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EXPERT COMMENT: Champion or copycat? Elvis Presley's ambiguous relationship with black America

Marking the the 40th anniversary passing of the King of Rock and Roll, Brian Ward, Professor in American Studies at Northumbria University raises the question: Was Elvis the 'king of cultural appropriation' or a tireless promoter of African-American music and culture?

After Elvis Presley died on August 16, 1977, the African American newspaper, the Chicago Defender explained that: "When Elvis Presley breathed his last breath and the press hailed him as the 'King of Rock,' Ol' Man River cried out, 'Naw he ain't! My friend Chuck Berry is the King of Rock. Presley was merely a Prince who profited from the royal talent of a sovereign ruler vested with tremendous creativity. Had Berry been white, he could have rightly taken [Presley's] throne and worn his crown well.'"

By contrast, James Brown, the "Godfather of Soul", declared: "I wasn't just a fan, I was his brother." Brown – born dirt-poor in Barnwell, South Carolina, on the other side of the segregated south's racial divide from Presley, who was born dirt-poor in Tupelo, Mississippi – was reputedly the only entertainer granted private time with Elvis's body. "Elvis and I are the only true American originals," Brown insisted. "There'll never be another like that soul brother."

Four decades after his death, how can we reconcile these two apparently contradictory black responses to Elvis? The conventional wisdom casts Elvis as one in a long line of craven white exploiters of black musical culture for whom African Americans had nothing but contempt. In 1989, this orthodoxy was summed up in Public Enemy's rap anthem Fight the Power:

Elvis was a hero to most,

But he never meant shit to me ...

Straight up racist that sucker was,

Simple and plain.

Giving credit

But the truth is far from “simple and plain”. Elvis’s relationship with and reputation among African Americans was complex, particularly in the mid-1950s when he burst onto the national scene as part of a biracial rock-and-roll phenomenon that erupted just as the campaign against racial segregation in the American south began to gather real momentum.

At that time, the black press proudly pointed out the critical influence of black blues, rhythm-and-blues and gospel music on Presley’s style – not to chastise him for cultural appropriation, but to applaud his impeccable taste at a time when black music was routinely denied mainstream radio and television airtime and often denigrated as immoral and barbaric.

“Presley makes no secret of his respect for the negroes, nor of their influence on his singing. Furthermore, he does not shun them, either in public or private,” reported the now-defunct *Tan* magazine.

Presley himself was humble about his relationship with black music and musicians:

A lot of people seem to think I started this business. But rock ‘n’ roll was here a long time before I came along. Nobody can sing that kind of music like coloured people. Let’s face it: I can’t sing like Fats Domino can. I know that.

With good cause, *Tan* was careful to point out the disparity between Presley’s annual income of more than US\$2m and Domino’s annual earnings of

US\$700,000 earnings. Perhaps disingenuously, however, it did not belabour the racial coordinates of that disparity. Instead, it stressed Presley's forthright championing of black musicians as part of a narrative that saw many positives in growing young white interest in African American-based musical styles.

Thank God for Elvis

While there has never been any necessary or simple correlation between white love of black music and racially progressive politics, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many black commentators, musicians and fans viewed the emergence of a biracial market for rock-and-roll music performed by black and white singers as a portent of, maybe even a vehicle for, better race relations.

Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that black attitudes towards Elvis were far from uniformly hostile. "I thank God for Elvis Presley. I thank the Lord for sending Elvis to open that door so I could walk down the road, you understand?" commented his contemporary Little Richard in 1970. One of the many black rock-and-rollers who suffered financially from the cover phenomenon – in which white artists took anodyne copies of black songs into the pop charts – Richard appreciated that the whole rock-and-roll phenomenon, with Elvis as its epicentre, had opened up new opportunities for black artists and songwriters to reach a young white audience.

It was not only black musicians who appreciated Elvis. In 1956, Presley was introduced to 9,000 black Memphians at radio station WDIA's Goodwill Ball. The crowd, waiting to see B.B. King and Ray Charles, went wild when Elvis appeared and police had to rescue the singer from overenthusiastic black fans. On black-oriented radio stations, black DJs routinely programmed Presley and other white rock-and-rollers such as Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis and the Everly Brothers alongside Bo Diddley, Little Richard, James Brown, Ruth Brown and Ray Charles because they knew their young black core audience liked those artists.

The late civil rights leader Julian Bond recalled singing an Elvis song at an ice-breaker event at Atlanta's prestigious black Morehouse College in 1957:

Three friends of mine and I sang 'Teddy Bear' ... and I remember thinking it not at all remarkable that we would sing this Elvis Presley song. So here's these four black young men singing, 'Just wanna be your Teddy Bear,' ... We just said, "This

is OK ... this guy is alright.' I think my peers thought Elvis Presley, at least in that early stage, was OK.

Even more compelling is the sales evidence. In early 1956, Presley's breakthrough RCA single Heartbreak Hotel simultaneously topped the traditionally white pop and country music singles charts and the traditionally black rhythm and blues chart. Indeed, Presley had 24 Top 10 rhythm and blues hits between 1956 and November 1963, including four number ones.

To put this into a broader historical context, this was probably the most integrated popular music market in US recording history: 175 Top Ten rhythm and blues singles were cut by more than 120 different white artists while black artists regularly enjoyed pop chart hits. By November 1963, Billboard could no longer differentiate between white and black consumption and suspended its separate black singles chart.

Cultural appropriation?

This era of biracial musical creation and consumption has been largely erased from popular memory. It lies buried beneath simplistic parables of white expropriation and exploitation of black culture in which Elvis has become emblematic of centuries of uncompensated and unacknowledged white appropriation of black cultural ingenuity and labour.

There is enormous moral power to this perspective and, to be sure, plenty of evidence of just such exploitation and theft. Nonetheless, it still makes for unpersuasive history and fails to help us to understand the significance of Elvis and the whole biracial rock-and-roll phenomenon that intersected with the dawn of the modern civil rights movement.

Nat Williams, the dean of black announcers on WDIA, had immediately recognised this symbolic linkage. At the Goodwill Ball, Williams had pondered the enthusiasm of black audiences for Elvis, "when they hardly let out a squeak over B.B. King, a Memphis cullud boy". Williams speculated that this might "reflect a basic integration in attitude and aspiration," in the black community.

He was right. The piebald charts and radio playlists of the late 1950s and early 1960s, like black admiration for young Elvis, belonged to a particular moment of rising black activism and cautious optimism about the prospects for widespread, meaningful and enduring changes in the pattern of US race

relations.

This article was originally written for The Conversation. Read the original article [here](#).

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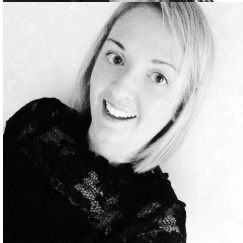


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