



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 8, 2013

Elvis and the World He Left “All Shook Up”

Perhaps one of his pop music, teen idol rivals said it best when Elvis Presley died in 1977 at the age of 42: Old age would not have fit the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll. It would be hard to even imagine an old Elvis, Pat Boone said. Heck, I have a hard time imagining an old Pat Boone, even though I see him in TV commercials from time to time. Pat Boone — pushing 80. “Ain’t That a Shame.”



Boone was at or near the top of the heap before Elvis came along. Some kids favored Boone, others Little Richard, still others Bill Haley and the Comets. After Elvis upset the pop music apple cart, there would be still other idols — Frankie Avalon, Fabian, Conway Twitty, Paul Anka, and others. But once Elvis arrived, it was simple: Elvis was king. The others were fighting for second place. A distant second place.

He was born in Tupelo, Mississippi on January 8, 1935, during the depths of the Great Depression. As a young adult, about to conquer the nation and the world, he came along at the right time. Americans, having endured the privations of the Depression, followed by the rationing and other sacrifices of World War II, were ready to embrace wholeheartedly the new religion of unbridled consumerism — formerly known as hedonism. And among the things we wanted to consume were each other. Men and women were dressing differently, showing more skin. Young men wore T-shirts with sleeves rolled up to show off biceps and triceps. Skirts on young women became shorter and looser. Hoop skirts flew up delightfully when they spun around on the dance floor. And thanks to the movies, the record industry and the be-bop style in music, the girls’ bodies and the boys’ heads were spinning more than ever.

The cars had more chrome and steel. The lunch pails and the dinner plates were fuller. Television gave us an eye on the world. The products advertised were for mass consumption, not for the privileged few. We seemed to be coming close to the ideal preached by that radical governor and U.S. senator from Louisiana, Huey Long: “Every man a king.” Bosomy women smiling from the movie screens and magazine covers seemed to be smiling and posing just for us. They appeared undressed or lightly clad on calendars, appropriately enough, as their daring seemed to herald the dawn of a new, uninhibited day, pregnant not with babies, which were more mouths to feed and less money available for the second car or the college education for junior. Now the days were pregnant with promise of a better, freer, more self-indulgent life. The dream of Willie Wordsworth was coming true: “Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to the young was very heaven.”

On television, the ramrod straight, uptight Ed Sullivan presented wacky, loose-limbed stars like Martin and Lewis. Milton Berle was an early cross-dresser. In the valley and shadow of the atomic and hydrogen bombs, Americans thought about fallout shelters and going back to church. The Bible and



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books about the Bible were more popular than ever. Some not only bought, but even read them. Norman Vincent Peale tried to calm our anxieties with *The Power of Positive Thinking*. An anxious, troubled nation turned his books into bestsellers. Oral Roberts pitched his tent and spread his healing ministry through the miracle of television. Bishop Fulton Sheen moved religion from Sunday mornings to prime time weekday evenings with his *Life Is Worth Living* series. His ratings propelled the Catholic prelate past Milton Berle and Frank Sinatra. Saturday nights for the elderly and shut-ins brought the soothing champagne music of Lawrence Welk. Then along came Elvis.

Kids had money to spend and few responsibilities governing how they spent it. Kids were made for fads. Elvismania was a fad that lasted. By all rhyme and reason, it should have burned out in six months to a year at most. His elders and ours confidently labeled the gyrating, hip rotating singer a “flash in the pan.” Some flash. Some pan. Years and decades later, the Boston Red Sox allowed a pitching great named Roger Clemens to go his way as a free agent. The team’s general manager said the big right-hander was in “the twilight of his career.” Four Cy Young Awards later, Clemens would remark on that irony. “It’s takin’ a long time for that ol’ sun to go down, isn’t it?” Elvis could have said something similar about his “flash in the pan.” Except he wasn’t given to boasting. Offstage he seemed incredibly modest, even shying away from the title that was bestowed on him at age 21 and followed him the rest of his life: King of Rock ‘n’ Roll.

He was almost astonishingly polite, addressing all adults as “sir” or “ma’am.” An only child (a twin brother died in infancy), he was known to be very devoted to his mother. It was well publicized that he neither drank nor smoked. Offstage a young Mormon seemed to be inhabiting that lithe, muscular young body with the restless energy that would explode onstage into a whirling musical frenzy. When that happened, Dr. Jekyll was long gone and out of mind, and Mr. Hyde had the stage. Then the ducktail haircut and the sideburns seemed to fit the youthful rebellion he personified as he moved like a restless panther across a stage, a curled smile that resembled a sneer on his lips, a James Dean, amplified and set to a pulsating rock ‘n’ roll beat. And, of course, the shaky legs and the pulsating lower portion of his body earned him the nickname “Elvis the Pelvis.”

He debuted on national TV in January of 1956 with the Dorsey Brothers on the *Stage Show*, an ironic venue where he entertained a mature audience accustomed to the more gentle swing of the big bands before the bobby soxers invaded and started screaming with uninhibited delight and longing. He appeared twice on the *Milton Berle Show* and on the second of those appearances, he performed “Hound Dog” with a bump and grind routine on prime time television that brought national outrage and condemnation. Ed Sullivan announced that he would never have such a vulgar act on his show. Then Steve Allen, whose NBC variety show was on in the same Sunday night time slot as Sullivan’s CBS show, signed Elvis for one show and on that particular Sunday night, Allen clobbered Sullivan in the ratings, the only time he ever beat the wooden, but iconic, master of ceremonies. Sullivan suddenly discovered the virtues of that young man and signed Presley to appear on three *Ed Sullivan Shows* for the then unheard of sum of \$50,000. The King ruled and if he didn’t know how to squeeze show biz execs for all he could get, his manager, the flamboyant Colonel Tom Parker, sure as heck did.

Listening to his music today and appreciating the incredible range of his vocal skills and interests, it’s hard to believe how many professionals dismissed him as a no-talent huckster when he first burst onto the national scene. Yet the more critics panned him, the more his fans loved him. He sold records in unprecedented quantities. RCA Victor, which had purchased his contract from the regional Sun Records Company in Memphis, Tennessee, couldn’t print Presley records fast enough. Then he went into the



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movies and though his acting skills were mostly undeveloped, he became an immediate box office sensation. He was drafted into the Army for two years, but his records continued to sell. They sold even faster when he returned.

Even today, sophisticates have trouble accepting his enduring popularity. They can admit to liking some of his later music, but not the “Hound Dog” and “Heartbreak Hotel” wailings that knocked the world on its ear in 1956. The record-buying public kept defying the critics and what would have seemed to be common sense. Though he never performed outside the United States, his dizzying popularity was worldwide. In 2005, to commemorate his 70th birthday, his record company in England re-released a 1958 gold record, “One Night.” It soared to Number One all over again, 47 years after its original run and 28 years after the singer’s death. More remarkably, the song it displaced when it reached Number One in 2005 was his 1957 gold record, “Jailhouse Rock,” the title song of one of his early motion pictures.

The 19-year-old who left the Grand Ol’ Opry crushed after the audience reacted to his performance by sitting on their hands, nonetheless toured the South and West as the “Hillbilly Cat,” appearing as the opening act for more established country stars who watched in alarm as he drove the largely female audiences into frenzied delight with his music and antics. “You son of a bitch!” one star reportedly growled as the young idol walked offstage. “How the hell am I supposed to follow that?”

Photo of Elvis Presley in 1964: AP Images



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