

Rocking with Elvis Presley

If music be the food of love, play on



by Michael Curtis

In mid 20th century America the country was blessed with two performers each of whom self-described or self-billed himself as the “world’s greatest entertainer.” Both to different degrees introduced in their singing and actions a mixture of influences across color lines during a time in this country of changes in race relations, some of which were successful, others hateful, all controversial. One was Al Jolson (Asa Yoelson) son of a Jewish cantor, born in a village in Lithuania in 1886 who came to the US in 1894, and became famous, although an immigrant—the star of mainstream Broadway and radio, who started his career as a black-faced singer. The second was Elvis Presley, born in poverty in 1935 in Tupelo,

Mississippi, relocated to Memphis at age 13, fascinated by African American music at an early age, who had no formal music training, but became the leading figure in creating a fusion of black and white musical styles. Both entertainers had affection for Black musicians and had crossover success in both the Black and white populations.

The career of Jolson was portrayed in *The Jolson Story* (1946) starring Larry Parks as Jolson, but with Jolson himself doing all the singing. A version of the life of Presley from childhood to rock and roll icon has now been presented in the film *Elvis*, directed by Baz Luhrmann as a highly styled chronicle with intense, frenetic rhythms aimed at portraying Elvis as an innocent who was exploited by his manager and father, a performer in love with the act of performing who became the essence of rock. Luhrman shows that Presley, even as a child, was a listener to country singers like Hank Snow, gospel singers like Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and local African American musicians including B.B. King.

Defining American musical styles with precision, ragtime, rhythm and blues, jazz, swing, rock and roll, borders on the perilous because of the constant changes of styles. What is apparent is that these styles, certainly most of them, originated from the Black community, and were often criticized or condemned by whites, before being assimilated into the mainstream. The 12-bar blues, a Black tale of sadness and pain, based on three chords in fixed sequences, were so assimilated that "Race music" became "rhythm and blues" with flattened blues notes and bent pitches.

An early illustration of the mixture of musical styles that are typical of the Great American Song Book can be found in the legendary 1927 *Show Boat*, composed by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, a musical about serious social issues including race and sexual themes, incorporating minstrel show influences, waltz, blues, work songs, jazz. In the era of the more recent world with its drastic changes ranging from speech

to moral attitudes and rights including gender in flux, along with its emphasis on youth, the age of the Great American Songbook was succeeded by that of rock and roll with its appeal to teenagers.

The term rock and roll, or rock music, was applied to rhythm and blues music originating in the mid 1950s aimed at Black audiences. It was the disc jockey, Alan Freed, in his Cleveland, Ohio radio show who first referred to it as rock and roll and popularized the term for more general audiences. He explained that "rock n' roll" is really swing with a modern name. It began on the levees and plantations, took on folk songs, and features blues and rhythm." In essence Freed by playing this hard driving rhythm and blues music, an exciting sound, promoted African American rhythm and blues on the radio under the name of rock and roll for white audiences.

The root of rock and roll, is generally regarded, as described above, as originating in rhythm and blues, combined with gospel, folk and country music but it developed in different ways and its history is complicated. Chuck Berry, for instance, was a major figure in transposing the two-note lead line of jump blues piano to the electric guitar, thus creating rock guitar, a combination of jazz, country music, boogie woogie, and Chicago-style electric blues. Elvis entered into this complex musical sound, aware of Black performers like Arthur Crudup who was a rock and roll pioneer. He was also influenced by other Black musicians as well as Crudup and BB King, such as Fats Domino.

Presley popularized rock and roll to a greater extent than any other performer, from the time he emerged as a singing sensation. Presley's impact began with the recording of the hit, "*That's All Right*," at Sam Phillips' Sun Records Studio in Memphis. Phillips was one of the promoters who wanted to bring the sound of African American music to wider audiences. Phillips declared that "if I could find a white man who had a Black sound and the Black feel, I could make a million

dollars." He found Presley and the millions followed.

Some of Presley's early recordings were partial rewrites of earlier Black rhythm and blues songs. With his rhythm and acoustic guitar, Elvis introduced "rockabilly," an up-tempo fusion of country music and rhythm and blues. He had successful television appearances, on variety shows like Milton Berle, Steve Allen, and Ed Sullivan, and starred in a number of films, although the films were less successful. He quickly became the leading figure of rock and roll.

Elvis was always a subject of dispute, a mix of success and controversy partly because of his mixture of influences across color lines. Mississippi Senator Jim Eastland warned that Presley would corrupt white children and provoke racial hostility. But it was the blatant sexuality in his performances, the sexually provocative actions, rotations of the pelvis, gyrations that were suggestive and vulgar, that drew attention, especially from young women. Presley's sexually provocative performance style was quickly picked up by other performers like Mick Jagger. His adoption of the Hollywood style of life with a series of relationships with stars including Natalie Wood, Ann-Margret, and Cybill Shepherd enhanced his reputation as highly sexualized.

He declined as a result of drug abuse and bad eating habits, a glutton used to heavy Southern cooking such as chicken-fried steak, and died in 1977 aged 42, in his mansion, Graceland, in Memphis. In his last years, he was a parody of himself with his gaudy rhinestone suits and flamboyant cowboy attire, all on view today at Graceland.

Presley, like Al Jolson, embodied the American dream, the rise from poverty to riches and fame.

His legacy lies in his creation of the fusion style that signaled a new era in pop music, developed in the 1960s by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the many groups that he

influenced. He was one of, if not the best-selling solo American musical artist of all time, a success in pop, country, rhythm and blues, and gospel.

It's interesting to compare Presley and Jolson, in several ways. Neither was ever a racist. Quite the contrary: they both started their careers influenced by African American music, Presley by jazz musicians, and Jolson, a generation earlier, by Black minstrel performers who populated the stages during the vaudeville era. Jolson, like Presley, also created a form of pop music that caused a paradigm shift—the style of music from which the Great American Song Book emerged—a style that combined jazz with ballads and resulted in the popularity of subsequent solo vocalist-performers like Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra. Third, they became pop cultural icons, making American pop music dominant worldwide. Today, if one goes to Europe, Asia, Africa, or South America, the musical sound stems from their music.

One wonders about pop music today. Social networks have shattered cultural unity with splinter musical movements that abound. It's an exciting time to listen to new music, but at the same time to reflect on history.