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Elvis Presley



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Elvis Aaron Presley^a (January 8, 1935 – August 16, 1977) was one of the most popular American singers of the 20th century. A cultural icon, he is widely known by the single name Elvis. He is often referred to as the "King of Rock and Roll" or simply "the King".

Born in [Tupelo, Mississippi](#), Presley moved to [Memphis, Tennessee](#), with his family at the age of 13. He began his career there in 1954 when [Sun Records](#) owner [Sam Phillips](#), eager to bring the sound of [African-American music](#) to a wider audience, saw in Presley the means to realize his ambition. Accompanied by guitarist [Scotty Moore](#) and bassist [Bill Black](#), Presley was one of the originators of [rockabilly](#), an uptempo, [backbeat](#)-driven fusion of [country](#) and [rhythm and blues](#). [RCA Victor](#) acquired his contract in a deal arranged by [Colonel Tom Parker](#), who would manage the singer for over two decades. Presley's first RCA single, "Heartbreak Hotel", released in January 1956, was a number one hit. He became the leading figure of the newly popular sound of [rock and roll](#) with a series of network television appearances and chart-topping records. His energized interpretations of songs, many from [African American](#) sources, and his uninhibited performance style made him enormously popular—and controversial. In November 1956, he made his film debut in *Love Me Tender*.

Conscripted into military service in 1958, Presley relaunched his recording career two years later with some of his most commercially successful work. He staged few concerts, however, and, guided by Parker, proceeded to devote much of the 1960s to making Hollywood movies and soundtrack albums, most of them critically derided. In 1968, after seven years away from the stage, he returned to live performance in a celebrated [comeback television special](#) that led to an extended [Las Vegas](#) concert residency and a string of profitable tours. In 1973, Presley staged the first concert broadcast globally via satellite, *Aloha from Hawaii*, seen by approximately 1.5 billion viewers. Prescription drug abuse severely compromised his health, and he died suddenly in 1977 at the age of 42.

Presley is regarded as one of the most important figures of 20th-century popular culture. He had a versatile voice and unusually wide success encompassing many genres, including country, [pop ballads](#), [gospel](#), and [blues](#). He is the best-selling solo artist in the history of popular music.^{[1][2][3][4]} Nominated for 14 competitive [Grammys](#), he won three, and received the [Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award](#) at age 36. He has been inducted into four music [halls of fame](#).

Elvis Presley

Publicity photo for *Jailhouse Rock* (1957)

Background information

Birth name	Elvis Aaron Presley
Born	January 8, 1935 Tupelo, Mississippi, U.S.
Died	August 16, 1977 (aged 42) Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.
Genres	Rock and roll , pop , rockabilly , country , blues , gospel , R&B
Occupations	Musician, actor
Instruments	Vocals, guitar, piano
Years active	1953–77
Labels	Sun , RCA Victor
Associated acts	The Blue Moon Boys , The Jordanaires , The Imperials
Website	elvis.com

- Fiji Hindi
- Føroyskt
- Français
- Frysk
- Gaeilge
- Gaelg
- Gàidhlig
- Galego
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- Hrvatski
- Ido
- Bahasa Indonesia
- Íslenska
- Italiano
- עברית
- Basa Jawa
- Kapampangan
- ()
- Kiswahili
- Кырык мары
- Latina
- Latviešu
- Lëtzebuergesch
- Lietuvių
- Lumbaart
- Magyar
- Македонски

- Bahasa Melayu
- Mirandés
- Монгол
- Nāhuatl
- Nederlands
- Nedersaksisch
- 日本語
- Norsk (bokmål)
- Norsk (nynorsk)
- Occitan
- Олык Марий
- Oʻzbek
- Pangasinan
- Papiamentu
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Life and career

Early years (1935–53)

Childhood in Tupelo

Elvis Presley was born on January 8, 1935, in **Tupelo, Mississippi**, to 18-year-old Vernon Elvis and 22-year-old Gladys Love Presley.^[5] In the two-room **shotgun house** built by his father in readiness for the birth, Jesse Garon Presley, his identical twin brother, was delivered 35 minutes before him, **stillborn**. As an only child, Presley became close to both parents and formed an unusually tight bond with his mother. The family attended an **Assembly of God** church where he found his initial musical inspiration.^[6]

Presley's ancestry was primarily a Western European mix: On his mother's side, he was **Scots-Irish**, with some



Presley's birthplace in **Tupelo**, Mississippi

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Português
 Română
 Runa Simi
 Русинський
 Русский
 Sardu
 Shqip
 Sicilianu
 Simple English
 Slovenčina
 Slovenščina
 Ślůnski

Српски / Srpski
 Srpskohrvatski /
 Српскохрватски
 Suomi
 Svenska
 Tagalog

Тоҷикӣ
 Türkçe
 Українська

Tiếng Việt
 Volapük
 Winaray

Yorùbá
 粵語
 Žemaitėška
 中文

French Norman; one of Gladys's great-great-grandmothers

was **Cherokee**.^[7]^b His father's forebears were of

Scottish^[8] or **German**^[9] origin. Gladys was regarded by relatives and friends as the dominant member of the small family. Vernon moved from one odd job to the next, evidencing little ambition.^[10]^[11] The family often relied on help from neighbors and government food assistance. In 1938, they lost their home after Vernon was found guilty of altering a check written by the landowner. He was jailed for eight months, and Gladys and Elvis moved in with relatives.^[12]

In September 1941, Presley entered first grade at East Tupelo Consolidated, where his instructors regarded him as "average".^[13] He was encouraged to enter a singing contest after impressing his schoolteacher with a rendition of **Red Foley's** country song "**Old Shep**" during morning prayers. The contest, held at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show on October 3, 1945, saw his first public performance: dressed as a cowboy, the ten-year-old Presley stood on a chair to reach the microphone and sang "Old Shep". He recalled placing fifth.^[14] A few months later, Presley received for his birthday his first guitar. He had hoped for something else—by different accounts, either a bicycle or a rifle.^[15]^[16] Over the following year, he received basic guitar lessons from two of his uncles and the new pastor at the family's church. Presley recalled, "I took the guitar, and I watched people, and I learned to play a little bit. But I would never sing in public. I was very shy about it."^[17]

Entering a new school, Milam, for sixth grade in September 1946, Presley was regarded as a loner. The following year, he began bringing his guitar in on a daily basis. He would play and sing during lunchtime, and was often teased as a "trashy" kid who played **hillbilly** music. The family was by then living in a largely African American neighborhood.^[18] A devotee of **Mississippi Slim's** show on the Tupelo radio station **WELO**, Presley was described as "crazy about music" by Slim's younger brother, a classmate of Presley's, who often took him in to the station. Slim supplemented Presley's guitar tuition by demonstrating chord techniques.^[19] When his protégé was 12 years old, Slim scheduled him for two on-air performances. Presley was overcome by stage fright the first time, but succeeded in performing the following week.^[20]

Teenage life in Memphis

In November 1948, the family moved to **Memphis, Tennessee**. After residing for nearly a year in rooming houses, they were granted a two-bedroom apartment in the **public housing** complex known as the Courts.^[21] Enrolled at **Humes High School**, Presley received only a C in music in eighth grade. When his music teacher told him he had no aptitude for singing, he brought in his guitar the next day and sang a recent hit, "Keep Them Cold Icy Fingers Off Me", in an effort to prove otherwise. A classmate later recalled that the teacher "agreed that Elvis was right when he said that she didn't appreciate his kind of singing."^[22] He was generally too shy to perform openly, and was occasionally bullied by classmates who viewed him as a "mama's boy".^[23] In 1950, he began practicing guitar regularly under the tutelage of Jesse Lee Denson, a neighbor two-and-a-half years his senior. They and three other boys—including two future rockabilly pioneers, brothers **Dorsey** and **Johnny Burnette**—formed a loose musical collective that played frequently around the Courts.^[24] That September, he began ushering at Loew's State Theater.^[25] Other jobs followed during his school years: Precision Tool, Loew's again, and MARL Metal Products.^[26]

During his junior year, Presley began to stand out more among his classmates, largely because of his appearance: he grew out his sideburns and styled his hair with rose oil and Vaseline. On his own time, he would head down to **Beale Street**, the heart of Memphis's thriving **blues** scene, and gaze longingly at the wild, flashy clothes in the windows of **Lansky Brothers**. By his senior year, he was wearing them.^[27] Overcoming his reticence about performing outside the Courts, he competed in Humes's Annual "Minstrel" show in April 1953. Singing and playing guitar, he opened with "**Till I Waltz Again with You**", a recent hit for **Teresa Brewer**. Presley recalled that the performance did much for his reputation: "I wasn't popular in school ... I failed music—only thing I ever failed. And then they entered me in this talent show ... when I came onstage I heard people kind of rumbling and whispering and so forth, 'cause nobody knew I even sang. It was amazing how popular I became after that."^[28]

Presley, who never received formal music training or learned to read music, studied and played by ear. He frequented record stores with **jukeboxes** and listening booths. He knew all of **Hank Snow's**

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songs^[29] and he loved records by other country singers such as [Roy Acuff](#), [Ernest Tubb](#), [Ted Daffan](#), [Jimmie Rodgers](#), [Jimmie Davis](#), and [Bob Wills](#).^[30] The [Southern Gospel](#) singer [Jake Hess](#), one of his favorite performers, was a significant influence on his ballad-singing style.^{[31][32]} He was a regular audience member at the monthly All-Night Singings downtown, where many of the white gospel groups that performed reflected the influence of African American [spiritual music](#).^[33] He adored the music of black gospel singer [Sister Rosetta Tharpe](#).^[30] Like some of his peers, he may have attended blues venues—of necessity, in the [segregated South](#), only on nights designated for exclusively white audiences.^[34] He certainly listened to the regional radio stations that played "race records": spirituals, blues, and the modern, [backbeat-heavy](#) sound of [rhythm and blues](#).^[35] Many of his future recordings were inspired by local African American musicians such as [Arthur Crudup](#) and [Rufus Thomas](#).^{[36][37]} [B.B. King](#) recalled that he knew Presley before he was popular when they both used to frequent Beale Street.^[38] By the time he graduated high school in June 1953, Presley had already singled out music as his future.^{[39][40]}

First recordings (1953–55)

Sam Phillips and Sun Records

See also: [Elvis Presley's Sun recordings](#)



In August 1953, Presley walked into the offices of [Sun Records](#). He aimed to pay for a few minutes of studio time to record a two-sided [acetate disc](#): "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin". He would later claim he intended the record as a gift for his mother, or was merely interested in what he "sounded like", though there was a much cheaper, amateur record-making service at a nearby general store. Biographer [Peter Guralnick](#) argues that he chose Sun in the hope of being discovered. Asked by receptionist Marion Keisker what kind of singer he was, Presley responded, "I sing all kinds." When she pressed him on whom he sounded like, he repeatedly answered, "I don't sound like nobody." After he recorded, Sun boss [Sam Phillips](#) asked Keisker to note down the young man's name, which she did along with her own commentary: "Good ballad singer. Hold."^[41] Presley cut a second acetate in January 1954—"I'll Never Stand In Your Way" and "It Wouldn't Be the Same Without You"—but again nothing came of it.^[42]

Not long after, he failed an audition for a local vocal quartet, the Songfellows. He explained to his father, "They told me I couldn't sing."^[43] Songfellow [Jim Hamill](#) later claimed that he was turned down because he did not demonstrate an ear for harmony at the time.^[44] In April, Presley began working for the Crown Electric company as a truck driver.^[45] His friend Ronnie Smith, after playing a few local gigs with him, suggested he contact Eddie Bond, leader of Smith's professional band, which had an opening for a vocalist. Bond rejected him after a tryout, advising Presley to stick to truck driving "because you're never going to make it as a singer."^[46]

Phillips, meanwhile, was always on the lookout for someone who could bring the sound of the black musicians on whom Sun focused to a broader audience. As Keisker reported, "Over and over I remember Sam saying, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.'"^[47] In June, he acquired a demo recording of a ballad, "Without You", that he thought might suit the teenaged singer. Presley came by the studio, but was unable to do it justice. Despite this, Phillips asked Presley to sing as many numbers as he knew. He was sufficiently affected by what he heard to invite two local musicians, guitarist [Winfield "Scotty" Moore](#) and upright bass player [Bill Black](#), to work something up with Presley for a recording session.^[48]

The session, held the evening of July 5, proved entirely unfruitful until late in the night. As they were about to give up and go home, Presley took his guitar and launched into a 1946 blues number, Arthur Crudup's "[That's All Right](#)". Moore recalled, "All of a sudden, Elvis just started singing this song, jumping around and acting the fool, and then Bill picked up his bass, and he started acting the fool, too, and I started playing with them. Sam, I think, had the door to the control booth open ... he stuck his head

["That's All Right"](#)

Presley transformed not only the sound but the emotion of the song, turning what had been written as a "lament for a lost love into a satisfied declaration of independence."^[49]

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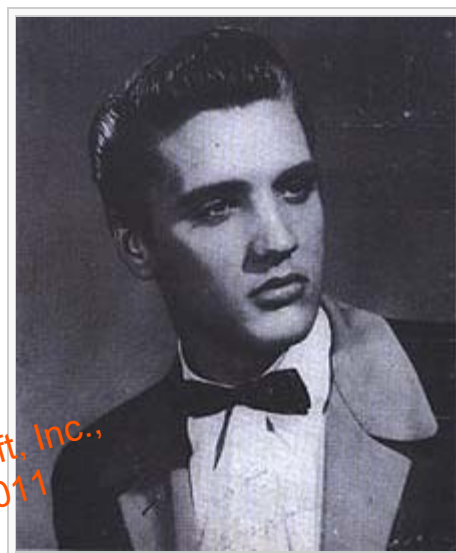
out and said, "What are you doing?" And we said, "We don't know." 'Well, back up,' he said, 'try to find a place to start, and do it again.'" Phillips quickly began taping; this was the sound he had been looking for.^[50] Three days later, popular Memphis DJ [Dewey Phillips](#) played "That's All Right" on his *Red, Hot, and Blue* show.^[51] Listeners began phoning in, eager to find out who the singer was. The interest was such that Phillips played the record repeatedly during the last two hours of his show. Interviewing Presley on-air, Phillips asked him what high school he attended in order to clarify his color for the many callers who had assumed he was black.^[52] During the next few days the trio recorded a [bluegrass](#) number, [Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky"](#), again in a distinctive style and employing a jury-rigged [echo effect](#) that Sam Phillips dubbed "slapback". A single was pressed with "That's All Right" on the A side and "Blue Moon of Kentucky" on the reverse.^[53]

Early live performances and signing to RCA

The trio played publicly for the first time on July 17 at the Bon Air club—Presley still sporting his child-size guitar.^[54] At the end of the month, they appeared at the [Overton Park Shell](#), with [Slim Whitman](#) headlining. A combination of his strong response to rhythm and nervousness at playing before a large crowd led Presley to shake his legs as he performed: his wide-cut pants emphasized his movements, causing young women in the audience to start screaming.^[55] Moore recalled, "During the instrumental parts he would back off from the mike and be playing and shaking, and the crowd would just go wild".^[56] Black, a natural showman, whooped and rode his bass, hitting double licks that Presley would later remember as "really a wild sound, like a jungle drum or something".^[56] Soon after, Moore and Black quit their old band to play with Presley regularly, and DJ and promoter [Bob Neal](#) became the trio's manager. From August through October, they played frequently at the Eagle's Nest club and returned to Sun Studio for more recording sessions,^[57] and Presley quickly grew more confident on stage. According to Moore,

"His movement was a natural thing, but he was also very conscious of what got a reaction. He'd do something one time and then he would expand on it real quick."^[58] Presley made what would be his only appearance on [Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry*](#) on October 2; after a polite audience response, *Opry* manager [Jim Denny](#) told Phillips that his singer was "not bad" but did not suit the program.^[59] Two weeks later, Presley was booked on [Louisiana Hayride](#), the *Opry's* chief, and more adventurous, rival. The [Shreveport](#)-based show was broadcast to 198 radio stations in 28 states. Presley had another attack of nerves during the first set, which drew a muted reaction. A more composed and energetic second set inspired an enthusiastic response.^[60] House drummer [D.J. Fontana](#) brought a new element, complementing Presley's movements with accented beats that he had mastered playing in strip clubs.^[61] Soon after the show, the *Hayride* engaged Presley for a year's worth of Saturday-night appearances. Trading in his old guitar for \$8 (and seeing it promptly dispatched to the garbage), he purchased a [Martin](#) instrument for \$175, and his trio began playing in new locales including [Houston, Texas](#), and [Texarkana, Arkansas](#).^[62]

By early 1955, Presley's regular *Hayride* appearances, constant touring, and well-received record releases had made him a substantial regional star, from Tennessee to West Texas. In January, Neal signed a formal management contract with Presley and brought the singer to the attention of [Colonel Tom Parker](#), whom he considered the best promoter in the music business. Parker—Dutch-born, though he claimed to be from West Virginia—had acquired an honorary colonel's commission from country singer turned Louisiana governor [Jimmie Davis](#). Having successfully managed top country star [Eddy Arnold](#), he was now working with the new number one country singer, [Hank Snow](#). Parker booked Presley on Snow's February tour.^{[63][64]} When the tour reached [Odessa, Texas](#), a 19-year-old [Roy Orbison](#) saw Presley for the first time: "His energy was incredible, his instinct was just amazing. ... I just didn't know what to make of it. There was just no reference point in the culture to compare it."^[29] Presley made his television debut on March 3 on the [KSLA-TV](#) broadcast of



Presley in a [Sun Records](#) promotional photograph, 1954

Louisiana Hayride. Soon after, he failed an audition for *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* on the CBS television network. By August, Sun had released ten sides credited to "Elvis Presley, Scotty and Bill"; on the latest recordings, the trio were joined by a drummer. Some of the songs, like "That's All Right", were in what one Memphis journalist described as the "R&B idiom of negro field jazz"; others, like "Blue Moon of Kentucky", were "more in the country field", "but there was a curious blending of the two different musics in both".^[65] This blend of styles made it difficult for Presley's music to find radio airplay. According to Neal, many country music disc jockeys would not play it because he sounded too much like a black artist and none of the rhythm and blues stations would touch him because "he sounded too much like a hillbilly."^[66] The blend came to be known as *rockabilly*. At the time, Presley was variously billed as "The King of Western Bop", "The Hillbilly Cat", and "The Memphis Flash".^[67]

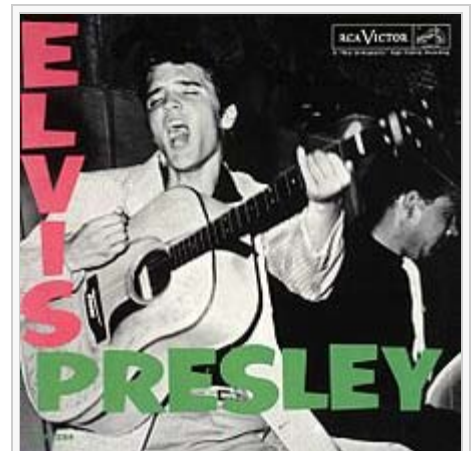
Presley renewed Neal's management contract in August 1955, simultaneously appointing Parker as his special adviser.^[68] The group maintained an extensive touring schedule throughout the second half of the year.^[69] Neal recalled, "It was almost frightening, the reaction that came to Elvis from the teenaged boys. So many of them, through some sort of jealousy, would practically hate him. There were occasions in some towns in Texas when we'd have to be sure to have a police guard because somebody'd always try to take a crack at him. They'd get a gang and try to waylay him or something."^[70] The trio became a quartet when *Hayride* drummer Fontana joined as a full member. In mid-October, they played a few shows in support of *Bill Haley*, whose "Rock Around the Clock" had been a number one hit the previous year. Haley observed that Presley had a natural feel for rhythm, and advised him to sing fewer ballads.^[71]

At the Country Disc Jockey Convention in early November, Presley was voted the year's most promising male artist.^[72] Several record companies had by now shown interest in signing him. After three major labels made offers of up to \$25,000, Parker and Phillips struck a deal with *RCA Victor* on November 21 to acquire Presley's Sun contract for an unprecedented \$40,000.^[73] Presley, at 20, was still a minor, so his father signed the contract.^[74] Parker arranged with the owners of *Hill and Range* Publishing, *Jean* and *Julian Aberbach*, to create two entities, *Elvis Presley Music* and *Gladys Music*, to handle all of the new material recorded by Presley. Songwriters were obliged to forego one third of their customary royalties in exchange for having him perform their compositions.^[75] By December, RCA had begun to heavily promote its new singer, and before month's end had reissued many of his Sun recordings.^[76]

Commercial breakout and controversy (1956–58)

First national TV appearances and debut album

On January 10, 1956, Presley made his first recordings for RCA in Nashville.^[79] Extending the singer's by now customary backup of Moore, Black, and Fontana, RCA enlisted pianist *Floyd Cramer*, guitarist *Chet Atkins*, and three background singers, including Gordon Stoker of the popular *Jordanaires* quartet, to fill out the sound.^[80] The session produced the moody, unusual "Heartbreak Hotel", released as a single on January 27.^[79] Parker finally brought Presley to national television, booking him on CBS's *Stage Show* for six appearances over two months. The program, produced in New York, was hosted on alternate weeks by big band leaders and brothers *Tommy* and *Jimmy Dorsey*. After his first appearance, on January 28, Presley stayed in town to record at RCA's New York studio. The sessions yielded eight songs, including a cover of *Carl Perkins'* rockabilly anthem "Blue Suede Shoes". In February, Presley's "I Forgot to Remember to Forget", a Sun recording initially released the previous August, reached the top of the *Billboard country chart*.^[81] Neal's contract was terminated and, on March 2, Parker became Presley's manager.^[82]



The "iconic cover" of Presley's 1956 debut album^[77] featuring a photo taken July 31, 1955^[78]



RCA Victor released Presley's [self-titled debut album](#) on March 23. Joined by five previously unreleased Sun recordings, its seven recently recorded tracks were of a broad variety. There were two country songs and a bouncy pop tune. The others would centrally define the evolving sound of [rock and roll](#): "Blue Suede Shoes"—"an improvement over Perkins' in almost every way", according to critic [Robert Hilburn](#)—and three R&B numbers that had been part of Presley's stage repertoire for some time, covers of [Little Richard](#), [Ray Charles](#), and [The Drifters](#). As described by Hilburn, these "were the most revealing of all. Unlike many white artists ... who watered down the gritty edges of the original R&B versions of songs in the '50s, Presley reshaped them. He not only injected the tunes with his own vocal character but also made guitar, not piano, the lead instrument in all three cases."^[83] It became the first rock and roll album to top the *Billboard* chart, a position it held for 10 weeks.^[79] While Presley was not an innovative instrumentalist like Moore or contemporary African American rockers [Bo Diddley](#) and [Chuck Berry](#), cultural historian Gilbert B. Rodman argues that the album's cover image, "of Elvis having the time of his life on stage *with a guitar in his hands* played a crucial role in positioning the guitar...as the instrument that best captured the style and spirit of this new music."^[84]

Milton Berle Show and "Hound Dog"

Presley made the first of two appearances on NBC's *Milton Berle Show* on April 3. His performance, on the deck of the [USS Hancock](#) in [San Diego](#), prompted cheers and screams from an audience of sailors and their dates.^[85] A few days later, a flight taking Presley and his band to Nashville for a recording session left all three badly shaken when an engine died and the plane almost went down over Arkansas.^[86] Twelve weeks after its original release, "Heartbreak Hotel" became Presley's first number one pop hit. In late April, Presley began a two-week residency at the [New Frontier Hotel and Casino](#) on the [Las Vegas Strip](#). The shows were poorly received by the conservative, middle-aged hotel guests—"like a jug of corn liquor at a champagne party", wrote a critic for *Newsweek*.^[87] Amid his Vegas tenure, Presley, who had serious acting ambitions, signed a seven-year contract with [Paramount Pictures](#).^[88] He began a tour of the Midwest in mid-May, taking in 15 cities in as many days.^[89] He had attended several shows by [Freddie Bell and the Bellboys](#) in Vegas, and was struck by their cover of "Hound Dog", a hit in 1952 for blues singer [Big Mama Thornton](#) by songwriters [Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller](#). It became the new closing number of his act.^[90] After a show in [La Crosse, Wisconsin](#), an urgent message on the letterhead of the local Catholic diocese's newspaper was sent to FBI director [J. Edgar Hoover](#). It warned that "Presley is a definite danger to the security of the United States. ... [His] actions and motions were such as to rouse the sexual passions of teenaged youth. ... After the show, more than 1,000 teenagers tried to gang into Presley's room at the auditorium. ... Indications of the harm Presley did just in La Crosse were the two high school girls ... whose abdomen and thigh had Presley's autograph."^[91]

The second *Milton Berle Show* appearance came on June 5 at NBC's Hollywood studio, amid another hectic tour. Berle persuaded the singer to leave his guitar backstage, advising, "Let 'em see you, son."^[92] During the performance, Presley abruptly halted an uptempo rendition of "Hound Dog" with a wave of his arm and launched into a slow, grinding version accentuated with energetic, exaggerated body movements.^[92] Presley's gyrations created a storm of controversy.^[93] Television critics were outraged: [Jack Gould](#) of *The New York Times* wrote, "Mr. Presley has no discernible singing ability. ... His phrasing, if it can be called that, consists of the stereotyped variations that go with a beginner's aria in a bathtub. ... His one specialty is an accented movement of the body ... primarily identified with the repertoire of the blond bombshells of the burlesque runway."^[94] Ben Gross of the New York *Daily News* opined that popular music "has reached its lowest depths in the 'grunt and groin' antics of one Elvis Presley. ... Elvis, who rotates his pelvis ... gave an exhibition that was suggestive and vulgar, tinged with the kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and bordellos".^[95] [Ed Sullivan](#), whose own variety show was the nation's most popular, declared him "unfit for family viewing".^[96] To Presley's displeasure, he soon found himself being referred to as "Elvis the Pelvis", which he called "one of the most childish expressions I ever heard, comin' from an

"Blue Suede Shoes"

Presley exhorts guitarist Scotty Moore during his [break](#). "Let's go, cat!" was in the Perkins original. "Aw, walk the dog!" is all Elvis.

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adult."^[97]

Steve Allen Show and first Sullivan appearance

The Berle shows drew such high ratings that Presley was booked for a July 1 appearance on NBC's *Steve Allen Show* in New York. Allen, no fan of rock and roll, introduced a "new Elvis" in a white bow tie and black tails. Presley sang "Hound Dog" for less than a minute to a *basset hound* wearing a top hat and bow tie. As described by television historian Jake Austen, "Allen thought Presley was talentless and absurd... [he] set things up so that Presley would show his contrition."^[98] Allen, for his part, later wrote that he found Presley's "strange, gangly, country-boy charisma, his hard-to-define cuteness, and his charming eccentricity intriguing" and simply worked the singer into the customary "comedy fabric" of his program.^[99] Presley would refer back to the Allen show as the most ridiculous performance of his career.^[100] Later that night, he appeared on *Hy Gardner Calling*, a popular local TV show. Pressed on whether he had learned anything from the criticism to which he was being subjected, Presley responded, "No, I haven't, I don't feel like I'm doing anything wrong. ... I don't see how any type of music would have any bad influence on people when it's only music. ... I mean, how would rock 'n' roll music make anyone rebel against their parents?"^[95]



The rivalry between variety show hosts *Steve Allen* and *Ed Sullivan* (pictured) helped catapult Presley to unprecedented fame.

The next day, Presley recorded "Hound Dog", along with "*Any Way You Want Me*" and "*Don't Be Cruel*". *The Jordanaires* sang harmony, as they had on *The Steve Allen Show*; they would work with Presley through the 1960s. A few days later, the singer made an outdoor concert appearance in Memphis at which he announced, "You know, those people in New York are not gonna change me none. I'm gonna show you what the real Elvis is like tonight."^[101] In August, a judge in *Jacksonville, Florida*, ordered Presley to tame his act. Throughout the following performance, he largely kept still, except for wiggling his little finger suggestively in mockery of the order.^[102] The single pairing "Don't Be Cruel" with "Hound Dog" ruled the top of the charts for 11 weeks—a mark that would not be surpassed for 36 years.^[103] Recording sessions for Presley's second album took place in Hollywood during the first week of September. Leiber and Stoller, the writers of "Hound Dog", contributed "*Love Me*".

Allen's show with Presley had, for the first time, beaten CBS's *Ed Sullivan Show* in the ratings. Sullivan, despite his June pronouncement, booked the singer for three appearances for an unprecedented \$50,000.^[104] The first, on September 9, 1956, was seen by approximately 60 million viewers—a record 82.6 percent of

the television audience.^[105] Actor *Charles Laughton* hosted the show, filling in while Sullivan recuperated from a car accident.^[96] Presley appeared in two segments that night from *CBS Television City* in Hollywood. According to Elvis legend, Presley was shot only from the waist up. Watching clips of the Allen and Berle shows with his producer, Sullivan had opined that Presley "got some kind of device hanging down below the crotch of his pants—so when he moves his legs back and forth you can see the outline of his cock. ... I think it's a Coke bottle. ... We just can't have this on a Sunday night. This is a family show!"^[106] Sullivan publicly told *TV Guide*, "As for his gyrations, the whole thing can be controlled with camera shots."^[104] In fact, Presley was shown head-to-toe in the first and second shows. Though the camerawork was relatively discreet during his debut, with leg-concealing closeups when he danced, the studio audience reacted in customary style: screaming.^{[107][108]} Presley's performance of his forthcoming single, the ballad "*Love Me Tender*", prompted a record-shattering million advance orders.^[109] More than any other single event, it was this first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* that made Presley a national celebrity of barely precedented proportions.^[96]

Accompanying Presley's rise to fame, a cultural shift was taking place that he both helped inspire and came to symbolize. Igniting the "biggest pop craze since *Glenn Miller* and *Frank Sinatra* ... Presley brought rock'n'roll into the mainstream of popular culture", writes historian Marty Jezer. "As Presley set the artistic pace, other artists followed. ... Presley, more than anyone else, gave the young a

belief in themselves as a distinct and somehow unified generation—the first in America ever to feel the power of an integrated youth culture."^[110]

Crazed crowds and movie debut

The audience response at Presley's live shows became increasingly fevered. Moore recalled, "He'd start out, 'You ain't nothin' but a Hound Dog,' and they'd just go to pieces. They'd always react the same way. There'd be a riot every time."^[111] At the two concerts he performed in September at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show, 50 **National Guardsmen** were added to the police security

to prevent crowd trouble.^[112] *Elvis*, Presley's second album, was released in October and quickly rose to number one. Assessing the musical and cultural impact of Presley's recordings from "That's All Right" through *Elvis*, rock critic **Dave Marsh** wrote that "these records, more than any others, contain the seeds of what rock & roll was, has been and most likely what it may foreseeably become."^[113]

Presley returned to the Sullivan show, hosted this time by its namesake, on October 28. After the performance, crowds in Nashville and St. Louis burned him in effigy.^[96] His first motion picture, *Love Me Tender*, was released on November 21. Though he was not top billed, the film's original title—*The Reno Brothers*—was changed to capitalize on his latest number one record: "Love Me Tender" had hit the top of the charts earlier that month. To further take advantage of Presley's popularity, four musical numbers were added to what was originally a straight acting role. The movie was panned by the critics but did very well at the box office.^[88] Presley would receive top billing on every subsequent film he made.



On December 4, Presley dropped into Sun Records where Carl Perkins and **Jerry Lee Lewis** were recording and **jammed** with them. Though Phillips no longer had the right to release any Presley material, he made sure the session was captured on tape. The results became legendary as the "Million Dollar Quartet" recordings—**Johnny Cash** was long thought to have played as well, but he was present only briefly at Phillips' instigation for a photo opportunity.^[114] The year ended with a front-page story in *The Wall Street Journal* reporting that Presley merchandise had brought in \$22 million on top of his record sales,^[115] and *Billboard's* declaration that he had placed more songs in the top 100 than any other artist since records were first charted.^[116] In his first full year on RCA, one of the music industry's largest companies, Presley had accounted for over 50 percent of the label's singles sales.^[109]

Leiber and Stoller collaboration and draft notice

Presley made his third and final *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance on January 6, 1957—on this occasion indeed shot only down to the waist. Some commentators have claimed that Parker orchestrated an appearance of censorship to generate publicity.^{[108][117]} In any event, as critic **Greil Marcus** describes, Presley "did not tie himself down. Leaving behind the bland clothes he had worn on the first two shows, he stepped out in the outlandish costume of a pasha, if not a harem girl. From the make-up over his eyes, the hair falling in his face, the overwhelmingly sexual cast of his mouth, he was playing **Rudolph Valentino** in *The Sheik*, with all stops out."^[96] To close, displaying his range and defying Sullivan's wishes, Presley sang a gentle black spiritual, "**Peace in the Valley**". At the end of the show, Sullivan declared Presley "a real decent, fine boy".^[118] Two days later, the Memphis **draft board** announced that Presley would be **classified 1A** and would probably be drafted sometime that year.^[119]

Each of the three Presley singles released in the first half of 1957 went to number one: "**Too Much**", "**All Shook Up**", and "**(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear**". Already an international star, he was attracting fans even where his music was not officially released. Under the headline "Presley Records a Craze in Soviet", *The New York Times*

"We're gonna do a sad song..."

Presley's definition of rock and roll included a sense of humor—here, during his second Sullivan appearance, he introduces one of his signature numbers.

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reported that pressings of his music on discarded X-ray plates were commanding high prices in Leningrad.^[120] Between film shoots and recording sessions, the singer also found time to purchase an 18-room mansion eight miles (13 km) south of downtown Memphis for himself and his parents: *Graceland*.^[121] *Loving You*—the soundtrack to his second film, released in July—was Presley's third straight number one album. The title track was written by Leiber and Stoller, who were then retained to write four of the six songs recorded at the sessions for *Jailhouse Rock*, Presley's next movie. The songwriting team effectively produced the *Jailhouse* sessions and developed a close working relationship with Presley, who came to regard them as his "good-luck charm".^[122] The title track was yet another number one hit, as was the *Jailhouse Rock* EP.



Presley and costar *Judy Tyler* in the trailer for *Jailhouse Rock*, released October 17, 1957

Presley undertook three brief tours during the year, continuing to generate a crazed audience response.^[123] A Detroit newspaper suggested that "the trouble with going to see Elvis Presley is that you're liable to get killed."^[124] Villanova students pelted him with eggs in Philadelphia,^[124] and in Vancouver, the crowd rioted after the end of the show, destroying the stage.^[125] Frank Sinatra, who had famously inspired the swooning of teenaged girls in the 1940s, condemned the new musical phenomenon. In a magazine article, he decried rock and roll as "brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious. ... It fosters almost totally negative and destructive reactions in young people. It smells phoney and false. It is sung, played and written, for the most part, by cretinous goons. ... This rancid-smelling aphrodisiac I deplore."^[126] Asked for a response, Presley said, "I admire the man. He has a right to say what he wants to say. He is a great success and a fine actor, but I think he shouldn't have said it. ... This is a trend, just the same as he faced when he started years ago."^[127]

Leiber and Stoller were again in the studio for the recording of *Elvis' Christmas Album*. Toward the end of the session, they wrote a song on the spot at Presley's request: "Santa Claus Is Back In Town", an innuendo-laden blues.^[128] The holiday release stretched Presley's string of number one albums to four and would eventually become the best selling Christmas album of all time.^{[129][130]} After the session, Moore and Black—drawing only modest weekly salaries, sharing in none of Presley's massive financial success—resigned. Though they were brought back on a per diem basis a few weeks later, it was clear that they had not been part of Presley's inner circle for some time.^[131] On December 20, Presley received his draft notice. He was granted a deferment to finish the forthcoming *King Creole*, in which \$350,000 had already been invested by Paramount and producer Hal Wallis. A couple of weeks into the new year, "Don't", another Leiber and Stoller tune, became Presley's tenth number one seller. It had been only 21 months since "Heartbreak Hotel" had brought him to the top for the first time. Recording sessions for the *King Creole* soundtrack were held in Hollywood mid-January. Leiber and Stoller provided three songs and were again on hand, but it would be the last time they worked closely with Presley.^[132] A studio session on February 1 marked another ending: it was the final occasion on which Black was to perform with Presley. He died in 1965.

Military service and mother's death (1958–60)

On March 24, Presley was inducted into the U.S. Army as a private at Fort Chaffee, near Fort Smith, Arkansas. Captain Arlie Metheny, the information officer, was unprepared for the media attention drawn by the singer's arrival. Hundreds of people descended on Presley as he stepped from the bus; photographers then accompanied him into the base.^[133] Presley announced that he was looking forward to his military stint, saying he did not want to be treated any differently from anyone else: "The Army can do anything it wants with me."^[134] Later, at Fort Hood, Texas, Lieutenant Colonel Marjorie Schulten gave the media carte blanche for one day, after which she declared Presley off-

limits to the press.^[135]

Soon after Presley had commenced basic training at Fort Hood, he received a visit from Eddie Fadal, a businessman he had met when on tour in Texas. Fadal reported that Presley had become convinced his career was finished—"He firmly believed that."^[136] During a two-week leave in early June, Presley cut five sides in Nashville. He returned to training, but in early August his mother was diagnosed with [hepatitis](#) and her condition worsened. Presley was granted emergency leave to visit her, arriving in Memphis on August 12. Two days later, she died of heart failure, aged 46. Presley was devastated;^[137] their relationship had remained extremely close—even into his adulthood, they would use baby talk with each other and Presley would address her with pet names.^[138]

After training at Fort Hood, Presley joined the 3rd Armored Division in [Friedberg](#), Germany, on October 1.^[139] Introduced to [amphetamines](#) by a [sergeant](#) while on maneuvers, he became "practically evangelical about their benefits"—not only for energy, but for "strength" and weight loss, as well—and many of his friends in the outfit joined him in indulging.^[140] The Army also introduced Presley to [karate](#), which he studied seriously, later including it in his live performances.^[141] Fellow soldiers have attested to Presley's wish to be seen as an able, ordinary soldier, despite his fame, and to his generosity while in the service. He donated his Army pay to charity, purchased TV sets for the base, and bought an extra set of fatigues for everyone in his outfit.^[142]

While in Friedberg, Presley met 14-year-old [Priscilla Beaulieu](#). They would eventually marry after a seven-and-a-half-year courtship.^[143] In her autobiography, Priscilla says that despite his worries that it would ruin his career, Parker convinced Presley that to gain popular respect, he should serve his country as a regular soldier rather than in Special Services, where he would have been able to give some musical performances and remain in touch with the public.^[144] Media reports echoed Presley's concerns about his career, but RCA producer [Steve Sholes](#) and [Freddie Bienstock](#) of Hill and Range had carefully prepared for his two-year hiatus. Armed with a substantial amount of unreleased material, they kept up a regular stream of successful releases.^[145] Between his induction and discharge, Presley had ten top 40 hits, including "[Wear My Ring Around Your Neck](#)", the best-selling "[Hard-Headed Woman](#)", and "[One Night](#)" in 1958, and "[\(Now and Then There's\) A Fool Such as I](#)" and the number one "[A Big Hunk o' Love](#)" in 1959.^[146] RCA also managed to generate four albums compiling old material during this period, most successfully *[Elvis' Golden Records](#)* (1958), which hit number three on the LP chart.

Focus on movies (1960–67)

Elvis Is Back

Presley returned to the United States on March 2, 1960, and was honorably discharged with the rank of sergeant on March 5.^[148] The train that carried him from [New Jersey](#) to Tennessee was mobbed all the way, and Presley was called upon to appear at scheduled stops to please his fans.^[149] On the night of March 20, he entered [RCA's Nashville studio](#) to cut tracks for a new album along with a single—"Stuck on You" was rushed into release and swiftly became a number one hit.^[150] Another Nashville session two weeks later yielded a pair of his best-selling singles, the ballads "[It's Now or Never](#)" and "[Are You Lonesome Tonight?](#)", along with the rest of *Elvis Is Back!* The album features several songs described by Greil Marcus as full of [Chicago blues](#) "menace, driven by Presley's own super-miked acoustic guitar, brilliant playing by Scotty Moore, and demonic sax work from [Boots Randolph](#). Elvis's singing wasn't sexy, it was pornographic."^[151] As a whole, the record "conjured up the vision of a performer who could be all things", in the words of music historian John Robertson: "a flirtatious teenage idol with a heart of gold; a tempestuous, dangerous

[152]

File:Elvis compressed.jpg

Presley aboard *USS [General George M. Randall](#)* en route to Germany, September 29, 1958

"It's Now or Never"



Presley broke new stylistic ground and displayed his vocal range with this number one hit. The quasi-operatic ballad ends with Presley "soaring up to an incredible top G sharp."^[147]

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lover; a gutbucket blues singer; a sophisticated nightclub entertainer; [a] raucous rocker". Released only days after recording was complete, it reached number two on the album chart.

Presley returned to television on May 12 as a guest on *The Frank Sinatra Timex Special*—ironic for both stars, given Sinatra's not-so-distant excoriation of rock and roll. Also known as *Welcome Home Elvis*, the show had been taped in late March, the only time all year Presley performed in front of an audience. Parker secured an unheard-of \$125,000 fee for eight minutes of singing. The broadcast drew an enormous viewership.^[153]

G.I. Blues, the soundtrack to Presley's first film since his return, was a number one album in October. His first LP of sacred material, *His Hand in Mine*, followed two months later. It reached number 13 on the U.S. pop chart and number 3 in Great Britain, remarkable figures for a gospel album. In February 1961, Presley performed two shows for a benefit event in Memphis, on behalf of 24 local charities. During a luncheon preceding the event, RCA presented him with a plaque certifying worldwide sales of over 75 million records.^[154] A 12-hour Nashville session in mid-March yielded nearly all of Presley's next studio album, *Something for Everybody*.^[155] As described by John Robertson, it exemplifies the *Nashville sound*, the restrained, cosmopolitan style that would define country music in the 1960s. Presaging much of what was to come from Presley himself over the next half-decade, the album is largely "a pleasant, unthreatening pastiche of the music that had once been Elvis's birthright."^[156] It would be his sixth number one LP. Another benefit concert, raising money for a *Pearl Harbor* memorial, was staged on March 25, in *Hawaii*. It was to be Presley's last public performance for seven years.^[157]

Lost in Hollywood

See also: Elvis Presley filmography

Parker had by now pushed Presley into a heavy moviemaking schedule, focused on formulaic, modestly budgeted musical comedies. Presley at first insisted on pursuing more serious roles, but when two films in a more dramatic vein—*Flaming Star* (1960) and *Wild in the Country* (1961)—were less commercially successful, he reverted to the formula. Among the 27 movies he made during the 1960s, there were few further exceptions.^[158] His films were almost universally panned; one critic dismissed them as a "pantheon of bad taste".^[159] Nonetheless, they were virtually all profitable. Hal Wallis, who produced nine of them, declared, "A Presley picture is the only sure thing in Hollywood."^[160]

Of Presley's films in the 1960s, 15 were accompanied by soundtrack albums and another 5 by soundtrack EPs. The movies' rapid production and release schedules—he frequently starred in three a year—affected his music. According to Jerry Leiber, the soundtrack formula was already evident before Presley left for the Army: "three ballads, one medium-tempo [number], one up-tempo, and one break blues boogie".^[161] As the decade wore on, the quality of the soundtrack songs grew "progressively worse".^[162] Julie Parrish, who appeared in *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* (1966), says that he hated many of the songs chosen for his films.^[163] The Jordanaires' Gordon Stoker describes how Presley would retreat from the studio microphone: "The material was so bad that he felt like he couldn't sing it."^[164] Most of the movie albums featured a song or two from respected writers such as the team of *Doc Pomus* and *Mort Shuman*. But by and large, according to biographer *Jerry Hopkins*, the numbers seemed to be "written on order by men who never really understood Elvis or rock and roll."^[165] Regardless of the songs' quality, it has been argued that Presley generally sang them well, with commitment.^[166] Critic Dave Marsh heard the opposite: "Presley isn't trying, probably the wisest course in the face of material like 'No Room to Rumba in a Sports Car' and 'Rock-a-Hula Baby'."^[113]

In the first half of the decade, three of Presley's soundtrack albums hit number one on the pop charts, and a few of his most popular songs came from his films, such as "*Can't Help Falling in Love*" (1961) and "*Return to Sender*" (1962). ("*Viva Las Vegas*", the title track to the 1964 film, was a minor hit as a B-side, and became truly popular only later.) But, as with artistic merit, the commercial returns steadily diminished. During a five-year span—1964 through 1968—Presley had only one top ten hit: "*Crying in the Chapel*" (1965), a gospel number recorded back in 1960. As for non-movie albums, between the June 1962 release of *Pot Luck* and the November 1968 release of the soundtrack to the television special that signaled his comeback, only one LP of new material by

Presley was issued: the gospel album *How Great Thou Art* (1967). It won him his first **Grammy Award**, for Best Sacred Performance. As Marsh described, Presley was "arguably the greatest white gospel singer of his time [and] really the last rock & roll artist to make gospel as vital a component of his musical personality as his secular songs."^[167]

Shortly before Christmas 1966, more than seven years since they first met, Presley proposed to Priscilla Beaulieu. They were married on May 1, 1967, in a brief ceremony in their suite at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas.^[168] The flow of formulaic movies and assembly-line soundtracks rolled on. It was not until October 1967, when the *Clambake* soundtrack LP registered record low sales for a new Presley album, that RCA executives recognized a problem. "By then, of course, the damage had been done", as historians Connie Kirchberg and Marc Hendrickx put it. "Elvis was viewed as a joke by serious music lovers and a has-been to all but his most loyal fans."^[169]

Comeback (1968–73)

Elvis: the '68 Comeback Special

Main article: [Elvis \(1968 TV program\)](#)

Presley's only child, [Lisa Marie](#), was born on February 1, 1968, during a period when he had grown deeply unhappy with his career.^[172] Of the eight Presley singles released between January 1967 and May 1968, only two charted in the top 40, and none higher than number 28.^[173] His forthcoming soundtrack album, *Speedway*, would die at number 82 on the *Billboard* chart. Parker had already shifted his plans to television, where Presley had not appeared since the Sinatra Timex show in 1960. He maneuvered a deal with NBC that committed the network to both finance a theatrical feature and broadcast a Christmas special.^[174]

Recorded in late June, the special, called simply *Elvis*, aired on December 3, 1968. Later known as the '68 Comeback Special, the show featured lavish staged studio productions as well as songs performed with a band in front of a small audience—Presley's first live performances since 1961. The live segments saw Presley clad in tight black leather, singing and playing guitar in an uninhibited style reminiscent of his early rock and roll days. Director and coproducer [Steve Binder](#) had worked hard to reassure the nervous singer and to produce a show that was far from the hour of Christmas songs Parker had originally planned.^[175] The show, NBC's highest rated that season, captured 42 percent of the total viewing audience.^[176]

[Jon Landau](#) of *Eye* magazine remarked, "There is something magical about watching a man who has lost himself find his way back home. He sang with the kind of power people no longer expect of rock 'n' roll singers. He moved his body with a lack of pretension and effort that must have made [Jim Morrison](#) green with envy."^[177] Dave Marsh calls the performance one of "emotional grandeur and historical resonance."^[178]

By January 1969, the single "[If I Can Dream](#)", written for the special, reached number 12. The [soundtrack album](#) broke into the top ten. According to friend [Jerry Schilling](#), the special reminded Presley of what "he had not been able to do for years, being able to choose the people; being able to choose what songs and not being told what had to be on the soundtrack. ... He was out of prison, man."^[176] Binder said of Presley's reaction, "I played Elvis the 60-minute show, and he told me in the screening room, 'Steve, it's the greatest thing I've ever done in my life. I give you my word I will never sing a song I don't believe in.'"^[176]

From Elvis In Memphis and the International

Buoyed by the experience of the Comeback



The '68 Comeback Special produced "one of the most famous images" of Presley.^[170] Taken on June 29, 1968, it was adapted for the cover of *Rolling Stone* in July 1969.^{[170][171]}

Special, Presley engaged in a prolific series of recording sessions at [American Sound Studio](#), which led to the acclaimed *[From Elvis in Memphis](#)*. Released in June 1969, it was his first secular, non-soundtrack album from a dedicated period in the studio in eight years. As described by Dave Marsh, it is "a masterpiece in which Presley immediately catches up with pop music trends that had seemed to pass him by during the movie years. He sings country songs, soul songs and rockers with real conviction, a stunning achievement."^[180] The album featured the hit single "[In the Ghetto](#)", issued in April, which reached number three on the pop chart—Presley's first non-gospel top ten hit since "Bossa Nova Baby" in 1963. Further hit singles were culled from the American Sound sessions: "[Suspicious Minds](#)", "[Don't Cry Daddy](#)", and "[Kentucky Rain](#)".

Presley was keen to resume regular live performing. Following the success of the Comeback Special, offers came in from around the world. The [London Palladium](#) offered Parker \$28,000 for a one-week engagement. He responded, "That's fine for me, now how much can you get for Elvis?"^[181] In May, the brand new [International Hotel](#) in Las Vegas, boasting the largest showroom in the city, announced that it had booked Presley. He was scheduled to perform 57 shows over four weeks beginning July 31. Moore, Fontana, and the Jordanaires declined to participate, afraid of losing the lucrative session work they had in Nashville. Presley assembled new, top-notch accompaniment, led by guitarist [James Burton](#) and including two gospel groups, [The Imperials](#) and [Sweet Inspirations](#).^[182] Nonetheless, he was nervous: his only previous Las Vegas engagement, in 1956, had been dismal. Parker, who intended to make Presley's return the show business event of the year, oversaw a major promotional push. For his part, hotel owner [Kirk Kerkorian](#) arranged to send his own plane to New York to fly in rock journalists for the debut performance.^[183]

Presley took to the stage without introduction. The audience of 2,200, including many celebrities, gave him a standing ovation before he sang a note and another after his performance. A third followed his encore, "Can't Help Falling in Love" (a song that would be his closing number for much of the 1970s).^[184] At a press conference after the show, when a journalist referred to him as "The King", Presley gestured toward [Fats Domino](#), who was taking in the scene. "No," Presley said, "that's the real king of rock and roll."^[185] The next day, Parker's negotiations with the hotel resulted in a five-year contract for Presley to play each February and August, at an annual salary of \$1 million.^[186] *Newsweek* commented, "There are several unbelievable things about Elvis, but the most incredible is his staying power in a world where meteoric careers fade like shooting stars."^[187]

Rolling Stone called Presley "supernatural, his own resurrection."^[188] In November, Presley's final non-concert movie, *[Change of Habit](#)*, opened. The double album *[From Memphis To Vegas/From Vegas To Memphis](#)* came out the same month; the first LP consisted of live performances from the International, the second of more cuts from the American Sound sessions. "Suspicious Minds" reached the top of the charts—Presley's first U.S. pop number one in over seven years, and his last.

[Cassandra Peterson](#), later television's Elvira, met Presley during this period in Las Vegas, where she was working as showgirl. She recalls of their encounter, "He was so anti-drug when I met him. I mentioned to him that I smoked marijuana, and he was just appalled. He said, 'Don't ever do that again.'"^[189] Presley was not only deeply opposed to recreational drugs, he also rarely drank. Several of his family members had been alcoholics, a fate he intended to avoid.^[190]

Back on tour and meeting Nixon

Presley returned to the International early in 1970 for the first of the year's two month-long engagements, performing two shows a night. Recordings from these shows were issued on the album *[On Stage](#)*.^[191] In late February, Presley performed six attendance-record-breaking shows at the [Houston Astrodome](#).^[192] In April, the single "[The Wonder of You](#)" was issued—a number one hit in Great Britain, it topped the U.S. [adult contemporary](#) chart, as well. MGM filmed rehearsal and concert footage at the International during August for the documentary *[Elvis: That's the Way It Is](#)*. Presley was by now performing in a jumpsuit, which would become a trademark of his live act. During this engagement, he was threatened with murder unless \$50,000 was paid. Presley had been

"Power of My Love"



Beginning with his American Sound recordings, soul music became a central element in Presley's fusion of styles. Here, he revels in lyrics full of sexual innuendo.^[179]

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the target of many threats since the 1950s, often without his knowledge.^[193] The **FBI** took the threat seriously and security was stepped up for the next two shows. Presley went onstage with a **Derringer** in his right boot and a .45 pistol in his waistband, but the concerts went off without incident.^{[194][195]}

The album *That's the Way It Is*, produced to accompany the documentary and featuring both studio and live recordings, marked a stylistic shift. As music historian John Robertson notes, "The authority of Presley's singing helped disguise the fact that the album stepped decisively away from the American-roots inspiration of the Memphis sessions towards a more middle-of-the-road sound. With country put on the back burner, and soul and R&B left in Memphis, what was left was very classy, very clean white pop—perfect for the Las Vegas crowd, but a definite retrograde step for Elvis."^[196] After the end of his International engagement on September 7, Presley embarked on a week-long concert tour, largely of the South, his first since 1958. Another week-long tour, of the West Coast, followed in November.^[197]



Presley meets U.S. President **Richard Nixon** in the White House Oval Office, December 21, 1970

On December 21, 1970, Presley engineered a bizarre meeting with President **Richard Nixon** at the White House, where he expressed his patriotism and his contempt for the **hippie drug culture**. He asked Nixon for a **Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs** badge, to add to similar items he had begun collecting and to signify official sanction of his patriotic efforts. Nixon, who apparently found the encounter awkward, expressed a belief that Presley could send a positive message to young people and that it was therefore important he "retain his credibility". Presley told Nixon that **The Beatles**, whose songs he regularly performed in concert during the era,^[198] exemplified what he saw as a trend of anti-Americanism and drug abuse in popular culture.^[199] (Presley and his friends had had a four-hour get-together with The Beatles five years earlier.)

On hearing reports of the meeting, **Paul McCartney** later said that he "felt a bit betrayed. ... The great joke was that we were taking [illegal] drugs, and look what happened to him", a reference to Presley's death, hastened by prescription drug abuse.^[200]

The U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce named Presley one of its annual Ten Most Outstanding Young Men of the Nation on January 16, 1971.^[201] Not long after, the City of Memphis named the stretch of **Highway 51 South** on which Graceland is located "Elvis Presley Boulevard". The same year, Presley became the first rock and roll singer to be awarded the **Lifetime Achievement Award** (then known as the Bing Crosby Award) by the **National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences**, the Grammy Award organization.^[202] Three new, non-movie Presley studio albums were released in 1971, as many as had come out over the previous eight years. Best received by critics was *Elvis Country*, a **concept record** that focused on genre standards.^[203] The biggest seller was *Elvis Sings the Wonderful World of Christmas*, "the truest statement of all", according to Greil Marcus. "In the midst of ten painfully genteel Christmas songs, every one sung with appalling sincerity and humility, one could find Elvis tom-cattin' his way through six blazing minutes of 'Merry Christmas, Baby,' a raunchy old **Charles Brown** blues. ... If [Presley's] sin was his lifelessness, it was his sinfulness that brought him to life".^[204]

Marriage breakdown and *Aloha from Hawaii*

See also: *Aloha from Hawaii*

MGM again filmed Presley in April 1972, this time for *Elvis on Tour*, which went on to win the **Golden Globe Award for Best Documentary Film** that year. His gospel album *He Touched Me*, released that month, would earn him his second Grammy Award, for Best Inspirational Performance. A 14-date tour commenced with an unprecedented four consecutive sold-out shows at New York's **Madison Square Garden**.^[205] The evening concert on July 10 was recorded and issued in LP form a week later. *Elvis: As Recorded at Madison Square Garden* became one of Presley's biggest-selling albums. After the tour, the single "Burning Love" was released—Presley's last top ten hit on the U.S. pop chart. "The most exciting single Elvis has made since 'All Shook Up'", wrote rock critic **Robert Christgau**. "Who else could make 'It's coming closer, the flames are now licking my body' sound like

an assignation with [James Brown's backup band](#)?^[206]

Presley and his wife, meanwhile, had become increasingly distant, barely cohabiting. In 1971, an affair he had with Joyce Bova resulted—unbeknownst to him—in her pregnancy and an abortion. He often raised the possibility of her moving in to Graceland, saying that he was likely to leave Priscilla.^[208] The Presleys separated on February 23, 1972, after Priscilla disclosed her relationship with Mike Stone, a karate instructor Presley had recommended to her. Priscilla relates that when she told him, Presley "grabbed ... and forcefully made love to" her, declaring, "This is how a real man makes love to his woman."^[209] Five months later, Presley's new girlfriend, [Linda Thompson](#), a songwriter and one-time Memphis beauty queen, moved in with him.^[210] Presley and his wife filed for divorce on August 18.^[211]

In January 1973, Presley performed two benefit concerts for the [Kui Lee Cancer Fund](#) in connection with a groundbreaking TV special, *Aloha from Hawaii*. The first show served as a practice run and backup should technical problems affect the live broadcast two days later. Aired as scheduled on January 14, *Aloha from Hawaii* was the first global concert satellite broadcast, reaching approximately 1.5 billion viewers live and on tape delay.^{[212][213][214]}

Presley's costume became the most recognized example of the elaborate concert garb with which his latter-day persona became closely associated. As described by [Bobbie Ann Mason](#), "At the end of the show, when he spreads out his American Eagle cape, with the full stretched wings of the eagle studded on the back, he becomes a god figure."^[215] The accompanying double album, released in February, went to number one and eventually sold over 5 million copies in the United States.^[216] It proved to be Presley's last U.S. number one pop album during his lifetime.

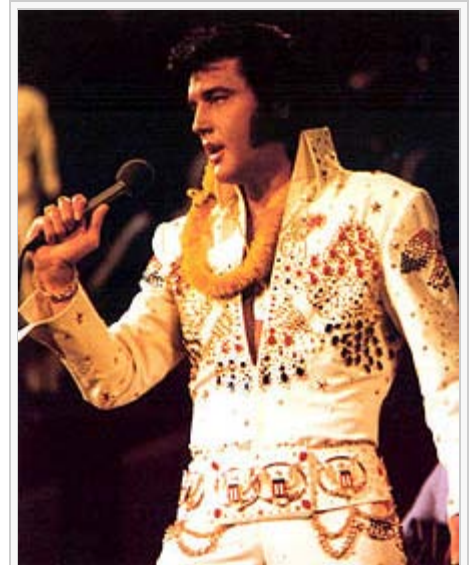
At a midnight show the same month, four men rushed onto the stage in an apparent attack. Security men leapt to Presley's defense, and the singer's karate instinct took over as he ejected one invader from the stage himself. Following the show, he became obsessed with the idea that the men had been sent by Stone to kill him. Though they were shown to have been only overexuberant fans, he raged, "There's too much pain in me ... Stone [must] die." His outbursts continued with such intensity that a physician was unable to calm him, despite administering large doses of medication. After another two full days of raging, [Red West](#), his friend and bodyguard, felt compelled to get a price for a contract killing and was relieved when Presley decided, "Aw hell, let's just leave it for now. Maybe it's a bit heavy."^[217]

Health deterioration and death (1973–77)

Medical crises and last studio sessions

Presley's divorce took effect on October 9, 1973.^[218] He was now becoming increasingly unwell. Twice during the year he overdosed on [barbiturates](#), spending three days in a coma in his hotel suite after the first incident. Toward the end of 1973, he was hospitalized, semicomatose from the effects of [Demerol](#) addiction. According to his main physician, Dr. [George C. Nichopoulos](#), Presley "felt that by getting [drugs] from a doctor, he wasn't the common everyday junkie getting something off the street."^[219] Since his comeback, he had staged more live shows with each passing year, and 1973 saw 168 concerts, his busiest schedule ever.^[220] Despite his failing health, in 1974 he undertook another intensive touring schedule.^[221]

Presley's condition declined precipitously in September. Keyboardist [Tony Brown](#) remembers the singer's arrival at a [University of Maryland](#) concert: "He fell out of the limousine, to his knees. People jumped to help, and he pushed them away like, 'Don't help me.' He walked on stage and held onto the mike for the first thirty minutes like it was a post. Everybody's looking at each other like, Is the



Presley in *Aloha From Hawaii*, broadcast live via satellite on January 14, 1973. The singer himself came up with his famous outfit's eagle motif, as "something that would say 'America' to the world."^[207]

tour gonna happen?"^[222] Guitarist John Wilkinson recalled, "He was all gut. He was slurring. He was so fucked up. ... It was obvious he was drugged. It was obvious there was something terribly wrong with his body. It was so bad the words to the songs were barely intelligible. ... I remember crying. He could barely get through the introductions".^[223] Wilkinson recounted that a few nights later in Detroit, "I watched him in his dressing room, just draped over a chair, unable to move. So often I thought, 'Boss, why don't you just cancel this tour and take a year off...?' I mentioned something once in a guarded moment. He patted me on the back and said, 'It'll be all right. Don't you worry about it.'"^[223] Presley continued to play to sellout crowds. As cultural critic [Marjorie Garber](#) describes, he was now widely seen as a garish pop crooner: "in effect he had become [Liberace](#). Even his fans were now middle-aged matrons and blue-haired grandmothers."^[224]

On July 13, 1976, Vernon Presley—who had become deeply involved in his son's financial affairs—fired "[Memphis Mafia](#)" bodyguards Red West (Presley's friend since the 1950s), Sonny West, and David Hebler, citing the need to "cut back on expenses".^{[225][226][227]} Presley was in [Palm Springs](#) at the time, and some suggest the singer was too cowardly to face the three himself. Another associate of Presley's, John O'Grady, argued that the bodyguards were dropped because their rough treatment of fans had prompted too many lawsuits.^[228] However, Presley's stepbrother David Stanley has claimed that the bodyguards were fired because they were becoming more outspoken about Presley's drug dependency.^[229] Presley and Linda Thompson split in November, and he took up with a new girlfriend, [Ginger Alden](#).^[230] He proposed to Alden and gave her an engagement ring two months later, though several of his friends later claimed that he had no serious intention of marrying again.^[231]

RCA, which had enjoyed a steady stream of product from Presley for over a decade, grew anxious as his interest in spending time in the studio waned. After a December 1973 session that produced 18 songs, enough for almost two albums, he did not enter the studio in 1974.^[232] Parker sold RCA on another concert record, *Elvis: As Recorded Live on Stage in Memphis*.^[233] Recorded on March 20, it included a version of "How Great Thou Art" that would win Presley his third and final competitive Grammy Award.^[234] (All three of his competitive Grammy wins—out of 14 total nominations—were for gospel recordings.) Presley returned to the studio in Hollywood in March 1975, but Parker's attempts to arrange another session toward the end of the year were unsuccessful.^[235] In 1976, RCA sent a mobile studio to Graceland that made possible two full-scale recording sessions at Presley's home.^[236] Even in that comfortable context, the recording process was now a struggle for him.^[237]

For all the concerns of his label and manager, in studio sessions between July 1973 and October 1976, Presley recorded virtually the entire contents of six albums. Though he was no longer a major presence on the pop charts, five of those albums entered the top five of the country chart, and three went to number one: *Promised Land* (1975), *From Elvis Presley Boulevard, Memphis, Tennessee* (1976), and

Moody Blue (1977).^[239] The story was similar with his singles—there were no major pop hits, but Presley was a significant force in not just the country market, but on adult contemporary radio as well. Eight studio singles from this period released during his lifetime were top ten hits on one or both charts, four in 1974 alone. "My Boy" was a number one AC hit in 1975, and "Moody Blue" topped the country chart and reached the second spot on the AC in 1976.^[240] Perhaps his most critically acclaimed recording of the era came that year, with what Greil Marcus described as his "apocalyptic attack" on the soul classic "Hurt".^[241] "If he felt the way he sounded", Dave Marsh wrote of Presley's performance, "the wonder isn't that he had only a year left to live but that he managed to survive that long."^[242]

Final year and death

Journalist Tony Scherman writes that by early 1977, "Elvis Presley had become a grotesque caricature of his sleek, energetic former self. Hugely overweight, his mind dulled by the

"Hurt"




An R&B hit for [Roy Hamilton](#) in 1955 and a pop hit for blue-eyed soul singer [Timi Yuro](#) in 1961, Presley's [deep soul](#) version was picked up by country radio in 1976.^[238]

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pharmacopoeia he daily ingested, he was barely able to pull himself through his abbreviated concerts.^[243] In [Alexandria, Louisiana](#), the singer was on stage for less than an hour and "was impossible to understand".^[244] Presley failed to appear in [Baton Rouge](#); he was unable to get out of his hotel bed, and the rest of the tour was cancelled.^[244] Despite the accelerating deterioration of his health, he stuck to most touring commitments. In [Rapid City, South Dakota](#), "he was so nervous on stage that he could hardly talk", according to Presley historian Samuel Roy, and unable to "perform any significant movement."^[245] Guralnick relates that fans "were becoming increasingly voluble about their disappointment, but it all seemed to go right past Elvis, whose world was now confined almost entirely to his room and his [spiritualism](#) books."^[246] A cousin, Billy Smith, recalled how Presley would sit in his room and chat for hours, sometimes recounting favorite [Monty Python](#) sketches and his own past escapades, but more often gripped by paranoid obsessions that reminded Smith of [Howard Hughes](#).^[247] "Way Down", Presley's last single issued during his lifetime, came out on June 6. His final concert was held in [Indianapolis](#) at the [Market Square Arena](#), on June 26.

The book *Elvis: What Happened?*, cowritten by the three bodyguards fired the previous year, was published on August 1.^[248] It was the first exposé to detail Presley's years of drug misuse. He was devastated by the book and tried unsuccessfully to halt its release by offering money to the publishers.^[249] By this point, he suffered from multiple ailments—glaucoma, high blood pressure, liver damage, and an enlarged colon, each aggravated, and possibly caused, by drug abuse.^[219]

Presley was scheduled to fly out of Memphis on the evening of August 16, 1977, to begin another tour. That afternoon, Alden discovered him unresponsive on his bathroom floor. Attempts to revive him failed, and death was officially pronounced at 3:30 pm at Baptist Memorial Hospital.^[250]

President [Jimmy Carter](#) issued a statement that credited Presley with having "permanently changed the face of American popular culture".^[251] Thousands of people gathered outside Graceland to view the open casket. One of Presley's cousins, Billy Mann, accepted \$10,000 to secretly photograph the corpse; the picture appeared on the cover of the [National Enquirer](#)'s biggest-selling issue ever.^[252] Alden struck a \$105,000 deal with the *Enquirer* for her story, but settled for less when she broke her exclusivity agreement.^[253] Presley left her nothing in his will.^[254]

Presley's funeral was held at Graceland, on Thursday, August 18. Outside the gates, a car plowed into a group of fans, killing two women and critically injuring a third.^[255] Approximately 80,000 people lined the processional route to Forest Hill Cemetery, where Presley was buried next to his mother.^[256] Within a few days, "Way Down" topped the country and UK pop charts.^{[240][257]} Following an attempt to steal the singer's body in late August, the remains of both Elvis Presley and his mother were reburied in Graceland's Meditation Garden on October 2.^[253]

Since 1977

Between 1977 and 1981, six posthumously released singles by Presley were top ten country hits.^[240] Graceland was opened to the public in 1982. Attracting over half a million visitors annually, it is the second most-visited home in the United States, after the White House.^[258] It was declared a [National Historic Landmark](#) in 2006.^[259]

Presley has been inducted into four music [halls of fame](#): the [Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#) (1986), the [Country Music Hall of Fame](#) (1998), the [Gospel Music Hall of Fame](#) (2001), and the [Rockabilly Hall of Fame](#) (2007). In 1984, he received the [W. C. Handy Award](#) from the [Blues Foundation](#) and the [Academy of Country Music](#)'s first Golden Hat Award. In 1987, he received the [American Music Awards](#)' Award of Merit.^[260]

A [Junkie XL](#) remix of Presley's "[A Little Less Conversation](#)" (credited as "Elvis Vs JXL") was used in a [Nike](#) advertising campaign during the [2002 FIFA World Cup](#). It topped the charts in over 20



Presley's final resting place at Graceland

countries, and was included in a compilation of Presley's number one hits, *ELVIS*, that was also an international success. In 2003, a remix of "Rubberneckin'", a 1969 recording of Presley's, topped the U.S. sales chart, as did a 50th-anniversary re-release of "That's All Right" the following year.^[261] The latter was an outright hit in Great Britain, reaching number three on the pop chart.

In 2005, another three reissued singles, "Jailhouse Rock", "One Night"/"I Got Stung", and "It's Now or Never", went to number one in Great Britain. A total of 17 Presley singles were reissued during the year—all made the British top five. For the fifth straight year, *Forbes* named Presley the top-earning deceased celebrity, with a gross income of \$45 million.^[262] He placed second in 2006,^[263] returned to the top spot the next two years,^{[264][265]} and ranked fourth in 2009.^[266] The following year, he was second with his highest annual income ever, \$60 million, spurred by the celebration of his 75th birthday and the launch of *Cirque du Soleil's Viva Elvis* show in Las Vegas.^[267] In November 2010, *Viva Elvis: The Album* was released, setting his voice to newly recorded instrumental tracks.^{[268][269]} As of mid-2011, there were an estimated 15,000 licensed Presley products.^[270]

Presley holds the records for most songs charting in *Billboard's* top 40 and top 100: chart statistician *Joel Whitburn* calculates the respective totals as 104 and 151;^[271] Presley historian Adam Victor gives 114 and 138.^[272] Presley's rankings for top ten and number one hits vary depending on how the double-sided "Hound Dog/Don't Be Cruel" and "Don't/I Beg of You" singles, which precede the inception of *Billboard's* unified *Hot 100 chart*, are analyzed.^e According to Whitburn, Presley holds the record for most top ten hits with 38;^[273] per *Billboard's* current assessment, he ranks second with 36 behind *Madonna's* 37.^[274] Whitburn and *Billboard* concur that The Beatles hold the record for most number one hits with 20 and that *Mariah Carey* is second with 18. Whitburn has Presley also with 18 and thus tied for second;^[273] *Billboard* has him third with 17.^[275] Presley retains the record for cumulative weeks at number one: alone at 80, according to Whitburn and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame;^{[276][277]} tied with Carey at 79, according to *Billboard*.^{[278][279]} He holds the records for most British number one hits, with 21, and top ten hits, with 76.^{[280][281]}

Musical style

Influences

Presley's earliest musical influence came from *gospel*. His mother recalled that from the age of two, at the Assembly of God church in Tupelo attended by the family, "he would slide down off my lap, run into the aisle and scramble up to the platform. There he would stand looking at the choir and trying to sing with them."^[282] In Memphis, Presley frequently attended all-night gospel singings at the Ellis Auditorium, where groups such as the *Statesmen Quartet* led the music in a style that, Guralnick suggests, sowed the seeds of Presley's future stage act:

The Statesmen were an electric combination ... featuring some of the most thrillingly emotive singing and daringly unconventional showmanship in the entertainment world ... dressed in suits that might have come out of the window of Lansky's. ... Bass singer Jim Wetherington, known universally as the Big Chief, maintained a steady bottom, ceaselessly jiggling first his left leg, then his right, with the material of the pants leg ballooning out and shimmering. "He went about as far as you could go in gospel music," said Jake Hess. "The women would jump up, just like they do for the pop shows." Preachers frequently objected to the lewd movements ... but audiences reacted with screams and swoons.^[283]

As a teenager, Presley's musical interests were wide-ranging, and he was deeply informed about African-American musical idioms as well as white ones (see "*Teenage life in Memphis*"). Though he never had any formal training, he was blessed with a remarkable memory, and his musical knowledge was already considerable by the time he made his first professional recordings in 1954 at the age of 19. When Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller met him two years later, they were astonished at his encyclopedic understanding of the blues.^[284] At a press conference the following year, he proudly declared, "I know practically every religious song that's ever been written."^[125]

Genres

Music scholar Paul Friedlander describes the elements of the **rockabilly** style, which he characterizes as "essentially ... an Elvis Presley construction", that the singer and his band mates developed at Sun Records: "the raw, emotive, and slurred vocal style and emphasis on rhythmic feeling [of] the blues with the string band and strummed rhythm guitar [of] country".^[285] Moore's guitar solo in "That's All Right", the group's first record, "a combination of **Merle Travis**–style country finger-picking, double-stop slides from acoustic boogie, and blues-based bent-note, single-string work, is a microcosm of this fusion."^[285]

At RCA, Presley's rock and roll sound grew distinct from rockabilly with group chorus vocals, more heavily amplified electric guitars^[286] and a tougher, more intense manner.^[287] While he was known for taking songs from various sources and giving them a rockabilly/rock and roll treatment, he also recorded songs in other genres from early in his career, from the pop standard "**Blue Moon**" at Sun to the country ballad "How's the World Treating You?" on his second LP to the blues of "Santa Claus Is Back In Town". In 1957, his first gospel record was released, the four-song EP *Peace in the Valley*. Certified as a million seller, it became the top-selling gospel EP in recording history.^[288] Presley would record gospel periodically for the rest of his life.

After his return from military service in 1960, Presley continued to perform rock and roll, but the characteristic style was substantially toned down. His first post-Army single, the number one hit "**Stuck on You**", is typical of this shift. RCA publicity materials referred to its "mild rock beat"; discographer Ernst Jorgensen calls it "upbeat pop".^[291] The modern blues/R&B sound captured so successfully on *Elvis Is Back!* was essentially abandoned for six years

until such 1966–67 recordings as "Down in the Alley" and "**Hi-Heel Sneakers**".^[292] The singer's output during most of the 1960s emphasized pop music, often in the form of ballads such as "**Are You Lonesome Tonight?**", a number one in 1960. While that was a dramatic number, most of what Presley recorded for his movie soundtracks was in a much lighter vein.^[293]

While Presley performed several of his classic ballads for the '68 Comeback Special, the sound of the show was dominated by aggressive rock and roll. He would record few new straight-ahead rock and roll songs thereafter; as he explained, they were "hard to find".^[294] A significant exception was "Burning Love", his last major hit on the pop charts. Like his work of the 1950s, Presley's subsequent recordings reworked pop and country songs, but in markedly different permutations. His stylistic range now began to embrace a more contemporary **rock** sound as well as **soul** and **funk**. Much of *Elvis In Memphis*, as well as "Suspicious Minds", cut at the same sessions, reflected his new rock and soul fusion. In the mid-1970s, many of his singles found a home on country radio, the field where he first became a star.^[295]

Vocal style and range

Music critic **Henry Pleasants** observes that "Elvis Presley has been described variously as a baritone and a tenor. An extraordinary compass ... and a very wide range of vocal color have something to do with this divergence of opinion."^[296] He identifies Presley as a high baritone, calculating his range as two octaves and a third, "from the baritone low G to the tenor high B, with an upward extension in falsetto to at least a D-flat. Presley's best octave is in the middle, D-flat to D-flat, granting an extra full step up or down."^[296] In Pleasants' view, his voice was "variable and unpredictable" at the bottom, "often brilliant" at the top, with the capacity for "full-voiced high Gs and As that an opera baritone might envy."^[296] Scholar Lindsay Waters, who figures Presley's range as two and a quarter octaves, emphasizes that "his voice had an emotional range from tender whispers to sighs down to shouts, grunts, grumbles and sheer gruffness that could move the listener from calmness and surrender, to fear. His voice can not be measured in octaves, but in decibels; even that misses the problem of how to measure delicate whispers that are hardly audible at all."^[297] Presley was always "able to duplicate the open, hoarse, ecstatic, screaming, shouting, wailing, reckless sound of the black rhythm-and-blues and gospel singers," writes Pleasants, and also demonstrated a remarkable



ability to assimilate many other vocal styles.^[296]

Questions over cause of death

"Drug use was heavily implicated" in Presley's death, writes Guralnick. "No one ruled out the possibility of [anaphylactic shock](#) brought on by the [codeine](#) pills ... to which he was known to have had a mild allergy." A pair of lab reports filed two months later each strongly suggested that [polypharmacy](#) was the primary cause of death; one reported "fourteen drugs in Elvis' system, ten in significant quantity."^[298] Forensic historian and pathologist Michael Baden views the situation as complicated: "Elvis had had an [enlarged heart](#) for a long time. That, together with his drug habit, caused his death. But he was difficult to diagnose; it was a judgment call."^[299]

The competence and ethics of two of the centrally involved medical professionals were seriously questioned. Before the autopsy was complete and toxicology results known, [Medical Examiner](#) Dr. Jerry Francisco declared the cause of death as [cardiac arrhythmia](#), a condition that can be determined only in someone who is still alive.^[300] Allegations of a cover-up were widespread.^[299] While Presley's main physician, Dr. Nichopoulos, was exonerated of criminal liability for the singer's death, the facts were startling: "In the first eight months of 1977 alone, he had [prescribed] more than 10,000 doses of sedatives, amphetamines and narcotics: all in Elvis's name." His license was suspended for three months. It was permanently revoked in the 1990s after the Tennessee Medical Board brought new charges of over-prescription.^[219]

In 1994, the Presley autopsy was reopened. Coroner Dr. Joseph Davis declared, "There is nothing in any of the data that supports a death from drugs. In fact, everything points to a sudden, violent [heart attack](#)."^[219] Whether or not [combined drug intoxication](#) was in fact the cause, there is little doubt that polypharmacy contributed significantly to Presley's premature death.^[300]

Racial issues

When Dewey Phillips first aired "That's All Right" on Memphis radio, many listeners who contacted the station by phone and telegram to ask for it again assumed that its singer was black.^[52] From the beginning of his national fame, Presley expressed respect for African American performers and their music and disregard for the norms of segregation and racial prejudice then prevalent in the South. Interviewed in 1956, he recalled how in his childhood he would listen to blues musician [Arthur Crudup](#)—the originator of "That's All Right"—"bang his box the way I do now, and I said if I ever got to the place where I could feel all old Arthur felt, I'd be a music man like nobody ever saw."^[36] *The Memphis World*, an African American newspaper, reported that Presley, "the rock 'n' roll phenomenon", "cracked Memphis's segregation laws" by attending the local amusement park on what was designated as its "colored night".^[36] Such statements and actions led Presley to be generally hailed in the black community during the early days of his stardom.^[36] By contrast, many white adults, according to *Billboard*'s Arnold Shaw, "did not like him, and condemned him as depraved. Anti-negro prejudice doubtless figured in adult antagonism. Regardless of whether parents were aware of the Negro sexual origins of the phrase 'rock 'n' roll', Presley impressed them as the visual and aural embodiment of sex."^[301]

Despite the largely positive view of Presley held by African Americans, a rumor spread in mid-1957 that he had at some point announced, "The only thing Negroes can do for me is buy my records and shine my shoes." A journalist with the national African American weekly *Jet*, Louie Robinson, pursued the story. On the set of *Jailhouse Rock*, Presley granted him an interview, though he was no longer dealing with the mainstream press. He denied making such a statement or holding in any way to its racist view. Robinson found no evidence that the remark had ever been made, and on the contrary elicited testimony from many individuals indicating that Presley was anything but racist.^[36]^[302] Blues singer [Ivory Joe Hunter](#), who had heard the rumor before he visited Graceland one evening, reported of Presley, "He showed me every courtesy, and I think he's one of the greatest."^[303] Though the rumored remark was wholly discredited at the time, it was still being used against Presley decades later.^[304] The identification of Presley with racism—either personally or symbolically—was expressed most famously in the lyrics of the 1989 rap hit "[Fight the Power](#)", by [Public Enemy](#): "Elvis was a hero to most / But he never meant shit to me / Straight-up racist that sucker was / Simple and plain".^[305]

The persistence of such attitudes was fueled by resentment over the fact that Presley, whose musical and visual performance idiom owed much to African American sources, achieved the cultural acknowledgment and commercial success largely denied his black peers.^[302] Into the 21st century, the notion that Presley had "stolen" black music still found adherents.^{[304][305]} Notable among African American entertainers expressly rejecting this view was [Jackie Wilson](#), who argued, "A lot of people have accused Elvis of stealing the black man's music, when in fact, almost every black solo entertainer copied his stage mannerisms from Elvis."^[306] And throughout his career, Presley plainly acknowledged his debt. Addressing his '68 Comeback Special audience, he said, "Rock 'n' roll music is basically gospel or rhythm and blues, or it sprang from that. People have been adding to it, adding instruments to it, experimenting with it, but it all boils down to [that]." Nine years earlier, he had said, "Rock 'n' roll has been around for many years. It used to be called rhythm and blues."^[307]

Influence of Colonel Parker and others

Parker and the Aberbachs

See also: [Colonel Tom Parker](#)

Once he became Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker insisted on exceptionally tight control over his client's career. Early on, he and his Hill and Range allies, the brothers [Jean](#) and [Julian Aberbach](#), perceived the close relationship that developed between Presley and songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller as a serious threat to that control.^[308] Parker effectively ended the relationship, deliberately or not, with the new contract he sent Leiber in early 1958. Leiber thought there was a mistake—the sheet of paper was blank except for Parker's signature and a line on which to enter his. "There's no mistake, boy, just sign it and return it", Parker directed. "Don't worry, we'll fill it in later."

Leiber declined, and Presley's fruitful collaboration with the writing team was over.^[309] Other respected songwriters lost interest in or simply avoided writing for Presley because of the requirement that they surrender a third of their usual royalties.^[310]

By 1967, Parker had contracts with Presley that gave him 50 percent of most of the singer's earnings on recordings, films, and merchandised.^[307] Beginning in February 1972, he took a third of the profit from live appearances.^[307] a January 1976 agreement entitled him to half of that as well.^[313]

Priscilla Presley noted that "Elvis detested the business side of his career. He would sign a contract without even reading it."^[314] Presley's friend Marty Lacker regarded Parker as a "hustler and a con artist. He was only interested in 'now money'—get the buck and get gone."^[315]

Lacker was instrumental in convincing Presley to record with Memphis producer [Chips Moman](#) and his handpicked musicians at American Sound Studio in early 1969. The American Sound sessions represented a significant departure from the control customarily exerted by Hill and Range. Moman still had to deal with the publisher's staff on site, whose song suggestions he regarded as unacceptable. He was on the verge of quitting, until Presley ordered the Hill and Range personnel out of the studio.^[316] Although RCA executive Joan Deary was later full of praise for the producer's song choices and the quality of the recordings,^[317] Moman, to his fury, received neither credit on the records nor royalties for his work.^[318]

Throughout his entire career, Presley performed in only three venues outside the United States—all of them in Canada, during brief tours there in 1957. Rumors that he would play overseas for the first time were fueled in 1974 by a million-dollar bid for an Australian tour. Parker was uncharacteristically reluctant, prompting those close to Presley to speculate about the manager's past and the reasons for his apparent unwillingness to apply for a passport. Parker ultimately squelched any notions Presley had of working abroad, claiming that foreign security was poor and venues unsuitable for a star of his magnitude.^[319]

Parker arguably exercised tightest control over Presley's movie career. In 1957, [Robert Mitchum](#) asked Presley to costar with him in *Thunder Road*, on which Mitchum was both writer and producer.^[320] According to George Klein, one of his oldest friends, Presley was offered starring roles in *West Side Story* and *Midnight Cowboy*.^[321] In 1974, [Barbra Streisand](#) approached Presley to star with her in the remake of *A Star is Born*.^[322] In each case, any ambitions the singer may have had to play such parts were thwarted by his manager's negotiating demands or flat refusals. In Lacker's

description, "The only thing that kept Elvis going after the early years was a new challenge. But Parker kept running everything into the ground."^[315] The operative attitude may have been summed up best by the response Leiber and Stoller received when they brought a serious film project for Presley to Parker and the Hill and Range owners for their consideration. In Leiber's telling, Jean Aberbach warned them to never again "try to interfere with the business or artistic workings of the process known as Elvis Presley".^[161]

Memphis Mafia

Main article: [Memphis Mafia](#)

In the early 1960s, the circle of friends with whom Presley constantly surrounded himself until his death came to be known as the "Memphis Mafia".^[323] "Surrounded by the[ir] parasitic presence", as journalist [John Harris](#) puts it, "it was no wonder that as he slid into addiction and torpor, no-one raised the alarm: to them, Elvis was the bank, and it had to remain open."^[324] [Tony Brown](#), who played piano for Presley regularly in the last two years of the singer's life, observed his rapidly declining health and the urgent need to address it: "But we all knew it was hopeless because Elvis was surrounded by that little circle of people ... all those so-called friends".^[325] In the Memphis Mafia's defense, Marty Lacker has said, "[Presley] was his own man. ... If we hadn't been around, he would have been dead a lot earlier."^[326]

Larry Geller became Presley's hairdresser in 1964. Unlike others in the Memphis Mafia, he was interested in spiritual questions and recalls how, from their first conversation, Presley revealed his secret thoughts and anxieties: "I mean there *has* to be a purpose...there's got to be a reason...why I was chosen to be Elvis Presley. ... I swear to God, no one knows how lonely I get. And how empty I really feel."^[327] Thereafter, Geller supplied him with books on religion and mysticism, which the singer read voraciously.^[328] Presley would be preoccupied by such matters for much of his life, taking trunkloads of books with him on tour.^[219]

Sex symbol



The title and marketing of *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (1962) took advantage of Presley's sex symbol status.

Presley's physical attractiveness and sexual appeal were widely acknowledged. "He was once beautiful, astonishingly beautiful", in the words of critic [Mark Feeney](#).^[329] Television director [Steve Binder](#), no fan of Presley's music before he oversaw the '68 Comeback Special, reported, "I'm straight as an arrow and I got to tell you, you stop, whether you're male or female, to look at him. He was that good looking. And if you never knew he was a superstar, it wouldn't make any difference; if he'd walked in the room, you'd know somebody special was in your presence."^[330] His performance style, as much as his physical beauty, was responsible for Presley's eroticized image. Writing in 1970, critic [George Melly](#) described him as "the master of the sexual simile, treating his guitar as both phallus and girl."^[331] In his Presley obituary, [Lester](#)

[Bangs](#) credited him as "the man who brought overt blatant vulgar sexual frenzy to the popular arts in America."^[332] Ed Sullivan's declaration that he perceived a soda bottle in Presley's trousers was echoed by rumors involving a similarly positioned toilet roll tube or lead bar.^[333]

While Presley was marketed as an icon of heterosexuality, some cultural critics have argued that his image was ambiguous. In 1959, *Sight and Sound*'s Peter John Dyer described his onscreen persona as "aggressively bisexual in appeal".^[334] Brett Farmer places the "orgasmic gyrations" of the title dance sequence in *Jailhouse Rock* within a lineage of cinematic musical numbers that offer a "spectacular eroticization, if not homoeroticization, of the male image".^[335] In the analysis of Yvonne Tasker, "Elvis was an ambivalent figure who articulated a peculiar feminised, objectifying version of white working-class masculinity as aggressive sexual display."^[336]

Reinforcing Presley's image as a sex symbol were the reports of his dalliances with various

Hollywood stars and starlets, from [Natalie Wood](#) in the 1950s to [Connie Stevens](#) and [Ann-Margret](#) in the 1960s to [Candice Bergen](#) and [Cybill Shepherd](#) in the 1970s. [June Juanico](#) of Memphis, one of Presley's early girlfriends, later blamed Parker for encouraging him to choose his dating partners with publicity in mind.^[189] Presley, however, never grew comfortable with the Hollywood scene, and most of these relationships were insubstantial.^[337]

Legacy

Further information: [Cultural impact of Elvis Presley](#); [Elvis Presley phenomenon](#); [Cultural depictions of Elvis Presley](#)

"His music and his personality, fusing the styles of white country and black rhythm and blues, permanently changed the face of American popular culture. His following was immense, and he was a symbol to people the world over of the vitality, rebelliousness, and good humor of his country."

President [Jimmy Carter](#)
August 17, 1977^[251]

Presley's rise to national attention in 1956 transformed the field of popular music and had a huge effect on the broader scope of popular culture.^[4] As the catalyst for the cultural revolution that was rock and roll, he was central not only to defining it as a musical genre but in making it a touchstone of youth culture and rebellious attitude.^[338] With its racially mixed origins—repeatedly affirmed by Presley—rock and roll's occupation of a central position in mainstream American culture facilitated a new acceptance and appreciation of black culture.^[339] In this regard, Little Richard said of Presley, "He was an integrator. Elvis was a blessing. They wouldn't let black music through. He opened the door for black music."^[340] [Al Green](#) agreed: "He broke the ice for

all of us."^[341] Presley also heralded the vastly expanded reach of celebrity in the era of mass communication: at the age of 21, within a year of his first appearance on American network television, he was one of the most famous people in the world.^[342]

Presley's name, image, and voice are instantly recognizable around the globe.^[343] He has inspired a legion of impersonators.^[344] In polls and surveys, he is recognized as one of the most important popular music artists and influential Americans.^f "Elvis Presley is the greatest cultural force in the twentieth century", said composer and conductor [Leonard Bernstein](#). "He introduced the beat to everything and he changed everything—music, language, clothes. It's a whole new social revolution—the sixties came from it."^[345] [Bob Dylan](#) described the sensation of first hearing Presley as "like busting out of jail".^[341]

A *New York Times* editorial on the 25th anniversary of Presley's death observed, "All the talentless impersonators and appalling black velvet paintings on display can make him seem little more than a perverse and distant memory. But before Elvis was camp, he was its opposite: a genuine cultural force. ... Elvis's breakthroughs are underappreciated because in this rock-and-roll age, his hard-rocking music and sultry style have triumphed so completely."^[346] Not only Presley's achievements, but his failings as well, are seen by some cultural observers as adding to the power of his legacy, as in this description by Greil Marcus:

Elvis Presley is a supreme figure in American life, one whose presence, no matter how banal or predictable, brooks no real comparisons. ... The cultural range of his music has expanded to the point where it includes not only the hits of the day, but also patriotic recitals, pure country gospel, and really dirty blues. ... Elvis has emerged as a great *artist*, a great *rocker*, a great *purveyor of schlock*, a great *heart throb*, a great *bore*, a great *symbol of potency*, a great *ham*, a great *nice person*, and, yes, a great American.^[347]



Stamp depicting Presley issued by the German post office in 1988

Discography

Main article: Elvis Presley discography

See also: List of songs by Elvis Presley, Elvis Presley hit singles, and Elvis Presley hit albums

A vast number of recordings have been issued under Presley's name. The total number of his original master recordings has been variously calculated as 665^[272] and 711.^[329] His career began and he was most successful during an era when singles were the primary commercial medium for pop music. In the case of his albums, the distinction between "official" studio records and other forms is often blurred. In addition, for most of the 1960s, his recording career focused on soundtrack albums. In the 1970s, his most heavily promoted and best-selling LP releases tended to be concert albums. This summary discography lists only the albums and singles that reached the top of one or more of the following charts: the main U.S. *Billboard* pop chart; the *Billboard* country chart, the genre chart with which he was most identified (there was no country album chart before 1964); and the official British pop chart.^g In the United States, Presley also had five or six number one R&B singles and seven number one adult contemporary singles;^h in 1964, his "[Blue Christmas](#)" topped the Christmas singles chart during a period when *Billboard* did not rank holiday singles in its primary pop chart.^{[239][348]} He had number one hits in many countries beside the United States and United Kingdom, as well.

Number one albums

Year	Album	Type	Chart positions		
			US ^[349]	US Country ^[350]	UK ^{[257][351]}
1956	Elvis Presley	studio/comp.	1	n.a.	1
	Elvis	studio	1	n.a.	3
1957	Loving You	sound/studio	1	n.a.	1
	Elvis' Christmas Album	studio	1	n.a.	2
1960	Elvis Is Back!	studio	2	n.a.	1
	G.I. Blues	soundtrack	1	n.a.	1
1961	Something for Everybody	studio	1	n.a.	2
	Blue Hawaii	soundtrack	1	n.a.	1
1962	Pot Luck	studio	4	n.a.	1
1964	Roustabout	soundtrack	1	—	12
1969	From Elvis in Memphis	studio	13	2	1
1973	Aloha from Hawaii: Via Satellite	live	1	1	11
1974	Elvis: A Legendary Performer Volume 1	compilation	43	1	20
1975	Promised Land	studio	47	1	21
1976	From Elvis Presley Boulevard, Memphis, Tennessee	studio	41	1	29
1977	Elvis' 40 Greatest	compilation	—	—	1
	Moody Blue	studio/live	3	1	3
	Elvis in Concert	live	5	1	13
2002	ELVIS: 30 #1 Hits	compilation	1	1	1
2007	Elvis the King	compilation	—	—	1

Number one singles

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Year	Single	Chart positions		
		US ^[273]	US Country ^[352]	UK ^[257] ^[351]
1956	"I Forgot to Remember to Forget"	—	1	—
	"Heartbreak Hotel"	1	1	2
	"I Want You, I Need You, I Love You"	1	1	14
	"Don't Be Cruel"	1	1	2
	"Hound Dog"	1	1	2
	"Love Me Tender"	1	3	11
1957	"Too Much"	1	3	6
	"All Shook Up"	1	1	1
	"(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear"	1	1	3
	"Jailhouse Rock"	1	1	1
1958	"Don't"	1	2	2
	"Hard Headed Woman"	1	2	2
1959	"One Night"/"I Got Stung"	4/8	24/—	1
	"A Fool Such as I"/"I Need Your Love Tonight"	2/4	—	1
	"A Big Hunk o' Love"	1	—	4
1960	"Stuck on You"	1	27	3
	"It's Now or Never"	—	—	1
	"Are You Lonesome Tonight?"	1	22	1
1961	"Wooden Heart"	—	—	1
	"Surrender"	1	—	1
	"(Marie's the Name) His Latest Flame"/"Little Sister"	4/5	—	1
1962	"Can't Help Falling in Love"/"Rock-A-Hula Baby"	2/23	—	1
	"Good Luck Charm"	1	—	1
	"She's Not You"	5	—	1
	"Return to Sender"	2	—	1
1963	"(You're The) Devil in Disguise"	3	—	1
1965	"Crying in the Chapel"	3	—	1
1969	"Suspicious Minds"	1	—	2
1970	"The Wonder of You"	9	37	1
1977	"Moody Blue"	31	1	6
	"Way Down"	18	1	1
1981	"Guitar Man" (reissue)	28	1	43
2002	"A Little Less Conversation" (JXL remix)	50	—	1
2005	"Jailhouse Rock" (reissue)	—	—	1
	"One Night"/"I Got Stung" (reissue)	—	—	1
	"It's Now or Never" (reissue)	—	—	1

Filmography

Main article: [Elvis Presley filmography](#)

See also

- [Honorific nicknames in popular music](#)
- [List of artists by total number of UK number one singles](#)
- [List of best-selling music artists](#)
- [Personal relationships of Elvis Presley](#)



Book: *[Elvis Presley](#)*

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[Elvis Presley portal](#)

Notes

- ^** **Note a:** Although some pronounce his surname "PREZ-lee", Presley himself used the pronunciation of the [American South](#), "PRESS-lee", as did his family and those who worked with him.^[353] The correct spelling of his middle name has long been a matter of debate. The physician who delivered him wrote "Elvis Aaron Presley" in his ledger.^[354] The state-issued birth certificate reads "Elvis Aron Presley". The name was chosen after the Presleys' friend and fellow congregation member Aaron Kennedy, though a single-A spelling was probably intended by Presley's parents in order to parallel the middle name of Presley's stillborn brother, Jesse Garon.^[138] It reads Aron on most official documents produced during his lifetime, including his high school diploma, RCA record contract, and marriage license, and this was generally taken to be the proper spelling.^[355] In 1966, Presley expressed the desire to his father that the more traditional biblical rendering, Aaron, be used henceforth, "especially on legal documents."^[354] Five years later, the Jaycees citation honoring him as one of the country's Outstanding Young Men used Aaron. Late in his life, he sought to officially change the spelling to Aaron and discovered that state records already listed it that way. Knowing his wishes for his middle name, Aaron is the spelling his father chose for Presley's tombstone, and it is the spelling his estate has designated as official.^[355]
- ^** **Note b:** According to a third cousin of Presley's, one of Gladys's great-grandmothers was Jewish.^[356] There is no evidence that Presley or his mother shared this belief in a Jewish heritage. Syndicated columnist Nate Blanton has challenged the cousin's account, which he calls a "tall tale".^[357]
- ^** **Note c:** Of the \$40,000, \$5,000 covered back royalties owed by Sun.^[73]
- ^** **Note d:** In 1956–57, Presley was also credited as a cowriter on several songs where he had no hand in the writing process: "[Heartbreak Hotel](#)"; "[Don't Be Cruel](#)"; all four songs from his first film, including the title track, "[Love Me Tender](#)"; "[Paralyzed](#)"; and "[All Shook Up](#)".^[358] He received credit on two other songs to which he did contribute: he provided the title for "[That's Someone You Never Forget](#)" (1961), written by his friend Red West; Presley and West collaborated with another friend, guitarist Charlie Hodge, on "[You'll Be Gone](#)" (1962).^[359]
- ^** **Note e:** Whitburn follows actual *Billboard* history in considering the four songs on the "Don't Be Cruel/Hound Dog" and "Don't/I Beg of You" singles as distinct. He tallies each side of the former single as a number one (*Billboard*'s sales chart had "Don't Be Cruel" at number one for five weeks, then "Hound Dog" for six) and reckons "I Beg of You" as a top ten, as it reached number eight on the old Top 100 chart. *Billboard* now considers both singles as unified items, ignoring the historical sales split of the former and its old Top 100 chart entirely. Whitburn thus analyzes the four songs as yielding three number ones and a total of four top tens. *Billboard* now states that they yielded just two number ones and a total of two top tens, voiding the separate chart appearances of "Hound Dog" and "I Beg of You".
- ^** **Note f:** [VH1](#) ranked Presley #8 among the "100 Greatest Artists of Rock & Roll" in 1998.^[360] The [BBC](#) ranked him as the #2 "Voice of the Century" in 2001.^[361] [Rolling Stone](#) placed him #3 in its list of "The Immortals: The Fifty Greatest Artists of All Time" in 2004.^[362] [CMT](#) ranked him #15 among the "40 Greatest Men in Country Music" in 2005.^[363] The [Discovery Channel](#) placed him #8 on its "Greatest American" list in 2005.^[364] [Variety](#) put him in the top ten of its "100 Icons of the Century" in 2005.^[365] [The Atlantic Monthly](#) ranked him #66 among the "100 Most Influential Figures in American History" in 2006.^[366]
- ^** **Note g:** (1) The year given is the year the record first reached number one, rather than its original year of release. For instance, in 1974, *Elvis' 40 Greatest*, a compilation on the budget Arcade label, was the fourth

highest selling album of the year in the United Kingdom; at the time, the main British chart did not rank such compilations, relegating them to a chart for midpriced and TV-advertised albums, which *Elvis' 40 Greatest* topped for 15 weeks.^[367] The policy was altered in 1975, allowing the album to hit number one on the main chart in 1977, following Presley's death.^[368] (2) Before late 1958, rather than unified pop and country singles charts, *Billboard* had as many as four charts for each, separately ranking records according to sales, jukebox play, jockey spins (i.e., airplay), and, in the case of pop, a general Top 100. *Billboard* now regards the sales charts as definitive for the period. Widely cited chart statistician Joel Whitburn accords historical releases the highest ranking they achieved among the separate charts. Presley discographer Ernst Jorgensen refers only to the Top 100 chart for pop hits. All of the 1956–58 songs listed here as number one U.S. pop hits reached the top of both the sales and, with three exceptions, the Top 100 charts: "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" (three), "Hound Dog" (two, behind its flip side, "Don't Be Cruel"), and "Hard Headed Woman" (two). (3) Several Presley singles reached number one in the United Kingdom as double A-sides; in the United States, the respective sides of those singles were ranked separately by *Billboard*.

- [^] **Note h**: Whitburn calculates a total of six number one R&B singles, including "Don't Be Cruel", released as a double A-side with "Hound Dog";^[348] *Billboard*'s Keith Caulfield excludes "Don't Be Cruel".^[239]

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External links

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- Elvis Presley at AllBoys
- Elvis Presley discography at Discogs
- Elvis Presley Enterprises official site of the Elvis Presley brand
- Elvis The Music official record label site
- Elvis Presley Interviews on officially sanctioned Elvis Australia site
- Elvis Presley at the Open Directory Project
- Elvis Presley Ancestry at Genealogy.com
- Elvis Presley interviewed on *the Pop Chronicles* (1969).



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