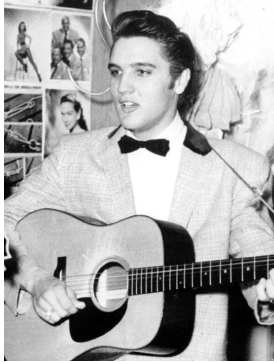


# 40 years after his death, Elvis is still ‘The King’

Carl Golden Published 12:15 p.m. ET Aug. 15, 2017



(Photo: AP Photo)

Aug. 16 marks 40 years since the death of Elvis Presley in his mansion in Memphis. His passing didn't rise to the memory level of other public notables – “I remember where I was when Elvis died” – but it shocked millions around the world who mourned one of the most enduring cultural icons of the 20th century.

Those of us who were on the verge of our teen years or had just edged into them were convinced that music wasn't invented until Bill Haley and the Comets recorded “Rock Around The Clock” in 1954. They invented it, but it was Elvis who perfected it in 1956 when he recorded “Heartbreak Hotel.”

We reveled in the adult reaction to Elvis, snickering when he was denounced from the pulpit as the embodiment of evil or shaking our heads in disbelief when local government officials banned his concerts. It was our rebellion, kicking the establishment in the shins and grinning when we got away with it.

Presley's movies were dreadful, remarkably thin plots which served as background noise for his singing. We went anyway. I can still recall sitting in a darkened theater in my hometown of Easton, Pa., a small, blue-collar town on the New Jersey border, watching “Love Me Tender,” Presley's first movie. He sang four songs and was killed in the end.

As we grew older, the shocking reality hit that we had become “the establishment,” the recent targets of our shin-kicking. But, we still followed Elvis, bought his records, jammed with the upbeat material and hummed along with the ballads.

We stuck with him through his leather jumpsuit phase and elaborately-staged engagements in Las Vegas. Those Vegas years were a far cry from the solo performer, backed up by a trio of musicians, who electrified the near-hysterical crowds at county fairs, concert halls and arenas.



Elvis Presley in this undated file photo. (Photo: AP Photo)

The pink over black shirts, white shoes, pegged pants (that's trousers tapered to narrow cuffs, for all you uninformed), had been replaced by sequined-studded white leather jumpsuits and the back-up musicians had given way to scantily-clad showgirls, a full orchestra and chorus.

We may have disliked the Vegas Elvis and longed for the 1950's version, but we managed to put aside our reservations because, after all, it was still Elvis. Even as his appearance deteriorated and his physique transformed into an overweight middle-aged man, his voice still reached and touched us.

When the stories surfaced and intensified about his drug use, we didn't try to rationalize or ignore it. The voice was still there, maybe a little less strong and vibrant, but we could always conjure up the Elvis of the movies or the Ed Sullivan Show.

Presley's work has been remarkably enduring. Videos of his shows and CDs of his songs are hawked endlessly on television. Documentaries tracing his career, featuring interviews and concert footage still draw decent viewership. He stood atop an era marked by arguably the best music ever committed to vinyl – groups and solo performers who delivered close harmony ballads known as doo-wop.

Never has an entertainer spawned so many impersonators, people who either grew up with Elvis or who were captured by his music and style even after he had died.

Elvis stood alone in our music-centric generation. He was us or what we convinced ourselves he was.

His rebel streak was ours – the clothes, sideburns, ducktail haircut. His cool was our cool and he wasn't afraid to show it.

He didn't conform to the rigidity of the 1950's and we were convinced neither did we. He was in control and we all thought we were, too.

The years have dulled the edge of our rebelliousness and our collective memory is, perhaps, a triumph of nostalgia over reality. But, 40 years later, in any discussion of American music, someone will mention The King. There's no need to ask for clarification; everybody knows who it is.

Now, that's endurance.

Elvis was but 42 years old when he died, an age many of us have long surpassed. Had he lived, he'd probably long retired from performing and spending his days at Graceland listening to himself and re-living the fifties. He would be 82 – and those of us who memorized “Heartbreak Hotel” and who saw “Love Me Tender” multiple times are closing in on that as well.

Sigh.

*Carl Golden was born and raised in Easton, Pa. He served as press secretary to Govs. Tom Kean and Christie Whitman and is currently a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.*

Read or Share this story: <https://njersy.co/2w7jGus>