Was Elvis Presley 'Nothing' But A Black Imitator?
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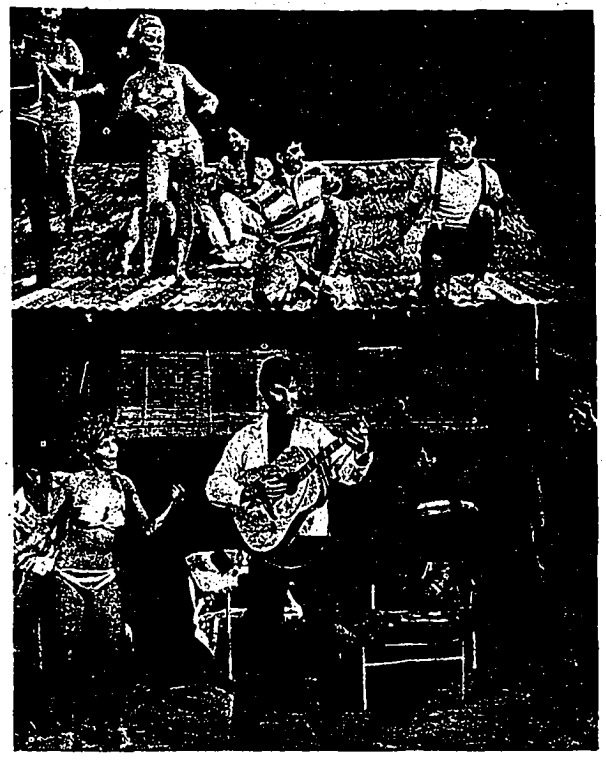

Sending The Fans Crazy

Elvis Presley in his heyday could do anything with a guitar and a song. This is a typical scene as how frenzied he could send his fans.

Even though "God doesn't love ugly," the Black teenager who was arrested for reckless dring and manslaughter when he plowed into a line of mourners outside Elvis Presley's estate, Graceland, may have been unconsciously acting out the hostility felt by some toward the White Hope of Pop music. Despite the laudatory terms that press coverage used to describe Presley's contribution to America's music, he vividly represented the questionable, dual standards used today that combat or attempt to stifle the ideal of equal opportunity.

Presley, who, despite being an example of the realization of the American Dream — with a slight Southern accent — seemed a tortured soul. The account of his bodyguards describe him as enjoying all the luxuries of the rich and successful and yet still harboring the insecurities psychological tics of the "misunderstood."

He got started on his road to lush living because he had a talent that Sam Phillips, head of the Memphis Recording Company, was looking for, according to his office manager, Marion Keisker.

She recalled Phillips, saying, "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars."

When the 19-year-old truck driver, Presley, walked into the MCR office to make a record to give his mother, Ms. Keisker remembered what her boss had said when she listened to the young unknown's recording:

Negro Sound

"This is what I heard .... what they now call Soul, this Negro sound. So I taped it . . ."

Do you know what she heard? That "Negro sound" that Presley shook the little recording studio with came during this period from his soaking in the music from his favorite Black group, "The Inkspots." This was 1953 and he waxed his version of their "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin."

Presley had also been listening all of his life to southern church music, growing up in the Bible Belt with its camp meetings, revivals and all-night gospel sings — he even sang spirituals sometimes at some of these affairs.

In fact, that distinctive wringing and twisting that earned him $50,000

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Was Elvis Presley An Imitator

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for an appearance on the nationwide Ed Sullivan Show changed his billing as the "Hillbilly cat" to the descriptive "Elvis the Pelvis."

Got the Message

Some of his chroniclers credit this actin that Sullivan could only let his Tv cameras shoot from the waist up to the uninhibited religious experiences of those days. But Robert Shelton, when he covered a Presley performance for the New York Times back in 1956 said "the gyrating country singer . . . got the message of the hard beat and explosive body motion from Negro gospel and rhythm and blues singers."

Bo Diddley, who is performing in Las Vegas, said that while he was doing his act at the Apollo Theatre, someone told him Elvis was out in the audience. Not too long afterwards, Bo said he caught one of Presley's performances. The first thing Bo noticed was, "Hey, this cat is doing my thing."

If Jackie Wilson, the singer who is hospitalized in New Jersey could talk, he, too, might say something similar. He, Little Richard, B.B. King Lightning Hopkins, Fats Domino, Arthur Crudup, Chuck Berry and Bo, at certain periods of Presley's skyrocketing career, must have felt like the victims of Dracula. Instead of being drained of blood, their song styling and stage mannerisms were neatly being incorporated into the total performance of now legendary Elvis Presley.

Those same Elvis Presley fans who had waited so faithfully beside the ornate, 18-room mansion with the stone lions guarding the door like the Fifth Avenue counterparts watch over the New York Public Library, and dampened with their tears the path taken by the funeral cortege to the Forest Hills Cemetery in Memphis refuse to be consoled. They might as stubbornly refuse to accept the fact that their idol was the puppet dangling from the strings of their emotions and secret desires.

Although the Klan in its recruitment material probably would have White America believe that Blacks are lusting after their blonde sisters, Elvis' success may really be the other side of the racial coin. Bob Christgau claims that Elvis was "every white Southern boy who envied his Black neighbor."

It might shatter them to discover that Black songwriters penned some of Elvis' biggest hits — like Otis Blackwell's "Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up," and Wynonie Harris' "Good Rockin' Tonight" and "I Don't Care If The Sun Don't Shine," and Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right, Mama."

Instead they prefer to hear that "It was Elvis who first dared to give the people a music that hit them where they lived, deep in their emotions, yes, even below their belts," as another Times writer told it in 1970. This reporter admitted bluntly, "Oh, other singers had been doing it for generations, but they were Black. They didn't count . . . because little white girls in middle America had a hard time getting any kind of fantasy going with a Black man. It was easy though with Elvis."

Stevie Wonder, a musical genius admired by all, said it a different way. He noted that America, disregarding a person's talents, had "a kind of backwards mental capability" in the Fifties.

Friend or Foe?

Elvis, "being a Caucasian brother," Stevie said charitably, "was able to do away with that whole thing."

Boxer Archie Moore and others who had appeared in shows with him were friends with the singer. The late Mahalia Jackson and Sammy Davis Jr. knew him intimately and overseas correspondents reported that he frequented a Parisian night spot, owned by a Black American Nancy Holloway, an attractive, former chorus girl.

But those nagging rumors still persist that he made some flippant, typically red-necked remarks. One reader reminded us, as the world mourned Presley's sudden demise and debated whether drugs had been the cause — despite a physician's report to the contrary — that 20 years ago, Elvis was being assailed for a remark — which he vehemently denied ever making — that the only thing Black folks could do for him was to buy his records and shine his shoes.

Probably one of those who would refuse to believe this, too, is a happy and lucky lady, Mrs. Minnie L. Person. Two years ago, she was the fortunate fellow-Memphisonian whom Elvis saw oohing and ahing over his custom-built Cadillac. He found out her birthday was coming up and had it delivered to her house with the keys and a check.

Again, when Elvis was appearing in concert in 1975, some Norfolk-Virginians said he told the thousands of Presley fans, "I smell green peppers and onions — and the Sweet Inspirations have probably been eating catfish."

One thing is certain, the first ones who heard him were the Memphis listeners of Dewey Phillips, a white deejay, with an all-Black radio audience. They say at that time, mixing Black and white music was taboo. But within a couple of days, orders flooded in for some five thousand records. Whatever Elvis' opinion, Black people made him.