

Special Article

Unapologetically Improper and Unkempt: Elvis's Style of Sex Appeal in 1954 and 1955



Matt Shedd

Graduate Teaching Fellow at University of Oregon

Rock and roll culture has always carried with it a lifestyle to accompany the music—an attitude and a fashion that changes over the years, depending on the artist and period. Elvis, the figure often cited as the founder of modern rock and roll (not without dispute, however), serves as America's most pervasive icon from 20th century popular culture.

Elvis is no longer a single person, but a multifaceted *image* reflecting the most highly-prized American ideals, even if they contradict each other: freedom and economic mobility; patriotism and youthful rebellion; Hollywood superstardom and small-town rural America.

Elvis's great ability was to synthesize—the most significant accomplishment was his success in bringing



rural American music and black American music together for a mainstream audience. In *Dead Elvis*, Greil Marcus notes Elvis's uncanny ability to hold all of these seemingly contradictory dreams together for so many different audience members. Marcus writes the following of Elvis's mythic presence: "I understand Elvis not as a human being...but as a force...the necessity existing in every culture to lead it to produce a perfect, all-inclusive metaphor for itself" (3).

And Elvis, America's perfect metaphor of itself, continues to live on in various sanitized and family friendly forms, such as the soundtrack of Disney's children film *Lilo and Stitch*, the barrage of flash advertisement and Elvis-based attractions that fill the screen when you visit the Official Website of Elvis Presley, and, of course, in the shrine called

Graceland—the temple for the various sects of Elvis devotees. Elvis's image and name

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are so widespread, that he continues to be a financially profitable brand more than thirty years after his death.

After years of Elvis Presley laying claim to the status of the most pervasive American icon—and all the contradictions that role entails—it's hard to access just how shocking and really quite downright *nasty* many people found this upstart young kid jumping around wildly on stage in 1954 and 1955.

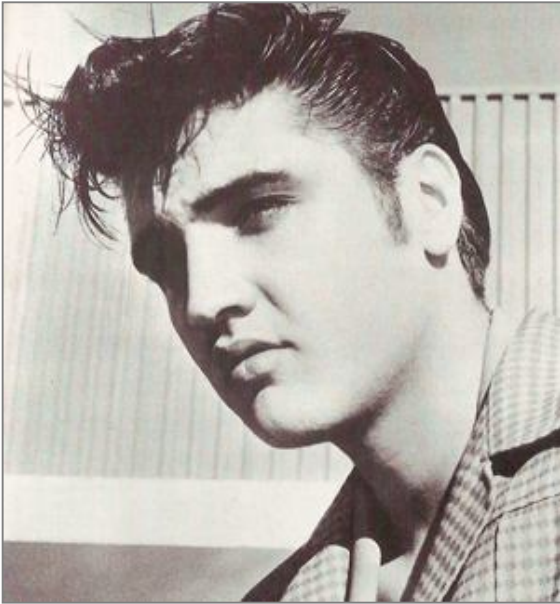


Across Peter Guralnick's accomplished biography *Last Train to Memphis*, many acquaintances recall that Elvis had a dirty neck, generally poor hygiene, but made sure to grease up that famous hair. All these things gave him the appearance of being unkempt and low class, but Jimmie Rodgers Snow (son of Hank Snow) recalls, "I asked him why he used that butch wax, and he said that was so when he performed his hair would fall down a certain way." Why was this important to Elvis? "He thought that was cool" (qtd in Guralnick172).

Many of Elvis's early performances are theater mixed with instruction on how to be cool. Elvis, not yet a television star and global icon, performs *Coolness* for his primarily teenage audience. "Milk Cow Blues" had been a hit by Bob Wills with versions performed by others. Elvis and the boys start what became the "Milcow Boogie Blues" as a subdued, half-time version of the song. But Elvis calls it to a halt, and then says, "Now, wait a minute, fellas. That don't *move* me. Let's get *real, real* gone for a change." And then the song kicks into its double-timed version of the song with its suggestive lyrics. Post-war American white suburbanite teens with disposable incomes, were looking for somebody to show them how to break away from the stifling values of their parents, and figures like Presley and Brando were the ones offering these options to them.

Elvis helped define cool by embracing what seemed dirty and vulgar, and this authentic and celebratory embrace of typically described low-culture and base impulses produced a spectacle that brought him the nation's attention. Chick Crumpacker recalls one 1955 performance containing "frequent belches "frequent belches into the mike, and the clincher came when he took his chewing gum out and tossed it into the audience" (qtd Guralnick in 190). He would even spit on the stage to the thrill of the hormone-flooded onlookers. These instances bring to light some

surprisingly crude element to Elvis's initial art of seduction. Rather than pretending he came from some rich background he knew nothing about, Elvis played up his image of being low-class.



Although Elvis records had been selling phenomenally already in the Southern U.S., something qualitatively different happened at the performances, provoking a response that extended far beyond the music to a cultural style. When audiences (particularly young girls) saw Elvis Presley perform, no number of records sold could prepare people for the chaos that Elvis reigned over while touring with the Louisiana Hayride and elsewhere during that time. Female sexuality was given room to be expressed publicly in those concerts, and Elvis knew exactly how to draw it out of teenage girls and the crowd in general in the form of screaming, fainting, and general unruliness.

But with this rebellious style was his simultaneous innocence and naiveté. "He didn't drink," Snow recalls, "he'd carry a cigarette around in his mouth, one of those filter types, never light it because he didn't smoke, but he'd play with it" (qtd. in Guralnick 172). His style and charisma is so irresistible to many precisely because he straddles these contradictions of unbridled sexuality on the one hand and wide-eyed innocence on the other. What set Elvis apart from the way we traditionally think of rock and roll rebellion was that he always showed respect to adults in public and was pretty shy. He loved singing spirituals, and even maintained his belief that his voice was a gift from God. Yet simultaneously, Elvis's gritty image was thoroughly punk in many ways, like Johnny Rotten. His sexuality depended on an earthiness the audience was not receiving from the more pristine acts at the time like Perry Como.

Elvis remains a fashion icon, marketable both economically and good tender in the marketplace of ideas, as I'm using him in this article. But I think if we look closely at the performances that started his career, he embodies an affirmation of life: he was not ashamed of the poverty he came from, he embraced it. He also wasn't ashamed of his sexuality. He remained a good ol' boy with that sly charm and that half-smile that suggested something you know you shouldn't be doing without admitting it. No matter how shocking his performance, Elvis always remained in the realm of plausible deniability, claiming that the performance was misunderstood, but that half-crooked smile always seemed to suggest that he knew exactly what he was doing. He provided the release of rebellion without the consequences. He created a world for his audience where rebellion is a game, and sexuality is fun, and serious things need not be considered. In fact, Elvis's sexually infused performances of 1954 and 55 serve as a rebellion against seriousness in any form.

Acknowledgement

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Picture 1: http://blog.mlive.com/entertainment/bay-city/2009/01/medium_elvis-debutmlive.jpg

Picture 2: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_zAoyoHwC5IQ/S-wpq-TnHxl/AAAAAAAAAlgo/bPoYOZzeS78/s1600/Elvis+1.jpg

Picture 3: <http://songinmyhead.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/elvis.jpg>

Works Cited

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Marcus, Greil. *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. Print.

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Matt Shedd is Graduate Teaching Fellow at University of Oregon, a featured contributor for No Depression: The Roots Music Authority and general editor for A Missing America (www.amissingamerica.com). Email: matthewpaulshedd@gmail.com
