

FROM: ROBERT G. PIELKE,

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION:

ROCK MUSIC IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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Elvis and the Negation of the Fifties

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Once upon a time, there was no such thing as rock and roll. Oh, there was the music, of course; at least all the necessary ingredients were present in roughly the correct proportions. But it wasn't *called* rock and roll, and the naming of it as such was a momentous occurrence.

Most people attribute the naming to Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed, whose observations of white teenagers buying rhythm and blues records in 1950 led to his programming this music on his Moondog Show. Called "race" music at the time, Freed tried to avoid the epithet and, no doubt, the accompanying bad publicity and poor ratings, by adapting some of the music's frequent phraseology as a more apt description. (He did, after all, have a large white audience.) Probably the term originated from "We're Gonna Rock, We're Gonna Roll," a 1947 song by Wild Bill Moore or the even earlier, but stylistically different, "My Daddy Rocks Me with One Steady Roll," recorded by a variety of artists throughout the 1920s.

By 1954, the term still hadn't achieved widespread acceptance, but the impact of the music had surely been noticed. In the July 3 edition of *The Cash Box* that very year, Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun reflected on what they termed "The Latest Trend: R & B Disks are Going Pop."¹ They suspected that it was only a matter of time before the trend would blossom into a full-fledged craze. As evidence they cited reports from the South, where high school and college students had begun dancing to rhythm and blues records instead of those by nationally known artists such as Jo Stafford, Eddie Fisher, Perry Como and Patti Page. They also found it significant that, while "hillbilly fans" apparently initiated the

trend, they were quickly followed by the more financially influential "bobbysoxers." When disc jockeys saw which way the wind was blowing, they were not only forced to bring R & B records with them to record hops, they were also forced to change the format of their radio programs. Larger audiences and more advertisers were the immediate results.

After tracing how this music had spread throughout the South and into the North, the Midwest and the West Coast, Wexler and Ertegun made a self-consciously futile attempt to define the kind of music that they were talking about. Resorting to an "ostensible" definition, they listed about a dozen examples, including songs by Lloyd Price, the Clovers, the Drifters, the Crows, Joe Turner, Ruth Brown, Fats Domino and the Chords. Following the southern "hillbillies" and "bobbysoxers," they called it "cat" music. It was music with a beat, with infectious catch phrases and with a "message."

It wasn't long before juke box operators followed suit by putting "cat" records in more and more ostensibly "pop" locations. Record companies responded by having their contracted artists "cover" the new music. In both cases, although Wexler and Ertegun didn't mention it, white kids were beginning to adopt black music as their own, and the mixture was bound to be volatile. They concluded their observations with the conviction that "cat" music was now on center stage in the national music scene. Indeed it was.

In the beginning, white teenagers, initially the outcasts and then later the middle class, began listening to and buying black recordings, music that was expressing an almost total disillusionment with American society and its prevailing values. Underneath the danceable rhythms and high spirits was a mixture of indignation and accommodation, resentment and resignation, none of which was lost on the new white audience. What developed was a curious and potentially explosive conflict, a conflict that could only have arisen under circumstances such as these. For the "message" conveyed by this music was in direct contradiction to what virtually every middle-class white had always been taught about the American dream—equality before the law, hard work leading to success, human dignity for everyone, the guarantee of opportunity, an appreciation of individuality, liberty for all, and the pursuit of happiness. These are all potent ideals, and the more they were believed (consciously or unconsciously), the greater the anger and outrage at being confronted with the fact of their denial to all but the powerful and privileged few. White teens, in massive numbers, were now stricken with a divided consciousness: the ideals they had been taught were being subjected to a complex

attack through the music they had come to love. On the one hand, they had to face the fact that, for a significantly large group of Americans, these ideals would never be realized; on the other hand, they had to absorb a whole new set of ideals, some of which violated their accepted beliefs. No other group in America could incorporate this internal dilemma, and, as a consequence, it was from them that the explosion emanated.

When whites started writing and performing this music on their own, not just covering it, there were added subtle new elements—a barely suppressed rage and fury at the hypocrisy to which they had been subjected, and a fascination with hitherto forbidden attitudes and pleasures. With these driving forces behind the music, genuine rock and roll was born.

Its parents were the rhythm and blues of black Americans and the hillbilly sounds of white southern outcasts. Bill Haley put them together with his cover of Sonny Dae's "Rock around the Clock" in 1954, but it took the film *Blackboard Jungle* to catapult the song into national prominence and notoriety and establish it as a lasting phenomenon. Bill Haley, however, with his recently transformed country and western band, the Saddlemen, could in no way exemplify the material they were playing. What was needed was someone who could merge the two musical traditions into something uniquely one, as a direct manifestation of a singular personality. Neither Fats Domino nor Chuck Berry, who were far more talented and who also had hits that year, could do it either. All of them, their music aside, didn't have the kind of basic and universal appeal that might accomplish such a merger, and because it was to be a merger of black and white, a truly charismatic personality would be essential.

As myth would have it, Sam Phillips of Sun Records in Memphis, Tennessee, had been on the lookout for just such a person, and with Elvis Aaron Presley, a part-time truck driver for the Crown Electric Company, hailing originally from Tupelo, Mississippi, he found him. Wexler and Ertegun couldn't have known it, of course, but just three days after their column appeared in print, Elvis was in the studios of the Memphis Recording Service at 706 Union Avenue (a mere stone's throw from the justly famous Beale Street), readying his first single "That's All Right (Mama)" for release. The rest of the story is too familiar to repeat, but it's worth remembering that none of it would have happened had not Elvis been familiar with black music as well as white. (He grew up listening to C & W performers like Hank Williams and Jimmy Rogers, pop singers like Dean Martin and Mario Lanza, blues singers like Big Bill

Broonzy and Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, and the R & B sounds of Johnny Ace and Rufus Thomas.)

Because of his debilitating final years and tragic death, there is a tendency to dwell on the weaknesses associated with his arrested adolescence—his preference for kinky sex, his dependency on a veritable cornucopia of pharmaceuticals, his perverse pleasure in the martial arts, his inability to accept anything but toadyism from his employees and associates, and, of course, his savage abuse of carbohydrates. To concentrate on his flaws, however, would be to miss his monumental significance for contemporary American culture. No doubt quite apart from his conscious intentions, Elvis forced us to confront the repressive sexual morality so characteristic of our Western religious heritage. Further, his very success pointed out the outrageous disparity between the quantity and/or quality of effort on the one hand and the social rewards on the other; there was no correlation whatsoever, no justice at all. He also single-handedly transformed America's color from white to black. If this last claim seems a bit extreme, consider for a moment the racial designation attributed to the children of mixed parentage: never are they designated white. Such is the power of racism to regard anything nonwhite as a contaminant. Similarly, the merger of black and white music was perceived by nearly every antagonist to have been just such a "contamination"; rock and roll, no matter what its actual origin, was deemed to be black, and everyone knew what this connoted. The premier playing of "That's All Right (Mama)," on WHBQ's blues program, "Red Hot and Blue" (hosted by Dewey Phillips, no relation to Sam), was so well received that Phillips had to play it repeatedly all evening, and was finally compelled to have someone drag Elvis out of a local movie theater for a live interview. A reception like this stunned everyone involved with the recording; they apprehended an experience more along the lines of being run out of town on a rail, after having been unceremoniously dipped in tar and feathers. Elvis was white, but he clearly sounded black—a heady brew for the folks at that time.

Dread

Of all the feelings described by Otto, the one most emphatically characteristic of Elvis was the sensation of dread or horror, all the other components of the religious consciousness being colored by this one feeling.

Even those of us who were, openly or secretly, his fanatic devotees found him in many ways terrifying. He wasn't anything like anyone we had ever known or even heard about: he dressed differently, he wore his hair differently, he spoke differently, he moved differently and he sure sang differently. He wasn't black, but somehow he wasn't white either; he was "something else," something to be regarded with extreme caution. Needless to say, if he struck *us* this way, there was no telling the apoplexy suffered by our *parents* because of him.

Today, all of this might seem laughable, but at the time it was pretty traumatic. Elvis was authentic—no *poseur*. His alienness was genuine, as Greil Marcus observes in *Mystery Train*: "Elvis didn't have to exile himself from his own community in order to justify and make real his use of an outsider's culture. . . : as a Southerner and white trash to boot, Elvis was already outside." No matter what became of him later, he would always remain something mysteriously other, unapproachable in some vaguely absolute sense. His self-imposed seclusion within the confines of Graceland obviously contributed to this, but even when he toured, his performances were seemingly intended to perpetuate this image. Even the degeneration of his personal life served to distance him from us, for revulsion, too, is an important facet of Otto's concept of daemonic dread.

His alienness notwithstanding, his attraction for the youth of the nation was overpowering, mystical even. Given that McCarthyism was still a virulent presence in American life, anything as captivating as this was necessarily viewed as a threat. While there were some who alleged a direct connection with "the international communist conspiracy," others, along with Frank Sinatra, believed that rock and roll was "the martial music of juvenile delinquents," with Elvis as their general—leading a pack of black-leather-jacketed hooligans bent on the total destruction of life as we know it.

Elvis was part of, if not the founder of, the whole rockabilly movement, the first fruits of the merger of black and white. In *White Boy Singin' the Blues*, Michael Bane links this movement with the entire history of rock that followed: "It was rockabilly—the music of Sam Phillips and Elvis Presley—that set the tone for rock. Rockabilly, with its balanced exuberance and fury, its tension between blues and country, black and white, plucked a chord that is still vibrating strongly. It was rockabilly that decreed rock and roll should be more than just fun; that rock was a revolution in lifestyle as well." Ultimately, this is what scared the hell out of everyone, the specter of rebellion, of the outcasts arising and losing their chains, the haunting prospect that everything

familiar and secure was about to be overthrown. As it turned out, everyone was right.

It is worth remembering exactly what rockabilly was all about, and Bane recaptures its spirit pretty well:

Rockabilly, at its very bottom, is *mean* music, sung through clenched teeth by red-eyed men who look as if they've seen the wrong end of too many broken bottles. That's something we've lost sight of today. . . . It's easy to forget that beneath the insipid lyrics and the simple rhythms, rockabilly tapped a wellspring of revolution. It dipped below the calm surface of the 1950s to the dark smoldering potential of a generation looking for a voice. . . . With a few decades safely between us and the music, we can manage to overlook the level of violence inherent in it, the shattering of a way of life. Yet the violence walked hand in hand with an overwhelming sense of joy and release. Rockabilly is a statement of identity and a call to battle at the same time. . . . To the kids around Memphis, rockabilly was a revolution deeper and more profound than anything that would happen in the 1960s. . . . What happened in Memphis in the days that followed a certain July afternoon in 1954 was that for a second or two, black and white understood each other completely, on a gut level, and the world rocked.²

The pinnacle figure behind all of this was the overpowering presence of Elvis Presley, who in his very person embodied the paradox of violence and joy, anger and release, that Bane notices.

Greil Marcus sees the same kind of paradox in Elvis's music, especially in *The Sun Sessions* (his earliest singles, recorded originally by Sun, but bought and released in 1976 by RCA): "What I hear, most of the time, is the affection and respect Elvis felt for the limits and conventions of his family life, of his community, and ultimately of American life, captured in his country sides; and his refusal of those limits, of any limits, played out in his blues. This is a rhythm of acceptance and rebellion, lust and quietude, triviality and distinction." Coming out of the South was perhaps the only way this revolution could have begun, for it was there alone that race was the singularly most influential, yet wholly un-suppressed, determinant of consciousness; and only in the South was a strain of puritanism both practiced and violated with equal and un-ashamed enthusiasm. According to Marcus, "[I]f Elvis's South was filled with Puritans, it was also filled with natural-born hedonists, and the same people were both."³ So, as hordes of unregenerate southern patriots had been awaiting for lo these many years, the South did indeed rise again, but not quite as they had anticipated.

The Man in the Pink Cadillac

Just as Elvis symbolized the initial period of the cultural revolution, the pink Cadillac (convertible) came to symbolize him, and no one was more aware of it than Elvis himself. Immediately after buying one of his very own, as a measure of his newly achieved status, he adapted the lyrics of a black blues song by Arthur Gunter, "Baby, Let's Play House," as an expression of his mixed feelings: "You may have a pink Cadillac/But don'cha be nobody's fool." Marcus believes that "the pink Cadillac was at the heart of the contradiction that powered Elvis's early music; a perfect symbol of the glamor of his ambition and the resentments that drove it on. . . . Elvis sang with a wish for its pleasures and status. Most of all he sang with delight at the power that fame and musical force gave him: power to escape the humiliating obscurity of the life he knew, and the power to sneer at the classy world that was now ready to flatter him."⁴ Michael Bane, too, sees the symbolic link between the man and the car. Prior to Elvis, performers were jus' good ol' boys, providing a service for which they were duly compensated; they were not yet "personalities." "The first time Elvis went tooling down the street in his pink Cadillac all that changed. Elvis was more than simply an extension of his audience. He was a figurehead for that audience, a living, breathing symbol of the revolution that all the kids of the 1950s were beginning to feel. He had come from the community . . . but he was no longer part of the community and he never would be again."⁵ No observer of contemporary American culture, no matter what his or her personal feelings about Elvis might be, can avoid sympathizing with Greil Marcus's conviction that "Elvis Presley is a supreme figure in American life, one whose presence, no matter how banal or predictable, brooks no real comparisons."⁶

All of this is right on the mark, but it only makes sense when Elvis is correctly understood as a symbol, when his status as such is clearly distinguished from him as a flesh-and-blood person. No matter that his goal was to be another entertainer like Dean Martin, that his songs were written by others (black and white), that he also recorded some of the ickiest glop ever heard, that he eventually became a parody of himself, and that he would always be known in the black community as "the white boy who stole the blues." Of such things are symbols made.

In Tillich's terms, Elvis Presley pointed to a dimension of sensuality and pleasure hitherto forbidden (if not unknown) to whites, and by so doing he smashed the barriers separating the races. It was a level of real-

ity in which he himself lived, not very successfully; admittedly, but the important thing in this is how he was perceived. Sam Phillips may have been looking for just such a person, but it's extremely important to recognize the fact that he *found* him; he didn't *create* him. The distinction is crucial, for if the Presley phenomenon was a deliberate creation, then it could be duplicated. Virtually everyone in the business tried, of course, even Phillips himself, and he tried with some of the very best (Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis). All attempts failed. If anything, the Elvis phenomenon resulted from the unconscious strivings of the vast numbers of repressed American youths who had tasted of the tree of rhythm and blues.

The key element responsible for its working out like this was Elvis's whiteness. A revolution of this character could never have come from those already excluded from a genuine entry into American society. It had to come from those invited inside, from those who were self-consciously benefiting from America's class and racial divisions. In other words, the revolution had to come from the immense, patriotic and religiously conservative middle class. No other group could feel the contradictions in numbers sufficient to threaten the status quo. Comfortable whites would never have been disturbed by the complaints of blacks or even poor whites; as so often in the past, their rumblings could easily have been dismissed as sour grapes or simply ignorance, if not the pure manifestation of laziness. But when they heard these same complaints coming from their own children, who had begun to identify themselves with the sentiments of the outcasts, something was bound to happen. Imagine the internal contradictions these youths must have felt when they first adopted this strange music as their own; it was expressing emotions and attitudes dangerously at odds with everything they had been taught, and they were buying into it in ever increasing numbers. At the very least, it caused them to question the legitimacy of their position and the position of the outcasts in American society; at the most, it caused them to do something about it.

The primary carrier of this infection was, of course, Elvis, the symbol. Were it not for his unique status, he would never have been able to breach the legal and moral fortress the established order had erected to protect itself. Writing from a white's perspective, Michael Bane is convinced that "the final element necessary to turn rock into something other than just another musical fad was the element of rebellion, and that had to come from the whites themselves. Chuck Berry could slyly hint at it, and Little Richard . . . could even shout it out, but the message wouldn't become real until it came from one of *us*, as opposed to one of *them*. . . . A

fusion had to take place; a white boy had to sing the blues. There had to be an Elvis."⁷ Make no mistake about this. Elvis was no mere imitation; he absorbed the music of both blacks and whites, but what resulted was something never before heard. According to Marcus, "It is vital to remember that Elvis was the first young Southern white to sing rock 'n' roll, something he copied from no one but made up on the spot; and to know that even though other singers would have come up with a white version of the new black music acceptable to teenage America, of all that did emerge in Elvis's wake, none sang as powerfully, or with more than a touch of his magic."⁸ We could listen to him and admire him because he was white, but he told us about a world of forbidden pleasures, and when we heard about it, like it or not, we would never be the same.

Some say it all came to an end when he acquiesced to the United States Army's apparently desperate need for his services, although this was years before an opposition to the draft would mean anything. Others mark the decline even earlier, with his leaving Sun Records for the seductive entrapments of the corporate world of RCA. But it really makes no difference; at some point, Elvis, the living symbol, ceased to be. Yet, like a well-known predecessor, he rose again to live on in spirit. The tragic hulk of flesh and blood that Elvis eventually became was committed to the ground at Graceland, but the real Elvis, the symbol, has never died. Shortly before his own tragic death, John Lennon, in a *Playboy* interview, remembered all those years ago when rock and roll became a way of life for him: "I think it was 'Rock around the Clock.' I enjoyed Bill Haley, but I wasn't overwhelmed by him. It wasn't until 'Heartbreak Hotel' that I really got into it." And he was still into it in December of 1980. In the same interview Lennon stressed the distinction between Elvis himself and what he stood for: "The early Elvis records live on without Elvis being a beautiful male animal who swung his pelvis. . . . I didn't see him. I heard the music first. Afterwards I saw that it did come in a package. But *you don't need the package*. With Elvis, the basic thing, the basic energy, is on the records."⁹ So it is, but even more it's in our consciousness, ready to be reawakened whenever the occasion arises.

The single most important factor hindering his resurrection for many people is the idolatrous regard in which he has always been held. Perhaps it was unavoidable, but his countless worshippers have never been able to distinguish between the transitory and finite Elvis and the Elvis who is eternal and infinite. In all probability, they've never tried. If so, the only thing remaining to them is the sediment of nostalgia, a dead past. Avoiding idolatry is the only possible way for a symbol to live on eternally, and

self-negation is the only means to accomplish this, which is Tillich's criterion for validity.

Despite the fact that many of his fans missed or ignored Elvis's self-negation, there are ample illustrations of how he satisfied the criterion. No doubt he was completely unaware of what he was doing, but his awareness is totally irrelevant. As I've tried to stress so often throughout the book, what matters is how things are perceived, for there is no other reality available to us. For most observers, Elvis's self-negation actually comes closer to self-destruction. The debauchery of his later years seems now as if it were intentionally undertaken to accomplish the necessary self-negation, but the indications were clear even in his prime. Greil Marcus feels "[H]e was implicitly presenting his new successful self as a target for his own resentments. . . . Somehow taking both sides, Elvis could show his listeners just how much, and how little, that pink Cadillac was worth: more and less than anyone would have guessed." And he adds in a footnote, "When he smashed through the contradictions of his career with such music, we have Elvis at his greatest." Marcus, I think, is one of the most astute of all the practicing Elvisologists, but his analysis was done while Elvis was still alive, before all the postmortem exposes and maudlin retrospectives complicated the possibility of intelligent criticism. He saw an Elvis who "parodied his menace," an Elvis whose quintessential performance was

an overwhelming outburst of real emotion and power, combined with a fine refusal to take himself with any seriousness at all. Finding that power within himself, and making it real, was part of the liberation he was working out in his music; standing off from the power, with a broad sense of humor and amusement, was another. This was the saving grace of Elvis's ambition, and a necessary counter to it. It allowed him to transcend his success and his public image . . . ; that casual élan would let him see at least part of the way through the unprecedented adulation he received.¹⁰

Whether or not this attitude lasted with him to the end can never be known, but what is certain is the fact that he felt trapped by what he had become. This is a sure sign that he was aware of the liabilities of being Elvis Presley.

An episode from his "coronation" (his three appearances on "The Ed Sullivan Show") suggests the presence of self-negation from the very beginning, for anyone who had eyes to see. Only on the third show was

he shown from the waist up; for the earlier two, he was merely requested to control his suggestive body movements so as not to offend common decency. During one song, however, he got so caught up in the music that he *apparently* forgot his instructions. When he realized his "wiggling" was beyond the pale, he laughed and crossed his legs at the knees as if to conceal his pelvic parts from the invasive scrutiny of the network censors, knowing full well that the audience would scream with delight. At other times, while singing or during a pause, he would feign a snarl or hint at the possibility of an illicit movement—and laugh at himself. The point is that he knew very well what he was doing, and we knew that he knew, and he knew that we knew that he knew. Ed Sullivan didn't know and our parents didn't know, but we didn't care, and he didn't care either, and we and he knew that too. Under these circumstances, the only people who were taking Elvis with ultimate seriousness were those most distant from him, people who tended to identify the flesh and blood person with what he symbolized. As a result, much of the outrage and adulation was misdirected; attention was mistakenly focused on the swiveling hips of someone who died in 1977 (and thereby calling far more attention to them than even the best efforts of Colonel Tom Parker could ever hope to approximate). Those who knew better, fans and enemies alike, were looking at someone whose presence is with us still.

Recognition of Elvis's significance hinges directly on his symbolic stature, that which Greil Marcus perceptively acknowledges:

At his best Elvis not only embodies but personalizes so much of what is good about this place: a delight in sex that is sometimes simple, sometimes complex, but always open; a love of roots and a respect for the past; a rejection of the past and a demand for novelty; the kind of racial harmony that for Elvis, a white man, means a profound affinity with the most subtle nuances of black culture combined with an equally profound understanding of his own whiteness; a burning desire to get rich and to have fun; a natural affection for big cars, flashy clothes, for the symbols of status that give pleasure both as symbols and on their own terms. Elvis has long since become one of those symbols himself.¹¹

Marcus wrote these words in 1974, three years before Elvis died; he revised the book in 1982, five years afterward, and he chose, quite consciously, to retain the present tense. That says it all.

 Illud Tempus

In the beginning was the music, and the music was with Elvis, and the music was Elvis. So it began.

The fifties began with a new testament. The promises of the old order were now in the process of being fulfilled by that which was at the same time ending the old order. The latinization of "That Time" was Eliade's way of stressing the paramount importance of the Time of Origin, the events of which are always preserved in myth and symbol, making its return and reactualization an eternal possibility. Michael Bane, too, is sensitive to this dimension of the cultural revolution: "The late 1950s mark the beginning of the rock and roll mythology, the gospel according to rock."¹² And forevermore, this would be the essential spirit to be re-captured, the final measure of authenticity, the time before which there was only darkness upon the face of the nation.

None of this should imply, however, that there were no roots that led up to this moment. Any decent history of American music would dispel that impression immediately. But we are not really dealing with facts of this kind; our attention is on the mythic account, *interpreted* facts organized in such a way as to provide a meaning for whatever data actually exist. And there's quite a bit to work from in this case. By now, of course, many of the musicians' names are legend, but many more are known only to those who've devoted their lives to a study of rock's pre-history. Sadder still is the fact that an unknown number of names are lost for good, no one ever thinking that their many contributions would amount to anything worth noting for future generations. In any case, this music has a past that ought not be forgotten.

From its African roots, which took hold in the South and traveled north along the banks of the Mississippi, to its eventual merger with a variety of old-English traditions hidden away in the hills of Appalachia, it was played, sung, and performed by countless musicians of varying degrees of talent and skill. Elvis certainly didn't create his distinctive sounds *ex nihilo*; more accurately, he gave a shape and meaning to the musical traditions he found readily available in the multiracial culture of the South. It was a shape and meaning that the world had never before experienced, something wholly unanticipated.

According to Eliade, "every myth shows how a reality came into existence, whether it be the total reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment. . . . To tell how things came into existence is to explain them and at the same

time indirectly to answer another question: *Why* did they come into existence?" A factual account is obviously important, but far more important for our human existence is the meaningfulness of it all, and this is the overriding purpose of myth. Without providing a meaning, a direction, or an overall scheme, a myth could not fulfill its *raison d'être*; indeed, it would not be myth. Eliade added that "[T]he supreme function of the myth is to 'fix' the paradigmatic models for all rites and all significant human activities," and he listed such activities as eating, sexuality, work, education, economics, and war.¹³ In other words, everything.

As for Elvis, in his very being he showed us how it all came about; he was, after all, a white boy singing the blues, and the message wasn't lost on anyone, least of all our parents. Those old enough may recall the now laughable rivalry between Elvis and Pat Boone. Pat covered some of Fats Domino's songs and, for one brief moment, embodied the "clean" (non-black) side of rock and roll. He was one of the establishment's attempts to co-opt something it could neither appreciate nor understand. He was at that time the only safe alternative to Elvis available to the establishment, and his white bucks and ducks seemed deliberately to indicate just a bit more than the color of his favorite beverage. Guess who our parents preferred.

As has happened so often before with the founders of cultural movements, an outcast led the way and became the model for his followers to emulate. If Elvis could walk on what was, for then, the "wild side," then so could we. If Elvis could express uninhibited sexuality, then we'd try it too. If Elvis could regale, to the point of obscenity, in what everyone knew to be wealth and privilege not "earned" through hard work, then our attitudes toward work would be transformed accordingly. Our parents worried about our affecting the outward trappings of the Elvis imagery—a black leather jacket, long sideburns, a d.a. (duck's ass) haircut, a certain demeanor of body movement, and a well-practiced, disdainfully cavalier turn of the upper lip. The trappings were important, of course, but the real changes weren't visible; they took place in our consciousness. Even the vast majority who adopted none of the visible signs were irreversibly influenced, and this includes all the "squares" who ostensibly hated everything Elvis stood for. No one escaped. Elvis the symbol told us how it all happened and what it all meant. It took some time for everything to sink in, but once it did, we were never the same.

Through appropriate rituals, the mythic time of origin is infinitely recoverable and the founding events eternally repeatable. According to Eliade, every religious festival is based on a sacred event that took place *ab origine* (in the beginning), which is ritually made present. In this way,

the participants in the festival can become contemporaries of the earlier mythical event. In his last years, Elvis himself assumed the role of reactualizing his mythic past in the highly ritualized setting of his concerts. (The 1968 comeback special on TV is a notable exception in only one respect: it was superlative, a work of genius.) Somewhere, usually toward the end, he would go through a medley of his early and classic hits, attired, as he always was in his later concerts, in what for lack of a better phrase can only be described as an "Elvis suit": a gold, white, or black sequined monstrosity, girdled with a wide ornamental belt (designed partially to hold in his girth) and a buckle that could stop an artillery shell; accented with a raised collar at least four inches high; framed with an immense, swooping cape that he would unchain with a ceremonial flourish at an appropriately dramatic moment; and intended to reveal an equally ostentatious shirt that displayed every hair that could ever be grown on his chest. During the medley, one of his sycophants would hand him a continual supply of cheap silky scarves, which he would ritualistically pass around his neck and toss out into the worshipful crowd (overflowing with aging men practically dragging their sideburns over their shoulders, and their plumpish wives sporting their own distinctive bleached beehive coiffures).

A sad and tacky exercise in nostalgia? Perhaps. But it was also much more than that, as one of John Lennon's friends found out. "A friend of mine," Lennon reported, "a big Elvis fan, bigger than I was, went to see him. . . . When he saw him in Vegas, I asked my friend how he was. He said, 'Well, if you sort of half shut your eyes and pretended, it was heaven.'" "Ordinary, chronological time doesn't permit this kind of reversal; mythic time, however, demands it. "Religious man," who for Eliade is the only fulfilled human, "feels the need to plunge periodically into this sacred and indestructible time. For him it is sacred time that makes possible the other time, profane duration in which every human life takes its course." It is *not*, however, "a rejection of the real world and an escape into dream and imagination"; on the contrary, "it is at once thirst for the *sacred* and nostalgia for *being*." "More than anything else, Elvis's audiences came to reorient themselves to something they felt to be timeless, the source of everything they had come to be. This was no simpleminded journey down memory lane; this was their attempt to get in touch with their existential roots.

Before Elvis there were rich and vital musical traditions among both blacks and whites, but there was no revolution. Before Elvis there was even something called rock and roll, but there was no revolution. Before Elvis there was rage and alienation throughout the entire country, barely

held in check by a dogmatically repressive and subtly authoritarian regime, yet still there was no revolution. Before Elvis there were many people who embodied perfectly the tensions that lay just beneath the surface of the supposedly placid Fifties, but they were neither symbolic nor actual revolutionaries. Hence, as John Lennon observed on hearing about his death at Graceland, "Before Elvis, there was nobody."

Vignettes of Negation

If Elvis symbolized the negation of the prevailing attitudes towards sex, race, and work, there were countless others who were living the negation. Two groups in particular were the beats and greasers.

After the Soviet Union's wholly unforeseen triumph in putting the first artificial satellite in orbit around the earth (*Sputnik*), beats came to be known as *beatniks*, to suggest that their leftist leanings did not go unnoticed. A more perceptive appraisal came from *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac's literary tone poem on the American hipster. Aside from virtually defining what it meant to be beat, Kerouac and his North Beach associates named an entire generation. Although the beats were few in number, their influence was staggering. Those who didn't emulate them in some way were frightened by them, but no one could ignore them. In one of those paradoxes so incredibly strange that it necessarily escapes a mind attuned only to the rational, the very people who had the most to fear from what the beats stood for were also the very ones to propagate and popularize the beat movement. The established order devoted far more attention to it than would seem to have been warranted—news coverage, editorial lamentations, sociological and psychological analyses, religious outrage, and, most important of all, commercial exploitation.

Many people, including myself, first encountered the beat movement without meeting a single genuine beat. One guy in high school, for example, affected the style pretty well, and we all went along with his charade, because, well, real beats were hard to come by. On Saturday nights a group of us would hang out at one of Baltimore's hip "coffee houses," the Flambeau, and pretend to be hipper than thou, snapping our fingers to the absurdist poetry and minimalist music while sipping expensive and oddly named herb teas and spiced coffees. Last, and certainly least, was Manyard G. Krebs, TV's picture of the lovable, harmless, and slightly touched beatnik, whose weird and unthinkably wild clothing consisted of

dungarees and a sweat shirt. Thus, in the strangest of ways, were most of us introduced to the beat movement, at least its style if not its substance. The idea that a counterculture group *existed* was what was propagated, causing us to wonder what it was all about. And so the movement was spread farther and wider than if the established order had left well enough alone. What we eventually learned from the beats mirrored precisely the messages we were receiving from rock and roll; the only significant difference was the beats' enjoyment of something called marijuana, and of that we would learn more later.

Greasers were another matter entirely. They challenged the same values but in a very different way. The beats were essentially peaceful and nonaggressive, almost to the point of isolationism, while the black-leather-jacket crowd presented the image of violence and terror. Again, this was far more the result of creative publicity than hard, verifiable fact, but the image is what counted. I remember asking my parents for a black leather jacket for Christmas one year; I also remember the consternation that this request caused them, yet they never explained why such an artifact had this effect on them. (My gift turned out to be a rather bulky *brown* leather jacket, which I consigned to my little brother as soon as decency and good taste would permit.) Unlike the beats, who tended to relate to each other in small, amorphous, and ever-shifting groups, the greasers were gang oriented. Everyone needs some kind of support group for the development and protection of personal identity, but a gang gives its members a sense of power as well, which every youth at that time lacked, simply by virtue of youth. Although the greasers were just as small a minority as the beats, their influence might actually have been even more disproportionate; we didn't want to join them, or God knows, even associate with them, but we sure envied them. Marlon Brando and James Dean weren't youth heroes for nothing.

Of the three issues most obviously and intimately involved in the fifties negation, race topped the list. In a very real way, all other facets of the negation were implicit in the toppling of the prevailing attitude toward race relations. What was being negated was the notion that whiteness was equivalent to goodness, both moral and nonmoral, (for example, "That's white (meaning decent) of you," and "If it's white, it's all right"). This equation has been so ingrained in our culture that it wasn't until Diana Ross and the Supremes that white males could openly acknowledge that black women could be just as beautiful and desirable as white women. And still today, it remains the case that "innocent until proven guilty" is much more of an unrealized ideal for blacks than for whites. Yet this disparity is no longer an acceptable part of our culture, as it once was. One

of the most interesting illustrations of how this racial equation was negated has to do with Johnny Otis, a white man who self-consciously chose to live black and play the blues. Never before was it so clearly apparent that blackness and whiteness are the result of social conventions, not physical characteristics (except in minor and unimportant ways). For him to "pass" in the opposite way would have been unthinkable without the destruction of the racist equation, at least for him and all those who accepted and admired his "passing." With the inception of rock and roll in the fifties, the destruction began in earnest, an irreversible process that continues to this day.

The second most influential negation concerned sexuality, and again, what was being destroyed was an equation involving goodness: goodness associated with a certain set of sexual mores, notably virginity or abstinence, self-restraint, male dominance, exclusivity, procreation, heterosexuality, all of which were based on the religiously sanctioned monogamous marriage. Sex was unclean, a weakness to be strongly resisted, an understandable drive for men but a craven urge for women; its ultimate (and often singularly) justifiable purpose was to fulfill the divine command to multiply and subdue the earth. Rock and roll's attack on this ideology has been so massive as to be impossible as well as pointless to document. The very term "rock and roll" is sexual in origin, and "dance" is used euphemistically so often that, for all practical purposes, "to dance" is to attack the inherited equation. In the music, sex is portrayed positively, a part of our physical nature to be enjoyed, desirable in and of itself, good for no other reason than that it's pleasurable. Other implications of the attack would have to be worked out in the future (most especially the sexist baggage), but for the moment, it was sufficient to undermine the rectitude of the traditional standards, replacing the fundamental idea that sex is bad with its opposite. After all, the usual reason given as to why rock and roll was so devilishly corrupting was sex, and those who felt (and still feel) this way were pretty close to the mark. An interesting change has taken place, however, since the attack was first engaged. In 1958, at what seemed to be the pinnacle of his career, Jerry Lee Lewis was ruined because of a sex scandal, having married his fourteen (or thirteen, or twelve, depending on the source) year old cousin. The specific charge was incest, but rock and roll was deemed to be the underlying cause. Significantly, this was the last time a sex scandal ruined any rock and roller's career; soon a "scandal" had pretty much the opposite effect.

The third and final activity singled out for negation was the complex set of norms commonly referred to as the Protestant work ethic: the idea

that effort, skill, and talent are in some mystical way directly proportional to success and rewards; another idea that work itself was desirable as an ultimate value; and the idea that a morally good person would necessarily be hardworking. So again, there is an equation: work is intrinsically good, both as an end and as a means. Because of the music, however, it was becoming increasingly obvious that work and success were unrelated; not only were the founders of the rock tradition never adequately compensated for their contributions, but luck and aggressive promotion were playing a much larger role than anything else. How else can the likes of Frankie Avalon and Fabian be explained except through the well-financed campaigns of their manager, Robert Marcucci (about whom the film *The Idolmaker* was made)? If hard work wasn't very effective, neither was it desirable. If anything, it was a means to an end, but the end was pleasure. The Protestant work ethic was being confronted with nothing less than the gospel of hedonism, an unequal contest if there ever was one.

The negation of the fifties came very close to what some philosophers have termed "negative freedom," the freedom *from* certain interferences and barriers. The removal of these obstacles was the immediate object, but we must never lose sight of the fact that nothing less than freedom was the ultimate aim. What this meant in positive terms would be spelled out in the sixties, but the sixties could never have happened had the fifties not cleared the way. And if anyone captured the spirit of this negation, and embodied its threefold attack in his person so perfectly that the very mention of his name can evoke its power still today, that person would have to be none other than Elvis Presley.