



ELVIS PRESLEY'S VISUAL APPEAL

by Albin Zak

From the very beginning, rock and roll has been defined by both its sound and its look. Between 1955 and 1957, rock erupted on the world stage with widespread radio exposure, mass distribution of records and images seen by millions on television and in films. On its initial release in 1954, Bill Haley's "(We're Gonna) Rock around the Clock" barely made the *Billboard* charts, fading after a single week. But the following year, when it was used as part of the soundtrack to *Blackboard Jungle*, it became one of the best-selling singles of all time. The film gave visual form to the record's sonic barrage, and young audiences responded as if to a call. Now the record's disembodied sounds were linked to specific images confirming and heightening rock and roll's association with youthful rebellion. And although the song played only over the opening credits, the film's

images somehow mingled in the public consciousness with the sound of rock and roll.

Teenagers' favorite DJ, Alan Freed, also brought rock and roll into film, capitalizing on his celebrity by starring in such films as *Rock around the Clock* (1956), *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956), *Don't Knock the Rock* (1956), and *Mr. Rock and Roll* (1957). These films had little in the way of plot or characters, but in presenting performances by stars of the day—including Haley, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers—they provided mass exposure to the sounds and images of the new pop idols. To the consternation of many critics, those pictures included an unprecedented concentration of black faces.

Elvis Presley was especially suited to the visual medium. With good looks, sex appeal, and an electrifying performance style, his television appearances thrust him onto the national stage, linking his musical energy to a visual spectacle. He set off a firestorm of both adulation and scorn, depending largely on the age of the viewer. When audiences saw his hip gyrations, leg shakes, and lip curls—his seemingly reckless physical abandon—the responses were almost immediate. No mainstream pop singers made these moves, which many critics considered aggressive and even dangerous in their overt sexuality. Once again, the music was associated with specific images that became identifying markers. Presley's style invoked familiar rock and roll themes—the rebellious outsider persona typified by his favorite actor, James Dean; a repertoire and performance style drawing heavily on the music of black performers; and a powerful sexual presence. This explosive package was apparent to those who had seen

him perform live, but television would bring it to a huge nationwide audience.

Following the release of his first Sun recording on July 19, 1954, Presley was known primarily in the South, where he played dozens of one-nighters in venues from Florida to Texas. His biggest media stage was provided by radio, when he performed on the *Louisiana Hayride* or the *Grand Ole Opry*. In 1955, his three hit records showed up only on the country charts. But in January 1956, after leaving Sun and signing with RCA and Parker, Presley appeared on television in a series of four weekly performances on *Stage Show*, a variety show hosted by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. His first appearance was on January 28, the day after RCA released the single “Heartbreak Hotel.”

Stage Show had poor ratings, and at first relatively few people saw Elvis’s performances. At his first show, the theater audience was sparse; the promoter recalled being “unable even to give away” the dozens of leftover tickets. Publicity mentioning a “special guest” on the show referred not to Presley but to the famous DJ Bill Randle, who was brought in to introduce the young singer. But unlike any of Presley’s previous shows, this one reached a nationwide audience. If it was small by television standards, it was still the largest stage he had yet played. Most importantly, it linked the musical and visual sides of the Presley persona. In the following weeks, Presley’s fame increased with astonishing speed. “Heartbreak Hotel” began to sell more than any of his previous records; it not only put him on the pop chart but also rose all the way to number one. In turn, he

was signed for two further Dorsey shows. Following his six appearances on *Stage Show* in the space of two months, he appeared twice on *The Milton Berle Show* and twice on *The Steve Allen Show*, and signed a three-show deal for Ed Sullivan’s *Toast of the Town*.

Presley’s appearances on television attracted widespread criticism in the press, most of it aimed at his look and style. One commentator summed up the general unease: “Where do you go from Elvis Presley, short of obscenity—which is against the law?” But the criticism only sharpened the generational divide, and his popularity with young people meant Presley’s rise was unstoppable. Seven months before his first Sullivan performance on September 9, he had earned \$1,250 for his *Stage Show* appearance. For the three Sullivan shows, he was paid \$50,000. By January 1957, Presley was the biggest singing star in America, and *Love Me Tender*, his first film, was playing nationwide. In less than a year of mass media exposure, he went from regional hillbilly star to worldwide rock and roll icon.

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