

Elvis Presley the “King of Rock n Roll”

Essential Question: What role did Elvis Presley play in the emergence of a youth culture based on rock n roll?

When a young truck driver named Elvis Presley walked into Sun Studios, Memphis in 1953, he had no idea that his life was going to change. Presley wanted to record a record for his mother as a birthday present. The studio offered anyone the chance to record an album for \$3.98 plus tax. Sam Phillips, recording engineer and owner of Sun Records, thought that there might be something to the young man’s singing and mentioned it to his partner. The partner, Marion Kreisler, continued to remind Phillips about Presley and in July 1954 Phillip’s invited him back.

Phillips knew that the music world was looking for a new sound to take it by storm. He had some ideas about that new sound, but had not heard it yet. When Presley came in for the session on July 5, Phillips was not impressed. Nothing sounded right, so Phillips called for a break. During the break, Presley began to play around on his guitar and started singing the blues classic “That’s All Right,” but in a fast paced style. When Phillips heard it, he knew he had found his sound. He recorded Presley’s version of “That’s All Right,” which became a local hit and launched Presley’s career and rock n roll.

Elvis Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi on January 8, 1935. He grew up surrounded by his mother’s love and the gospel music he heard in the Pentecostal church. In 1948, the family moved to Memphis. It is said that as a teenager, Presley would sneak out to Beale Street to listen to jazz and blues musicians. Whether or not this is true, Presley was certainly influenced by those styles of music.

Within a few short months Presley was a star in Memphis and Phillips sold his contract to RCA. “Heartbreak Hotel” became his first across the board hit. Presley’s star power derived not only from his singing ability, but also his good looks and dance moves. Presley’s live performances featured hip shaking dance moves that made teenage girls swoon and outraged many adults.

While there are many examples from Presley’s career of his status as a teen icon, one in particular stand outs. The first was Presley’s 1956 appearance on the Ed Sullivan show. Presley had already scandalized some members of the TV audience when he performed his signature dance moves while singing “Hound Dog” on the Milton Berle Show. When Presley appeared on the Ed Sullivan show on September 9, 1956, he once again sang “Hound Dog” while snarling his lip and gyrating his hips. Eighty-two percent of American television viewing audience was watching. Presley repeated the performance on October 28th. When the studio audience realized he was going to sing “Hound Dog” the crowd went wild.

So did the people at homes who viewed Presley as a threat to morals, decency and American youth. Following the performance, crowds burned Presley in effigy in Nashville and St. Louis. Ministers, politicians and concerned citizens pushed to stop the growth of rock n roll and youth culture. Presley's sexy dance moves had created so much controversy, that when he appeared on Ed Sullivan a final time on January 6, 1957, the CBS censors demanded that he only be shot from the waist up. Presley's critics had won the battle, but they lost the war. Teenagers across America continued to buy Presley's albums and flock to his performances. Presley went on to a wildly successful career with over 100 Top 40 hits and numerous hit movies. Soon other rock n roll groups, like the Beatles would take the stage at the Ed Sullivan show, but nothing defined the shift in attitudes the signaled the birth of a youth culture like Elvis Presley's performance on the Ed Sullivan show.

Author's Note: You can watch Elvis' controversial performance for yourself at <http://www.edsullivan.com/artists/elvis-presley/>

Sources: "This Day in History: Elvis Presley records 'That All Right (Mama)'." *History.com*. The History Channel. 2014. Web. 27 July 2014. < <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/elvis-presley-records-quotthats-all-right-mamaquot>>

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Write a short newspaper article from the perspective of someone who just watched Elvis Presley perform for the first time. Things to keep in mind: Are you upset or entertained? What is his music like? How did he dance?

(Your response should be about 3 sentences.)
