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Elvis Presley and His Significant Impact on American Culture

Bachelor thesis

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne

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Děkuji PhDr. Matthew Sweney, Ph.D. za odborné vedení práce, poskytování rad a podkladů k práci.

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Introduction

Music is an essential part of human life. It is constantly around us. From the moment when we are born and our parents sing lullabies to send us to sleep, to the moment when a sad song is played on our funeral. Music has the power to influence people and evokes all types of emotions. It can bring tears into our eyes, it can fill us with joy and happiness but it can also evoke irritation or detestation if a negative association is connected to it. Nonetheless, life without music would be sad and empty. Music is the spice that gives our lives zest.

Musicians are able to spread messages through the lyrics. Many artists use music as a tool to express their feelings towards the events happening in the world. Music has a tremendous power to connect people and create massive energy. Even the Hussites knew how powerful a song can be and used their war hymns to scare the enemies. Furthermore, many protest and anti-war songs helped to bring people together and to encourage them to fight for their future.

Music also mirrors the culture. Artists, who comment on current cultural events and trends, create a picture of the society through their music. Culture is constantly changing and so is the music. A perfect example of this is the difference between generations and their taste in music. Teenagers often think the music their parents listen to is old fashioned and embarrassing. Simultaneously, parents often do not understand the music taste of their children. The change is natural. The music that is popular now might be outdated in a few years. Luckily, everyone is different and has different taste in music and therefore even the outdated music will still have its loyal listeners. Elvis Presley was on the peak of his popularity many decades ago yet there are still thousands of people who enjoy his music today.

On a summer evening in 1954 in Memphis, Tennessee a poor young boy from Tupelo, Mississippi came to the Sun Records studio with four dollars in his pocket in order to record a song as a birthday present for his beloved mother.¹ That night a special chapter in the history of rock and roll began.

Elvis Presley is one of the most significant representatives of the rock and roll era. He was influenced by the gospel, blues and country music and he revolutionized the

¹ Scott Schinder and Andy Schwartz, *Icons of Rock: An Encyclopedia of the Legends Who Changed Music Forever, Volumes 1 & 2* (London: Greenwood Press, 2008), 2.

sound of popular music as well as the way people related to it. He introduced African American music to millions of white people and contributed to the racial harmony. He brought a new fresh wind into the industry of entertainment.²

Tracy Kathleen describes Presley as following, “to some, he is simply the King. To others, he’s the poster child of overindulgent excess. But whether viewed as musical pioneer or tragic figure, Elvis remains one of the most influential performers—and cultural catalysts—of the twentieth century”.³ Presley was a controversial figure in the music industry. Some people loved him. Some people despised him. Nonetheless, he contributed to social and racial revolution and shaped the culture of 1950s remarkably.

This thesis aims to introduce the life and career of one of the icons of rock and roll Elvis Presley with a focus on his significant impact on American culture.

The thesis consists of four parts. In the first part I will touch upon the theme of music in general. In order to understand the role of music and its relevance to our everyday lives, I will cover what is considered to be music and its relationship with our culture. Then I will inspect the background of rock and roll genre.

In the second section the main focus will be placed on the personal and professional life of Elvis Presley.

The third chapter will revolve around Elvis Presley and his significant impact on the culture in the United States. I will address the range of his influence along with the changes in the society caused by his actions. I will explore the reasons why he became such an icon and I will mention other artists and works that were influenced by Presley. Finally I will address two studies regarding Presley’s impact on people.

In the final chapter I will focus on some of Presley’s recordings. I will try to provide an analysis of the songs “If I Can Dream”, “In The Ghetto”, “Heartbreak Hotel” and “Hound Dog” in order to understand his enormous success and to explore some of the themes in his music.

Finally a conclusion will be provided in order to sum up all the important information in the thesis.

² Schinder and Schwartz, 2.

³ Tracy Kathleen, *Elvis Presley: A Biography* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 1.

1 Rock and Roll

1.1 What Is Music?

What is music? There is no right or wrong answer to this question. Everybody has their own taste in music and their own definition of what music means to them. Music is and has always been part of the human culture and each culture has its own specific features. As it is stated in *The Origins of Music* “For every structural feature that can be claimed as being a defining feature of music, one can always find (or dream up) a musical style that lacks this property.”⁴

In 1952, John Cage, an American experimental composer, music theoretician and a leader of the post-war avant-garde, created a composition called 4’33”.⁵ As the title suggests, this composition is four minutes and thirty-three seconds long and can be played by any instrument. It consists of three movements. During these three movements a performer is supposed not to play his instrument. In other words the aim of the composition is to capture the silence of the instrument in order to emphasize the sounds of the environment around the listeners. By creating this composition, Cage asserts the idea that musicality can be found in any sound or noise.⁶ Therefore we could say that music is around us at all times. Even in a completely silent room, we could still hear the sounds of our own bodies.

As we can see, any sound can be considered music. It depends how every individual human being understands music and what meaning music has to him. Some people consider only Mozart’s classical compositions as true music, while others can listen to a monotonous beats of drum machines for hours and still enjoy it nonetheless. It all depends on one’s preferences.

What is the purpose of music? We can think of music as something that brings pleasure, joy or comfort when needed. Something that allows humans to express themselves and share what they feel when words are not enough. However, Dr Thomas

⁴ Nils Lennart Wallin, Steven Brown, and Björn Merker, eds. *The Origins of Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 6.

⁵ “John Cage Artist Overview and Analysis,” *The Art Story*, accessed August 1, 2017, http://www.theartstory.org/artist-cage-john.htm - synopsis_header

⁶ “John Cage Artist Overview and Analysis,” *The Art Story*, accessed August 1, 2017, http://www.theartstory.org/artist-cage-john-artworks.htm - pnt_2

Currie, lecturer from the University of Exeter, argues that the main reason why people create music is to “bring people together and bond social groups – it can be kind of social glue.”⁷ It does not matter what age, race, gender or religion you are, music is a tool that connects everyone.

1.2 Music and Culture

Each culture has its own form of music; it is part of the human evolution. Wallin, Brown and Merker explain in their book *The Origins of Music* that “even the most cursory glance at life in traditional cultures is sufficient to demonstrate that music and dance are essential components of most social behaviors, everything from hunting and herding to story telling and playing; from washing and eating to praying and meditating; and from courting and marrying to healing and burying. Therefore the study of music origins is central to the evolutionary study of human cultural behaviour generally”.⁸ Therefore we can assume that music has always been a part of the human culture.

Social situations, politics, economics, religion, current trends, these are some of the aspects that influence music. Another important aspect is technology. Especially in these days, modern technology allows artists to create new sounds and experiment with new instruments. Nowadays, with the access to the Internet, anybody can share their work with the rest of the world. Simultaneously anyone can access the music from all around the world within a few clicks of a mouse.

In her article *Music and Society*, Elie Siegmeister notes “music has at all times had a social function or functions, corresponding to the objective needs of society.”⁹ Music reflects the society and the culture. That is why the music is constantly changing. Many artists have utilized the power of music. Through thoughtful lyrics they comment on the important moments in history and provide the needed push for a change in the society. For example, Sam Cooke wrote a protest song “A Change is Gonna Come” to support the civil rights movement; Edwin Starr and his song “War” became an anti-war anthem; Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” is a protest song emphasizing the racism in Southern

⁷ “Study reveals a common beat in global music,” 2015, accessed August 14, 2017, <https://phys.org/news/2015-06-reveals-common-global-music.html>

⁸ Wallin, 4.

⁹ Elie Siegmeister, *Music and Society* (Critics group Press, 1938), 6, accessed August 7, 2017. <http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/music/sieg/sieg.pdf>

America; Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, and Mary Lambert's song "Same Love" supports gay rights.¹⁰ These are just a few examples of how music can help to provoke social actions.

The uniqueness and power of music is undeniable. As Bono, the lead vocalist of the rock band U2, once said, "Music can change the world because it can change people."¹¹

1.3 Rock and Roll Origins

Loud guitars, honky-tonk piano, strong beats and simple yet catchy melodies, that is rock and roll. A genre that shook the world. Rock and roll originated from genres such as country, rhythm and blues, gospel, jazz or pop. The roots of the genre can be found in the Southern United States in the late 1940s, where the working class of black and white people would "sing together in the cotton fields".¹² However, it is hard to specify the exact time when rock and roll evolved since it is such a wide mixture of genres and its development was gradual.¹³

After the Second World War the economic prosperity supported the development of rock and roll music. The new baby-boom generation was now financially more secure and people could invest their money into music. Rock and roll was influenced by the innovations in technology. The development of electric guitar formed the characteristic sound of rock and roll; on the other hand, expansion of television and radio broadcasting enabled people to access music more easily.¹⁴

The post-war America was a perfect place for the evolution of rock and roll as it was undergoing major demographic changes. With the migration of African Americans from the South to the North, many cities like Memphis, Chicago or Detroit became melting pots where blacks and whites were living close to each other and were

¹⁰ "10 Influential Songs That Changed The World," last modified February 6, 2017, accessed August 14, 2017. <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/articles/the-10-influential-songs-that-changed-the-world/>

¹¹ Timothy D. Neufeld, *U2: Rock 'n' Roll to Change the World* (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2017), 175.

¹² "Country History", *A Brief History of Country Music*, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://www.halfhearteddude.com/2013/01/history-of-country-ebook/>

¹³ Albert Christ-Janer, Charles W. Hughes, and Carleton S. Smith, *American Hymns Old and New* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 364.

¹⁴ David P. Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll* (Pearson: Toronto, 2015), xiv.

influenced by one another's culture.¹⁵ Schinder and Schwartz describe that rock and roll was formed by "a long-simmering cross-pollination of black and white musical styles, an evolution that was fuelled by the increasing pervasiveness of music radio broadcasting in America beginning in the 1930s".¹⁶

In the late 1940s the American music industry started producing rhythm and blues recordings that sounded nothing like the music before. Songs that were originally performed by African American singers were re-recorded by white singers and black music started appearing in jukeboxes. White teenagers were suddenly exposed to this different kind of sound and started appreciating the appealing elements of rhythm and blues. It offered a strong cultural contrast to the conventional white music; the energy, unique rhythms and new sounds spoke to young people. Black music was rebellious and therefore attractive to the juveniles.¹⁷

Rock and roll became a lifestyle. *A Brief History of Country Music* describes it as following, "rock & roll was an assertive posture, a rejection of prescribed inhibition and the formulae of social expectations. It was a cultural insurrection, and politically helped nudge America towards racial integration. It was a social and sexual revolt, and, briefly, a musical uprising."¹⁸ The post-war affluence allowed young generation to enjoy rock and roll to the fullest and as a result contributed to the expansion of the genre.

When it comes to key figures of rock and roll, Kent Demaret emphasizes the importance of Little Richard's impact. In his article, Demaret claims that, "No performer deserves more credit for the metamorphosis of black rhythm and blues into rock'n'roll. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley all credited him as a seminal influence."¹⁹ Another musician of African-American origin that influenced the development of rock and roll music is Chuck Berry, who often portrayed the American

¹⁵ James M. Salem, *The Late, Great Johnny Ace and the Transition from R & B to Rock 'n' Roll* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 4.

¹⁶ Schinder and Schwartz, 1.

¹⁷ Charlie Gillet, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock & Roll* (London: Souvenir Press, 1996), 10-11.

¹⁸ "Country History", *A Brief History of Country Music*, accessed June 20, 2017,

<http://www.halfhearteddude.com/2013/01/history-of-country-ebook/>

¹⁹ Kent Demaret, "The Temptations of Rock Behind Him, Little Richard Becomes a Bible Salesman.", *People*. January 8, 1979, accessed August 17, 2017, <http://people.com/archive/the-temptations-of-rock-behind-him-little-richard-becomes-a-bible-salesman-vol-11-no-1/>

youth in his songs.²⁰ Finally, Elvis Presley, one of the best-known white performers of rock and roll, contributed to the popularity and evolution of rock and roll music to a great degree. The next chapter will focus on his life and career.

2 “The King of Rock and Roll”

“The King of Rock and Roll” is the nickname for one of the most significant icons of the musical industry of the twentieth century Elvis Presley. His life was far from ordinary. Although he grew up in poverty, he managed to achieve his dream and conquered the music industry. His unique voice is known all around the world. His iconic moves and style are still imitated by many people. We could say that he still lives in many people’s hearts. Some even believe that he actually is alive. The Internet is full of conspiracy theories speculating about his death. Whether these theories are truthful or not, one thing is certain – he will always remain one of the greatest figures in the history of music.

2.1 Early Life

On an early morning of January 8th, 1935 Gladys Presley gave birth to twin sons in a two-room shotgun house in Tupelo, Mississippi. Elvis Aaron Presley was born healthy. However, his identical twin brother, Jessie Garon, was stillborn. Consequently a very special and close bond was formed between Presley and his parents Gladys and Vernon Presley. His parents always believed their son was special and although they were a typical working-class family with little money, they always did their best to provide their child with all he needed. However, that does not necessarily mean that the parents would spoil their son. They were strict and Presley was well mannered and raised with respect to elders and love for his parents.²¹

Presley’s parents were deeply religious and they attended the Assembly of God Church in Tupelo. Here Presley found his love for singing gospel and music in general. In 1948 the family moved to Memphis. It was a spontaneous decision. As Presley

²⁰ Michael Campbell, ed., *Popular Music in America: And the Beat Goes On. 3rd. ed.*, (Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2008), 168-169.

²¹ Priscilla Presley, *Můj Život s Elvisem*, trans. Marie Běliková (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1992), 47.

himself stated “we left Tupelo overnight. Dad packed all our belongings in boxes and put them in the trunk and on top of a 1939 Plymouth. We just headed for Memphis.”²²

Memphis was an intermingling place for black and white music. Presley was absorbing all the musical traditions and started developing his image “with sideburns and a slicked back haircut that was scandalous by the standards of the time”.²³ Presley was different and never fitted the standards. He was not afraid to be himself – to wear different clothes, to comb his hair certain way and to behave differently than his contemporaries.

2.2 The Beginning

It was Gladys’ birthday and Presley decided to surprise his mother with a recording of him singing songs “My Happiness” and “That’s When Your Heartaches Begin”. That is when he first stepped into the Sun Records office.²⁴

From the moment Presley’s voice cut the silence it was obvious that there was something special about him. After the recording was done, the founder of the studio, Sam Phillips, assured him that they might contact him in the future. A few months later Philips invited Presley to his studio. Along with guitarist Scotty Moore and his bass player Bill Black Presley recorded “That’s All Right Mama”, a song which became an immediate hit. When a disk jockey Dewey Philips first played the song on his station, the response was overwhelming.²⁵ Presley’s voice and style appealed to people and he became an overnight sensation.

2.3 Colonel Parker

Presley’s popularity was rising quickly. He was performing regularly, he went on tours and his records were very successful. His unique voice along with his provocative style drew in young people and his fan base was growing rapidly. Colonel Tom Parker,

²² Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1994), 12, 28.

²³ Schinder and Schwartz, 3.

²⁴ Schinder and Schwartz, 2.

²⁵ Kathleen, 63.

a talent manager, noticed Presley's popularity and saw a massive potential in him. Soon he took over the place of Presley's manager Bob Neal.²⁶

As Kathleen says, "In Elvis, he [Parker] saw a virtual feast—a man who projected an ambiguous sexuality that, if properly handled, could draw both men and women. He viewed Elvis as a commodity to market and had put together a plan to do just that. Parker saw vividly what both Sam Phillips and Bob Neal had missed, and he knew that he could catapult Elvis the way neither of them ever could."²⁷

Parker arranged a record deal with RCA Records. On January 10, 1956 Presley's hit "Heartbreak Hotel" was born. The song immediately skyrocketed to the top of *Billboard's* pop chart and sold over three hundred thousand copies within three weeks. Soon after that a combination of Presley's previous recordings from Sun Records and new recordings he made at RCA was released as his debut album called *Elvis Presley*.²⁸

As a result of Parker's clever entrepreneurship, Presley started appearing in television shows. Parker was aware of Presley's good visual appearance and knew that exposing him on television would increase the demand. However, because of Presley's controversial moves some shows allowed to film him only from the waist up. At some shows Presley was not allowed to move at all because his dancing was considered too sexual.²⁹

Parker sensed the singer would be perfect for movies and made use of his previous connections to enable Presley enter Hollywood. In 1956 Presley signed a contract with Paramount Studios and started his acting career.³⁰ His film debut was called *Love Me Tender*. As anticipated, Presley's appearance in film was a success. Since then Presley appeared in dozens of films. Some of his best-known and popular films are *Loving You*, *Jailhouse Rock* or *King of Creole*.³¹

²⁶ Schinder and Schwartz, 7.

²⁷ Kathleen, 74.

²⁸ Schinder and Schwartz, 7-9.

²⁹ Schinder and Schwartz, 10.

³⁰ James Dickerson, *Colonel Tom Parker: The Curious Life of Elvis Presley's Eccentric Manager* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 75-76.

³¹ Paul Duncan, ed., *Movie Icons: Presley* (Köln: Taschen, 2010), 35, 36, 49, 84.

Presley was a sensation with a tremendous following of fans. He caused a mania. His records and movies were flourishing and made him financially secure for the first time in his life.³² Presley became the epitome of American Dream.

2.4 The U.S. Army

In December 1957 Presley received a draft letter to join the army. The following year, after completing his basic training in Texas, he was sent to Friedberg in Germany for eighteen months.³³ His manager Colonel Parker made arrangements so that Presley could live in a rented house during the training, besides that, the singer was treated no differently than any other soldier.³⁴

During his time in the army in Germany, Presley was nervous about his return back to the United States. He was worried people would forget about him. However, when he returned back to the music industry, he realized his concerns about his career were pointless. His popularity remained the same and people were excited to welcome him back. He recorded a new song called “Stuck On You” which became Presley’s first hit single after his comeback. Presley also returned back to television when he appeared in a show called *Welcome Home Elvis*, where he performed alongside Frank Sinatra. Soon after that he recorded an album called *Elvis Is Back!*.³⁵

Throughout the 1960s filmmaking was Presley’s prime job. The reason being is that films were more profitable. Avaricious Parker wanted to make money hand over fist. He became aware of the success of Presley’s films and took advantage of every opportunity.³⁶ According to Duncan, Parker “launched him [Presley] on a hugely successful movie career, and saw to it that the world was awash in Elvis dolls, Elvis pencils, and Elvis ‘products’ of every kind imaginable.”³⁷

It is fair to say that if Presley worked with different manager or if Colonel Parker was not so hungry for money, the further development of Presley’s career could have been different. The pure pressure of marketing affected Presley’s career.

³² Kathleen, 65.

³³ Schinder and Schwartz, 14.

³⁴ Kathleen, 99.

³⁵ Todd Slaughter and Anne E. Nixon, *The Elvis Archives* (London: Omnibus Press, 2004), 57-58.

³⁶ Schinder and Schwartz, 15.

³⁷ Duncan, 12.

During 1960s rock and roll scene undergone changes and Presley's popularity was slowly descending. Presley's status of now married man was not helping his career either. His status of a heartthrob was stolen by The Beatles, an English rock band that caused similar hysteria as Presley did previously. Presley was filming more and singing less. The majority of his new records were only soundtracks to his second-rate films.³⁸

2.5 1968 Comeback

Presley was desperate to show the world that he still had a lot to offer. In order to win the fame back, Parker arranged a special television show with NBC known as the '68 *Comeback Special*. The show was broadcasted on the 3rd of December and brought back Presley's glory. Wearing his famous black leather suit, Presley put on an outstanding performance. He sang most of his old songs from the 1950s with slight variations. The comeback was a success. Schinder and Schwartz describe the show as following, "The NBC special reestablished Elvis as a vital musical force virtually overnight, showing his talent and magnetism intact after nearly a decade of aesthetic neglect."³⁹

People were fascinated by Presley's pompous return. Jon Landau commented on Presley's performance, "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."⁴⁰

Presley got a second wind. He was excited to start making music again. He recorded hits like "Suspicious Mind" and "I Can't Help Believin". He also released a new album called *From Elvis in Memphis*. He ended his acting career and started performing live again. Presley became a regular performer at the International Hotel in Las Vegas for four weeks. After that he went on a successful tour around the United States and continued performing in Las Vegas. In 1972 Presley became the first entertainer who sold out The Madison Square Garden in New York with his four shows in a row.⁴¹

³⁸ Schinder and Schwartz, 15-16.

³⁹ Schinder and Schwartz, 17.

⁴⁰ Jerry Hopkins, *Elvis: The Biography* (London: Plexus, 2007), 215.

⁴¹ Schinder and Schwartz, 19.

Although Presley's professional life was flourishing once again, his private life was falling apart. He and his wife became strangers and in 1973 they separated. Presley continued performing, however it was obvious that his private problems were affecting him deeply. He would spend a lot of time in hospitals; he was succumbed by a massive consumption of prescription drugs and he evidently gained weight. His performances were poor. His memory was getting worse and he often forgot lyrics. He was unpredictable and could not focus very well. His behavior was often inappropriate. His once graceful movements were now gone.⁴²

We might only speculate whether it was the divorce, the hectic lifestyle, frustration from the declining fame or a combination of all of the above that led him to this awful state. Presley became victim of his own success.

2.6 The King Is Dead

August 16, 1977 marks a sad day in the music history. Presley died. His girlfriend found his dead body lying on the floor in a bathroom. He died of heart attack. The news spread quickly and the public was shocked. His death brought crowds of mourning fans to Graceland.⁴³

The world has lost "the King". A talented man who changed lives of many people and revolutionized the music forever. His life was a perfect example of American dream. A poor boy became a star that was loved by millions. He also represented the idea that anything is possible if you want it bad enough and work hard.

In his official statement, president Jimmy Carter addressed Presley's death with the words "Elvis Presley's death deprives our country of a part of itself. He was unique, irreplaceable. More than twenty years ago, he burst upon the scene with an impact that was unprecedented and will probably never be equalled. His music and his personality, fusing the styles of white country and black rhythm and blues, permanently changed the face of American popular culture".⁴⁴

⁴² Presley, 228 – 236.

⁴³ Presley, 237, 238.

⁴⁴ "Statement by the President on the Death of Elvis Presley," The American Presidency Project, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7969/>

3 Elvis Presley and His Impact

Elvis Presley, a term, a brand, a phenomenon and a name that turned out to be one of the most discussed topics in the history of music. He was described as the “King”, the “Hillbilly Cat” or a “white nigger”. He was controversial and challenged the social boundaries in the American culture. For some people he was a talented music lover who admired the work of black artists and helped to emphasize the importance of equality of all beings; to others he was a racist and a troublemaker who corrupted the youth and who profited from the music of African Americans.⁴⁵ To this day, Presley’s life is surrounded by many myths and remains a subject of interest to many people.

Presley is a music icon. Even though it has been forty years since he died, he still remains one of the most influential protagonists of rock and roll music and “one of the most successful entertainers of the twentieth century”.⁴⁶ Elvis Presley is also a representation of the 1950s. His career opened the doors of rock and roll to the public all around the world. Though his persona might be quite controversial, one thing must be admitted and that is that his activities had an enormous influence on Americans. Bertrand described Presley’s influence as following, “while his excursions without question were unsystematic, imperfect, and “apolitical”, they nevertheless threatened the racial status quo. By implicitly advocating that working-class African Americans and working-class whites might have had more in common than not, Presley’s crossing of the color line undermined the myths and stereotypes that sustained Jim Crow segregation”.⁴⁷

Presley did not invent rock and roll as some may think. In fact, rock and roll developed from the black music when white musicians started performing slightly revised versions of rhythm and blues songs that were originally sung by black artists. Rodman explains that the new name “rock and roll” served only as a cover in order to “erase the connotations of blackness associated with the “rhythm ‘n’ blues” label and to

⁴⁵ Michael T. Bertrand, “Elvis and Politics of Popular Memory,” *Southern Cultures*, (Fall 2007): 63.

⁴⁶ Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 21.

⁴⁷ Bertrand, “Elvis and Politics of Popular Memory,” 63-64.

create a fiction that white musicians had in fact invented this “new” music themselves”.⁴⁸

In the following chapters I am going to explore Presley’s overall impact on the culture, other artists and his impact on his admirers as well.

3.1 Presley’s Impact on American Culture

After the end of World War II the racial segregation in the United States was becoming more and more prominent. The increasing inequality raised a demand for racial integration in the American society. Though African Americans were treated as inferiors all over the country, the disparity was most apparent in the South areas. African Americans were not allowed to vote, attend some schools, drink the same water as whites or even sit next to whites on a bus. One of the events that disrupted the stigma was the *Brown v. Board of Education* in May 1954 when the Supreme Court suppressed the segregation in American state schools. Only two months after that, Presley’s first single, a song originally performed by African American artist, was released. This was one of the first steps into the cultural desegregation as it manifested that black music could be enjoyed equally by white and black people.⁴⁹

The mid-twentieth century was crucial for the development of music in the United States. Music reflected the racially divided culture. As Burke puts it “music experienced a cultural shift as Western artists became influenced by African and Indian sounds resulting from immigration and the fall of the British Empire”.⁵⁰

Presley’s involvement in the race music was somehow contentious. On one hand he introduced and popularized the African American culture to the white community and therefore contributed to the racial integration. On the other hand he was criticized for spoiling the culture of black community. Presley was seen as an intruder in the eyes of black artists. They felt that he was taking their music away from them. They perceived

⁴⁸ Gilbert B. Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 48.

⁴⁹ “Elvis and Race in 1950s America,” TeachRock educational project, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://teachrock.org/lesson/elvis-and-race-in-1950s-america/>.

⁵⁰ Callum P. Burke, “Cultural Appropriation and Orientalism: Elvis Presley vs. The Beatles.”, *ResearchGate*. May 2014, accessed March 30, 2018.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263279790_Cultural_Appropriation_and_Orientalism_Elvis_Presley_vs_The_Beatles

Presley as someone who stole part of their culture and started commercializing it for the white community while not giving any credit to the creators of the music. Wynonie Harris, one of the representatives of the black music, accused Presley not only of copying the music but also of copying the characteristic dance moves from the black performers.⁵¹

Although Presley repeatedly credited the black artists as his source of inspiration he had to face a barrage of criticism for seemingly stealing the rhythm and blues music. In 1957, Presley stated in an interview “the colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I’m doin’ now, man, for more years than I know. They played it like that in their shanties and in the juke joints and nobody paid no mind ‘til I goosed it up. I got it from them. Down in Tupelo, Mississippi, I used to hear old Arthur Crudup [American Delta blues musician] bang his box the way I do now and I said if I ever got the place I could feel all old Arthur felt, I’d be a music man like nobody ever saw”.⁵²

In addition, Presley frequently mentioned his interest in gospel music throughout his career. He often confessed that the black music influenced him deeply. In 1957 in a Canadian interview, Presley was asked whether his first love was Western Music. His reply was “No sir, it’s not. My first I would say would be spiritual music . . . I mean some of the old colored spirituals, you know, from years back”.⁵³

It is debatable whether the criticism of Presley for copying other artists is accurate. Presley grew up surrounded by the culture of both black and white communities and he spent much of his childhood “absorbing the music of local impoverished black communities like Shake Rag in Tupelo and later on the Beale Street area of Memphis”.⁵⁴ Therefore, it is natural that he picked up some aspects of the African American culture. Similarly to other teenagers, Presley was a fan of the black music. He acquired the clothing style and language of black entertainers as well. Bertrand further

⁵¹ Burke, 2.

⁵² James A. Cosby, *Devil’s Music, Holy Rollers and Hillbillies: How America gave Birth to Rock and Roll* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2016), 145.

⁵³ Jerry Osborne, *Elvis – Word for Word: What He Said, Exactly As He Said It* (Port Townsend: Osborne Enterprises Publishing, 1999), 85.

⁵⁴ David Troedson, “Elvis Presley and Racism,” last modified December 1, 2017, <https://www.elvis.com.au/presley/elvis-not-racist.shtml>.

explains that Presley “created an identity by patterning his music, speech, mannerisms, and appearance on what he observed and imagined of African American masculinity”.⁵⁵

The aversion towards Presley was fairly reasonable since the black musicians have never received as much credit as he did. In his essay, Burke mentions that “the credit and monetary disparity of performances and record sales . . . infuriated black musicians. Black musicians that had been producing similar work before and during Elvis’s rise to stardom but, had only managed to secure a limited proportion of the recognition due to the condemnation of ‘race music’ in America”.⁵⁶ In a 1990 interview, Little Richard described the cultural discrimination as following, “I believe that if Elvis had been black, he wouldn’t have been as big as he was. If I was white, do you know how huge I’d be? If I was white, I’d be able to sit on top of the White House! A lot of things they would do for Elvis . . . they wouldn’t do for me”.⁵⁷ This quote raises an interesting question. Would Presley become successful if his skin was black?

To answer this question we might look at the famous quote by Sam Phillips, “If I could find a white man with the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars”.⁵⁸ As Bertrand emphasizes, Phillips was aware that selling a black singer to a mainstream audience would be problematic considering the 1950s segregated music industry. The white audience was introduced to the rhythm and blues artists through the so-called “Negro Appeal Radios”.⁵⁹ These radio stations emerged during the times of segregation and were oriented towards the African American audiences. Bertrand emphasizes the importance of black radio programming because the segregated society “tried very hard to dehumanize African Americans and steal away their dignity, black radio program pushed the exact opposite message”.⁶⁰ The repertoire of these radios usually consisted of gospel and rhythm and blues music. Some independent radio stations were broadcasting certain programs specifically for black audiences. The establishment of these radio stations was crucial for racial integration and further

⁵⁵ Michael T. Bertrand, “Elvis and Politics of Popular Memory,” 76.

⁵⁶ Burke, 2-3.

⁵⁷ Rodman, 49.

⁵⁸ *The Telegraph*, “Sam Phillips,” August 1, 2003,

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1437680/Sam-Phillips.html>

⁵⁹ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 9, 2018.

⁶⁰ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 7, 2018.

development in the mainstream music. The reason being is that the radio stations portrayed African Americans and their music as equal to everyone else. In the late 1940s the white audience began listening to these stations and started appreciating the sounds of rhythm and blues music.⁶¹ It is at this point where we can realize the impact of black radio stations along with Presley and his generation on the culture in the United States. Presley and his contemporaries were praising the music of African Americans which contributed to the racial integration.

Bertrand notes that the majority of the white audience was introduced to the music of black artists through the radio stations. However, rhythm and blues was directed mainly at minority audiences. This meant that black artists were recording only for small companies. Because of the persisting segregation, the rhythm and blues artists were not allowed to record with major record companies. The major record labels usually signed the white mainstream artists who would record the songs of black artists. However, none of the mainstream performers of that time were able to deliver a performance with the characteristic Negro feel. Therefore Phillips was looking for a white performer who could deliver an authentic rhythm and blues performance.⁶²

Surrounded by black music from a very young age, Presley developed a deep admiration for this style of music. As a result he adopted the distinctive features of black performers and therefore became the perfect adept to sing rhythm and blues songs. Thus, to summarize, if Presley had been a black singer he probably would not have become as successful. The segregation in the United States would probably hinder his talent. Presley arose as a result of the music industry that was undergoing changes at that time. To a great degree it was the popularity of Presley and rock and roll that actually allowed African American artists to enter the mainstream culture. Bertrand acknowledges that “if Elvis had not emerged, someone similar probably would have”.⁶³

Personally, I think that Presley would probably find his place in the music industry had his skin been black. His voice and the peculiarity of his personality would surely bring him some amount of attention. However, his popularity would probably be nowhere near to the popularity he achieved as a white performer.

⁶¹ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 9, 2018.

⁶² Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 9, 2018.

⁶³ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 9, 2018.

Returning back to the issue of Presley being criticized by black performers, not all black artists were against Presley. In fact, some artists have openly spoken about their admiration for Presley and his work. For example, B.B. King defended Presley by saying “Elvis didn’t steal any music from anyone. He just had his own interpretation of the music he’d grown up with . . . I think Elvis had integrity”.⁶⁴

Presley did benefit from the music written by black artists, however he helped to revolutionize it. He managed to “embrace a music forbidden by much of society”⁶⁵ by delivering vibrant performances and combining different musical styles in a way that was attractive for the audience.

Presley personified a road to freedom and the authorities were aware of that. They criticized him and labelled his behaviour as vulgar because they were afraid that Presley could give people the hope for racial equality. It was the authorities who claimed that race music was not supposed to be played for and by white people. In addition, Presley was breaking the segregation standards by attending number of events that were classified as “coloured” events and when he was performing the whites and blacks in his audience mixed together. By recording the music that was at that time considered inferior Presley influenced the development of music industry. He respected the black people and was breaking the stigma. As a result the authorities regarded him as a threat and attempted to reduce his popularity.⁶⁶

Presley turned rock and roll into global sensation. With his arrival, the popularity of rock and roll skyrocketed. Bernard describes, “Elvis Presley personified the excitement and fears identified with rock ‘n’ roll. Moreover, as a figure who thoroughly encompassed within his celebrity the volatile issues of class, race, and age that shook the postwar South, he embodied the conflict and tension of a southern world in transition.”⁶⁷ Presley did not change only the way rock and roll sounded. He also influenced the way it looked. His original style inspired the fashion trends and many

⁶⁴ Craig H. Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America*, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 264.

⁶⁵ Troedson, “Elvis Presley and Racism.”

⁶⁶ Troedson, “Elvis Presley and Racism.”

⁶⁷ Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis*, 23.

teenagers started wearing clothes like Presley. Boys were trying to imitate his hairstyle, they combed their hair and grew side-burns like he did.⁶⁸

Presley also influenced the young generation in terms of self-expression. Presley was not afraid to be different. By embracing the black culture himself, he served as a model for others to express themselves openly. Jezer describes his impact as following “In Presley, young whites experienced the soul power that they never imagined they had. He gave them a sense of energy that had seemingly been lost, but had been preserved--in isolation--in black culture. Presley, more than anyone else, gave the young a belief in themselves as a distinct and somehow unified generation—the first in America ever to feel the power of an integrated youth culture.”⁶⁹ Presley helped the young generations to accept who they are regardless their race, age, gender or social status.

Early in his career, Presley was popular among African Americans. It is evident from the success of his recordings in the African American parts of the United States. As Bertrand notes, “according to a survey documenting record sales in the African American market between 1949 and 1971, Presley ranked as the nation’s nineteenth most popular rhythm and blues performer”.⁷⁰ These data demonstrate that Presley had a large number of African American supporters. It also reflects how Presley was breaking the stereotype that whites should only listen to white artists and blacks to black artists.

Presley was often criticized for his rebellious behaviour, his seductive moves and tempting moans. However it seems that it was not Presley that actually bothered people. It was the fact that he was praising the culture of black artists and rock and roll in general. At that time, it was unacceptable for whites to listen to the music of African Americans. Any signs of miscegenation were considered a threat to society. The older generation was aware of the fact that Presley sang music of African Americans hence they questioned his impact on their children. Bertrand describes how “many news columns and columnists denounced rock ‘n’ roll and all of its practitioners, black and white, as immoral, degrading, and a contributing factor in the rise of juvenile delinquency . . . others accused Presley and his compatriots of having secularized the

⁶⁸ Presley, 25.

⁶⁹ Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages, Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1982), 281.

⁷⁰ Bertrand, “Elvis and Politics of Popular Memory“, 78.

zeal of gospel, thus debauching religious music. From a completely different perspective, some even opined that rock ‘n’ roll in general, and Presley in particular, signified a potential panacea for the South’s racial dilemma”.⁷¹ Presley was pushing the social and moral boundaries of the conservative society in the United States. Some people admired his fearless actions while others, usually the members of older generation, were irritated by them. As Rodman puts it, Presley was breaking the taboos of 1950s. The fact that he was a white artist singing rhythm and blues was already considered outrageous. Moreover, the idea that he was causing sexual awakening in many teenage girls concerned the public even more. However, Rodman argues that what terrified people the most was probably the fact that “he [Presley] did both these things at once – that he excited white girls with black music”.⁷²

One of the first waves of criticism regarding Presley’s controversy came in 1956. With his growing popularity Presley soon became a target for film and television producers as they realized his potential to attract the audience. He started appearing in various television programs and his performances were in high demand.⁷³ As *History* puts it, “if “Heartbreak Hotel” is what made him the king of the radio and record stores . . . it was television that truly made him the King of Rock and Roll”.⁷⁴ One of the programs Presley took part in was The Milton Berle Show. As he was singing his latest hit “Hound Dog” Presley executed his passionate pelvic dance moves. His performance caused an upheaval. As a result of his scandalous dancing Presley was not allowed to move at all in one of the following programs. During his performance in the Ed Sullivan show, Presley was shown only from his waist up in order to not offend anyone.⁷⁵

Presley’s dancing was disapproved by many critics, however it challenged the social values and opened the themes of sexuality and self-expression. Once again, Presley has pushed the moral limits of the society.

⁷¹ Bertrand, “Elvis and Politics of Popular Memory,” 79.

⁷² Rodman, 57.

⁷³ Marcie Wallace, “Elvis Presley: A Revolutionist,” *La Grange*, n.d., 101, https://www.lagrange.edu/resources/pdf/citations/2012/11_Wallace_History.pdf.

⁷⁴ “Elvis Rocks The Milton Berle Show,” History.com, accessed April 14, 2018, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/elvis-rocks-the-milton-berle-show>.

⁷⁵ Wallace, “Elvis Presley: A Revolutionists.” 101-102.

Presley's overall influence seems odd. Despite the fact that he was not aspiring to change the society he caused a dramatic development in the cultural events. As Bertrand further describes "placing Elvis in a larger historical context indeed affords a glimpse into the complexities and tensions associated with the rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll movements that simmered below the southern societal surface".⁷⁶ Presley represented the generation that grew up in biracial environment and perceived race differently. This generation was open-minded and respectful of African Americans. Bertrand observes that this new perspective marks an important historical development in terms of racial equality and notes that Presley's fame indicated the possibility of racial peacefulness after the war.⁷⁷ By consistently challenging the values of society, Presley became a symbol of a new generation. He admired the music and culture of African Americans and respected it, which was very brave. Especially in the times of segregation. In order to understand Presley's impact we have to look at his life before he became an international superstar. As an adolescent he was interested in black music and culture as a way to express himself. He admired African Americans and repressed the segregation in the United States by doing so. Before Presley the white audience was kept away from the culture of African Americans. With Presley's arrival these barriers were broken down. Popularizing rhythm and blues music caused a change in attitudes towards African Americans and therefore contributed to racial integration significantly.

Presley's impact on culture is undeniable. He caused a tremendous revolution not only in the United States but also all around the world. Presley and his music tore down the barriers between whites and blacks. He became an important figure in the history by bringing attention to the racial integration. His music helped to repress the stereotypical skin differences between people. It also influenced young people's beliefs and enabled them to express themselves differently from their ancestors. He served as a model for the possible change in society by embracing the culture of African Americans. His success was partly tarnished because he achieved his fame by using the music of African Americans who never profited from it as he did. However, his contributions to musical industry are immense and it would be hard to imagine music without Elvis Presley. He challenged the moral values of society and caused sexual revolution by his provocative dancing. He gave the world a new way of thinking and a new way of self-

⁷⁶ Bertrand, "Elvis and Politics of Popular Memory," 79, 80.

⁷⁷ Bertrand, "Elvis and Politics of Popular Memory," 81.

expression. He showed that one's origin or looks do not matter. Most importantly he was a white man who embraced the African American culture and redounded to the racial revolution.

3.2 Why Was Presley So Popular?

As we can notice from the countless publications, biographies, documentaries or websites that celebrate Presley's life and career, Presley was and still remains one of the biggest icons of music history. The question is what made him so popular?

To start with, he was very attractive. Many girls have fallen in love with his bright eyes, strong jawline and the way his perfect hair fell into his face. However, I believe that it was not only about his attractiveness. I am sure there were other white singers who were good-looking. But could they sing like he did? Could they dance like he did? Were they as charismatic, polite, energetic and confident on stage? I think that Presley was a perfect mix of all these qualities and that was what made him stand out.

In addition, the fact that he was a very talented singer and a brilliant performer should not be neglected. He interpreted songs in his own distinctive fashion and his performances were one of a kind. His energy was contagious and it seemed like he put his whole body into singing. The power of his performances was unique. Presley's arrival on the scene was like a breath of fresh air into the music industry.

His songs were captivating and cheerful which enhanced his popularity. Presley's music was a combination of different musical styles and his sound was new. Presley offered the youth a music that was much more vibrant than the slow tones of Frank Sinatra and other popular artists of that time. The novelty of his sound caused a sudden cultural boom.

We may assume that Presley's personality also contributed to his popularity. It is apparent from many interviews that Presley was a down to earth, humble man. He came from working-class family and his almost movie-like life story of becoming an international superstar obviously made him attractive. Furthermore, he arose from the audience that he later started performing for. The fact that people felt like he was one of them made him even more likeable. This links us to a study by Fraser and Brown which I will address later in the thesis.

People are naturally drawn to forbidden things. In a way Presley was the forbidden fruit of 1950s. He expressed himself differently than his contemporaries. He wore different clothes and styled his hair in a special way. He was revolting against the

morals of conservative society and many adults were alarmed by his wild behaviour. As a result, his rebellious reputation functioned as a magnet to juveniles. Ironically, some of the criticism has turned into a boon for him. The more he was despised by adults the more he was loved by youngsters.

The timing of Presley's arrival to the scene was pivotal. Presley started his career as a teenager and he represented a "generation of Southerners who reached adolescence in the late 1940s and early 1950s".⁷⁸ Bertrand emphasizes that this generation of Southerners experienced an interesting shift in their region. Originally impoverished South was evolving from agricultural place into a rather industrialized and urbanized one. The juveniles were now living in a world full of new opportunities as the region was "joining the mainstream".⁷⁹ This also applied to the segregation in the country as African Americans were attempting to enter the new mainstream sphere. Teenagers were exposed to rhythm and blues and black culture differently than the previous generations. The fact that the black radio programming portrayed African Americans as equal to whites affected the youth to be more open to crossing racial borderlines and Presley served as a role model for the possible changes in the society.⁸⁰

To conclude, Presley was a full package. He had all the appealing qualities that attracted people. He was talented. He stood out from other artists. His status and life story allowed people to identify themselves with him and finally, he was in the right place at the right time.

3.3 Impact on Other Artists

Elvis Presley was exceptionally distinct figure. He had his own unique style and was not afraid to be himself. He challenged cultural principles and revolutionized the music industry. He was a one of a kind and he paved the way for other musicians. His talent and sincere approach influenced many people. Up to this day, many artists still look up to Presley as a source of inspiration. Some of the artists and the work inspired by Presley are mentioned below.

We can find references to Presley almost anywhere, from Andy Warhol's famous pop art paintings to various motion pictures. *Wild at Heart*, directed by David Lynch, is

⁷⁸ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 7, 2018.

⁷⁹ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 7, 2018.

⁸⁰ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 7, 2018.

a road movie that portrays the main character as an imitation of Presley.⁸¹ *3000 Miles to Graceland* is an action film starring Kurt Russell and Kevin Costner that tells a story about a group of men who decide to rob a casino dressed in Presley costumes during an Elvis Presley convention in Las Vegas.⁸² The biographical drama about Andy Kaufman's life, *Man on the Moon*, which was directed by Miloš Forman, also made a reference to Presley. In one of the scenes, Kaufman's character, played by Jim Carrey, impersonates Presley as he sings "Blue Suede Shoes" while wearing Presley's iconic jumpsuit.⁸³ Presley was also mentioned in one of Tarantino's greatest films *Pulp Fiction*. In one of the scenes Mia, played by Uma Thurman, explains that people can be either categorized as "Elvis people" or "Beatles" people"; later in the film she also makes a comment "an Elvis man should love it".⁸⁴ Presley's character also appeared in the film *Forrest Gump*. In one of the scenes, Presley stays in the Gump house and plays one of his songs for little Forrest. Forrest dances to the song comically, however Presley likes it. In the following scene Forrest and his mother are walking down the street. When they stop by a shop window, they see a television show where Presley executes a dance similar to Forrest's. The plot portrays Forrest as the one who had inspired Presley's inappropriate moves.⁸⁵

After his death more than two hundred films have made references to Presley. Some of them were biographical films about his life and career, for example films *Elvis* (1990), *Elvis and Me* (1988) or *Elvis Meets Nixon* (1997) depict the highlights of Presley's life; numerous other films refer to Presley directly and some of them mention him in the dialogues.⁸⁶

Several songs had been written in memory of Presley. As Brian May mentioned, Freddie Mercury composed "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" as a tribute to Presley.⁸⁷

⁸¹ "Wild at Heart," Entertainment, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://ew.com/article/1990/08/17/wild-heart-3/>

⁸² "3000 Miles to Graceland," IMDb, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0233142/>

⁸³ "Muz na Mesici," IMDb, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0125664/>

⁸⁴ "Pulp Fiction Trivia," The Quentin Tarantino Archives, accessed May 9, 2018, https://wiki.tarantino.info/index.php/Pulp_Fiction_Trivia

⁸⁵ *Forrest Gump*, dir. Robert Zemeckis (1994; Hollywood: Paramount, Pictures).

⁸⁶ "Elvis in Movies," Elvis the Icon, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.elvistheicon.com/in-movies>

⁸⁷ "Queen interview: Brian May on Crazy Little Thing Called Love," posted by Absolute Radio, August 7, 2011, video, 0:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvGIDkQqxoc>

The song “DisGraceland” written by Alice Cooper was a reaction to Presley’s death; as Cooper himself stated “I thought that Elvis Presley’s death was a disgrace compared to his career”.⁸⁸ American singer Lana Del Ray mentioned Presley in many of her songs, including “Body Electric” or “Elvis”.⁸⁹ Bruce Springsteen was shook by Presley’s death and it took him three years to write a song dedicated to “the King” called “Johnny Bye Bye”.⁹⁰ “Personal Jesus” by Depeche Mode represents the relationship between Presley and his wife Priscilla; the song was inspired by Priscilla’s book *Elvis and Me* where she describes her husband as her guide who taught her everything.⁹¹ “Walking in Memphis” is often mistaken as a direct reference to Presley, however, as the author Marc Cohn states, the song is an autobiography concerning his own life rather than Presley’s.⁹²

Multiple artists have mentioned Presley’s influence upon their own careers as well as his impact on music in general. David Bowie stated “Elvis was a major hero of mine”; Isaac Hayes noted “Elvis was a giant and influenced everyone in the business”; Buddy Holly acknowledged “none of us could have made it without Elvis”; Elton John stated “It was Elvis that got me interested in music” and Robbie Williams mentioned “He inspired me to be a performer, he is a legend, the King”.⁹³ In addition, both John Lennon and Paul McCartney emphasized that if it was not for Presley, The Beatles would probably never have happened.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ “3. Alice Cooper speaks about knowing Elvis and DisGraceland,” posted by listeninSEE, July 7, 2013, video, 0:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyuRzX4Dtic>

⁸⁹ “Body Electric (song),” Lanapedia, accessed May 6, 2018, [http://lanadelrey.wikia.com/wiki/Body_Electric_\(song\)](http://lanadelrey.wikia.com/wiki/Body_Electric_(song))

⁹⁰ “Johnny Bye Bye,” Rolling Stone, last modified January 16, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-bruce-springsteen-songs-of-all-time-20140116/johnny-bye-bye-19691231>

⁹¹ “Personal Jesus,” Wikipedia, last modified April 25, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_Jesus

⁹² “Marc Cohn went back to 1970 for latest album,” Chicago Tribune, last modified July 21, 2011, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-07-21/entertainment/ct-ott-0722-marc-cohn-20110722_1_james-taylor-ray-charles-garfunkel

⁹³ “What they have said about Elvis,” Elvis The King, accessed May 10, 2018, <http://www.elvis.net/whattheysay/theysayframe.html>

⁹⁴ “What they have said about Elvis.”

In 2015, Spotify, one of the greatest online music services, designed a thorough website “The Elvis Influence” that demonstrates Presley’s immense impact on other artists. The platform was created by analysing data about each artist and it provides an extensive list of musicians who were influenced by Presley himself or indirectly by other artists who were influenced by him. From The Beatles, Bob Dylan or Led Zeppelin, to Rihanna, Imagine Dragons and Taylor Swift; the list of artists inspired by Presley’s work is endless.⁹⁵

Presley is nowadays often mocked by other artists due to the infamous circumstances surrounding his sudden death. However, we should not neglect the fact that Presley influenced literally everything. His impact is a continuous process. He influenced hundreds of artists who then influenced other artists. Therefore even the today’s popular artists are somehow inspired by Presley’s work directly or indirectly. It almost seems like he never left this world.

3.4 Influence on Popular Culture

Presley’s manager Colonel Parker saw the potential in Presley. He knew Presley was adored not only for his voice but also for his looks which made him a perfect match for movies. Thus Parker arranged a contract with Paramount Studios. Presley himself was excited about entering the film industry. His dream was to become a respectable actor like Marlon Brando, James Dean or Rod Steiger who were his idols.⁹⁶

Unfortunately, Parker’s intentions to expose Presley in Hollywood were merely monetary. The films the singer appeared in were mediocre, usually with no particularly deep story. His films were successful because of Presley’s appearance rather than because of the quality. In fact the quality was overshadowed by quantity. But it worked. The viewers loved seeing their idol on the screen and the high-grossing films were easy money for Parker. Everyone was happy. Except for Presley. His initial excitement about his new acting career was replaced by bitter disappointment. The plots of his films were usually very bad and soon became repetitive. Presley would almost always portray a version of himself in shoddy musical or a romantic comedy. The problem was that those

⁹⁵ “The King Lives On: Elvis’s Biggest Influences,” Spotify Insights, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://insights.spotify.com/us/2015/01/07/the-elvis-influence/>

⁹⁶ Presley, 48.

cliché musicals were very successful and the directors did not feel the need to cast Presley into a serious role.⁹⁷

Some of Presley's most popular films were the ones he made before he left for the army. In 1957, he played one of his most memorable roles as a construction worker in the musical drama *Jailhouse Rock*. The story revolves around a young Vince Everett who accidentally kills a man and is sent to prison. His cellmate mentors him in music and once released Vincent becomes a popular singer.⁹⁸ In a way, the story resembles Presley's own career.

The highlight of the film is the theme song "Jailhouse Rock" and its famous dance scene in which Presley executes his iconic moves. These dance moves "would be mirrored down the decades in Michael Jackson's famous moonwalk".⁹⁹

The duo Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller wrote four songs of the soundtrack album including the theme song "Jailhouse Rock" and the album reached the top of *Billboard* EP chart.¹⁰⁰ The song became a hit single. The *Rolling Stone* magazine included it on the list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time".¹⁰¹ "Jailhouse Rock" was regularly covered by The Beatles, Cliff Richard, or Queen and in 1979 it became Queen's opening number on their tour; it was also featured in numerous films including *The Blues Brothers*, *Casper* or *Leroy & Stitch*; the dance choreography also inspired One Direction's music video "Kiss You".¹⁰²

The film is preserved in the United States National Film Registry for its cultural importance.¹⁰³ *Jailhouse Rock* remains one of Presley's most memorable films. It

⁹⁷ Presley, 146, 163.

⁹⁸ "Jailhouse Rock," IMDb, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050556/>

⁹⁹ Glen Jeanson et al., *Elvis Presley, Reluctant Rebel: His Life and Our Times* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 133.

¹⁰⁰ "Jailhouse Rock (EP)," Wikipedia, last modified March 13, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jailhouse_Rock_\(EP\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jailhouse_Rock_(EP))

¹⁰¹ "500 Greatest Songs of All Time," Rolling Stone, last modified April 7, 2011, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-20110407/elvis-presley-jailhouse-rock-20110525>.

¹⁰² "Jailhouse Rock (song)," Wikipedia, last modified May 3, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jailhouse_Rock_\(song\)#Covers_and_references](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jailhouse_Rock_(song)#Covers_and_references).

¹⁰³ "Jailhouse Rock (film)," Wikipedia, last modified March 21, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jailhouse_Rock_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jailhouse_Rock_(film)).

represents the peak of Presley's career. It was a source of inspiration for many artists and it is also a perfect example of the popular entertainment of 1950s.

Another notable film is *Blue Hawaii*, a 1961 musical romantic comedy. It was Presley's most successful musical. The plain plot portrays a story of Chadwick Gates, played by Presley, who returns from the army. Instead of following a family business he decides to work as a tour guide in Hawaii.¹⁰⁴

The soundtrack album occupied the top of *Billboard* Pop Album chart for twenty weeks and it was nominated for a Grammy Award. The album gave us the famous ballad "Can't Help Falling In Love" which later became the closing number of Presley's shows. The song was covered by several artists, namely the group UB40, whose reggae version became a worldwide hit single.¹⁰⁵

In 1969, Presley finally got a chance to show his acting talent in a serious role in his last film *Change of Habit*. It was the thirty-first film of his acting career. The musical drama portrays a story of three Catholic nuns, Michelle, Irene and Barbara, who are sent to volunteer at a ghetto clinic of Dr. Carpenter played by Presley. The women are hiding their identity from everyone because they believe that people would refuse their help if they knew they were nuns.¹⁰⁶

Presley's role in this film was different from his previous roles as he was allowed to perform slightly more serious acting without having to sing a pathetic song every other second. Although his character does sing to children, the number of songs in the film does not disrupt the story.

The soundtrack contained the songs "Change of Habit", "Rubberneckin'", "Have a Happy" and "Let Us Pray". Apart from "Rubberneckin'", which was remixed in 2003 by Paul Oakenfold and became a commercial tune for Toyota, none of these songs became too significant.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ "Blue Hawaii," Wikipedia, last modified March 11, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Hawaii

¹⁰⁵ "Can't Help Falling In Love," Wikipedia, last modified April 22, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Can%27t_Help_Falling_in_Love#UB40_version

¹⁰⁶ "Change of Habit," IMDb, accessed May 11, 2018, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065537/?ref_=nv_sr_1

¹⁰⁷ "Rubberneckin'," Wikipedia, last modified January 2, 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubberneckin%27>

In general, the typical Presley's film character could be described as a young charming gentleman who is also a great singer; sometimes he carries his guitar with him. Although he is very kind he is not afraid to get into a fistfight in case of injustice. He is attractive and therefore often chased by women. The films commonly presented the character as a hero of the story. Presley wanted to become respected actor but he was never given the chance to show his acting talent in a real serious role. If Colonel Parker was not so greedy and Presley got a chance to play a decent role, maybe the world would know him not only as a terrific singer but also as a talented actor.

Nevertheless, some of Presley's films served as an inspiration for other artists as well as a depiction of the culture in 1950s. Many songs of the soundtracks from Presley's films became his most popular singles.

3.5 The Identification With Elvis Presley

I believe that we all have someone we look up to. Whether it is our parents, siblings or friends, we all have that special someone who inspires us to be a better version of ourselves. Sometimes a complete stranger can be that source of inspiration. Many people look up to their favourite actor, singer or athlete even though they have never met them in person. These so-called role models have an immense power to influence ones actions and views in positive or negative ways.

The role models are usually very popular. Partly because of the way they are portrayed by the media. They tend to have a certain image and very often people put them on a pedestal. Presley has become such an icon that many people decided to devote their whole lives to promote his music and personal morals as his impersonators. These impersonators are keeping Presley's figure known to the wide public to this day. As it is stated in the *Mass Communication & Society* "Although Elvis is dead, he continues to entertain and influence a large number of people".¹⁰⁸

In 2002, Fraser and Brown published a study concerning Presley's influence on his fans. They tried to investigate how do Elvis Presley fans identify themselves with Presley and whether they aspire to propagate him and his values. A particularly diverse group of 35 Presley fans (more than half being active Presley impersonators) participated in this 5 year long study which consisted mainly of observations, interviews

¹⁰⁸ Benson P. Fraser, and William J. Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence: Identification With Elvis Presley," *Mass Communication & Society* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 183-184, 191.

and examinations of study materials. The majority of the respondents knew Presley's figure only through his records, movies and information from mass media. In fact, only 2 of the respondents had met Presley in person and only a few had visited his live show.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the role of mass media was crucial in the process of exposing Presley to the public.

As we can see, Presley plays a fairly huge role in many people's lives even though they have never met him in person. Some of the participants referred to Presley as their "father figure" since they were lacking the presence of their biological father in their childhood. As a result, they had found their role model in Presley. Dennis Wise, one of the participants of the study who has been impersonating Presley since high school, decided to take his Presley devotion to the next level. In order to achieve the perfect look, he underwent a facial plastic surgery. He justified his action as "an act of love for a surrogate father figure".¹¹⁰

Robert Lopez, a study participant of Latino origin, uses the name "El Vez" when he impersonates Presley. Lopez uses Presley songs to spread awareness about taboo topics. For example, he rearranged the song "In The Ghetto" to raise awareness of the problem of violence. Through his performances, Lopez seeks to prove that anyone can achieve their American Dream. He states, "the dream can be held by a Latino and an immigrant Black, a White [man], a yellow man. The American Dream is for everybody and that's the idea."¹¹¹

Whereas the male participants of the study identified with Presley mostly in fatherly fashion, the female participants perceived him in rather romantic fashion. Most women imagined Presley as their ideal partner. They described him as a man of good manners and some women stated that he was a "womanizer"; Randé Fritz, one of the female participants, explained that "Elvis spurred the sexual awakening" among young girls.¹¹² Many female participants admired Presley's values such as the respect and love for his parents and believed that his kindness and politeness made him a good role model for young boys. They admitted that Presley did have some negative qualities, such as his

¹⁰⁹ Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 191-193.

¹¹⁰ Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 195, 196.

¹¹¹ Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 197.

¹¹² Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 198.

problems with drugs, but decided to focus more on the positive ones, as they were more prevalent.¹¹³

Fraser and Brown observed that participants were often inspired by Presley's character and as a result they tried "to adopt the positive attributes of Elvis, his love and respect for his parents, his politeness, his generosity, his spirituality, and his multiculturalism, and apply them to their own lives".¹¹⁴

The authors of the study describe Presley's impact as "substantive and widespread", since his figure continues to attract thousands of people from all around the world thanks to the fact that his image is consistently kept present by the media and business marketing.¹¹⁵

As the results of the study show, the lives of the participants have changed due to their devotion to Presley. Some participants became more social as a result of becoming Presley's impersonators. Others were willing to completely change their appearance. The majority of participants mentioned their attempts to take on some of Presley's values including generosity, respect for authorities or loyalty. Fraser and Brown conclude that the participants developed a strong relation with their idol. His lifestyle influenced their lives significantly as the participants actively preach the positive qualities of Elvis Presley.¹¹⁶

3.6 Mark Duffett's Study

In 2015 Dr Mark Duffett published an article concerning the influence of Presley's music on society with reference to the religious traditions. The aim of Duffett's study was to analyse how do people relate to Presley and his music.

Presley was raised in a Christian family and he openly discussed his interest in gospel music. Critic Shane Brown stated that one of the first gospel songs that Presley ever recorded was the song "Satisfied", which was originally sung by Martha Carlson. Sadly, this song was never released. Presley's records contained only the rock and roll music, which often involved the themes of love. With his music and his passionate performances Presley evoked sexual feelings in young girls. As a result, Presley was

¹¹³ Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 199.

¹¹⁴ Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 200.

¹¹⁵ Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 191.

¹¹⁶ Fraser and Brown, "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence," 183-201.

blamed for corrupting the youth. He was understood as a rebel rather than a gospel singer and was often criticized by the conservative society for his behavior.¹¹⁷

Presley was very passionate about the gospel music and once he signed a contract with RCA company he started employing gospel singers as his backing vocalists. Later in his career he managed to release some gospel records. Personally, I believe that Presley's interest in gospel and religion in general was beneficial as he was a role model to many young people. Paradoxically, Presley was criticized for commercializing the gospel music. Duffett refers that one of the critics complained that "Elvis "sold out" gospel as sacred music, bastardizing it for a commercial mass audience".¹¹⁸

It is evident that Presley divided the society into two groups – the ones who loved him and the ones who despised him. Many people misunderstood his intentions and I believe that they felt aversion towards him solely because he was different and because he brought a change into the society.

Duffett noticed that both the admirers and critics tend to use religious vocabulary when referring to Presley. He argues that the reason being is that music evokes extraordinary, almost spiritual, feelings in humans.¹¹⁹

The research has been going on for over two decades and as Duffett states "I have met many fans that have been seduced, fascinated, empowered and inspired by his [Presley's] music. They all say that he has changed their lives for the better".¹²⁰ We can observe that the people who get fascinated with Presley's persona tend to believe that he is one of the sources of improvement in their lives. Many people do find energy and positivity in music. It is their form of relaxation. Therefore it does make sense that people link their wellbeing to the influence of Presley's music.

Even though Presley is no longer among us, his work still resonates within his fan base. His admirers are still able to connect with him and his music. Duffett explains that Presley and his fans "form an independent system in which all parts are linked and vibrate sympathetically".¹²¹ Similarly to the Fraser and Brown study, Duffett noticed

¹¹⁷ Mark Duffett, "Elvis' Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?" *Religions* 6, (March 2015): 193, 194.

¹¹⁸ Duffett, "Elvis' Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?" 194.

¹¹⁹ Duffett, "Elvis' Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?" 199.

¹²⁰ Duffett, "Elvis' Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?" 183.

¹²¹ Duffett, "Elvis' Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?" 187.

that those who admire Presley do not ignore the dark parts of his carrier (drug abuse, tragic death, unhealthy lifestyle). As a matter of fact, they can usually yield more reliable information about this topic than the media. However, they focus more on his positive qualities rather than the negative ones.¹²²

Duffett concludes that Presley could be described as “multi-layered phenomenon” and that listeners find comfort in his music. People admire his values and are often inspired by his work. His fans accept that he was not flawless but choose to emphasize his admirable qualities and the positive impact he had on society.¹²³

4 Song Analysis

Rock and roll music started evolving before Presley made his debut. However, with his first singles he contributed to the expansion of popularity of the genre. His recordings influenced the development of music significantly.

Presley did not write his own songs; as he once said in an interview “I never wrote a song in my life. I get one-third of the credit for recording it. It makes me look smarter than I am. I’ve never even had an idea for a song. Just once, maybe.”¹²⁴ However, Presley compensated for it by participating in selecting the music he wanted to record and by the way he delivered his powerful performances. When referring to Presley’s song “Jailhouse Rock”, the article “The Singer not the Song” comments on the uniqueness of Presley’s interpretation as following, “When other singers sing it, it’s a standard party song. With Presley, it’s an invitation to anarchy.”¹²⁵

Presley was not only a puppet on a string who would record every single song that was presented to him. He would select the records carefully and chose the songs that appealed to him as a music fan.¹²⁶ He also used to put his personality and all of his energy into his songs. He interpreted them in his own special way. He often incorporated various changes in lyrics as well as changes in tempo or tone into his

¹²² Duffett, “Elvis’ Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?” 190.

¹²³ Duffett, “Elvis’ Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?” 199.

¹²⁴ Presley, Elvis. Interview with Dolores Diamond. Backstage interview. Los Angeles, October 28, 1957. <https://www.elvis.com.au/presley/interview-with-elvis-presley-october-28-1957.shtml>

¹²⁵ “The Singer not the Song,” Classic Pop Icons, last modified December 13, 2010, <http://www.classicpopicons.com/the-singer-not-the-song/>.

¹²⁶ Michael Bertrand, email message to author, April 3, 2018.

performances. As the article “The Singer not the Song” states “a Presley mumble . . . could often add multiple meanings to a song in the same way that a Marlon Brando added depth to the lines he spoke in his movies”.¹²⁷ With Presley’s vocals the songs came alive and even though he did not write the songs he made them his own.

The songs that I will examine in the next section are “If I Can Dream”, “In The Ghetto”, “Heartbreak Hotel” and “Hound Dog”. The songs were selected with regard to their themes in order to present the diversity of his repertoire. In order to verify the accuracy of the lyrics provided on an anonymous web page, the selected songs were listened to. Complete lyrics are available in the Appendix.

4.1 “If I Can Dream”

As the title indicates, “If I Can Dream” is a song referring to Martin Luther King’s speech “I Have A Dream”. Along with the song “In The Ghetto” it is one of the most socially oriented songs Presley has ever recorded. It is also one of the most moving songs he has ever recorded. The single was released in 1968 as a final song of Presley’s television show *'68 Comeback Special* and it was written by Walter Earl Brown.¹²⁸

Presley has expressed his grief about the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. King was assassinated in Memphis, Presley’s hometown, only a few months before the filming of the *'68 Comeback Special* started. Steve Binder, the producer of the television show, was astonished by Presley’s raw feelings and decided to hire Brown to write a song for Presley that would reflect those emotions.¹²⁹ Presley is not the author of the song, however the song was inspired by his feelings and it expresses Presley’s attitude and beliefs.

“If I Can Dream” was one of the first songs Presley recorded for his grand comeback in 1968 and it reached number twelve on *Billboard’s* Hot 100 chart.¹³⁰ The ballad is a combination of soul, pop and gospel rhythms. An orchestra accompanies

¹²⁷ “The Singer not the Song.”

¹²⁸ Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 640.

¹²⁹ Paul Simpson, “If I Can Dream by Paul Simpson,” last modified December 13, 2008, <https://www.elvis.com.au/presley/if-i-can-dream-by-paul-simpson.shtml>.

¹³⁰ Ace Collins, *Untold Gold: The Stories Behind Elvis’s #1 Hits* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), 206.

Presley's powerful vocals, which gives the song its magnificence. The song consists of three verses and a bridge. The internal rhyme in the first two lines of the first and second verse is followed by an end rhyme in the third and fourth line, which gives the song a pleasant melody.

*There must be lights burning brighter somewhere
Got to be birds flying higher in a sky more blue
If I can dream of a better land
Where all my brothers walk hand in hand
Tell me why, oh why, oh why can't my dream come true?*¹³¹

The song is perhaps a call for a change in the society. From the very beginning the song describes a place where life could be better. It carries almost a utopian idea of a perfect land. A land where everyone is treated equally; a land that is peaceful and full of understanding and love. A land that would offer equal opportunities to everyone. A place where anyone is free and can believe in anything he wants to. This idea reflects Presley's own life story as he preached equality and embraced the differences between the black and white cultures. The song also resembles the description of American Dream.

The last verse sends a hopeful message that maybe one day we could live in an ideal world and as long as we have dreams we can do anything. The lyrics reflect the message that Presley was trying to pass onto his audience which might be the reason why he sings it so passionately. Simpson describes that "in three minutes and ten seconds, Elvis' vocal offers us a remarkable blend of anger, compassion, humility, authority, urgency, gravitas and passionate concern . . . he is actually lecturing us, underlining our responsibility to dream of a better world".¹³²

Although Presley is not the author of the lyrics, he sings it sincerely like the words were his own. The raw intensity and honesty is evident in every verse he sings. It is apparent that he really believed in the song. The idealistic song inspires the society to

¹³¹ "If I Can Dream," <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/elvispresley/ificandream.html>, (accessed August 1, 2017).

¹³² Paul Simpson, "If I Can Dream by Paul Simpson."

think about the values of equality. Collins explains, “Elvis’s voice and determination brought a problem into a context that anyone could understand.”¹³³

In Presley’s intensive vocal performance we can hear the tones of hope and urgency to make a change. “If I Can Dream” might be one of the most meaningful and uplifting songs Presley has ever sung. Although the song was different from Presley’s usual repertoire he managed to deliver a moving performance that was well received. The song is captivating not only for its deep meaning but also thanks to the slow pleasant melody of the instruments and Presley’s pacing vocals.

4.2 “In The Ghetto”

“In The Ghetto” is another socially oriented song. It was written by Mac Davis and it was released in 1969 as a leading single of the album *From Elvis in Memphis*. The song was inspired by Davis’s childhood friend – a black boy who grew up in poverty. Davis originally titled the song “The Vicious Circle”.¹³⁴

Presley wished to record a song that would provoke a reaction in the society and felt that this song was perfect for that. Collins describes that, “having grown up poor on the wrong side of the tracks, Elvis immediately identified with the number. The singer told friends that he felt a “calling” to share Davis’s emotional and important song with the world.”¹³⁵

The ballad carries elements of country and soul. The sound of guitar, bass, drums, piano, strings, horns and backing vocals accompany Presley’s touching voice. The song consists of eight verses without chorus. The author draws attention to the never-ending cycle of living in poverty and not being able to escape one’s destiny by repeating the phrase “in the ghetto” at the end of every verse. Presley’s voice is serious yet tender and helps to narrate the story sensitively.

“In The Ghetto” describes a story of a child that is born into poverty. The boy is born in a ghetto in Chicago during the harsh wintertime. His mother is desperate because she cannot take care of the child. The author warns that the child will grow up to be fierce and angry man if nobody offers a helping hand. The boy will become a thief

¹³³ Collins, 211.

¹³⁴ Francesca Aloisio, “In The Ghetto – Elvis Presley,” accessed May 1, 2018, <https://www.wordsinthebucket.com/in-the-ghetto-elvis-presley>.

¹³⁵ Collins, 208.

and the consequences of his delinquency will be fatal. The song stresses out the insensibility and passivity of people towards those in need.

*Take a look at you and me,
Are we too blind to see?
Do we simply turn our heads and look the other way?*¹³⁶

The child is wandering through the streets; he is hungry and as he grows up he learns how to survive by fighting and stealing. Out of desperation, the young boy buys a gun and steals a car. When trying to escape the police, the boy is killed and dies shortly before his own child is born again into poverty. The song carries an eye-opening message as it emphasizes the selfishness of people and draws attention to those living in poverty.

The song touched the subject of poverty, which was a delicate theme in the United States at the time, and evoked a positive response. Collins explains, “Elvis’s voice and determination brought a problem into a context that anyone could understand. It woke people up, and it forced many to look beyond long-held prejudices. Elvis and “In The Ghetto” proved again that music could change the world.”¹³⁷

4.3 “Heartbreak Hotel”

“Heartbreak Hotel” is one of Presley’s first and best-known singles. This song was very important for his career as it opened the door for Presley to become the leading figure of rock and roll era. The song was released in 1956 and was written by Tommy Durden and Mae Boren Axton in an eight-bar progression with relatively simple lyrics.¹³⁸ Collins notes that the song was inspired by a newspaper article about a man who had committed suicide by jumping from a hotel window.¹³⁹

Even though the song is styled into the blues progression Presley had transformed it into a vibrant rock and roll record; this represents “Presley’s real

¹³⁶ “In The Ghetto,” <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/elvispresley/intheghetto.html>, (accessed August 1, 2017).

¹³⁷ Collins, 211.

¹³⁸ Collins, 10.

¹³⁹ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, 238.

contribution to music, which was his ability to fuse several genres into a distinctive new sound”.¹⁴⁰ Presley’s voice is accompanied by the sounds of guitars, bass, piano and drums, and Floyd Cramer’s light piano tones are giving the song “nonchalance”.¹⁴¹ The simple instrumentation allows listeners to focus on Presley’s gloomy vocals and the easy rhythm is captivating.

“Heartbreak Hotel” consists of five verses that follow each other. There is no particular chorus, however the repetitive sequences with slight variations at the end of each verse give the song an attractive pattern. The melody is pleasant because of the end rhyme with an abcb scheme. Despite the simple lyrics, the song is appealing because of its raw and honest account of man’s loneliness. The themes of the song are love and desperation. These topics would reappear in most of Presley’s songs.

The song describes the situation of a man whose lover recently left him. He settles down in a hotel on the “Lonely Street”, where he spends time all alone. The hotel is always busy which might allude the fact that break-ups are inevitable part of our lives. Presley’s soothing voice invites everyone whose heart has been broken into the hotel to share their story. It is easy to empathize with the narrator since most people have found themselves in a similar situation.

*Well, since my baby left me,
well, I found a new place to dwell.
Well, it’s down at the end of Lonely Street
at Heartbreak Hotel.*¹⁴²

Although the song might not be the best composition of all time in lyrical terms, it is crucial to emphasize its importance as it started Presley’s career and served as the “musical catalyst for a host of top artists, including John Lennon and George Harrison of the Beatles, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, and Robert Plant of Led

¹⁴⁰ Shmoop Editorial Team, "Elvis Presley Calling Card in Heartbreak Hotel," *Shmoop University, Inc.*, Last modified November 11, 2008, <https://www.shmoop.com/heartbreak-hotel/calling-card.html>.

¹⁴¹ Walter Everett, *The Foundation of Rock: From “Blue Suede Shoes” to “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69.

¹⁴² “Heartbreak Hotel,” <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/elvispresley/heartbreakhotel.html>, (accessed August 1, 2017).

Zeppelin.”¹⁴³ The song became very popular and inspired many people. Elton John noted that the song changed his perception of music and that “it launched a whole new world and it was revolutionary in ways that we’re still dealing with”.¹⁴⁴

Why was the song so popular? Maybe it was the melancholic story. Maybe it was the fresh sound of the record or maybe it was a combination of both. The minimalistic instrumentation and Presley’s sincere, but slightly sexually charged, vocals created a perfect sound that enchanted thousands of listeners.

4.4 “Hound Dog”

What most people think of when they hear the title “Hound Dog” is Elvis Presley. However, only few people know that the song was originally sung by a woman. In 1952, an American rhythm and blues singer Willie Mae, also known as “Big Mama Thornton”, recorded the song “Hound Dog” and it immediately became one of her biggest hits. Four years later, Presley had covered the song with slight modifications. His version became equally successful.¹⁴⁵

The song was written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller and it was later edited by Freddie Bell in order for it to be presentable for Presley’s mainstream audience. The record reached the top of the *Billboard* charts and it was also listed among “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time” in the *Rolling Stone* magazine.¹⁴⁶

The original lyrics contained provocative implication concerning the fact that “the singer will no longer reward her “hound dog” visitor with sex”.¹⁴⁷ As Leiber explains “the song is not about a dog; it’s about a man, a freeloading gigolo”.¹⁴⁸ The sexual hint was unacceptable for the white audience at the time. Therefore, the lyrics had to be

¹⁴³ Norman Abjorensen, *Historical Dictionary of Popular Music* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 229.

¹⁴⁴ “Elton John Remembers Elvis Presley: And First Hearing Heartbreak Hotel,” Elvis Australia, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://www.elvis.com.au/presley/elton-john-remembers-elvis-presley.shtml>

¹⁴⁵ Shmoop Editorial Team, “Hound Dog,” Shmoop University, Inc., Last modified November 11, 2008, <https://www.shmoop.com/elvis-hound-dog/lyrics.html>.

¹⁴⁶ “500 Greatest Songs of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, last modified April 7, 2011, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-20110407/elvis-presley-hound-dog-20110517>

¹⁴⁷ Shmoop University, Inc.. “Hound Dog.”

¹⁴⁸ Jeansonne, 126.

revised which left the song's meaning rather trivial. You can see the main differences between the two versions of the song below.

Big Mama Thornton's version

You ain't nothing but a hound dog

Been snoopin' 'round my door

You can wag your tail

*But I ain't gonna feed you no more*¹⁴⁹

Elvis Presley's version

You ain't nothing but a hound dog

Crying all the time

Well you ain't never caught a rabbit

*And you ain't no friend of mine*¹⁵⁰

Leiber and Stoller did not endorse the edited version because the song had lost its original meaning, however, they benefited from Presley's cover as it enabled them to enter the commercial music industry and their careers started to flourish.¹⁵¹

The two versions differ not only in the lyrical aspect but also in the rhythm. The original version is styled into rhythm and blues with soft instrumentation that sets the listener into a mellow mood. The easy beat helps Thornton's vocals to stand out. Presley's version is much more upbeat. The song carries the rock and roll feeling that makes you want to jump up and start dancing around. The instrumentation is louder with drums being a dominant element. The tempo is faster and the record is overall much more dynamic. However, what both versions have in common is the vocal quality. Both singers use their rich voices efficiently and growl the lyrics with passion.

The song consists of four verses with a simple ababcb rhyming scheme repeating through the whole song. The verses follow each other with no clear chorus line. Both musically and lyrically, the song is fairly plain. However, the consequences of this song were significant.

¹⁴⁹ "Hound Dog," <https://genius.com/Big-mama-thornton-hound-dog-lyrics>, (accessed May 4, 2018).

¹⁵⁰ "Hound Dog," <https://genius.com/Elvis-presley-hound-dog-lyrics>, (accessed May 5, 2018).

¹⁵¹ Jeansonne, 126.

Rolling Stone magazine labelled the song as the “declaration of independence from generation’s cold, rigid elders”.¹⁵² The reason being is that when Presley performed the song he would do his iconic pelvic dance. While the juveniles adored these performances, the elders found them inappropriate and deviant. “Hound Dog” triggered a conflict between the two generations. The contempt was apparent during the making of Ed Sullivan show where the cameras would film Presley only from his waist up.¹⁵³ Despite the numerous criticisms levelled at Presley he refused to obey the conservative standards of society. He thought the idea of him spoiling the public with his music was absurd and stated “those people in New York are not gonna change me none”.¹⁵⁴

Although Presley did not write any of his songs he did contribute to his repertoire by selecting the music he wanted to record. He chose songs that appealed to him. Some of them touched him musically and some of them touched him lyrically as they reflected his own life experiences. His songs remain popular because they are about timeless themes like love and grief or fear and loneliness. Presley interpreted his songs in a distinctive way and gave them his personal stamp. The majority of his hit songs were either upbeat recordings or romantic ballads with simple lyrics. However, Presley also recorded songs that drew attention to the themes of equality and freedom. Although he was not a songwriter, he was a talented interpreter whose work still resonates with the culture today.

¹⁵² “500 Greatest Songs of All Time.”

¹⁵³ Shmoop University, Inc.. “Hound Dog.”

¹⁵⁴ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* , 304.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to acquaint the reader with Elvis Presley, one of the pivotal figures in music history, and to explore his significant impact on American culture.

Music is an inherent part of our culture as it is always around us. It became an important tool for connecting people regardless their race, age or gender and it is a key medium for spreading social messages. Music reflects the culture and it helps to erase boundaries in the society.

Elvis Presley was an American singer and actor who had become a symbol of rock and roll. Presley and his music have played a special role in the latter half of twentieth-century. His influence is often described as controversial because he achieved his fame at the expense of African Americans since he utilized the music of black artists who did not benefit from their music as he did. However, Presley embraced the culture of African Americans during the times of segregation and that demonstrates his greatest impact as he represented himself as an example of the possible change in society.

This thesis opened with a general description of music to help the reader understand the importance of music in our lives. The explanation of what can be considered music offered the idea that any sound can represent music and that music means different things to each individual. The thesis provided an overview of the development of rock and roll genre and explained its role in American culture. Rock and roll was evolving gradually from a wide mixture of genres such as rhythm and blues, gospel and jazz. The genre was important in the post-war culture in America and it helped to soothe the racial inequality.

The second part of the thesis introduced the hectic life of Elvis Presley. A detailed overview with important facts was presented. Elvis Presley's life was a perfect example of the American Dream. A poor boy coming from working-class background becomes a global superstar. During his lifetime Presley managed to influence lives of many people and shaped the way rock and roll sounded and looked.

The third chapter of the thesis emphasized the cultural impact of Elvis Presley. He contributed to the development of rock and roll and with his aid the relation between blacks and whites became more peaceful. He was one of the first white singers who popularized the music of African Americans and made it accessible to white people. This led not only to the repression of racial disparities but it also allowed African

American musicians to enter the mainstream music industry. He influenced his contemporaries in terms of style and self-expression and he challenged social values. Presley was a talented interpreter who influenced many artists and works. His cultural impact is still apparent and his music continues to reach many people up to this day. This chapter also mentioned two studies concerning the direct impact of Presley upon his admirers. The studies described how people identify with their idol.

The final chapter was dedicated to the analysis of songs “If I Can Dream”, “In The Ghetto”, “Heartbreak Hotel” and “Hound Dog”. The songs illustrated the main themes of his recordings. Although Presley did not write any of the lyrics, he compensated for it by his original interpretations. His songs remain a representation of the rock and roll era.

This thesis introduced Presley’s life and his career and it also emphasized the importance of Presley’s impact. I have discussed how Presley and his actions influenced the development of rock and roll, racial relations, social attitudes, careers of other influential artists and many artistic works. The thesis implied that Presley’s career should not be neglected because his popularity allowed African Americans to enter the mainstream culture. Furthermore, numerous references of other artists are evidence for the immense influence of Presley’s work. I have also observed that due to their devotion to the singer, some people have changed their lives completely, whether it be mentally or physically. The analysis of the four songs acquainted the reader with some of the major themes that appeared in Presley’s recordings, which shed light on the reasons why was he so popular. Presley was a crucial figure of twentieth century and he remains an inspiration to many artists today.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce si klade za cíl seznámit čtenáře s jedním z nejvýznamnějších představitelů hudební historie Elvisem Presleym a prozkoumat jeho vliv na kulturu ve Spojených státech amerických.

Práce poskytuje přehled vývoje rock and rollu, jehož vznik byl důležitým mezníkem v hudebním průmyslu 20. století. Práce dále obsahuje i stručnou biografii o životě a díle Elvise Presleyho, aby tak čtenáři představila, kdo Elvis Presley byl, a aby poskytla potřebné informace, které by měly být nápomocné k lepšímu porozumění jeho vlivu na kulturu. Dále se práce zabývá Presleyho významným vlivem na americkou kulturu a způsoby, jakými zpěvák ovlivnil a stále ovlivňuje společnost. Poslední část práce přináší stručné seznámení s Presleyho tvorbou, která byla důležitá pro další vývoj hudby. V této části jsou čtenáři předloženy analýzy čtyř písní. Cílem těchto analýz je předvést, jaká témata se v Presleyho tvorbě objevují a jakým způsobem jsou tato témata prezentována.

První část této práce začíná stručným popisem toho, co to hudba vlastně je. Tato část objasňuje, že hudba je přirozenou součástí lidské kultury a provází naše životy od narození až do smrti. Hudba v lidech vyvolává různé emoce a dokáže nás leckdy výrazně ovlivnit a motivovat. Pro svou silnou emotivnost se hudba stala velmi důležitým nástrojem, který umožňuje ovlivňovat společnost. Hudebníci tak mohou posouvat hranice společenských hodnot. Umělci často skrz hudbu vyjadřují své pocity nebo názory na sociální či politické dění a utváří tak obraz společnosti. Hudba tak reflektuje aktuální kulturní dění.

Práce dále vysvětluje, že jakýkoliv zvuk může být považován za hudbu a že hudba znamená pro každého něco jiného. Následuje krátký přehled toho, jak se rock and roll začal vyvíjet a jaký má vliv na kulturu. Rock and roll postupně vznikl z několika různých žánrů, jako jsou gospel, rhythm and blues či country. Tento nový žánr hrál velmi důležitou roli ve Spojených státech amerických v době po druhé světové válce, jelikož přispěl ke zmírnění rasových nepokojů. S postupně zvyšující se interakcí mezi černošskou a bělošskou populací vzrůstala i míra, do jaké se začaly tyto dvě komunity ovlivňovat. Bílá mládež objevila kouzlo černošské hudby a poptávka po hudbě vytvořené Afroameričany začala rapidně vzrůstat.

Druhá část této práce popisuje hektický život zpěváka a herce Elvise Presleyho. Podrobný přehled o jeho životě ukazuje, že Presley byl zdárným příkladem amerického

snu. Chlapec pocházející z chudých poměrů se stal světovou hvězdou. Jeho inspirující příběh dokazuje, že nic není nemožné. Jeho enormní úspěch se mu však stal osudným a Presley opustil tento svět poměrně brzy. Během svého života Presley dokázal ovlivnit životy tisíců lidí a významně také ovlivnil to, jak rock and roll zněl i vypadal.

Třetí kapitola se zabývá vlivem Elvise Presleyho na kulturu v Americe. Presley vytvořil z rock and rollu světový fenomén a svou hudbou přispěl ke zmírnění rasových nepokojů. Tím, že on sám měl rád rhythm and blues a aktivně se o tuto hudbu zajímal, ukázal lidem, že na kultuře, kterou vytvořili Afroameričani, není nic špatného. Tento čin byl v té době značně odvážný. Skutečnost, že se Presley nebál propagovat černošskou hudbu v době rasové segregace reprezentuje ten nejvýznamnější způsob, jakým Presley ovlivnil kulturu ve Spojených státech amerických. Presley se stal ztělesněním toho, že hodnoty ve společnosti se mohou změnit k lepšímu.

Práce popisuje, že Presley a jeho vliv je často považován za poněkud kontroverzní. Důvodem je, že Presley získal svou slávu a zbohatl na úkor Afroameričanů, protože využíval hudbu, kterou původně vytvořili černí umělci, kteří se nikdy nedočkali stejného úspěchu, jako Presley. Na druhou stranu, Presley umožnil Afroamerickým hudebníkům, aby vstoupili do hlavního hudebního proudu americké kultury.

Práce dále rozebírá důvody, proč se stal právě Presley hvězdou světového formátu. Následující podkapitoly se zabývají tím, jak Presley a jeho tvorba inspirovali stovky umělců a uměleckých děl. Nespočetné množství hudebníků uvádí Presleyho jako svůj zdroj inspirace. Elton John, Paul McCartney, John Lennon či Robbie Williams uvedli, že Presley výrazně ovlivnil jejich vztah k hudbě. Všichni tito hudebníci později ovlivnili další důležité hudebníky a umělce. Můžeme si tak všimnout, že Presleyho vliv je stále aktuální i v dnešní době. Odkazy na Presleyho osobnost můžeme najít v mnoha filmech, písních, divadelních hrách, výtvarném umění či videohrách. Presleyho vliv na kulturu byl zásadní a dodnes můžeme stále cítit dozvuky jeho kariéry.

V závěru třetí kapitoly práce rozebírá dvě studie, které se zaměřují na přímý vliv Presleyho na jeho příznivce. Tyto studie byly vybrány se záměrem, aby bylo čtenáři přiblíženo, jak Presleyho vliv funguje v praxi. Výsledky těchto studií ukazují, jak se lidé se svým idolem ztotožňují a do jaké míry je Presley ovlivnil.

Poslední kapitola se zabývá analýzou vybraných písní. Konkrétně se jedná o písně “If I Can Dream”, “In The Ghetto”, “Heartbreak Hotel” a “Hound Dog”. Tyto písně byly vybrány s ohledem na jejich témata a slouží jako reprezentativní ukázka

Presleyho tvorby. Presley sice nenapsal žádný z textů ke svým písním, což značně ztěžuje jejich analýzu. Presley se však podílel na výběru písní a vždy do svých nahrávek vložil svůj osobitý styl, čímž tento nedostatek částečně vykompenzoval. Jeho hudba měla a stále má velký vliv na ostatní umělce a zůstává symbolem rock and rollové éry.

Elvis Presley byl důležitým americkým zpěvákem a hercem, který svým osobitým stylem výrazně ovlivnil vývoj hudby. Jeho vliv posouval hranice společenských hodnot a přispěl k rasové harmonii. Jeho výrazný vliv můžeme v kultuře vnímat dodnes.

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Appendices

"If I Can Dream"

Walter Earl Brown, November 5, 1968, RCA Records

There must be lights burning brighter somewhere
Got to be birds flying higher in a sky more blue
If I can dream of a better land
Where all my brothers walk hand in hand
Tell me why, oh why, oh why can't my dream come true?

There must be peace and understanding sometime
Strong winds of promise that will blow away all the doubt and fear
If I can dream of a warmer sun
Where hope keeps shining on everyone
Tell me why, oh why, oh why won't that sun appear?

We're lost in a cloud with too much rain
We're trapped in a world that's troubled with pain
But as long as a man has the strength to dream
He can redeem his soul and fly

Deep in my heart there's a trembling question
Still I am sure that the answer's gonna come somehow
Out there in the dark, there's a beckoning candle
And while I can think,
While I can talk
While I can stand,
While I can walk
While I can dream,
Please let my dream come true... right now
Let it come true right now
Oh, yeah

“In The Ghetto“

Mac Davis, April 1969, RCA Victor

As the snow flies
On a cold and gray Chicago mornin'
A poor little baby child is born
In the ghetto (in the ghetto)

And his mama cries
'Cause if there's one thing that she don't need
It's another hungry mouth to feed
In the ghetto (in the ghetto)

People, don't you understand
The child needs a helping hand
Or he'll grow to be an angry young man some day?
Take a look at you and me
Are we too blind to see
Do we simply turn our heads, and look the other way?

Well, the world turns
And a hungry little boy with a runny nose
Plays in the street as the cold wind blows
In the ghetto (in the ghetto)

And his hunger burns
So he starts to roam the streets at night
And he learns how to steal, and he learns how to fight
In the ghetto (in the ghetto)

Then one night in desperation
A young man breaks away
He buys a gun, steals a car

Tries to run, but he don't get far
And his mama cries

As a crowd gathers 'round an angry young man
Face down on the street with a gun in his hand
In the ghetto (in the ghetto)

And as her young man dies
On a cold and gray Chicago mornin'
Another little baby child is born
In the ghetto (in the ghetto)
And his mama cries (in the ghetto)
(In the ghetto)
(Aah-aah)

“Heartbreak Hotel”

Mae Boren Axton and Thomas Durden, January 27, 1956, RCA Victor

Well, since my baby left me
Well, I found a new place to dwell
Well, it's down at the end of Lonely Street
At Heartbreak Hotel
Where I'll be, I'll be so lonely baby
Well, I'm so lonely
I'll be so lonely, I could die

Oh, and although it's always crowded
You still can find some room
For broken hearted lovers
To cry there in their gloom
They'll be so, they'll be so lonely baby
They get so lonely
They're so lonely, they could die

Now, the bell hop's tears keep flowin'
And the desk clerk's dressed in black
Well, they've been so long on Lonely Street
They'll never, never look back
And they get so, they get so lonely baby
They get so lonely
They get so lonely, they could die

Well, now, if your baby leaves you
And you got a tale to tell
Well, just take a walk down Lonely Street
To Heartbreak Hotel
Where you will be, you will be so lonely baby
You will be lonely
You'll be so lonely, you could die

Oh, and although it's always crowded
You still can find some room
For broken hearted lovers to cry there in their gloom
Where they get so, they get so lonely baby
They're so lonely
They'll be so lonely, they could die

“Hound Dog”

Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, March 1953, Peacock

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog
Cryin' all the time
You ain't nothin' but a hound dog
Cryin' all the time
Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit
And you ain't no friend of mine

Well they said you was high-classed
Well, that was just a lie
Yeah they said you was high-classed
Well, that was just a lie
Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit
And you ain't no friend of mine

Annotation

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Abstract: This thesis aims to introduce the life and career of Elvis Presley, one of the most significant musicians of the rock and roll era in American culture, and his remarkable impact on the culture in America.

Anotace

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Abstrakt: Tato bakalářská práce si klade za cíl představit život a kariéru Elvise Presleyho, jednoho z nejvýznamnějších představitelů žánru rock and rollu a jeho velký vliv na kulturu v Americe.