Elvis Presley

No one person can claim to have invented rock and roll. But if one were to come close, it would be Elvis Presley—Elvis, the King of Rock and Roll. Presley is arguably the single most significant figure in rock and roll history. Before he died in 1975, at the age of 42, he revolutionized the way American popular music sounded and looked and forever changed the way young people relate to music.

Elvis Aaron Presley was born January 8, 1935, in rural Tupelo, Mississippi, to Vernon and Gladys Presley. Presley's twin brother, Jesse Garon, was stillborn, leaving Presley an only child. Presley's first known public performance came at age 10, when he sang "Old Shep" in a youth talent contest at a fair. When Presley was 13, the family relocated to Memphis, Tennessee, in search of a better life. Memphis was a vibrant melting pot of black and white musical traditions, and Presley soon developed a passion for gospel, country, blues, and bluegrass, in addition to mainstream pop music.

As a teenager, Presley was shy and something of a misfit. A highlight of those years was his prize-winning performance at a school talent show. He absorbed African American music through regular trips to Memphis's bustling Beale Street, where he also purchased slick hipster clothes. He cultivated a nonconformist personal style, with sideburns and a slicked-back haircut that was scandalous by the standards of the time. In the summer of 1953, after graduating from high school, he visited the Memphis Recording Service, home of the Sun Records label, and paid about four dollars to record a pair of pop ballads, "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin," onto a 10-inch acetate disc as a present for his mother.

The Memphis Recording Service was founded in 1950 by Sam Phillips, a former disc jockey from Alabama who founded Sun Records two years later. Although Phillips had considerable success recording and releasing music by African American artists, he realized that the racial divisions that governed the entertainment industry at the time limited his sales potential. "If only I could find a white man with the Negro feel," Phillips has been quoted as saying, "I could make a billion dollars." Phillips wasn't present when Presley came to record the acetate disc, but Phillips's secretary, Marion Keisker, was impressed enough to make a tape copy of the tracks to play for her boss. Phillips wasn't impressed. In June 1954, Phillips had a demo of a ballad and decided to record the tune. After an unsuccessful attempt to find the vocalist on the original demo, Keisker suggested trying Presley. But the inexperienced singer had trouble connecting with the song, and nothing came from the session. Even so, Phillips was intrigued by Presley's voice and presence, and he tested the newcomer by asking him to run through every song he knew. Presley regaled Phillips with an impressive array of country, blues, gospel, and pop material.

This time Phillips was impressed, and he teamed the inexperienced singer with pair of young but established local country musicians, guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black. Phillips felt that Presley might fare better with sparse, stripped-down backing than with a full band. For several weeks, Presley, Moore, and Black met daily to run through songs and work on developing a sound. In July 1954, the group cut some tracks, including "That's All Right, Mama," a 1946 number by Mississippi bluesman Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. The combination of Presley's playful, forceful vocals; Moore
and Black's spare, fiery support; and Sun's trademark slapback echo combined to create a new sound. That echo would become a key component in the sound of early rock and roll.

"That's All Right, Mama" became a local hit in Memphis. In an effort to generate interest outside of their hometown, Presley, Moore, and Black hit the road. They often worked as a warm-up act for established country stars whose fans had never experienced anything like Presley's volcanic vocals and hip-swiveling, leg-shaking stage moves. It wasn't long before Presley's stage moves were regularly evoking hysterical responses from female audience members and hostility toward the young upstart from some quarters of the conservative country music community.

In September 1954, Presley performed on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, a radio show that was a bastion of mainstream country and western music. He was not well received. But he found a radio home in October on the Louisiana Hayride, which originated in Shreveport, Louisiana. His presence on the Louisiana Hayride played a significant role in winning Presley new fans across the South. His live shows continued to draw larger concentrations of young female fans, with the performances growing progressively wilder and more provocative. Presley's backup band brought on a drummer, D.J. Fontana, house drummer of the Louisiana Hayride.

Presley's rising popularity, and his musical progress, continued with more Sun singles. Most were interpretations of material recorded by other artists. But by the time Presley was done with them, the songs were his. By mid-1955, it had become obvious that Presley had superstar potential. But his popularity was still limited to the South. At the Louisiana Hayride, Presley had met Colonel Tom Parker, who managed country stars. A savvy showman, Parker recognized Presley's untapped earning potential and officially took over as his manager in August. Parker's first major move was to secure a new record deal. In November 1955, Presley signed with Radio Corporation of America (RCA) Records. Parker, meanwhile, set up music publishing companies to oversee the songs Presley would record for RCA. He also licensed Presley's name and likeness for a dizzying array of products, unleashing a torrent of Presley-related trinkets that continues to this day.

Presley's first RCA session took place in January 1956. Moore, Black, and Fontana were augmented by legendary guitarist Chet Atkins, noted session pianist Floyd Cramer, and the gospel vocal quartet the Jordanaires, who would continue to play a prominent role in Presley's recordings. That session yielded "Heartbreak Hotel," Presley's first national hit, rising to number one on Billboard's pop chart. Two months later the label released Presley's first full-length long playing (LP) record, Elvis Presley, which spent 10 weeks at the top of Billboard's pop LP chart, earning Presley his first gold record award. A string of hit singles followed over the next several years, including the signature "Hound Dog" backed by "Don't Be Cruel" in 1956, a double-sided smash that became one of the biggest selling singles the music industry had ever seen. Presley's star was on the rise.

A key factor in Presley's rise was a series of high-profile, prime-time TV appearances. His performance of "Hound Dog" on The Milton Berle Show in 1956 generated a storm of controversy over the singer's gyrations and simultaneously established Presley as a top ratings draw. As his popularity rose and he became the most prominent figure in the new youth culture, Presley was increasingly the target of various media observers and moral guardians who decried him as a corrupter of the nation's youth. But young people loved him, and his example launched an army of rockabilly hopefuls. Records weren't the only things that Presley was helping to sell. Sales of transistor radios and record players boomed in the wake of his rise to fame. The rock and roll explosion that he set off helped to build the fledgling record business into a major industry. Teenagers around the country emulated his dress and adopted his "ducktail" haircut.

Offers of movie roles began to pour in during that pivotal year of 1956. Presley eventually signed a seven-year movie
contract with Paramount Pictures. He made his big-screen debut with a role in *Love Me Tender*, a dull Civil War–era drama that allowed him to croon four songs. It was dismissed by critics but became a box office smash. *Love Me Tender* was followed in 1957 by Presley's first color feature, *Loving You; Jailhouse Rock*, released later that year; and *King Creole* in 1958, considered Presley's best film performance.

By 1957, Elvis Presley was arguably the world's most famous musical entertainer. In March, he purchased his soon-to-be-famous mansion, Graceland, in Memphis. His music and film careers were still on the upswing when he received a military draft notice in December 1957. By the time he reported for active duty in March 1958, he had left enough unreleased tracks in the can that RCA was able to continue releasing new material that made him a steady chart presence during his two-year Army stint. He was stationed in Germany, where he met 14-year-old Priscilla Beaulieu, stepdaughter of Army captain Joseph Beaulieu. His beloved mother Gladys suffered a heart attack and died in August 1958.

Presley returned to civilian life in March 1960 to find his popularity intact. Over the next few years, he released a handful of memorable singles, including "Return to Sender," "Can't Help Falling in Love," and "Little Sister." By 1963, however, just as rock was entering a new era as an agent of social change, Presley had more or less walked away from his status as the King of Rock and Roll in order to be a serious film actor. Parker had other ideas, though. Two or three times a year between 1960 and 1968, Presley walked through a string of such forgettable movies as *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (1962), *It Happened at the World's Fair* (1963), *Fun in Acapulco* (1963), *Kissin' Cousins* (1964), *Roustabout* (1964), *Girl Happy* (1965), *Tickle Me* (1965), *Harum Scarum* (1965) *Spinout* (1966), *Double Trouble* (1967), *Clambake* (1967), and *Speedway* (1968). The formula was predictable: cast Presley as a rakish lifeguard/helicopter pilot/race car driver/etc., place him in an exotic location, surround him with pretty girls and cartoonish comic complications, and have him sing enough mediocre songs to fill the accompanying soundtrack album. Still, most of the films were huge moneymakers, and Parker saw no point in messing with a winning formula.

By the time The Beatles usurped his status as the world's biggest rock and roll act in 1964, Presley's musical career had become little more than a sideline. His film commitments kept him from performing concerts, and most of his record releases were throwaway soundtrack albums. Presley and Beaulieu married on May 1, 1967, and the next year Priscilla gave birth to the couple's only child, Lisa Marie. By 1968, the King's prestige was at an all-time low. Fans even stopped coming to his movies. Whether because of artistic inspiration or career necessity, Presley's long-dormant musical instincts stirred back to life in the late 1960s, spawning a brilliant new body of work that instantly reestablished him as a creative force. Presley's return to rock and roll was signaled by a pair of tough, rootsy singles, "Big Boss Man" and "Guitar Man," released in September 1967 and January 1968. The album introduced a punchy new sound that imbued Presley's country and blues roots with funky country-soul grooves that were well suited to the songs' more mature attitude. A major hit from the album was "In the Ghetto"—it was the closest Presley would ever come to singing a protest song.

What really set Presley on the comeback trail, however, was his stirring, edgy performance on an NBC television special in 1968. This show decisively rekindled Presley's rocker roots. In the course of one hour, it managed to reestablish him as a contemporary artist. Suddenly Elvis Presley was relevant again. In January and February 1969, he recorded *From Elvis in Memphis*, considered by many to be the best album of his career. The album introduced a punchy new sound that imbued Presley's country and blues roots with funky country-soul grooves that were well suited to the songs' more mature attitude. A major hit from the album was "In the Ghetto"—it was the closest Presley would ever come to singing a protest song.

With Presley having finally freed himself of his Hollywood commitments, the next logical step in his resurrection was a return to live performances. Parker booked a four-week, 57-show engagement at the International Hotel in Las Vegas.
beginning in July 1969. Those performances introduced Presley's powerful new live band. The run was an unmistakable triumph, winning rave reviews and breaking Las Vegas attendance records. Presley continued to perform at Vegas and to tour until his death. The Vegas comeback coincided with Presley's biggest hit since 1962, the number one smash "Suspicious Minds," recorded during the From Presley in Memphis sessions but not included on the album. Two more songs, "Don't Cry Daddy" and "Kentucky Rain," also became hits in late 1969 and early 1970. But by the mid-1970s, Presley's Vegas shows had become overblown extravaganzas that often felt less like musical performances than opportunities for the faithful to worship at the Presley altar. The voice and energy were there, but many considered the spectacle—along with Presley's bejeweled, jumpsuit-clad stage persona—to be overly grandiose.

Priscilla left Presley (their divorce became final on October 9, 1973), and troubling rumors of drug use and unpredictable behavior began to swirl around the singer. In 1972, "Burning Love" became Presley's final Top 10 hit and, for all intents and purposes, his last stand as a rock and roller. Thereafter, he settled into a comfortably middle-of-the-road country-pop style that yielded some catchy, well-crafted music but nothing approaching the intensity of his best work. But Presley had bigger issues than musical direction, and he had grown increasingly isolated, rising at sunset and rarely venturing outside of Graceland when he wasn't on tour. He'd become increasingly dependent on a number of prescription drugs, and his prodigious consumption took a heavy toll on his health. His weight fluctuated wildly and his performances became distracted and incoherent, further raising concerns among fans and the press.

Presley died on August 16, 1977, at Graceland. Although the official cause of death was heart failure, lab reports detected 14 different drugs in his system and strongly suggested that his drug use played a role in his demise. His remains were initially buried at Forest Hill Cemetery in Memphis, next to his mother's, but were later moved to Graceland, which was opened to the public in 1982 as a monument to Presley's memory and continues to be a major tourist destination, attracting more than 600,000 visitors per year. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in March 2006. In 1986, Presley was one of the first inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He was added to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1998 and the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 2001. More than 30 years after his death, Presley remains one of the top three best-selling solo artists in popular music history and one of the top earning dead artists, with worldwide sales estimated well into the billions.

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Entry ID: 1364100