

Chapter 1

Introducing Elvis Presley

In This Chapter

- ▶ Outlining Elvis's place in American history
 - ▶ Summarizing Elvis's life
 - ▶ Tracking Elvis's popularity from beginning to end
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On the one hand, Elvis Presley needs no introduction, because his name and face are recognized around the world as the ultimate celebrity. Imitators re-create his act; late-night comedians joke about him; cable channels rerun his movies; and merchandisers exploit his image on everything from T-shirts to lamps. On the other hand, the reasons for his fame have become lost in the trappings of celebrity, especially for younger generations born after his death on August 16, 1977.

For the original fans, who have remained loyal for over 50 years, Elvis earned his reputation as the King of Rock 'n' Roll; for others, discovering why he deserved his fame and a place in American cultural history may be a revelation.

In this chapter, I introduce you to Elvis Presley through the high points of his life and career, including his post-death popularity. This chapter sets up an extensive exploration of Elvis Presley — the cultural icon — that details the events of his life, explains the significance of his music, and contemplates his meaning to American pop culture.

Identifying a Cultural Icon

Almost everyone knows that Elvis Presley was a famous singer, but many people don't fully understand what he contributed to popular music to earn his widespread fame. Elvis combined different types of music to form a style called *rockabilly*, which became one of the key sounds in rock 'n' roll. To form this musical style, he fused the country-western music of the South with the rhythm and blues of African Americans and the pop music that dominated the radio and recording industries.



The combination of musical genres and sounds into a new style of music was Elvis's true gift and his contribution to popular culture. That this integration of musical styles took place just prior to the civil rights movement, prefiguring social integration, makes this moment in pop culture history seem momentous.

Elvis wasn't the first to sing in a rock 'n' roll style, so he can't be credited with inventing it. But, his version of this new music became widely popular during the mid-1950s. He spread rock 'n' roll music across the country, making it popular to a wide audience, especially teenagers. In that regard, he was a true innovator. (For more information on Elvis's start in music, see Chapter 2).

Elvis also yielded a strong influence on youth culture. During the 1950s, teenagers had begun to think of themselves as being different from their parents' generation. Because of the economic prosperity of the period, teens enjoyed a disposable income that they could spend on themselves instead of contributing toward family survival. With that money they dressed themselves in fashions marketed to their age group, went to movies that featured stars of their generation, and listened to music that appealed to them. So it wasn't a surprise when Presley's rock 'n' roll music, his hairstyle, and his fashion sense became a part of this new culture for teenagers. (For more information on the burgeoning youth culture, see Chapter 5.)

Later in his career, Presley changed his musical style and his personal look to keep up with the times and gain popularity among older audiences. He became a movie star during the 1960s and then returned to live musical performances during the 1970s. Because his career went through so many changes, he was popular with different types of people for different reasons. Even after his death, his popularity remains strong among a wide variety of people. This wide popularity, as well as his important role in American musical history, makes him a cultural icon.

Uncovering the Roots of Elvis's Music

On January 8, 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi, Elvis Aron Presley was born a half hour after his stillborn twin brother, Jesse Garon. Thus, the occasion was a mixed blessing to parents Vernon and Gladys Presley, who lived in a two-room shotgun shack on the wrong side of the tracks in Tupelo. A true son of the South, Elvis never ventured far from his roots, physically or musically. While a young boy in Tupelo, Elvis learned to play the guitar from relatives, and then he fell under the influence of country-western singer Mississippi Slim.



It wasn't until his family moved to Memphis that Elvis's real musical education began. The diversity of music on Memphis's radio stations exposed Elvis to a variety of genres, which eventually influenced his music. Several radio stations played country music, and big band music was broadcast from the famed Peabody Hotel. Rhythm-and-blues artists could be heard on two different radio stations: WDIA and WHBQ. WDIA was owned by two white men, but it was mostly staffed by black disc jockeys who played the locally produced records of hometown bluesmen. WHBQ played a variety of music, but it's best remembered for disc jockey Dewey Phillips's *Red Hot and Blue* program that showcased the recordings of black artists.

Memphis also developed into the center for white gospel music during the 1950s, so the four-part harmonies of the gospel quartets who regularly visited the city became another influence on the teenage Elvis. He and his parents, and later he and his girlfriend, regularly attended the all-night gospel sings at Ellis Auditorium. In addition, the city's Beale Street district was home to the clubs and joints where African American musicians played blues and rhythm and blues. Elvis became familiar with the music of the well-known local R&B artists, including B.B. King, Rufus Thomas, and Big Memphis Ma Rainey. All these Southern-based musical genres inspired Elvis's early singing style, which turned out to be a true fusion of sounds. (For more information on Elvis's early years, see Chapter 2.)

Recording for Sun Studio



Sam Phillips, owner of Sun Studio and a small Memphis-based record company also called Sun, recorded the music of blues and R&B musicians. He was quoted in local papers as saying, "If I could find a white man who could sing with the sound and feel of a black man, I could make a billion dollars." Little did he know that Elvis would soon walk right through his doorway.

Elvis's ability to integrate Southern musical genres into a blend of beat and rhythm was exactly what Phillips was looking for. However, it took some time before the two walked into the studio together and made history with Elvis's first recording, "That's All Right," which was an old blues tune originally written and recorded by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Elvis's interpretation of the song featured a relaxed vocal style, upbeat tempo, and a driving rhythm as well as these two elements that would make his sound famous:

- ✓ Syncopated lyrics using a hiccupping sound
- ✓ Reverberation for an echo effect

Elvis's sound became the essence of rockabilly, though no one called it by that name at the time. A few days after his first recording, Elvis and the two musicians who backed him up — guitarist Scotty Moore and bass player Bill Black — recorded the bluegrass classic “Blue Moon of Kentucky” as the flip side to “That’s All Right,” giving Elvis his first single. (To read more about this single, check out Chapter 2.)

Sam Phillips took this first record to disc jockey Dewey Phillips (no relation to Sam) to play on his *Red Hot and Blue* radio program as well as to other deejays at other stations. By the end of the month, “That’s All Right” was shooting up the local charts, and Elvis made his first major public appearance at the Overton Park Shell.

Gaining a fan base

From the summer of 1954 to the end of 1955, Elvis and his band, who called themselves the Hillbilly Cat and the Blue Moon Boys, enjoyed success as a Southern-based country-western act. Even though their music sounded decidedly different from typical country music, their status as white Southern singers classified them and their music as “country.” They cut four more singles for Sun Studio and toured across the South on the same bill as such well-known country acts as Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters, Hank Snow, Faron Young, and Ferlin Husky.

Elvis's singing style wasn't the only unique feature of his high-powered act. As he crisscrossed the South, his performing style evolved to become a unique, highly energetic part of an Elvis Presley performance. Dressed in outrageously colorful clothes — such as those worn by R&B artists down on Beale Street — Elvis moved throughout his entire act, bouncing on the balls of his feet, shaking his legs, and swiveling his hips. In addition, bass player Bill Black, something of a comedian, danced and rolled around on the floor with his huge bass fiddle. The trio's frenzied performances were considered by some venues to be too wild, and other country performers hated to follow their act, but their weekly appearances on the *Louisiana Hayride* radio program brought them wide exposure across the South and a loud, raucous, and youthful fan base.



In *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music* by Paul Hemphill, country singer Bob Luman recalls seeing Elvis when Luman was still a teenager in Kilgore, Texas: “This cat came out in red pants and a green coat and a pink shirt and socks, and he had this sneer on his face and he stood behind the mike for five minutes, I’ll bet, before he made a move. Then he hit his guitar a lick, and he broke two strings. Hell, I’d been playing for ten years, and I hadn’t broken a total of two strings. So there he was, these two strings dangling, and he hadn’t done anything except break guitar strings yet, and these high school girls were screaming and fainting and running up to the stage, and then he started to move his hips real slow like he had a thing for his guitar”

The antics of the fans, especially the girls, drew the attention of country promoter Colonel Tom Parker (also known as simply “the Colonel”), who believed the strange-looking kid with the big moves could be a national success. By the end of 1955, Parker had succeeded in becoming Elvis’s manager, and with that the stage was set for Presley’s introduction to Middle America. (For more information on this era of Elvis’s career, see Chapter 3.)

Gyrating Across America

Colonel Parker negotiated a deal with the nationally based company RCA Victor to sign Elvis to a contract. The strategy at RCA involved exposing Elvis to mainstream audiences by promoting him in the nationally based pop market as well as the regionally based country and R&B markets. On January 8, 1956, Elvis recorded his first songs for RCA, including “Heartbreak Hotel.” An instant success, the song climbed to number one on the pop and country charts and number three on the R&B chart. (For more information on Elvis’s contract with RCA and his first recordings for the company, see Chapter 4.)



Parker’s goal from the beginning was to gain the broadest audience possible for his one and only client. In addition to promoting Elvis’s records in the pop market to court the teen audience nationwide, he wanted to use television to broaden his “boy’s” appeal. Little did he realize that he was about to set off one of pop culture’s most famous controversies.

Two weeks after Elvis’s first RCA recording session, he appeared for the first time on television as a guest on Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey’s weekly variety series *Stage Show*. Compared to the more conventional acts on the show — such as pop singers, dancers, and comedians who dressed, performed, and acted like the singers, dancers, and comedians on other variety shows — Elvis looked strange, alien, even dangerous. If you tuned in to *Stage Show* and saw Elvis performing, the following might have shocked you as it did many in the television audience:

- ✓ His ducktail haircut, which was long and slicked back
- ✓ His shiny Beale Street suit, which featured wide-legged trousers that shook when he moved
- ✓ Eye makeup on his eyelids and under his lashes that must have startled even show business veterans who had seen it all
- ✓ His high-energy performance in which he shook, shimmied, and swiveled, causing screams and squeals from the studio audience

During the next eight weeks, he appeared five more times on the program with ever-increasing ratings (though *Stage Show* never beat its competition on NBC, *The Perry Como Show*).

The Colonel continued to book Elvis on the most popular variety shows, including the much-beloved *Milton Berle Show*. Elvis and his band first appeared on the *Milton Berle Show* in April. When he returned for a second appearance in June, he performed “Hound Dog” for the first time on television — and in a particularly provocative manner, sensually thrust his hips toward the microphone. This single appearance ignited a nationwide backlash concerning his performing style. In fact, the performance prompted parents, religious groups, TV reviewers and columnists, and even the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) to condemn Elvis by declaring him indecent and associating his music with juvenile delinquency. The criticism against Elvis became part of the overall condemnation of the new youth-oriented music known as rock 'n' roll.

After the *Milton Berle Show*, Colonel Parker booked Elvis on *The Steve Allen Show*. The high ratings from Allen’s program prompted Ed Sullivan to offer the unprecedented fee of \$50,000 for Elvis to make three appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Elvis’s final appearance on Sullivan’s show in January 1957 features the now legendary moments when the CBS censors demanded that “Elvis the Pelvis,” the singer’s new nickname in the press, be filmed only from the waist up while singing. More than live concerts or recordings, Elvis’s TV appearances fueled the controversy surrounding his hip-swiveling performing style.



The controversy surrounding Elvis’s performing style became symbolic of generational conflict, reflecting the rise of the new youth culture (see the earlier section “Identifying a Cultural Icon” for more details on this new culture). However, other social circumstances also added to the conflict over Elvis and his music, including a prejudice against Southern culture and tastes and a racist attitude toward the music of African Americans. (For more information on the controversy generated by Elvis, see Chapter 5.)

Changing Elvis’s Notorious Image

Colonel Parker didn’t realize that courting teenage audiences around the country could generate so much controversy and bad publicity (see the preceding section for more on the uproar over Elvis the Pelvis). The notoriety certainly garnered television ratings, but it did little to broaden Elvis’s appeal to a mainstream audience. So throughout the rest of the 1950s, Parker and others worked to cool the controversy and broaden Elvis’s appeal.

Ever mindful of the value of old-fashioned promotion, which the Colonel called “exploitation,” the wily ex-carny generated a lot of publicity designed to counter Elvis’s image as a notorious rock 'n' roller. Specifically, he

- ✓ Released photos of Elvis participating in charities
- ✓ Encouraged interviews in which Elvis talked about his love for his parents
- ✓ Negotiated a movie contract with producer Hal Wallis

However, nothing generated acceptance by the mainstream audience like Elvis's service in the army. In the following sections, I look more closely at Elvis's first Hollywood movies and his service in the army, which did more than anything else to change his image.

Shooting his first films

Negotiating a movie contract for Elvis served Parker's long-term goal of reaching as broad an audience as possible. As a movie star, Elvis could attract regular moviegoers, including those outside the teen demographic, in addition to popular music fans. Producer Hal Wallis was an expert at recognizing star power and constructing screen images for his actors. His handling of Elvis's film career, including developing his film projects and fine-tuning his characters, led to a softening of Elvis's controversial image.



Wallis placed Elvis under personal contract, but the Colonel negotiated for a nonexclusive contract, so Presley was free to make films for other producers and studios.

Elvis made four movies between 1956 and 1958: *Love Me Tender*, *Loving You*, *Jailhouse Rock*, and *King Creole*. The first, a Civil War-era western, featured Elvis as the youngest son of a family of homesteaders. The other three films starred Elvis in dramatic stories about young singers with new sounds who are misunderstood by the press and public.

Clearly echoing Elvis's own career and life story, these films helped reshape the singer's image in the eyes of the public, softening the criticism aimed against him and presenting him as just another show business success story. Wallis produced *Loving You* and *King Creole*, while Pandro S. Berman produced *Jailhouse Rock*. (For a detailed account of Elvis's pre-army movies, flip to Chapter 6.)

Serving in the army

Elvis was drafted in late 1957 at the age of 22, but he managed to postpone his service in the army until March 1958 because of his contractual obligations to finish *King Creole*. When Elvis finally reported to his draft board, Colonel Parker made sure the press was on hand to document every step.

Parker repeated to the press time and again how Elvis could have joined special services in the army or the navy so he could serve his time by performing on bases around the world. However, Parker made it quite clear that Elvis opted to join the regular army and do his duty to serve his country — just like every other young man his age. Elvis spent the bulk of his two years serving in a tank division in Germany.

Instead of killing his career, serving in the army expanded it by attracting the attention of the mainstream audience, which is important to remaining at the forefront of show business. When Elvis was mustered out of the army in March 1960, the Colonel and others who helped manage Presley's career took advantage of his time away from the public eye to recast his image, maturing it to appeal to older audiences while retaining his original fan base. (For more information on the impact of Elvis's army service, see Chapter 5.)



While Elvis was in the army, two events in his personal life occurred that made a permanent impact on his life. In August 1958, near the beginning of his tour of duty, Elvis's mother, Gladys, died unexpectedly. With her death, he lost his biggest supporter. Then in early 1960, near the end of his tour of duty, Elvis met 14-year-old Priscilla Beaulieu, whose stepfather was also a soldier in the service. The two began a relationship that would continue in the 1960s when Priscilla moved to Memphis at Elvis's suggestion, eventually leading to marriage in 1967.

Becoming a Leading Man in Hollywood

While Elvis was in the service, critics speculated that the two years away from the public eye would seriously damage his career. They proclaimed that his position at the forefront of rock 'n' roll would likely be lost. To some extent, they were right. Elvis didn't return to the forefront of rock music when he was discharged from the army in 1960. However, that absence was deliberate. The Colonel wanted to shift Elvis away from rock 'n' roll, which had endured more notoriety between 1958 and 1960.

Instead, when Elvis returned home, he gradually pursued a more mellow pop-influenced style of music and adopted a more conventional look. The Colonel took advantage of the good publicity over Elvis's tour of duty to promote a new, more mature Elvis Presley. And, he and Elvis turned their attention almost exclusively to the movies as the medium to showcase this new Presley to a mainstream audience. In focusing on movie stardom, Elvis no longer needed high-profile backup musicians, so the Blue Moon Boys as a group were out of the picture. The group actually had stopped being called the Blue Moon Boys after Elvis signed with RCA in order to keep the focus on Elvis, though the trio continued to tour. During the 1960s, Scotty Moore and D.J. Fontana occasionally worked in the studio with Elvis as sessions musicians.



The movies Elvis didn't make

During the years Elvis was in Hollywood, he was offered opportunities to star in films that were not in the Presley formula — at least according to Colonel Parker. Stories about these opportunities have been exaggerated over the years by highly critical writers and biographers in order to discredit the films that he did make. But, there's no doubt that the Colonel turned down some interesting proposals.

For example, in 1956, Parker turned down an offer for Elvis to appear as one of the rock 'n' roll acts in director Frank Tashlin's spoof of 1950s musical crazes, *The Girl Can't Help It*, starring Jayne Mansfield. Apparently, the Colonel didn't want Elvis to share the screen with other notable rock 'n' roll acts, such as Gene Vincent. In the 1970s, Barbra Streisand wanted Elvis to appear in her remake of *A Star Is Born*, but the Colonel refused for reasons unknown.



The Colonel's goal was for Elvis to achieve widespread popularity as a movie star and therefore greater financial success. Elvis, on the other hand, yearned for a career as a serious actor. The Colonel attained his goal, but Elvis didn't.

Starting out as an actor

A few weeks after his discharge from the army, an eager Elvis returned to Hollywood to begin shooting *G.I. Blues*, a story about a singer who's serving in the army in Germany. Producer Hal Wallis borrowed details from Presley's life to flesh out the script just as he had done in the pre-army movies (see the earlier section "Shooting his first films" for details). However, unlike Elvis's earlier movies, *G.I. Blues* is a musical comedy, not a musical drama. Aimed at a family audience, the film presents the new, more mature Elvis Presley.

G.I. Blues was enormously successful; it ranked 14th in box office sales for 1960. The soundtrack album reached number one, remaining on the charts longer than any other Presley album. Sadly, Elvis didn't share the fans' enthusiasm for *G.I. Blues*. He felt the movie had too many musical numbers, and he believed that some of them made little sense in context of the plot. He also was concerned that the quality of many of the songs fell short of the music from his earlier films.

The western *Flaming Star*, released in December 1960, gave Elvis the chance to prove himself as a serious actor. In this tense western drama, Elvis held his own with veteran actors John McIntire and Dolores Del Rio. Unfortunately, the film wasn't the box office success it was expected to be.

Wild in the Country, a contemporary drama, followed *Flaming Star*. No songs were included in the original script for *Wild in the Country*, but after the disappointing showing of *Flaming Star*, Colonel Parker and some studio executives asked that several musical numbers be shot for the film. Six were shot, but only four made the final cut. *Wild in the Country* didn't lose money at the box office, but it didn't make much either. Both Elvis and costar Tuesday Weld were voted the Damp Raincoat Award for Most Disappointing Performers of 1961 by *Teen* magazine. While this award would hardly ruin anyone's career, it showed the Colonel exactly what kind of movie Elvis's fans didn't want to see. (See Part II for more information on Elvis's movies.)

Finishing as a movie star

After the disappointing dramas, Elvis returned to musical comedies with *Blue Hawaii*, which was his second most financially successful movie. The movie, directed by Norman Taurog, featured a huge cast of colorful characters who could handle comedy. In response to his fans' cries for more songs, *Blue Hawaii* also contains 14 musical numbers, including the title song and one of Elvis's biggest hits "Can't Help Falling in Love." The songs represent a range of types and styles, from pop-rock ("Rock-a-Hula Baby") to novelty tunes ("It's a Wonderful Life") to ballads ("Can't Help Falling in Love").

Released during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays in 1961, the film quickly became a box-office hit. The soundtrack album was the fastest-selling album that year. Unfortunately, the success of *Blue Hawaii* restricted Elvis to acting in musical comedy vehicles, because the Colonel, Hal Wallis, and other members of his management team used the box-office figures to convince him that this was the only kind of movie his fans wanted to see him in. This dashed Elvis's dreams of becoming a serious actor.

After *Blue Hawaii*, Presley made 23 more movies, most following the pattern established in this breezy musical comedy. Later, Elvis would bitterly refer to these formulaic films as the Presley Travelogues. Despite his distaste for them, most of Elvis's films were popular successes and highly profitable. At one point in the mid-1960s, Elvis became the highest-paid actor in Hollywood. Even though he failed to become a serious actor, Elvis Presley was an extremely successful movie star.



By 1964, Colonel Parker had persuaded Elvis to focus almost entirely on the movie soundtracks. Many of the songs written for these musical comedies were as formulaic as the films themselves, but some solid pop tunes also were included. However, because the songs on the soundtrack albums weren't well organized and because the albums weren't always marketed wisely, many of the good tunes were lost among the mediocre ones. (See Chapter 7 for more information on the movie music Elvis produced.)

Evaluating a Hollywood career

Many biographies, rock music histories, and other accounts of Elvis's career analyze his movie years with the benefit of hindsight. The standard interpretation of this period is that Elvis's musical comedy vehicles were disappointments in comparison to his earlier film work and that both his acting and singing talents were squandered by greedy agents and managers, particularly Colonel Parker. Considering the profundity and influence of Elvis's music from the 1950s, this negative opinion of his 1960s pop-oriented sound and movie-star persona almost makes sense. Yet other factors need to be considered.

For example, most of Elvis's movies and albums from the 1960s were financially successful no matter how hastily they were produced. Financial profit is a measure of success in pop culture, particularly in Hollywood, so Elvis and the Colonel had no reason to question — let alone alter — their game plan for Elvis's career. Also, if Elvis had continued singing rock 'n' roll, he may not have survived the changes to the music scene in the 1960s. After all, many pioneering rock 'n' rollers didn't. Finally, if Elvis had continued to make more serious films such as *Flaming Star* and *Wild in the Country*, he wouldn't have been guaranteed success with those either.

Despite the financial success of his films, Elvis became increasingly disappointed and depressed about his Hollywood career. And, there's no escaping the fact that both his movies and the accompanying soundtracks declined sharply during the mid- to late-1960s. (See Chapter 8 for more on the decline of Elvis's film career.)

Personally, Elvis lived an isolated, distorted existence far removed from the real world. The Colonel protected Elvis from the press and public throughout the 1960s, so interviews and articles about his life as a movie star were limited to those orchestrated or controlled by the Colonel himself.

Capitalizing on a Turning Point

The year 1968 marked a turning point for Elvis professionally and personally. The change began in January when RCA released the single of "Guitar Man." The song didn't chart very high, but it was a non-soundtrack recording that signaled Elvis's willingness and perhaps eagerness to cut material that wasn't related to the movies he was still contractually bound to make.

Colonel Parker then negotiated a deal with NBC for a television Christmas special. The special turned out to be the spark that reignited Elvis's talent and creativity. A combination of his old music and new material, the special reminded Elvis that he had a musical gift and challenged him to use it to regain his stature in the music industry. Proud of the results, Elvis knew he

wanted to change the direction of his career. Riding the momentum of the special, Elvis recorded the acclaimed album *From Elvis in Memphis*, which pointed him in a new direction musically.

Elvis's personal life also hit a high point in 1968. Married in the spring of 1967, Elvis and Priscilla became the proud parents of a baby girl, Lisa Marie, in February 1968. In this section, I talk about the important events that turned Elvis's career around, which serendipitously occurred during the happiest time of his personal life.

Making a comeback with the '68 Comeback Special

In early 1968, the Colonel announced plans for an Elvis Presley television special that would air on NBC in December. It was Elvis's first TV appearance in eight years. Parker planned for his boy to sing several Christmas carols in front of a Yuletide setting, but producer Steve Binder encouraged Elvis to participate in a daring variety program instead.

The special, originally titled *Elvis* but later referred to as *Elvis — the '68 Comeback Special* or simply the *'68 Comeback Special*, consisted of a series of polished production numbers designed to illustrate the roots of Elvis's music. These production numbers alternated with segments featuring Elvis singing live before a studio audience with two of his original backup musicians, Scotty Moore and D.J. Fontana. For the live segments, Elvis appeared in a black leather jacket and pants — a costume that recalled an earlier era without resorting to nostalgia.



The special revealed a side to Elvis that hadn't been seen since 1961 — the part of him that was the rock 'n' roll innovator. It reminded audiences of his music and its importance to the development of popular American music. And, the live segments showcased one of his true talents, which was his ability to excite an audience as a dynamic live performer. (For a detailed account of the *'68 Comeback Special*, see Chapter 11.)

Reinventing the music

The *'68 Comeback Special* aired on December 3, 1968, earning excellent ratings and favorable reviews. Invigorated by the challenge of doing something different from the movie musicals, he decided to cut a new album that was in no way related to a movie soundtrack. Elvis opted to record in Memphis for the first time since he had left Sun Records.

In January and February 1969, he spent several days recording with producer Chips Moman at the American Sound Studio, resulting in several chart-topping singles and one of his most critically acclaimed albums, *From Elvis in Memphis*. One of the songs from the American Sound Studio sessions was “Suspicious Minds,” his first number-one single in seven years and the last one of his career.

The material recorded at the American Sound Studio prefigured his musical style of the 1970s, which was a large-scale sound that revealed the influences of modern country, pop music, and contemporary rock. (See Chapter 11 for more information on Elvis’s sessions at American Sound Studio.)

Taking time for a personal life

Around the time that Elvis was reinventing himself, he married Priscilla Beaulieu, who had been more or less living at the Presley home in Memphis since the early 1960s. A wizard at manipulating the media, the Colonel kept her presence hidden from the press. Elvis and Priscilla married on May 1, 1967, and nine months later to the day, their only child, Lisa Marie, was born. (See Chapter 7 for more information on Priscilla Beaulieu Presley.)

To get the best account of Elvis’s marriage and family life, read Priscilla Presley’s autobiography *Elvis and Me*. Autobiographies by former members of the Memphis Mafia also offer opinions of Elvis’s personal life, but their views of the woman who was competition for their time with Elvis are often jaundiced or self-serving.

Returning to Live Performances

In the summer of 1969, the opportunity arose for Elvis to play at the newly opened International Hotel in Las Vegas. Elvis’s appearance at the infamous hotel marked a new phase of his career that had begun with the ‘68 *Comeback Special* and the album *From Elvis in Memphis*. At this point, he was still in the process of reinventing himself, and so he decided to return to concert performances with new material and a new image.



Just as he had deliberately changed his image in 1960 to expand his career and launch it in a new direction, he again stood ready in 1969 to reevaluate his goals and alter his musical style to return to live performances. Part of Elvis’s long-term success stemmed from his ability to reinvent himself by moving his career in new directions.

Attending an Elvis concert: Teddy bears and underwear

Elvis opened at the International Hotel on July 31, 1969, and the engagement was so successful that the Colonel inked a deal for Elvis to perform there twice a year for a month each time. The following year, Elvis began to tour when he wasn't playing Vegas. During this time, Elvis established a pattern that he followed for the rest of life: He hit the road two to three times a year but played Vegas for a month in winter and a month in summer. (For more information on Elvis's International Hotel engagement, see Chapter 12.)



As Elvis fine-tuned his act on the road, patterns and rituals were established that defined what a Presley concert was like. In the 1970s, beginning with the show at the International Hotel, Elvis sometimes mocked his sexually provocative 1950s image by comically imitating the pelvic thrusts, the snarling lip, and the other moves associated with Elvis the Pelvis (see Chapter 5). He also established new interactions with his fans; rather than egging them on with sexually provocative gyrations, he began “romancing” them with ballads such as “Love Me Tender.” During this song, fans came down to the front of the stage, and Elvis kissed them, touched their hands, or accepted flowers, teddy bears, and other trinkets. Sometimes, he threw them back.

Throwing objects back and forth between the stage and the audience became a common practice with Elvis and his fans. After wiping his brow with a towel or scarf, he would throw it into the audience. This exchange became such a standard part of the show that band member Charlie Hodge would continuously drape towels around Elvis's neck so he could toss them to the audience.

Another interesting ritual between Elvis and his fans in the audience involved throwing underwear onstage, especially in Las Vegas. Women would throw their panties onstage, which Elvis sometimes picked up and made jokes about. (For more information on Elvis's 1970s concerts, see Chapter 13.)

Dressing a star: The jumpsuits

During the International Hotel engagement, Elvis wore an open-necked black mohair ensemble with a red scarf. Bill Belew, who had designed Elvis's black leather outfit for the '68 *Comeback Special*, put together the mohair suit. After that Elvis always asked Belew to design costumes for his live performances. In fact, it was Belew who fabricated the white bejeweled jumpsuit, supposedly based on a suggestion by Priscilla Presley.

As the years passed, the jumpsuit costume grew more and more elaborate and was often accompanied by waist-length and even knee-length capes. Because Elvis had new jumpsuits designed for each tour, fans can date photos or footage of Elvis performing onstage in the 1970s based on the jumpsuit he's wearing. The jumpsuits are identified by their colorful names, such as the American Eagle, the Black Conquistador, the Peacock, and the Tiffany. You can see Elvis performing in one of his signature jumpsuits in Figure 1-1.

More than anything, the jumpsuit has become associated with Elvis during this phase of his career. Many who know little about Elvis's career and music can recognize him from this iconic outfit of his Vegas years. (For more information on Elvis's jumpsuits, check out Chapter 13.)

Figure 1-1: Elvis donned his White Matador jumpsuit for this 1971 concert performance.



Appreciating the World's Greatest Entertainer: "Vegas Elvis"

The extravagant costumes and complex rituals of Elvis's period in Vegas fit the scale of the 1970s Presley concert. In Vegas and on the road, Elvis was joined onstage by a gospel quartet, a female backup trio called the Sweet Inspirations, a rock band, and a 35-piece orchestra.

Elvis's repertoire of songs varied throughout the 1970s, but his style of music didn't change. The style wasn't exactly rock 'n' roll, but it wasn't country music or rhythm and blues either. Elvis's style took something from all these genres, and yet it still transcended musical categories to form a sound unique to the singer. Dramatic, potent, and emotional, Elvis's sound — embodied in such songs as "Suspicious Minds" and "Burning Love" — seemed aurally symbolic of Colonel Parker's favorite billing for Elvis, "the World's Greatest Entertainer."



Elvis enjoyed a number of career highlights during the 1970s, including some record-making accomplishments. (For more information on the high points of the 1970s, see Chapter 14.) Among the most memorable are:

- ✓ In June 1972, a handsome, fit Elvis Presley played four sold-out shows at Madison Square Garden. He became the first performer to sell out all of his shows in that venue in advance. Among the attendees were John Lennon, David Bowie, Bob Dylan, and George Harrison.
- ✓ MGM produced and released two financially successful documentaries that captured Elvis's live performances, *Elvis — That's the Way It Is* (1970) and *Elvis on Tour* (1972). The latter won a Golden Globe for the Best Documentary of 1972.
- ✓ In January 1973, Elvis starred in the television special *Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii*, which was broadcast live via the Intelsat IV telecommunications satellite to countries in the Far East. Two days later, a taped replay was broadcast in Europe, and in April, the special was aired in America. Some estimates claim that 1.5 billion people eventually watched this performance.

Taking a toll: A personal and professional decline

After his burst of creativity in the early 1970s, a demanding schedule and an unhealthy lifestyle took its toll on Elvis. Endless touring and the exhaustion that accompanied it eventually wore away the enthusiasm and inspiration he had felt after the '68 *Comeback Special*. Repetition and routine began to define his act as Elvis lost his desire to update or change material. Eventually, the concerts became standardized.

Elvis's albums also began to decline in quality as he grew restless with recording. He cut fewer new songs every year; in fact, some years he recorded no new material at all. Yet RCA still managed about three releases per year by relying on live albums of various concerts and by repackaging songs from previously issued albums with what little new material there was. Some of these albums and singles charted well, especially on the country charts, but Elvis lost interest in making music and lacked focus and enthusiasm when the Colonel or producer Felton Jarvis managed to get him to record.

Isolated from the real world and secluded at Graceland when not on tour, Elvis lived a strange life — sleeping all day and staying up all night. Inclined toward excess, including overeating, overspending, and prescription drug abuse, Elvis became increasingly out of shape, unhealthy, and erratic.

Elvis and Priscilla divorced in 1973, which friends and associates claim accelerated the star's drug use, health problems, and bizarre behavior. After 1973, frequent hospitalizations occurred as his health declined. (To read more on Elvis's personal and professional decline, refer to Chapter 15.)

The End of the Road for the King

On June 26, 1977, Elvis Presley gave his final performance at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, Indiana. Less than two months later, he was dead at age 42. His girlfriend, Ginger Alden, found his body slumped over in the bathroom at Graceland on August 16, 1977. After paramedics failed to revive him, he was taken to Baptist Memorial Hospital where further attempts to revive him failed. He was pronounced dead by his physician, Dr. George Nichopoulos, who listed the official cause of death as cardiac arrhythmia.

Within an hour of Elvis's death, fans began to gather in front of Graceland. Mourners arrived in Memphis from all over the world to pay their respects and be with other fans. At the funeral, the speakers included televangelist Rex Humbard, comedian Jackie Kahane, who had often opened for Elvis, and a local Memphis minister. Several prominent gospel performers, including Jake Hess, sang some of Elvis's favorite gospel hymns. After the service, a motorcade of all-white automobiles carried the body to Forest Hill Cemetery. A short time later, a threat to steal Elvis's remains was intercepted, prompting his father to have the body moved to Meditation Garden behind Graceland. His mother's remains were moved there as well. (For more information on Elvis's death, see Chapter 16.)

Elvis Presley's death generated much media attention, some of it positive and much of it negative; it also resulted in extended air play of his records on the radio and prompted rampant sales of his records. And, that was just the beginning.

Tracing Elvis Presley's Continued Popularity

Elvis's 23 years in show business constituted an extraordinary career. He pursued and conquered different avenues; his achievements were financially lucrative, which is always a barometer of success in the entertainment industry; and he made a major impact on the direction of popular music during the 1950s.

After his death, Elvis's "career" continued to be extraordinary. (See Part IV for a thorough account of the events, celebrations, accomplishments, and rumors surrounding the popularity of Elvis since his death.) His fan base has remained loyal to this day, which isn't surprising, but Elvis's enormous popularity and recognition go well beyond his original fan base. He also has:

- ✔ Generated new fans
- ✔ Become the focus of a multimillion-dollar business headed by Elvis Presley Enterprises
- ✔ Continued to be referenced often in the media, whether in news stories, in jokes, or in a measure of the magnitude of his celebrity
- ✔ Often been named the top-earning celebrity of the year — despite being dead for more than 30 years



Simply stated, the reason that Elvis retains such an enormous level of popularity is that he appeals to different groups of people for different reasons. His career was so diverse, his music so innovative, and the post-death phenomenon so strange that everyone finds something interesting or entertaining about the different phases of his life or career. Consider the following groups of Elvis fans:

- ✔ **Rock 'n' roll enthusiasts** prefer Elvis the Pelvis, who brought rock 'n' roll to the masses and represented rebellion against mainstream values and tastes.
- ✔ **Music historians and scholars** appreciate the cultural significance of his integration of regional influences to achieve a wholly new sound.
- ✔ **Country-western fans** embrace his music as an important influence on contemporary country styles.
- ✔ **Original fans** remember Vegas Elvis because of his charisma in concert.
- ✔ **Family audiences** like the lighthearted wholesomeness of his movies, which they can watch with their children on DVD.
- ✔ **Pop culture lovers** find fun in the way Elvis has become an icon of kitsch.

With Elvis Presley, there truly is something for everyone. Behind this simple statement lies a complex set of circumstances accounting for the phenomenon, however. Part sociohistorical context, part fan devotion, part merchandising, and part cultural influence, these circumstances combine to make Elvis Presley *the* American idol. Continue reading this book for a look at the unabridged story, a complete portrait of the man who remains The King of Rock 'n' Roll, and a credible interpretation for the reasons why.