



R&B greets B.B. King, Roy Brown and Big Joe Turner.

Rhythm & blues

Another hugely important batch of influences for Elvis were the black singers and groups that he had always admired so much as he was growing up. As previously mentioned, interviews with the singer were scarce after the first couple of years, so not too much is documented under this heading. Despite this, it is known that he admired a whole host of rhythm and blues artists** including Big Bill Broonzy, Roy Hamilton, Ivory Joe Hunter, Lonnie Johnson (with whose *Tomorrow Night* he once serenaded his girlfriend Dixie), B.B. King, Little Milton, Muddy Waters, Lloyd Price, Arthur Prysock, Rufus Thomas and Joe Turner.

The magnitude of the influence is obvious from the choice of material for his first five singles — *That's All Right* (Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup), *Good Rockin' Tonight* (Roy Brown), *Milkcow Blues Boogie* (Kokomo Arnold), *Baby Let's Play House* (Arthur Gunter) and *Mystery Train* (Little Junior Parker) — and from a host of later R&B covers including LaVern Baker's *Tweedlee Dee*, Ray Charles' *I Got A Woman* and *What'd I Say*, the Clovers' *Fool, Fool, Fool*, the Coasters' *Down In The Alley*, the Drifters' *Money Honey*, Billy Emerson's *When It Rains It Really Pours*, Little Richard's *Long Tall Sally* and *Tutti Frutti*, Lloyd Price's *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*, Joe Turner's *Shake, Rattle & Roll* and of course Big Mama Thornton's *Hound Dog*.

In direct contrast to Elvis, Buddy grew up in what was to all intents and purposes an all-white environment. There were black people in Lubbock, but they lived in another part of town and — unlike Memphis — rarely mingled with the white population. Whatever black influences Buddy absorbed would

* It is noteworthy that both sides of his first demo were originally popularised by black artists: *My Happiness* was a 1948 R&B hit for Ella Fitzgerald as well as a pop hit for Jon & Sandra Steele; *That's When Your Heartaches Begin* was recorded in 1952 by the Ink Spots.

** A few years ago, Scotty Moore revealed that Elvis gave him a case of thirty or so of his 78s to transfer onto tape, and that of these twenty-four were by black artists — an amazingly high proportion. It's facts such as this that make it inconceivable that Elvis wasn't greatly influenced by blues and R&B. If further proof were needed, it could be added that he recorded six Ivory Joe Hunter compositions, and many more by other black writers — most notably the late Otis Blackwell (*alias* Charles Calhoun), whose talented pen provided him with monster hits like *Don't Be Cruel*, *All Shook Up*, *Return To Sender* and *One Broken Heart For Sale*.



Black talents Lloyd Price, Mahalia Jackson and Ivory Joe Hunter.

most likely have been via radio signals beamed into this rural part of Texas from out of state. Even if he himself was ring-fenced by the hillbilly music that the majority of his contemporaries favoured, he made certain that he got to hear as much of that 'other music' as he could — even if it meant having to stay up late at night with his friends to catch *Stan's Record Review* on KWKH, the 50,000-watt clear channel giant transmitting out of Shreveport, Louisiana, or sneak into the Cotton Club on 'colored' nights to see it in the flesh.

His favourites at the time included Tiny Bradshaw, Ray Charles, Fats Domino, Lightnin' Hopkins, Howlin' Wolf, Lonnie Johnson, B.B. King, Little Walter, the Midnighters and Muddy Waters. Not surprisingly, like Elvis, he went on to record many songs by black artists and composers including Chuck Berry's *Brown Eyed Handsome Man*, Roy Brown's *Good Rockin' Tonight*, Ray Charles' *Drown In My Own Tears*, the Clovers' *Ting-A-Ling*, Bo Diddley's *Bo Diddley* and *Mona*, Bill Doggett's *Honky Tonk*, Fats Domino's *Blue Monday* and *Valley Of Tears*, Arthur Gunter's *Baby Let's Play House*, Clarence 'Frogman' Henry's *Ain't Got No Home*, Little Richard's *Ready Teddy*, *Rip It Up* and *Slippin' & Slidin'*, Shorty Long's *Rock Me My Baby*, Mickey & Sylvia's *Dearest* and *Love Is Strange*, the Robins' *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, Joe Turner's *Shake, Rattle & Roll* and Chuck Willis' *It's Too Late*.

Gospel

If anything, gospel music had an even more profound influence on Elvis Presley than country music or R&B. Although he later expressed admiration for Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and other black gospel stars, as a teenager he was captivated by white quartets like the Blackwood Brothers and the Statesmen and regularly attended the monthly *All-Night Gospel Singings* held at the Ellis Auditorium in Memphis to experience first-hand the tremendous excitement they generated.

In *Last Train To Memphis*, Peter Guralnick concludes that 'gospel music combined the spiritual force that he felt in all music with the sense of physical release and exaltation for which, it seems, he was casting about.' Elvis himself put it more simply: 'It more or less puts your mind to rest.'

* Frustratingly, some of these recordings still have not been released.



The exuberant Statesmen, still going strong in the mid-Sixties.

Whatever, it is certainly no coincidence that he later surrounded himself with a permanent entourage of gospel-styled backing singers such as the Jordanares, the Imperial Quartet (featuring Jake Hess), the Stamps (led by the impossibly deep-voiced J.D. Sumner) and Voice.

While Buddy Holly's involvement with gospel came nowhere near rivalling Presley's, it is nevertheless equally clear that he also loved the music (as he did almost all types of music that he encountered). In this context, it is particularly revealing to note that he based his *True Love Ways* on the old black gospel hymn, *I'll Be All Right* — perhaps after hearing the Angelic Gospel Singers' 1955 version on Nashboro.

Elvis Presley

Holly of course had one other major influence, and that was Elvis Presley himself, as he was always quick to point out. His heartfelt statement 'Without Elvis none of us could have made it' (taken from a 1957 interview shortly after his first big hit with the Crickets) says it all.*

The feeling appears to have been mutual, too, though the only concrete evidence the author could trace was this quote from Roy Orbison: 'Elvis was a great admirer of Buddy, who he considered one of the true originals of rock & roll... Elvis had a complete collection of Buddy's records

* There are many other recordings of interviews where Holly cites Presley as his own major influence, as well as mentioning that he met up with him quite a few times in the early years.

and I can tell you he was pretty shook up when Buddy died so tragically.'

When he was up on stage, Presley was such a radically different performer to any seen before — certainly as far as white American audiences were concerned — that he completely blew away all those who witnessed his act. And it was most definitely the sudden appearance of Elvis treading the honky-tonk hardwood floors of Lubbock, Texas that whipped up all the influences that the young Buddy Holly had absorbed into a state of musical flux.

Later on in the Sixties, the Beatles' John Lennon was to put it even more simply: 'Before Elvis there was no-one.' (His other oft-quoted comment that 'Elvis died when he went into the army' possibly has no place in this book, but behind Lennon's caustic observation lies undeniable fact that the wholesome, safe, acceptable Elvis that emerged in 1960 was very different from the wild rebel who went in — a brilliant bit of rebranding by the astute Tom Parker.)

Popular culture

One other important factor that can't be overlooked where Elvis Presley is concerned is that some of his greatest early influences didn't come from any sort of musical background at all, but from the popular culture of the time.

As a child, he was an avid fan of the comic book superhero, Captain Marvel Junior, and later incorporated his lightning bolt motif into his renowned 'TCB' (Taking Care of Business) logo. The young Captain's glossy black hair unquestionably provided at least some of the inspiration for the famous Presley look, which also partially derived from the macho styles worn by long-distance truckers (sideburns, grease) and the sharp threads he saw blacks buying from Lansky's clothing store downtown.

The teenage Elvis was also enormously influenced by movies. He was a regular customer at the local fleapit and even worked as an usher for a while until he was fired following an altercation with a colleague. Always something of an outsider and a loner, it is easy to understand why he felt an immediate empathy with the alienated, sensitive, misunderstood anti-hero portrayed by Tony Curtis in 1949's *City Across The River*, and later with James Dean's desperate character in *Rebel Without A Cause*.

One of the great mysteries about Presley's meteoric rise to stardom is how he managed to transform himself from a painfully shy, bumbling nineteen year old into the dynamic 'Hillbilly Cat' of legend within the short space of one year. Perhaps the answer lies here.

There's little doubt that he had been spellbound by the stars he saw up there on the silver screen during those impressionable years. It seems he felt that, while the world of film provided escapism for the masses, it might also one day also provide him with a means of escape from a life of poverty in Memphis, possibly even the chance to make something of himself. If historically we've got used to actors who really wanted to be singers, there is the distinct suspicion with Elvis that in his case the converse was true. Tony Curtis, Marlon Brando, Richard Widmark, James Dean and later Yul Brynner