

History

Elvis Presley: A Revolutionist

Marcie Wallace

Elvis Presley is the single most significant figure in rock and roll history. Elvis completely revolutionized music and his influence changed the entertainment industry forever. In the 1950's, the South was heavily racially segregated, but Presley's music broke past these racial barriers. He allowed African American music to be accessible to white American youth who had never really been exposed to it. Elvis challenged the social and moral values as his music and provocative dance moves created an entirely new generation.

By 1955, Elvis Presley had gone from a local to a national sensation. People quickly fell in love with his amazing voice and pelvic thrusting hips. Critics both loved and hated him, while girls swooned over him. As Elvis became more popular, the older generation began to resent him and controversy quickly surrounded him. The fact that Elvis shook his hips, thrust his pelvis, and danced passionately on stage, turned parents against his music. Presley posed a threat to the values that white American society strongly believed in. Elvis "set in motion a style of music that dominated the world for the rest of the century. It was the beginning of youth culture, the breakdown of sexual inhibition, and the end of racial segregation."

Elvis truly paved the path and opened the door for white Americans to listen to African American music. His popularity increased the opportunities for African Americans both inside and out of the industry which had a positive effect on racial relations, particularly in the South. Little Richard, who was a popular African American artist of the time, spoke very highly of Presley: "He was an integrator. Elvis was a blessing. They wouldn't let black music through, but he opened the door." Presley not only played a significant role in the integration of whites and African Americans but allowed people to have the freedom to express themselves physically and sexually. He challenged the social and moral values of the time and ended up creating a generation that was able to have the freedom of expression. Elvis Presley forever changed music and left a lasting legacy which positively influenced American society.

Elvis grew up as a poor, white, country boy who drove trucks for a living and seemed to have "sprung on the world without a history." One author describes Elvis' emergence in the mid-fifties as "so sudden, his music so fresh, his personality so evocative that he could not be labeled. People went crazy. There has never been a mania quite like it." Although there is no exact date or time that history tells us is the birth of rock n' roll, July 5, 1954 in the studio of Sun Records changed music

forever. Rock n' roll had been "brewing for years, but its defining moment was Elvis."

Elvis was born in Tupelo, Mississippi and began singing with his parents at the local First Assembly of God Church. In the summer of 1953, Elvis visited the Memphis Recording Studio, owned by Sun Records, and paid four dollars to record a few songs as a birthday present for his mother. A year later, the owner Sam Philips called Elvis back to the studio for a recording session. Elvis played a few songs but it was not until he broke out into "That's All Right Mama," a 1946 number by Mississippi bluesman Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, that music would never be the same. Elvis' combination of singing with a mixture of country, rhythm and blues, and black gospel was original and completely hypnotic.

Presley's version of "That's All Right Mama" soon became a local hit in Memphis. Not much later, Elvis landed a contract with RCA records and recorded his first single for RCA, "Heartbreak Hotel" which rose to number one on the charts. His unique vocal style, swinging hips, and incredibly good looks drove him to become a national sensation in no time. Bobbie Ann Mason describes how Elvis became an overnight phenomenon:

People didn't know what Elvis' music was. They didn't know if it was rhythm and blues, country, or what but whatever it was, listeners clamored for it. In an era when daytime radio was dominated by tepid crooning, quirky novelty, and chirpy innocence, here was a record- by a white boy- that had a flavor of juke-joint music. It had the thumping abandon, the driving energy, of the life force itself- a thrusting and writhing and wallowing and celebration.

Elvis' music "merged disparate strands of blues, country, and gospel into a fiercely dynamic sound that ignited a musical and cultural explosion whose reverberations are still being felt today." Elvis Presley started at Sun Records in 1954, went to RCA in 1955, and reached complete fame by 1956. Soon enough Elvis was literally everywhere; on the record charts, television, movie theaters, and live on stage. What seems to be every parent's worst nightmare was beginning to come true.

Producers of films and network television programs quickly recognized the charismatic appeal of Elvis, especially for younger audiences. As a result of his music career taking off, Elvis began to appear on television. His television career began during his appearances on CBS's Stage Show. Another of his first television appearances was The Milton Berle Show on June 5, 1956 which triggered the first controversy of his career. Presley sang his latest hit "Hound Dog" and danced with intense pelvis shaking moves as the American public watched in awe in their living rooms on their small television screen. Elvis used a stand up microphone as a prop as he bent the microphone towards him and danced with it passionately.

This controversial movement broadcasted on television brought sexuality in the open. People were disgusted with what they saw, as the sexual symbolism was uncanny. Fans adored him while critics across the country slammed his performance, for they believed it to be vulgar and provocative. American society was

terrified and fearful of the possibility that moral values could be changing, yet Elvis Presley was on his way to doing exactly that. Within a year of his appearance on the show, Elvis was the top selling performer of all time.

After the Milton Berle Show, Elvis was scheduled to appear on Steve Allen's new Sunday night variety program. Since Presley's performance on the Berle Show caused raging controversy, NBC decided to not cancel the show since Allen assured viewers that he would not allow Presley "to do anything that will offend anyone." Steve Allen presented Elvis by saying: "We want to do a show the whole family can watch and enjoy so tonight we are presenting Elvis Presley in what you might call his first comeback, here he is." Elvis came out dressed in a formal tux and a top hat and sang "Hound Dog" to a basset hound. NBC's attempt to civilize Elvis completely backfired as fans greeted Elvis the next day with signs that read "We Want the Real Elvis" and "We Want the Gyrating Elvis."

Soon after Ed Sullivan, who had one of television's most popular variety shows during that time, declared that he would never hire Elvis Presley. But after Elvis' performance on The Tonight Show, Sullivan decided to give Elvis a second chance. Ed Sullivan offered Presley a three-show contract and during the first two appearances, the camera only pulled far back enough to show Elvis' body for a short amount of time. At each movement of his body, however slight, the audience "erupted in paroxysms of emotion." But for the final show, camera operators were told to only shoot Presley from the waist up, even during his performance of the gospel song "There Will Be Peace in the Valley." The network decided to only have the cameras shoot Elvis from the waist up in hopes to not offend older viewers. At the end of the show, Sullivan assured the audience that Presley was a fine, decent boy.

Elvis' appearance on Ed Sullivan gave the show the second highest rating in its history and "whatever it is Elvis Presley has, he's definitely got it." An estimated audience of 54 million watched Elvis that night. This incident confirmed how Ed Sullivan and the majority of the general public were hesitant of Elvis Presley and the influence he was having upon their youth. Sullivan legitimized the singer with an adult audience yet did not diminish his standing with teenagers. Keeping Elvis' pelvis out of sight for a few songs was evidence of the dominance of sexual censors of the time. Yet no matter how hard society would try, Presley's influence upon sexuality was occurring. One author even goes so far to say that "his appearance on Ed Sullivan ripped the 1950's in half and American would never be the same." The rock n' roll era had officially begun.

Elvis' television appearances drew in popularity from across the country and as a result, Elvis began his career in Hollywood. Presley became heavily involved in the movie making business, signing two multi-picture Hollywood contracts in 1956. Elvis starred in 31 theatrical films during his career and although his presence on the big screen was very impactful, television was where his career really took off. Watching Presley on television was much more than a regular program, it was a

cultural experience.

Television was a huge event in a household as the whole family gathered together in the living room to watch. Presley's television appearances allowed millions of people of all ages to watch him for free. This caused many people to have an anti-Elvis attitude, while at the same time the American youth fell in love with Presley. The anti-Elvis reaction was a "major impetus to his popularity. Kids figured if he was despised that much by adults, he must be worth listening to." American teens knew that their parents hated Presley, which fueled their rebellious desires to listen to him even more.

White American youth had never seen anything like Elvis Presley before. In the early 1950's, the music charts were dominated by singers that appealed to an older audience. Elvis' style of music and dancing was totally different from the calm tones of popular artists such as Frank Sinatra and Tommy Dorsey. Presley's music spoke to teenagers and provided a way for them to let loose, go crazy, and express themselves. Elvis became an unstoppable force to be reckoned with as teenagers began to copy his clothes, his hair, the way he sang, danced, and so on. His "lowered lids, the curling lip, the musky voice, the sensuous gyrations drove the girls crazy and inspired scores of imitators." Presley introduced and created a whole new social revolution which included new music, language, clothes, and more.

The last thing Presley expected was to rise to fame so quickly. The response his audiences gave him as girls screamed his name, chased after him, and attempted to rip his clothes off was overwhelming. Robert Jennings, a columnist for the Saturday Evening Post, described Elvis' stage performance: "Spasms ran through both his legs, and soon the entire midsection of his body was jolting as if he'd swallowed a jack hammer." It was quite an adjustment for Presley to get used to all of the media and attention, but soon enough he learned how to harness his new found notoriety.

Since the early days when Elvis first starting performing onstage, women went in a complete craze while teenage boys were infatuated with jealousy over the impact Elvis had on women. Presley was considered to be a threat to the moral well-being of American youth, especially young women. Many factors led people to dislike Elvis because of his different look since did not wear the clothes and hairstyle that other people his age did. Presley became a symbol of teenage rebellion and was condemned because of it.

Not only was Elvis highly influential among females, but males as well. Young males began to imitate Elvis by slicking their hair back and growing sideburns. Soon all the teenage boys began to get Presley's infamous ducktail haircut, black slacks, and open-necked shirts. Girls wanted to be with him, and guys wanted to be just like him. Elvis captivated the youth of America, but was looked down upon by parents and the older population because he was too sexually provocative as his dancing was "poisoning the youth." American society could never have predicted the profound effect Elvis would have.

Onstage Elvis became a different person, a man of confidence with earth shattering dance moves as he began to “toy with his screaming fans like a lover.” Presley began to accept his new found fame and capitalized on it incredibly. Elvis was even given the nickname the “great seducer” as his effect on women became inevitable. Presley’s rise to popularity was partly due to the fact he began his career during a pivotal time in history. When asked why he became the phenomenon he did, Elvis replied humbly: “People were looking for something different and I came along just in time. I was lucky.”

When Elvis went from a local to a regional phenomenon, controversy was never far from him. Since Presley wiggled his hips, thrust his pelvis, and made seductive gestures onstage, people either fell in love with him, or despised him. The controversy that Elvis stirred up first started as a local matter, but soon became a heated topic which was widely discussed all over the country. A letter sent to J. Edgar Hoover went so far as to claim that “Presley was seen as a definite danger to the security of the United States.” The controversy around Elvis attracted a sense of curiosity from the public which ultimately propelled Elvis to even more stardom.

By the spring of 1956, Presley had gained huge popularity and teenagers flocked to his concerts and created riots all across the country. One of the first riots to take place was on May 13, 1955 when Elvis played a concert at a baseball park in Jacksonville, Florida. At the very end of the show, Elvis said, “I’ll see you all backstage girls” and the girls responded immediately. Teenage girls rushed to the dressing room as many of them attempted to climb through an open window. They ripped off Elvis’ clothes and even began to write their numbers with love messages all over his Lincoln Continental.

An article published in 1956 in *The Crusader* describes the public reactions to Elvis: “His suggestive style of wiggling while on the band stand won him fame with teenagers but is still meeting wide opposition in many areas outside of the south. Some 50,000 citizens greeted Elvis even though they are not supposed to like his ‘Rock n’ Roll’ style of music.” Elvis was having an incredibly powerful influence on American youth which soon began to create a widespread concern among parents and the older generation of the time.

With Elvis’ new found fame quickly came intense controversy. Tim Riley argued: “It is hard to say which scandalized middle-class white parents more- Presley’s black vocal mannerisms, his vigorous shaking off of the personal restraints of his parent’ generation, or his sexual expressiveness.” Criticism from parents, educators, politicians, columnists, and religious leaders surrounded Presley constantly. Critics responded to Elvis with bitter repugnance and distaste. After the infamous Milton Berle Show, Jack Gould responded in *The New York Times* by saying Elvis’ talent should be used in a different career:

Elvis is a rock-and-roll variation on one of the most standard acts in show business: the virtuoso of the hootchy-kootchy. His one specialty is an accented movement of the body that heretofore has been primarily identified with the rep-

ertoire of the blonde bombshells of the burlesque runway. The gyration never had anything to do with the world of popular music and still doesn't.

Critics of the time continuously attempted to put Elvis down in hopes that his career would end as quickly as it began. A critic for the New York Daily News believed that popular music "has reached its lowest depths in the 'grunt and groin' antics of one Elvis Presley." Even Frank Sinatra said "his kind of music is deplorable, a rancid smelling aphrodisiac. It fosters almost totally negative and destructive reactions in young people." Critic's condemnation of Elvis ultimately backfired as their criticism began to make Elvis even more popular. People incessantly bashed Elvis meanwhile, an increasing number of young supporters listened to Presley's music more and more frequently.

Throughout Elvis' career, attempts to restrict him were always occurring. Because of his controversial style of song and stage performances, authorities started to deny permits to prevent him from performing. Adult programmers announced that they would not play Elvis' music on their radio stations. In some communities, Presley was subject to restraining orders as police officers would watch an afternoon performance to decide whether or not they would allow an evening show. Often times Elvis had to reach compromises with the people who booked him, such as no wiggling or shaking onstage.

In August 1956, a local juvenile court judge threatened to arrest Elvis if he shook his body while performing at Jacksonville's Florida Theatre. The judge believed that his music was "undermining the youth of America." Presley followed the judge's orders and did not dance on stage, but responded in protest by wiggling one finger instead. Situations like this continued on for years, but no matter how hard critics bashed or parents refused, Elvis just could not be stopped. Presley responded to the controversies and stated: "Rhythm is something you either have or don't have, but when you have it, you have it all over."

As Elvis rose to fame, churches and religious leaders responded most harshly to his music. While teenagers adored watching Elvis on television, religious leaders did not have the same reaction. Religious people were not very fond of the fact that young teenage girls were swooning over Presley. Pastors observed the effects Presley was having on young girls as they screamed and shouted Elvis' name. One pastor who attended an Elvis concert described the scene as "screaming, falling to their knees as if in prayer, flopping limply over seats, stretching rigidly, wriggling in a supreme effort of ecstasy." As Elvis expressed himself by gyrating his hips in a suggestive and sexual manner on stage, religious leaders became worried. His music became referred to as "devil music" and preachers began to warn their congregations to not listen to rock n' roll music. Elvis was "the most visible figurehead of the new youth culture, he was an inviting target for those eager to blame him and his music for a litany of social ills, from juvenile delinquency to teen promiscuity."

A Roman Catholic Church even went so far as to denounce Elvis in their weekly magazine where they published an article titled "Beware Elvis Presley." Je-

suit priest editors described their disgust for Elvis and his music and told the public that his actions were obscene and vulgar. The sons of St. Ignatius responded to Elvis by saying "if the agencies would stop handling such nauseating stuff, all the Presleys of our land would soon be swallowed up in the oblivion they deserve." Many preachers felt compelled to preach the danger of Elvis and the impact he was having upon society. Despite their efforts, Presley's music continued to significantly influence American culture.

While there was a considerable amount of controversy, not all people condemned Elvis. In an issue of the *Toronto Star*, Reverend James H. Elder of Mullins' Methodist Church in Memphis publicly gave his support for Presley:

Some of the mossbacks of our city, who haven't had a youthful thought since the Civil War, say that rock and roll music is the theme song of juvenile delinquency and that Elvis Presley is making 'dead end kids' out of the whole generation. Nothing could be more idiotic. It is supposed to be perfectly all right for every bald-headed man in American to drool as Marilyn Monroe goes slithering across the pages of our time on the arm of husband number three. But the very moment that youth dance and Elvis shakes his left leg a bit, it's supposed to be juvenile delinquency of the worst sort."

Parents and religious leaders frowned upon the impact Presley was having upon their youth, yet teenagers did not see anything wrong with it. Elvis responded to all of the religious criticism in the *Charlotte Observer* in 1956: "When I sang hymns back home with Mom and Pop I stood still and look like you feel when you sing a hymn. But when I sing this rock and roll, my eyes won't stay open and my legs won't stand still. I don't care what they say, it ain't nasty." In Elvis' eyes, he was not rebelling against God or negatively influencing society. He danced and sang whatever he felt and the reactions that occurred were because white American youth felt like they could identify themselves with Elvis.

Some very extreme measures were taken to prevent the American youth from being influenced by Presley. A reverend at a Catholic school in Ottawa implemented a plan to keep her students away from Elvis. The week before Elvis' show, she asked students to write out a pledge which said: I promise that I shall not take part in the reception accorded Elvis Presley and I shall not be present at the program presented by him at the Auditorium on Wednesday, April 3, 1957.

Some of the girls who had signed the pledge later admitted they had attended the Presley show and were suspended for the remainder of the school year. Other attempts to restrict Elvis included an *Associated Press* article which Reverend Carl Elgena told his Iowa congregation that "Elvis Presley is morally insane and by his actions he's leading other young people to the same end." He warned over 800 members of his church that "the belief of unholy pleasure has sent the morals of our nation down to rock bottom and the crowning addition to this day's corruption is Elvis Presleyism." Situations like this were occurring all over America as many churches tried their hardest to prevent the youth from becoming corrupted.

Although Elvis received great hatred and criticism throughout his career, he ultimately had a positive impact on American society. Elvis did something that no one else during that time period was willing to do; he took a chance and decided to be different. He sang and danced the way he wanted to and did not let the critics bring him down. One very positive influence Elvis had was that he was a significant figure in the integration of whites and African Americans. Through his music, Presley exposed a sheltered white American society to African American culture.

The United States in the 1950's and 1960's was heavily segregated, especially in the South. American society was filled with Jim Crow segregation laws and groups like the Ku Klux Klan were formed to ensure separation of whites and African Americans. The court case *Brown vs. Board of Education* challenged segregation in public schools which helped pave the way for the civil rights movement. African Americans began to take to the streets for racial equality; incidences such as Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger, African Americans boycotting riding city buses, and Martin Luther King Jr. who brought a strategy of nonviolent, passive resistance to the civil rights movement, were very significant. Even though African Americans were beginning to have a voice, many whites continued to try and keep blacks inferior to them.

During this time period, white disc-jockeys would not play African American music. Listening to that type of music was prohibited by the majority of white society. In white American society it was not acceptable to listen to black music, but Presley broke through these racial barriers. Glenn Altschuler states: "Rock n' roll became a target of southern segregationists, who believed that race mixing led, inevitably, to miscegenation and that exposure to black culture promoted juvenile delinquency and sexual immorality." Since Presley was slowly breaking the norms of white American values, people began to have a very anti-Elvis attitude. Presley's innovative style really threatened the racial barricades fueled by segregation. One author describes his influence on society: Racists attacked rock and roll because of the mingling of black and white people it implied and achieved, and because of what they saw as black music's power to corrupt through vulgar and animalistic rhythms. The popularity of Elvis Presley was similarly founded on his transgressive position with respect to racial and sexual boundaries. It seems that many Americans wanted black music without the black people in it.

From the very beginning of his career, Elvis expressed "respect for African American performers and their music, and disregarded the norms of segregation and racial prejudice then prevalent in the South." Since the American youth had never really been exposed to African American culture before Elvis, his influence was quite profound.

Elvis' ability to perform music that was heavily influenced by black rhythm and blues for a white audience was very significant. Presley openly sang the songs of African Americans and helped focus industry and attention on blues and R&B. Even though he had achieved integration musically, it would take quite some time

for society to accept. Slowly throughout the 1950's, rhythm and blues and the rise of rock n' roll became very popular among teenagers as Elvis became the focal point of these genres of music. Elvis freely talked about the importance and influence of blues and R&B on his music and in interviews, he often named singers that reporters had never even heard. In an interview with the Charlotte Observer on June 26, 1956, Elvis explained the origins of his music: The colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I'm don' now for more years than I know. They played it like that in the shanties and in their juke joints and nobody paid it no mind 'til I goose it up. I got it from them, down in Tupelo, Mississippi I used to hear old Arthur Crudup band his box the way I do now, and I said if I ever got to the place I could feel all old Arthur felt, I'd be a music man like nobody ever saw.

People definitely recognized the fact that Elvis' music was heavily influenced by African Americans which made them very hesitant to allow their children to listen to it.

Now with Elvis on the scene, American culture began to evolve as white audiences began to listen and enjoy African American music. Elvis "struck an important blow for racial harmony by making African American music accessible to millions of white teens who wouldn't have been exposed to it otherwise." Elvis' success paved the way for African American performers such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Bo Diddley. Presley's racially mixed music allowed American culture to accept and finally appreciate black culture. Elvis' impact went far beyond his contributions in music, but went as far as changing the social parameters of the time.

With Elvis' popularity, he increased opportunities for African Americans not only in music, but in society as well. He helped make black music more popular and accessible in American society which resulted in a shift of cultural beliefs as attitudes towards African Americans evolved. One author states: "Enmeshed in the racial politics of the 1950's, rock n' roll was credited with and criticized for promoting integration and economic opportunity for blacks while bringing to mainstream culture black styles and values." Whether Elvis knew it or not, he was paving the way for integration. His music became a cultural phenomenon which ultimately helped the movement to grant civil rights to African Americans.

Not only was Elvis a main figure in the integration of whites and African Americans, but also in changing American sexuality. From the beginning of Elvis' career, society viewed Presley as a sex symbol. One author claimed that "the entertainment industry has unleashed the exultant grinding and lustful looks of Elvis Presley upon the world's innocence." Presley's physical attractiveness and performance style were greatly admired by women of all ages. Critic George Melly described Elvis as "the master of the sexual smile, treating his guitar as both phallus and girl." Presley's combination of good looks and talent were intoxicating to women as some even fainted at the sight of him.

Elvis was "drop dead handsome, a major flirt, and naturally charming, who

awakened the sexuality in his young female fans." While young females fell in love with Elvis, his performing style stirred the wrath of parents, educators, religious figures, newspaper editors, other entertainers, and local politicians. Their main concern was the effect Elvis was having on young girls as people described women's reactions to Elvis as a "hysteria" or "frenzy." One young teenage girl who saw Elvis at a concert exclaimed, "He's just one big hunk of forbidden fruit!" To women, the image of handsome Elvis was a reminder of their awareness of their sexuality as women. Elvis' provocative moves brought out the sexual nature of young girls as well as older women.

Presley represented sexual liberation which was believed to be a huge danger to society. Some saw the singer as a sex-crazed pervert that was corrupting their youth. Even some psychologists believed that teenagers could easily be "aroused to sexual indulgence and perversion by certain types of motions and hysteria- the exact type that was exhibited at the Presley show." Elvis was considered to be a sexual pervert and his actions were described as sexual self-gratification on stage.

Sexuality was a very controversial subject matter throughout the 1950's and 1960's. As Elvis produced a new genre of music known as rock n' roll, teenagers began to challenge sexuality: Rock n roll became the focal point for anxiety that cultural life in the United States had become sexualized and teenagers addicted to the pleasures of the body. Many adults feared that the weakening of traditional morality, diminished authority of parents, clergymen, and teachers, and availability of condoms and penicillin were making promiscuity safe, accepted, and universal to the post- World War II generation.

With the arrival of rock n' roll, Presley was able to open up the door for teenagers to express themselves sexually. Yet during this time period, parents and educators wanted both women and men to internalize sexual behavior. Parents attempted to restrain their children from sexual expression by educating them to stay "above the belt" and contain their sexual desires. Rock n' roll was "demonstrating the power of the libido, as the music pulsated, the guitarist fondled his instrument, and undulated sensuously. Rock n' roll seemed to be an anti-inhibitor provoking erotic vandalism."

Not only was Presley's dance moves seen as provocative and sexual, but his musical lyrics stirred up controversy as well. Elvis' hits such as "Love Me Tender" and "Don't Be Cruel" were seen as a threat because the lyrics of the song presented an emotional vulnerability that could lead to the forbidden sexual expression. Glenn Altschuler argued: "Like the clash over lyrics, the battle for Elvis' body aroused advocates of sexual containment and control that spread from radios, records, television, and more. The contest between Elvis and his enemies ended inconclusively, an indication that the sexual genie was climbing out of the bottle, with the cork nowhere in sight."

Ann Fulchino, the publicist for Elvis' record label, acknowledged that he

was “the equivalent of a male strip teaser, with the exception that he doesn’t take his clothes off.” Although Presley did have some intense dance moves, he was not advocating for teens to become sex-crazed perverts like the press claimed he was. Elvis did not even see anything wrong with his performances; he stated: “I don’t do no dirty body movements.” Despite what critics said and believed about Elvis, his musical performances allowed teenagers have the opportunity to express themselves in ways they never thought were possible.

Although parents believed the changing values of the time to be negative, it was actually very positive. Despite the fact that the older generation of this time strongly believed Elvis to a pervert, teenagers responded quite differently. Elvis Presley created a social revolution where sexuality could be expressed and no longer condemned. Although Elvis can justly be given the title of a sex symbol, he was much more than that. He provided the opportunity for the American youth to express themselves and find a new sense freedom and liberation. Presley’s music allowed for teenagers to have their own sense of identity that differed from their parents.

Richard Barnet claims: “Not only did Elvis give teens their own music with which to identify, he proved that much of the disposable income of this generation would be spent on music, fashion, and media of its own choosing.” The generation that grew up with Elvis in their lives experienced changes in society that previous generations had not. A prosperous economy during the 1950’s allowed teenagers to no longer have to contribute all of their incomes to their families for survival. The teenagers of this decade “emerged as a high-profile, identifiable group with their own fashion sense, hair styles, slang, taste in music, preferences in movie stars, and other favorite pastimes.” Presley was a true pioneer of rock n’ roll and he represented rebellion against the status quo. He was viewed as a nonconformist who “disrupted the complacency of the 1950’s.”

Elvis Presley was highly influential in changing the social and moral values of white American society, but also in creating a new genre of music which was known and rock n’ roll. The influence of rock n’ roll was very significant in the United States. Elvis’ music helped accelerate the path of integration for African Americans and the civil rights movement. Through rock n’ roll, the American youth obtained their own identity, one with new values, roles in society, and beliefs that differed from their parents. Elvis’ creation of rock n’ roll allowed for pivotal changes in American culture and society.

One author states that “in the ensuing decades, rock n’ roll demonstrated its persist net power. Rock n’ roll transformed an inchoate sense of disaffection and dissatisfaction into a political and cultural movement.” Through the music that Elvis created came an entirely new generation. It is truly remarkable how Elvis’ music not only reached the youth of the time, but continues generation after generation. Teenagers as well as adults continue to listen to his music as Elvis’ musical repertoire came to include ballads, classics, Christmas songs, and religious songs. . Greil Mar-

cus describes Presley's influence on history stating: Because of Elvis' arrival, because of who he was and what he became, because of his event and what we made of it, the American past, from the Civil War to the civil rights movement, from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln, looks different than it would have looked without him. Because of that event, the future has possibilities that would have been otherwise foreclosed. Presley's impact on American culture went far beyond what he ever imagined.

Elvis changed much more than the entertainment industry in the United States as his music set the stage for other musicians in the future. Presley inspired and influenced popular culture, rock n' roll, cinema, future musicians, and more. Susan Doll believes that "today's generation automatically perceives music of the 1960's to be the model they return to for inspiration and influence. They look to artists such as Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and James Brown." However one must remember that Elvis heavily influenced the 1960's generation and the music that derived out of that time period. The "rhythm, beat, sensuality, and attitude of rock n' roll all began with Elvis and the Blue Moon Boys. That influence cannot be underestimated." Statements by musical legends acknowledge the role that Elvis played in their music, such as John Lennon, who said: "Before Elvis, there was nothing." Greil Marcus argues: "Without the astonishing success of Elvis- nearly 500 million copies of his records had been sold by the time he died- rock n' roll might have been a passing fad."

When an unknown country boy walked into a recording studio on a hot summer day in 1953 and was asked by the woman running the studio, "who do you sound like?" Elvis answered: "I don't sound like nobody." This moment would define the beginning of Presley's career into stardom where his influence has lasted generation after generation. In the 1950's and 1960's, Elvis was credited with bringing sex and loose morality to the media. The media soon gave him the nickname "Elvis the Pelvis" and parents deemed his music to be "devil music." Parents, educators, and religious leaders responded to Elvis's music with hostility and negative responses.

In the 1950's and 1960's, people believed Elvis to have a negative influence on the American youth which became a heated topic of debate all over the country. Public disapproval surrounded him because it was believed his music did not have good moral values. Elvis' music was considered distasteful, improper, and immoral since it was mixed with roots of African American music which people were prejudice against. Susan Doll describes the influence of rock n' roll on society:

Rock n' roll was the most pervasive and potent form of popular music in American history. In contrast to the theme of containment that dominated the nation's domestic and foreign policy, rock n' roll shook loose many teenagers and shook up their parents. The baby boomers who were weaned on it embraced it- then and now- as a force for change, legitimizing their energy, impatience with the status quo, and dreams of freedom. Although controversy surrounded Elvis, that

did not hold the American youth back from listening to his music.

Elvis was revolutionary as he re-defined music and challenged social and moral values of the time. Presley had a “sound and style that uniquely combined his diverse musical influence and challenged the social and racial barriers of the time; he ushered in a whole new era of American music and popular culture.” He was able to integrate rhythm and blues, gospel, and country music, and created what today is called rock n’ roll. Elvis did not just change the history of music, but changed American history forever.

Bibliography

Reference Books

- Larkin, Colin. *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*. “Presley, Elvis.” New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
“Agin’ Rock n Roll, But Elvis Is Our Boy.” *Rockford, Illinois: The Crusader*, October 1956.
“TV, Today and Tomorrow.” *Kansas City, Kansas: Plain Dealer*, March 15, 1957.
Jennings, Robert. “There’ll Always Be an Elvis.” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 76-79, 1965.
Lomax, Almena. “Notes for Showfolks.” *Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles Tribune*, November 1958.
Secondary Monographs
Altschuler, Glenn. *All Shook Up: How Rock n’ Roll Changed America*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
Ariel Books. *Elvis: The King of Rock’n Roll*. U.K: Andrews McMeel, 2005.
Barnet, Richard. *The Story Behind the Song: 150 Songs that Chronicle the 20th Century*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004.
Brown, Peter Harry and Pat H. Broeske. *Down at the End of Lonely Street: The Life and Death of Elvis Presley*. U.K: Signet, 1998.
Doll, Susan. *Elvis For Dummies*. New York: Wiley, John & Sons, 2009.
Editors of the Time. *Great People of the 20th Century*. New York: Time Books, 1996.
Fensch, Thomas. *The FBI Files on Elvis Presley*. Cookville: New Century Books, 2001.
Gogerly, Liz. *Elvis Presley: The King of Rock n’ Roll*. Chicago: Heinemann/Raintree, 2004.
Hampton, Wilborn. *Elvis Presley: Up Close*. London: Puffin, 2008.
Hombach, Jean-Pierre. *Elvis Presley The King of Rock ‘n’ Roll*. Berlin: Epubli, 2012.
Keogh, Pamela Clarke. *Elvis Presley: the Man, the Life, the Legend*. New York: Atria Books, 2010.
Marcus, Greil. *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
Martin, Linda. *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock ‘n’ Roll*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1993.
Mason, Bobbie Ann. *Elvis Presley/Bobbie Ann Mason*. New York: Viking, c2003.
Nantais, David. *Rock-A My Soul: An Invitation to Rock Your Religion*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011.
Nicholls, David. *The Cambridge History of American Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
Riley, Tim. *Fever: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Transformed Gender in America*. London: Picador, 2005.
Schnider, Scott. *Icons of Rock: An Encyclopedia of the Legends Who Changed Music Forever*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008.

Internet Sources

- http://www.elvispresleymusic.com.au/elvis_presley_1953_1955.html
<http://www.elvis-history-blog.com/elvis-milton-berle.html>
<http://www.elvis-history-blog.com/elvis-religious-criticism.html>
<http://www.prism.gatech.edu/~wjohnson7/eng1102/elvis.html>
http://blog.lib.umn.edu/arrig002/politicsandpopculture/05_elvis_the_beatles_dylan

History Elvis Presley: A Revolutionist Marcie Wallace Elvis Presley is the single most significant figure in rock and roll history. Elvis completely revolutionized music and his influence changed the entertainment industry forever. In the 1950s, the South was heavily racially segregated, but Presley's music broke past these racial barriers. He allowed African American music to be accessible to white American youth who had never really been exposed to it. Elvis challenged the social and moral values as his music and provocative dance moves created an entirely new generation. By 1955, Elvis Pre...