transforming rock ‘n’ roll from a mere musical genre into a full-fledged cultural formation . . . without Elvis the cultural formation around rock ‘n’ roll would have taken a radically different shape, and thus followed a much different historical trajectory, than it actually did - if it ever took shape at all.

There would unquestionably have been rock ‘n’ roll music without Elvis . . . if for no other reason than that a great deal of rock ‘n’ roll music had already been made prior to Elvis’s arrival on the scene. It’s not at all clear, however, that this musical genre would have given rise to a cultural formation (or at least not one of any prominence or lasting significance) had Elvis followed some path other than the one that led him to rock ‘n’ roll . . . no other musician had anything close to the combination of charisma, ambition, determination, talent, and instinctive media savvy that Elvis had; while other artists may have made greater music, no one else could have accomplished what Elvis did in terms of bringing together a vast range of musical genres, attitudes, styles of dress, behaviors, and other social practices in such a way that a coherent cultural formation could come into existence. Elvis changed the ways that people viewed the world in which they lived and, in doing so, he brought about significant changes in the ways that those people could - and did - live their lives. It was as if the old map of the cultural terrain had been torn up, the pieces burned, the ashes scattered to the four winds, and the whole thing replaced with a radically different diagram of that same territory - so different that it’s easy to believe that this new map described an entirely new territory altogether.¹³⁶

Elvis Presley was a cornerstone for a brand new version of American culture, and even a star from a very different cultural world, Leonard Bernstein, has acknowledged his critical role. In the late 1960s, Bernstein—celebrated and prestigious composer and conductor of classical music—stated: “Elvis Presley . . . is the greatest cultural force in the twentieth century . . . It’s Elvis . . . He introduced the beat to everything, and he changed everything— music, language, clothes, it’s a whole new social revolution—the Sixties comes from it. Because of him a man like me barely knows his musical grammar anymore.”¹³⁷ As recently as 2003, a panel of top music journalists and experts ranked “That’s All Right,” [Mama] Presley’s first recording, at the top of a list of “100 Songs that Changed the World”—“100 ground-breaking world-altering songs that changed music and the world forever.” “That’s All Right” [Mama] topped many more well-known songs, including “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” the song that launched the Beatles in the United States, and “Like a Rolling Stone” by Bob Dylan. But perhaps most telling of all, rock ‘n’ roll music became the dominant popular music in America in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and that music, as well as the “cultural formation associated with it . . . [once] perceived as a major threat to mainstream US culture, . . . are [now] frequently assumed to be the very essence of that culture.”¹³⁸ And as twenty-first century Americans are well aware, Elvis Presley really is everywhere.

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Elvis Presley’s beloved home for more than 20 years has been so directly associated with him

¹³⁶ Ibid., 160-161.

¹³⁷ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993), 456-457.

¹³⁸ Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis*, 167.

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since its purchase in 1957 that Elvis and Graceland are interchangeable. “Graceland is an icon so widely recognized, so famous for being famous, as to have become effectively invisible: though signs about Graceland are familiar sights on the U.S. cultural terrain, what we typically see in such signs is not Graceland, but Elvis.”¹³⁹ In addition, the site’s extraordinarily high degree of integrity from its period of historic significance further reinforces this relationship. Such a strong association between a man and his home is unique and unprecedented in the twentieth century.

The house has had a significant—and largely unacknowledged—impact on the shape of Elvis’s stardom ever since he purchased it in March 1957. Graceland gave Elvis something no other US celebrity of the twentieth century had; a permanent place to call ‘home’ that was as well known as its celebrity resident . . .

Perhaps the single most important effect that Graceland had on Elvis’s public image is that it gave his stardom a stable, highly visible, physical anchor in the real world . . .

Even for the biggest and most visible of stars, the public links that exist between them and specific “real world” sites tend to be tenuous and fleeting . . . The existence of maps identifying the “Homes of the Stars” in southern California . . . demonstrates the absence of publicly recognized links between most stars and particular physical spaces . . .

The only real exception to this rule is Graceland, which has been linked in the public eye with Elvis and his stardom from the day he bought it in 1957 until the day he died there twenty years later . . . and beyond. From almost the first moment of his stardom, Elvis was associated with a very specific site on the map (i.e., not just a region or a city, but an actual street address) in a way that no other star ever was - or has been since - with the longstanding connection between these icons working to transform the private, domestic space of Elvis’s home into a publicly visible site of pilgrimage and congregation.¹⁴⁰

Graceland, Presley’s primary residence for 20 years of his 23-year career, is clearly the site most directly associated with his productive life and important achievements. Although he later purchased several other residential properties, they did not become well known, and his career as a professional entertainer encompassed a variety of workplaces; it was never confined to any office or studio. In fact, Graceland was featured on the cover of a 1974 album (“Elvis, Recorded Live On Stage in Memphis”), and he recorded one of his last albums at Graceland in 1976 (“From Elvis Presley Boulevard, Memphis, Tennessee”).

Graceland drew large crowds while Elvis was still in residence, but since his death, it has literally become a pilgrimage site. Presley, his parents, and paternal grandmother are all buried here in the Meditation Garden on the south side of the house, and anniversaries of his birth (January 8) and death (August 16) are commemorated every year. Graceland is an extraordinary place where Presley’s global community of fans can come together, connecting with Elvis and each other in their own way, and the site itself has played a critical role in fostering and maintaining the living legend of Elvis Presley.¹⁴¹

In addition to millions of Americans, Elvis fans from around the world have visited Graceland in astonishing numbers since the site opened to the public in 1982. (There are more than 625 fan clubs worldwide). Before that time, tourism in Memphis was minimal. Graceland’s contribution

¹³⁹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 99, 102.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

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to the local economy is now estimated at \$300 to \$400 million annually. It is one of the most visited historic house museums in the United States, and its visitation statistics put Graceland in the same league as Hearst Castle (California), Biltmore Estate (North Carolina), Monticello and Mount Vernon (Virginia).

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency

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- Federal Agency: National Park Service, Southeast Regional Office, Atlanta, Georgia
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository): Graceland Archives

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 13.588 acres

UTM References: **Zone Easting Northing**

A	16	771380	3882040
B	16	771730	3882100
C	16	771760	3881860
D	16	771400	3881900

Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundaries of Graceland are shown on the accompanying Shelby County property map as plat 38, lot 50.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries of Graceland encompass the land and resources historically associated with this property.

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DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
March 27, 2006