

“The Grain of the Voice”: Elvis Presley’s 1968 NBC-TV Special

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Summary

Simon Frith has stated that the aim of even serious rock musicians is, in short, to be popular (Frith 1983: 176). But popularity, Frith continues, “is taken to mean occupying a particular place in the community rather than just accumulating large record sales. The tensions emerge when these two goals are thought, for whatever reasons, to be incompatible” (Frith 1983: 176). Elvis’s epoch-making return to the stage in 1968 had all the hallmarks of an acrobat negotiating a tightrope, as he had to balance the expectations of his manager and the record-buying public on the one hand and his own sense of performance and popularity on the other. In focusing on the 1968 NBC-TV Special, an important milestone in Elvis’s career as a popular singer, this paper proposes to examine the production of the ‘68 Special against the backdrop of the tensions and the drama that led up to this signal moment in the history of American rock ‘n roll – a moment that would serve as a template for performing artists of the future. In many ways, the “Christmas” Special was a fulfilment of the vision of Steve Binder, the 23-year-old director, who said, “The one thing I knew that I wanted was Elvis to say something – let the world in on that great secret, find out what kind of a man he really was” (Hopkins 2007: 209).

Opsomming

Volgens Simon Frith is dit die doel van selfs ernstige rock-musici, kortom, om gewild te wees (Frith 1983: 176). Gewildheid, sê hy egter voorts, “is taken to mean occupying a particular place in the community rather than just accumulating large record sales. The tensions emerge when these two goals are thought, for whatever reasons, to be incompatible” (Frith 1983: 176). Elvis se epogmakende terugkeer na die verhoog in 1968 het al die kenmerke getoon van ‘n akrobaat wat op ‘n spandraad probeer bly, aangesien hy die verwagtinge van sy bestuurder en die albumkopende publiek enersyds en sy eie gewaarwording van vertoning en gewildheid andersyds moes balanseer. Hierdie artikel fokus op die spesiale TV-vertoning wat NBC in 1968 aangebied het – ‘n belangrike mylpaal in Elvis se loopbaan as ‘n gewilde sanger –, en ondersoek die opvoering teen die agtergrond van die spanning en drama wat gelei het na daardie belangrike moment in die geskiedenis van Amerikaanse rock ‘n roll – ‘n moment wat vir die uitvoerende kunstenaars van die toekoms as sjabloon sou dien. In talle opsigte was die “Kers”-opvoering die vervulling van die visie van Steve Binder, die 23-jarige regisseur, wat hom soos volg daaroor uitgelaat het: “The one thing I knew that I wanted was Elvis to say something – let the world in on that great secret, find out what kind of a man he really was” (Hopkins 2007: 209).

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[The] grain is the body in the voice as it sings
... I am determined to listen to my relation with
the body of the man or woman singing or
playing and that relation is erotic.

(Barthes 1977: 188)

It was the finest music of his life. If ever there
was music that bleeds, this was it. Nothing came
easy that night, and he gave everything he had –
more than anyone knew was there.

(Marcus 1991: 145)

Introduction: The King is Dead – Long live the King!

Legend has it that when John Lennon heard of Elvis Presley's death which occurred on 16 August 1977, he shook his head and said "Elvis died the day he went into the army" (Elvis in the Army). Before Elvis joined the US armed forces in March 1958, he had already earned the sobriquet King of Rock after a meteoric rise to the pinnacle of stardom after a mere three years in popular music. After his two-year stint in the army, he spent the next few years languishing in Hollywood, making inferior movies which nevertheless were successful at the box office. This was also the era of the British Invasion and no American singer – not even Elvis Presley – was unscathed by the British onslaught led by the Beatles. One source suggests that Elvis's recording career was in trouble even before the advent of the Beatles:

Elvis is sometimes cited as an American performer who was hurt by the British Invasion of 1964, but in reality his singing career was already in trouble by 1963. Too much effort was being expended in filmmaking, and too little in finding and recording good songs. Not that Elvis was doing either of those things. His handlers chose the movies and most if not all of the songs; all too often that latter were substandard, but they were recorded for the movies he made.

(Studwell and Lonergan 1999: 32)

The subject of Elvis's decline as a recording artist was actually raised by Lennon at the low-profile but historic meeting between Elvis and the Beatles when the latter visited him at his Hollywood home on 27 August 1965 while on their second tour of America. The British columnist, Chris Hutchins, who was present at the gathering, writes that when John Lennon asked Elvis why he had dropped the "old stuff", meaning the early rock of his Sun Records days, "Elvis squirmed in his seat. This was one line of questioning he had dreaded" (Hutchins 1996: 126). Elvis's response was: "Listen, just because I'm stuck with some movie soundtracks doesn't mean I can't do rock 'n' roll no more ... I might just get around to cuttin' a few sides and knockin' you

off the top” (Hutchins 1996: 126). Later, when Elvis bragged about “making movies at a million bucks a time” and that one of them “took only fifteen days to complete”, Lennon’s caustic rejoinder was, “Well, we’ve got an hour to spare now Let’s make an epic together” (Hutchins 1996: 126). Hutchins reports that “Elvis looked stunned, but held his tongue” (Hutchins 1996: 126). It is unlikely that Elvis would have forgotten Lennon’s “shark-infested mouth”, in Hutchins’ words, for the rest of his life.

Elvis’s absence from the top of the charts for most of the 1960s does not mean that the world had forgotten about him. Through the marketing strategy of his recording company, RCA, his image was kept alive for that decade. Simon Frith, in his study *The Sociology of Rock* (1978: 148), presents, in tabulated form, the results of a survey conducted by the magazine *New Musical Express* (NME) for the years 1959 to 1968 (ten years) to determine its readers’ choice of singers and entertainers in various categories, such as Male Singer, Female Singer, Vocal Group, New Singer, Personality, DJ and so forth. The categories fell under two branches, World and Britain. The winner of the best male singer in the World for nine out of the ten years was Elvis Presley. The only year when he was not voted was 1963, when that envied spot was taken by Cliff Richard. Extrapolating from this survey, it is significant to note that Elvis was still regarded as the best male singer in the World category from 1964 to 1968 – during the reign of the Beatles – even though his career as a recording star was at an all-time low during those post-army years.

The extent to which Elvis’s image as a singer and stage performer had all but disappeared from the public imaginary during his Hollywood years was put to the test by the man who was going to reintroduce the jaded King of Rock to a new generation of rock aficionados – and that person was Steve Binder who was to direct the 1968 NBC-TV Special featuring Elvis Presley. To impress upon Elvis that he should not take his popularity for granted, and that something different from the Hollywood routine was crucial to rescue his musical career, Binder took Elvis for an afternoon walk on Hollywood’s Sunset Strip. This is how Binder describes Elvis’s dismay at being unrecognised in public:

Elvis was undoubtedly wary – he hadn’t dared such a daylight visit to a public streetcorner in a decade – but he agreed to do the test. So, for perhaps ten to fifteen minutes, Elvis loitered outside a topless bar. Pedestrians strolled on by in the midday heat. Incredulous, Elvis began to cut up, trying to call attention to himself.

(Rodman 1996: 105)

At this juncture in his career, Elvis was a far cry from the phenomenon that had burst onto the music scene in 1956 to become the exemplar for aspiring young musicians across the world.

Resurrecting the King

The year 1968 was a momentous one in the history of the United States of America. On 4 April, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel (now converted into the Civil Rights Museum) in the city of Memphis, the home of Elvis. On June 6, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles. These cataclysmic events had an impact on Elvis and they are reflected in the angst of his performance in the final scene of the TV Special when he performs “If I can Dream”. The musical genius that was Elvis is evident in his performance of this song that was specially written for the occasion only the night before its debut performance. On a personal and professional level, the year 1968 was also a momentous one for Elvis Presley. It was the year when Lisa Marie was born to the Presley family on 1 February. According to Jerry Hopkins

Something else happened in 1968 to change the Presley image more than any cinematic propositions could Elvis’s films had been dropping in popularity, and profit, lately and unless the Colonel agreed to do a film and a special, probably the million-dollar figure would not have been met anywhere in Hollywood.

(2007: 208)

That “something” which happened in 1968 was, of course, the Elvis TV Special. Tom Parker, Elvis’s manager, had begun negotiations with NBC in October 1967 to produce an Elvis movie and a Christmas TV Special in time for the Christmas season. NBC had secured the sponsorship of the sewing machine company, Singer, which was its sole sponsor. Elvis was viewed by the company as an innovator in music, a concept that complemented the company’s product.

The year 2008 was the 40th anniversary of Elvis’s comeback to public performance after an absence of almost eight years. The NBC-TV special, originally titled “ELVIS” but more famously known as the ’68 Comeback Special, was recorded in June 1968, and aired on December 3 of that year. To commemorate the 40th anniversary, several events were hosted during the course of 2008, among them a free exhibition at Graceland in March showcasing Elvis paraphernalia related to the milestone event and a one-hour radio show set to premiere in August (the month of Elvis’s demise) of that year. According to one report, on March 14, at the 25th Annual William S. Paley Television Festival held at the Cinerama Dome at the ArcLight in Hollywood, Priscilla Presley, Steve Binder, the director, and Bones Howe the music producer of the TV special, were special guests to reminisce over the ’68 Special (Steve Binder and Bones Howe talk about the ’68 Special). Steve Binder talked about how Elvis was so nervous to go on stage that he wanted to back away at the last minute. He also revealed that Elvis, who had been staying overnight at the NBC studio, refused to take a call from the

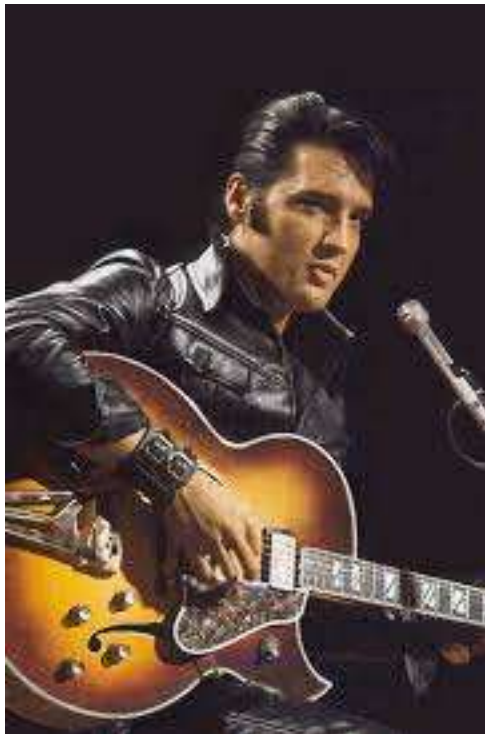
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Beatles as he had insisted that he would not be interrupted by phone calls from anyone. This kind of dedication is reminiscent of the days when it was not uncommon for the singer to do over a dozen takes of a song before settling on the final version of the record.

Epithets such as spontaneous and naturally gifted can justifiably be applied to Elvis Presley but they serve to obscure the fact that his genius, as is always the case with genius, was 90% perspiration more than anything else. The American cultural critic Greil Marcus has commented on Elvis’s work ethic:

... nearly every record Elvis made with Sam Phillips was carefully and laboriously constructed out of hits and misses, riffs and bits of phrasing held through dozens of bad takes. The songs grew slowly, over hours and hours, into a music that paradoxically sounded much fresher than all the poor tries that had come before; until Presley, Bill Black and Scotty Moore had the attack in their blood, and yes, didn’t have to think about it. That’s not exactly my idea of “spontaneity” or “unself-consciousness”.

(1975: 173)



The 1968 TV Special recuperated the image of Elvis Presley as an autonomous musician.

The “hits and misses” that Marcus speaks of in the early recordings at the Sun Studio were no less so with the ’68 TV Special. The 2006 DVD edition of the TV classic, which takes us behind the scenes, shows Elvis sometimes fluffing his lines but having great fun nevertheless. The success of the TV Special was in no small measure due to the star’s sense of spontaneity. When Steve Binder noticed that Elvis was fond of jamming with his friends at night, he conceived the idea of surrounding the singer with some of his old friends and musicians in order to see if the interaction “could be translated into program content” (Hopkins 2007: 211). According to biographer Jerry Hopkins, Steve Binder is reported to have said, “I thought it would be an excellent way to get Elvis talking, sitting there with the guys he knew, but it was an experiment only. We weren’t really sure what would happen,” (Hopkins 2007: 211). Guitarist Scotty Moore who, together with bassist Bill Black, made Elvis into a rock star in 1956, and who was the singer’s unofficial manager for a brief spell, is reported as saying that they spent a week

... rehearsing at night, if you would call it rehearsing. What it amounted to was we’d set up the guitars in the dressing room and everybody’d set back and start yakking. Just bangin’ around. It was like old times. First somebody’d think back on a good story on the other one, tell it, then maybe sing a couple of songs.

(Hopkins 2007: 211)

What emerged from these sessions in Elvis’s dressing room yielded audiotapes lasting four to five hours and helped inspire the first half of the TV Special. This is exactly what Steve Binder and Bones Howe had been looking for. It was an experiment that worked, much to the credit of Binder and Howe.

The Drama behind the Scenes

The three key figures in the production and execution of the project were Bob Finkel, the executive producer; Steve Binder, the 23-year old director; and Dayton “Bones” Howe, the record producer tasked with supervising the music for the Special. All three had distinguished themselves previously in show business. Bob Finkel had produced the successful Andy Williams Show for which he won two Emmys. Steve Binder, a former medical student at the University of Southern California, had directed the successful 1965 T.A.M.I. show (Teenage Music International) as well as a Petula Clark special which caused controversy because Harry Belafonte, an internationally famous black performer, had touched Clark on the arm! Bones Howe, according to Hopkins (2007: 208), had worked with Elvis in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

There were several obstacles placed in the way of the producers and the director of the forthcoming Special. The first and most difficult battle had to be fought with Elvis’s manager, the self-titled “Colonel” Tom Parker. Considering that the sponsor was Singer, the household name associated with the famous brand sewing machine, it is understandable that Parker wanted a show that would both please the sponsor and suit the ambience of Christmas time when the show was scheduled to be televised to the nation. Elvis could always be counted on to produce an album of Christmas songs, so what his manager wanted was another Elvis Christmas “album” delivered to the American populace in TV format. The young director would have none of it, as he is reported to have said:

[I] felt very, very, strongly that the television special was Elvis’s moment of truth. If he did another MGM movie on the special, he would wipe out his career and he would be known only as that phenomenon who came in the fifties, shook his hips and had a great manager. On the reverse side, if he could do a special and prove he was still number one, he could have a whole rejuvenation thing going.

(Hopkins 2007: 208)

Bones Howe, who was in charge of supervising the music for the Special, also felt that the show could be a defining moment for Elvis if the singer were to be himself instead of what his manager wanted him to be. In this regard he concurred with Steve Binder that if Elvis were organically involved in the show as he used to be “in producing his own records in the old days, before the movies – then we would have a great special. People would really see Elvis Presley, not what the Colonel wanted them to see” (Hopkins 2007: 208).

One of most crucial compromises that Steve Binder made was to delete a sequence that the sponsor would have found offensive. The show was loosely structured around the plot of a young man leaving home and entering the outside world. The opening sequence was to show the young man in a bordello, not in any compromising situation but simply being with an inexperienced girl named Purity. Before anything serious happens between them, the place is raided by the police and the young man is on the road again. Steve, in utter disappointment, had this to say:

If I didn’t say I was doing a bordello sequence, and said I was doing a number with twenty girls and Elvis, there would have been no fuss. I made an error and said what I was doing. It was that special moment in the show. People would have remembered it for years. At the same time, of course, Dean Martin can play with a girl’s boobs on the air and people say it’s great clean American fun.

(Hopkins 2007: 209)

Fortunately for posterity, this scene has been preserved on the DVD of the show. There was one more battle to be fought between Tom Parker and the producers of the Special, namely, over how the show would end. The Colonel, disappointed that the show had taken a different tack from his own conception of a Christmas Elvis, still felt strongly that his protégé should end with a Christmas song. Steve Binder, on the other hand, felt that when Elvis ended the show he should “blow everybody’s mind” (Hopkins 2007: 212). To this end he summoned his choral director, Earl Brown, and told him, “... I want you to go home tonight and write me the greatest song you ever wrote to close the show” (Hopkins 2007: 212). It was Steve’s idea that Elvis should end on a universal note of peace to humankind. The next morning, the song “If I Can Dream” was played for Elvis by Earl on his piano. After Earl had played it six times at Elvis’s request, Elvis agreed to do the number as his closing act. The key lines of the song are: “If I can dream of a better land/Where all my brothers walk hand in hand”. Jerry Schilling, a loyal member of the Memphis Mafia, says in his book:

The shock and hurt of the loss of Dr. [Martin Luther] King, and then Robert Kennedy, was still heavy in the air, and Elvis gave himself over completely to the stirring music and the simple message of hope. It was a breathtaking performance, and the pain, the power, and the heart that went into it made one thing very clear to me ... : The guy who had created all that excitement back in the fifties could still, in the turmoil of 1968, move you to tears with his awesome, undimmed talent. Nobody had originally talked about this as a “comeback special,” but Elvis had turned it into one.

(Schilling 2007: 191)

In October, two months before the television special was aired, RCA released “If I Can Dream”. By December it had reached number twelve position on *Billboard*, his highest position in five years. This song also gave Elvis his first million-selling single in more than three years.

The Comeback Kid

The strategy of mounting a television show, which is at the first remove from reality for the viewers at home, as well as bringing a live audience into the filming of the performance, was a stroke of genius on the part of the producers. Writing of the importance of live performance for the self-esteem of rock bands, Simon Frith asserts:

Performance is the central ritual of local rock, a special setting for music for which the audience is as important as the performers. It is in performance, as the musicians of Liverpool and Milton Keynes explain, that they experience

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the most intense feelings of achievement. To be on stage, the object of public attention, is to have confirmed the glamor of their chosen musical role.

(Frith in Grossberg et al 1992: 175)

As planned by Steve Binder, Elvis was accompanied on the square stage by friends and musicians. The Colonel’s own contribution to the Special was to get the prettiest girls in the audience close to the stage, even to sit on the edge of it. Lance LeGault was seated to Elvis’s right with a tambourine. Charlie Hodge was there with a guitar, along with Scotty Moore. Alan Fortas, Lamar Fike and D.J. Fontana were also on stage,

laughing, talking, feeding Elvis lines and reacting to those he contributed himself. The songs came naturally and powerfully, including many of the early hits: “That’s All Right”, “Blue Suede Shoes”, “Heartbreak Hotel”, “Love Me”, “Are You Lonesome Tonight”, “Lawdy, Miss Clawdy” and, pleasing the Colonel, “Blue Christmas”.

(Hopkins 2007: 214)

Steve Binder had taped nearly four hours of the original two live performances, most of which was edited for the NBC-TV Special broadcast which took place on Tuesday night at nine o’ clock, December 3, “opposite *Red Skelton* and *Doris Day* on CBS, and *It Takes a Thief* and *N.Y.P.D.* on ABC, swamping everyone, ...” (Hopkins 2007: 214).

Peter Guralnick, who has chronicled the singer’s entire life in two meticulously researched volumes, published in 1994 and 1999 respectively, describes the impact of the 1968 NBC-TV Special:

I don’t know if can convey how transcendent, how thrilling a moment it was. Here were all our fantasies confirmed – the look, the sound, the stance, the remarkable appositeness of the selection. The voice took off, it soared, it strained, and then to our vast surprise Elvis is sweating. He is unsure of himself, he is ill at ease, he is uncertain of our reaction, and it seems clear for the first time that Elvis is trying, and trying very hard, to please us.

(Guralnick in Miller 1976: 32)

While it is probably true that Elvis is sweating because he is unsure of himself and that he is trying hard to please his fans, there might be a more obvious reason why Elvis is sweating than the one suggested by Guralnick: He is clad in a leather jacket, leather pants and ankle-high boots. In the performance he is heard to quip several times about how hot it is in the suit, exacerbated by the studio lights. The leather outfit, diligently crafted for the show by Bill Belew, extends the semiotic repertoire we have of Elvis from the days when Alfred Wertheimer was allowed to photograph the twenty-one year old performer on his road show.

Another sign emerging from the 1968 Special, and one that has become a part of the archive of the Elvis semiology, is the name “ELVIS” – in upper

case lettering – emblazoned in red lights against a black background. This sign, “twenty feet high” (Hopkins 2007: 213), acted as the backdrop to the finale of the performance when Elvis, dressed in a white suit, rendered in gospel fashion the soul-stirring lyrics of “If I can Dream”. The LP that was released after this epochal moment in Elvis’s career captured this moment against the iconic ELVIS sign in red. Such is the ubiquity of this sign that, at the time of drafting this essay (May 2015), it appeared on slot machines at a popular casino and theatre venue called Montecasino in the north of Johannesburg, South Africa. It is a matter of speculation why this sign of Elvis should appear at a gambling mecca in South Africa but it does add to the glitz and glamour of the casino.

While the Comeback Special reached every home in the United States on 3 December 1968, it made for minor news in the South African print media. Strange as it may seem to American, European, Asian, and even some readers in parts of Africa, television only came to South Africa on a trial basis in 1976, not because the country was lacking in the technology to introduce television but because certain powerful ideologues in government lacked the political will to do so. Since coming into power in 1948, the government of the ruling National Party had sought to insulate its citizens from what it perceived to be the pernicious influence of the West, especially the mixing of different races in social contexts.¹ This strait-jacketed thinking had to change, as it did, very slowly, around 1976 when locally-produced programmes were piloted on TV. It would take another two decades before real TV – such as CNN and BBC – would come to South Africa. The point of this brief historical excursion into the origin of television in South Africa is that Elvis Presley’s 1968 NBC-TV Special remained a historical relic for South African music enthusiasts well into the late 1970s when it could be viewed on a television set as a video cassette recording (VCR).

What South Africans missed on 3 December 1968 – a mature, thirty-three year old Elvis and musically speaking, a reborn King of Rock – may be captured by Greil Marcus’s impression of the performance:

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1. An important arm of the South African government’s repressive apartheid policy was its Board of Censors which ensured that no print or visual medium would reach the public, or certain sections of the population, if its content was deemed as morally or politically offensive. Hence the 1960 movie *Flaming Star*, in which Elvis Presley gave one of his most dramatic performances, was banned in the country. One reason for this could be that Elvis’s character in the film is the offspring of a white man and an American-Indian woman. A more compelling reason is that the film portrays the injustices visited upon the American-Indians by the whites, in which case the parallels with South Africa under apartheid at that time would be too close for comfort.

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Shouting, crying, growling, lusting, Elvis takes his stand and the crowd takes theirs with him, no longer reaching for the past they had been brought to the studio to re-enact, but responding to something completely new. The crowd is cheering for what they had only hoped for: Elvis had gone beyond all their expectations, and his, and they don’t believe it.

(Marcus 1975: 145)

Jon Landau in *Eye* magazine wrote:

He sang with the kind of power people no longer expect from rock ‘n’ roll singers. He moved his body with a lack of pretension and effort that must have made Jim Morrison green with envy. And while most of the songs were ten or twelve years old, he performed them as freshly as though they were written yesterday.

(Hopkins 2007: 215)

Elvis had worked hard for this show, as his ex-wife Priscilla Presley testified in her autobiography: “Elvis knew this special was a big step in his career. For two straight months he worked harder than on all his movies combined. It was the most important event in his life” (Presley 1986[1985]: 266). The Elvis Special was a consummate performative act in which the singer, the medium, the costume and the music, complemented by the talented team of music producers, script writers, choreographers and dancers, under the stewardship of Steve Binder, cohered into a visual feast of popular entertainment that became a template for succeeding decades of performers. At the crossroads of the singer’s career, it was an epiphanic moment for Elvis and his fans – a moment that launched the singer into the third and last phase of his remarkable career, that of the Las Vegas-styled performer who toured the country extensively till the eve of his death. Even Albert Goldman, noted for his scurrilous biographies of Elvis and John Lennon, acknowledges the centrality of the TV show to the singer’s career: “What Binder and his boys were doing was not just resuscitating Elvis but putting him back in touch with the contemporary world” (Goldman 1982[1981]: 510). Television was always kind to the Presley image, since the days of the singer’s early appearances on the Tommy Dorsey and Ed Sullivan shows. Studwell and Lonergan (199: 31-32) aver that Elvis was “the first and biggest rock and roll star, and the first pop music star whose success was a direct result of television exposure”. In 1968, television once again played a pivotal role in Elvis’s career, this time not in creating a new star that had been born, but to re-create and re-invent a new image of a fading star in the crowded galaxy of rock musicians.

The Grain of the Voice

To borrow a precept from Roland Barthes, the TV Special was an actualisation of the notion of “the grain of the voice”. Barthes’ contribution to the aesthetics of popular culture has been considerable, not least of all in the field of music. His essay, “The Grain of the Voice” (*Image Music Text* 1977) has achieved mythological status. This is what Barthes means by the “grain of the voice”: the “grain is the body in the voice as it sings” (Barthes 1977: 188). “I am determined,” says Barthes, “to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic” (ibid.). Such a performance, according to Barthes, would sway us to “jouissance” which, in its French usage, has the connotation of an orgasm. Towards the end of the essay Barthes declares: “I shall not judge a performance according to the rules of interpretation, the constraints of style (anyway highly illusory), ... but according to the image of the body [grain of the voice] given me” (Barthes 1977: 188-189).

Barthes’ notion of the grain of the voice – a metaphor deriving from the materiality of timber – extends one’s aesthetic framework to appreciate the music of Elvis Presley, especially in the kind of performance evinced in the TV Special. Terms such as “jouissance”, “erotic” and “sexual” come so readily to mind when surveying the vast oeuvre of Elvis’s music, that it is not surprising when Simon Frith, taking his cue from Barthes, also uses this term in the context of Elvis’s music:

... jouissance, like sexual pleasure, involves self-abandonment, as the terms we usually use to construct and hold ourselves together suddenly seem to float free. And if this sounds like an unlikely way to treat rock ‘n’ roll pleasure, think of Elvis Presley – in the end this is the only way we can explain his appeal: not in terms of what he “stood for,” socially or personally, but by reference to the grain of his voice. Elvis Presley’s music was thrilling because it dissolved the signs that had previously put adolescence together. He celebrated – more sensually, more voluptuously than any other rock ‘n’ roll singer – the act of creation itself.

(1983: 165)

According to one online source, the ’68 Comeback Special is regarded as a “forerunner of the so-called ‘unplugged’ concept, later popularized by MTV” (Elvis 1968 TV Program). In another online source, Matt Bynum writes:

Unplugged music gives the human voice the respect that it is due ... When performing “unplugged” music, there is nowhere for the musician to hide. Every element must be top-notch – the music, the lyrics, and the performers, including the vocalist. And when all of these elements come together, it is heaven on earth. Such music is like a conversation with a close friend – and

the vocalist is your confidant, speaking directly to you in exquisite voice and sonorous tone.

(Music Unplugged)

Elvis had a penchant for extempore jam sessions. We are reminded of that famous jam session on 4 December 1956 when he visited the Sun Recording Studio where Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis were busy recording for Sam Phillips. Elvis was already a star by then, recording for RCA. When the trio was joined by Johnny Cash, what resulted was the Million Dollar Quartet, a product of the impromptu session which was recorded by Phillips, unbeknown to the musicians. A melange of gospel and rockabilly music, the Million Dollar Quartet is not much in the way of artistry or performance, but its value as a historical document, as Albert Goldman puts it, was “... enormous. At last you were inside the Sun Studio listening attentively as Sam Phillips’ greatest singers did what they most enjoyed doing: pickin’ and singin’ their favorite rock songs and hymns” (Goldman 1982[1981]: 709).

In the ’68 Comeback Special, Elvis is presented as the “guitar man” who leaves home in search of stardom. Carl Belz writes: “In his early career, Elvis Presley forcefully presented the image of a singer with his guitar. Like his folk predecessors, and like Bill Haley and his Comets, he was a symbol of the autonomous musician” (Belz 1969: 43-44). This image of Elvis almost faded away during his later Hollywood career to such an extent that some people were under the impression that he could not play the guitar. This misconception is evident in the documentary *Elvis on Tour* where we see the mayor of a town entering Elvis’s plane, the *Lisa Marie*, to welcome him. The mayor hands Elvis a toy guitar saying that he is presenting it on behalf of the townsfolk because “some people” told him that Elvis could not play the instrument. While accepting the gift graciously, Elvis politely but pointedly contradicts the mayor and informs him that he did play the guitar when he started off as a musician. Twelve years after he had burst onto the American and world stage, the 1968 TV Special once again, quite forcefully, recuperated the early image of Elvis as what Carl Belz terms, the autonomous musician.

In concluding, it would be pertinent to recall the words of Greil Marcus in the second epigraph to this paper: “If ever there was music that bleeds, this was it”. The image of bleeding, in tandem with the notion of a “Comeback Special”, conjures the metaphor of a former prize-fighter making his return to the ring in a bid to win his former glory. This metaphor is not lost on Albert Goldman (1982[1981]: 503) who also makes a passing allusion to it: “The ring! Why sure. Why not present him in the boxing arena? The great thing about the ring is that it cuts off the performer’s retreat and compels him to work in every direction at once like a modern dancer”. For most of the TV Special, Elvis performed on a “fifteen-by-fifteen-foot white stage rimmed in red” (Hopkins 2007: 213). In some ways, this metaphor works for Elvis’s TV Special. If, in the words of Peter Guralnick, Elvis was sweating

for the first time in his life because he was trying hard to please his audience, then the metaphor is apposite in presenting the image of a prize-fighter, who might have lost his edge through lack of practice, but trying his damndest to make a successful comeback to the public arena.

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