



Elvis in 1956, his long hair barely held in check under a layer of oil.

When Elvis Cut His Hair: The Meaning of Mobility

In the spring of 1958 word reached the nation's newspapers that Elvis Presley had cut his hair—twice in the past week, a little shorter each time. Known as much for his roco pompadour as for his pelvic pulsations and rock 'n' roll music, the 23-year-old singer was apparently trying to ease his way gently into the standard G.I. buzz cut. For early on the morning of March 24, a Monday, accompanied by his parents, a crowd of weeping teenage girls, and his manager (who passed out balloons inscribed with the title of the inductee's upcoming film), Elvis braved a drizzling rain to report to Local Draft Board 86 in Memphis, Tennessee. Along with eleven other potential privates, he took the oath and left for Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and a rendezvous with an Army barber. Although the sideburns of the young man bearing serial number U.S. 53310761 had mostly vanished already, there was enough coal-black hair left in his modified crew cut to elicit spirited bidding for the clippings.¹

Back in '58, teen legend had it that Elvis actually tooled up to his Army physical in a great big Cadillac convertible, with a Las Vegas showgirl snuggled up beside him, his ducktail rippling luxuriantly and defiantly in the breeze. But later rock critics and historians view the rainy morning of Elvis Presley's induction as the beginning of the end. Playing Delilah to young Presley's Samson, the Pentagon cut off his hair and thus delivered him up to the Philistines. "Military con-



Elvis gets an Army haircut at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. "Hair today, gone tomorrow," quipped the star.

scription tamed and revealed him for the dumb lackey he always was in the first place," Lester Bangs argued in 1977. The day of his Army haircut—the clippers were wielded by James Peterson as a *Life* photographer looked on—was also the day *real* rock 'n' roll died.² By the time Elvis finished his tour of duty in Germany in 1960, he had lost his edge. He came back vowing never to let the famous sideburns grow out again. And he made his first public appearance in a tux on Frank Sinatra's TV special, singing sedate duets with that middle-aged idol of the World War II generation. Many critics probably agreed with the *New York Times* pundit who called Presley's "recent liberation" from the Army to co-star with Sinatra "one of the most irritating events since the invention of itching powder." But most of them had precious little to say about the music. The hot news was that Elvis's hair now stayed demurely in place when he sang.³

The old Elvis had a head of hair that made decent men cringe and maidens yowl: it flopped and fluttered and fell across his face, requiring constant adjustment. Back at Humes High in Memphis, rumor had it that he went to a ladies' beauty parlor, that he had a permanent wave. In 1954 Elvis was almost blond. A year later his locks were a smoky brown and getting darker by the week. There was something perverse about boys who fussed with their hairdos like girls, although the young Elvis Presley was by no means the first teenager to seize on a hirsute symbol for generational rebellion in the Eisenhower years, when baldness stood for presidential wisdom and authority. Unorthodox styles with sculptural ducktails (known in less elegant circles as the "duck's ass," or DA cut) were a sign of spring in the high school set in the mid-50s.⁴ The names varied from region to region. Brooklyn's "Cavalier" became a "Princeton" in the Pacific Northwest. But the use of wave-set lotions and intricate sectioning and layering were universal. Neighborhood barbers charged an average of 25¢ extra for the time and the aggravation involved, if they consented to do DA's at all. Tints and permanents were often administered furtively at home, by a helpful girlfriend.

It was tempting to read a deeper significance into this particular form of boyish vanity during a period in which Audrey Hepburn's short, gamin hairdo amounted to a national craze. With their poodle cuts and Italian boy looks, girls were appropriating manly prerogatives of grooming while robust males were spending more time and money on their long, wavy hair (which required frequent applications of "control wax") than their dates or their mothers did.⁵ Was this tonsorial androgyny a sign of social decadence, of some awful moral lapse? Or was hair simply the last frontier between carefree youth and sober maturity?

A judge in Tacoma, Washington, sentenced a young offender with sideburns and a crown of curls to ten days in jail or "a man's haircut." Respectable professional men on Madison Avenue wore short crew cuts with their gray flannel suits. And Army regulations expressly forbade "extreme civilian haircuts [of the] 'Hollywood Ducktail' type." Grownups and organization men conformed to certain rigid stylistic norms: they were, in the parlance of the sociologist David Riesman, "outer-directed." But in teenagers of both sexes, the protest

against the inevitable coming of age was liable to go straight to one's head. Some high school girls showed their devotion to Elvis in 1957, as discussion of his draft status turned serious, by getting haircuts just like his, "slicked back with a lank hank over the forehead and a grippable tuft in front of each ear." And even before Elvis came on the scene, wrote correspondent Harrison Salisbury from Moscow that same year, rebellious Soviet teens (who had listened to bootlegged Sinatra records until Presley tunes began to circulate on used X-ray plates) showed their disdain for gray Russian conformity by wearing sideburns and DA's.⁶

A survey of the most popular men's haircuts of 1957 noted a general preference for close-cropped styles based on the standard G.I. clip. In older men, the crew cut (also known as the "Ivy League") reflected a certain nostalgia for a lost youth. Parted and brushed, the inch-long variant worn on Madison Avenue amounted to a mark of membership in a professional caste. But new, longer looks, imported from the Continent, had a theatrical panache thought appropriate for those in the entertainment industry. Barbers had taken to calling the old DA an "Elvis, . . . all hair and a mile high, hanging over the temples, deliberately, and with a long slashing sideburn"—but it was still strictly for kids. Boys bound for the service were urged to try a transitional "post-Elvis" with "normal" sideburns to lessen the pain of the inevitable shearing.⁷

Elvis's own hair was transgressive in a particular way, however. Normal kids fiddled endlessly with their "dos," sculpting each glistering, pomaded lock into place. Presley's hair was almost never neatly coiffed. The first barrage of Elvis Presley photos, published by the picture weeklies in the summer of 1956 after a series of television appearances made him a household name among adults who didn't play 45 records, used his disheveled hair as a kind of visual signature. The Elvis wannabes and rivals pictured alongside him have perfect, monolithic DA's while his hair is invariably disarranged by performance or by the sheer force of personality. Whether he sings or smooches fans or just sits and listens quietly to records in the new \$40,000 ranch house he bought for his parents, long, single strands of hair escape from the network of comb tracks above his forehead to

fall forward, over Presley's face. Even when he's riveted to the spot, the effect is of a man in motion, of a moving body just barely come to rest. The issue of *Life* that carried the pictures of Elvis and his trademark hair also included a story on the death of the rebel artist Jackson Pollock, the father of Action Painting, who had run his Olds convertible off a Long Island highway. The painter and the singer had both made mobility into an American art form. Pollock traced his own ritual movement across the canvas in drips of paint. In Elvis's case, the trajectory of the swinging, bristling, dangling locks of way-too-long hair became the means by which the still camera conveyed the shock of a live rock performance.⁸

His clothing enhanced and amplified his movements. In one of the most frequently quoted television reviews of the decade, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* said that the Elvis who appeared on Milton Berle's show in June of 1956 was nothing but a male "hootchy-kootchy" dancer "with no discernible singing ability." But Gould also took exception to Presley's physical appearance—to the sideburns and, most especially, to "the familiar oversize jacket and open shirt which are almost the uniform of the contemporary youth who fancies himself as terribly sharp." According to the rock dress code in force only a decade later, Elvis's jacket-and-sports-shirt ensemble seems remarkably tame. If his stage costume was an ironic comment on respectable street clothes, it was a mild one, conveyed through the exaggerated scale of the coat. In physical terms, however, his performance dress both permitted movement and enhanced its effects. As video recordings of the early TV appearances show, his heavily interlined jackets did not follow Presley's twists and turns of position. Instead, by retaining a stiff, rectilinear shape, especially across the front of the body, they called attention to the fluid wriggings of the wearer contained cocoon-wise within. His trousers were big, too, especially loose in the hips and legs (although pegged or tapered at the ankle) so that ripples and billows of fabric allowed each twitch of his notorious left leg to register dramatically, in the distant recesses of the balcony. It was precisely this outfit—big jacket, big pants—that appeared on the poster for his famous Jacksonville concert, in the summer of 1955, at which overheated fans, swept away by the sheer

sensuality of the show, charged the stage and ripped off his shirt, his suit coat, and his shoes.⁹

This was, to be sure, the look or *a* look for less than a year in the mid-50s. At the time, Elvis shopped almost every day and confirmed his reputation as a distinctive dresser by showing up for concert dates in unfamiliar combinations of things: on one noteworthy occasion, for instance, he wore a multi-colored cowboy shirt with cherry-pink slacks and a black tuxedo jacket. This outfit came toward the end of a memorable “pink-and-black kick” (there were fleeting interludes of red and black, too) detailed by Elvis in May 1956, which had him matching Cadillacs to shirts to the decor of his own bedroom, until he pronounced himself thoroughly “sick of it.” Back home, they called Elvis Presley the “Memphis Flash” for the zoot suit drape, the pink sport coat with the black velvet collar, and the pegged pants with darts up the legs that fell open to reveal a pink lining, all bought at Lansky Brothers, where white kids rarely ventured.¹⁰

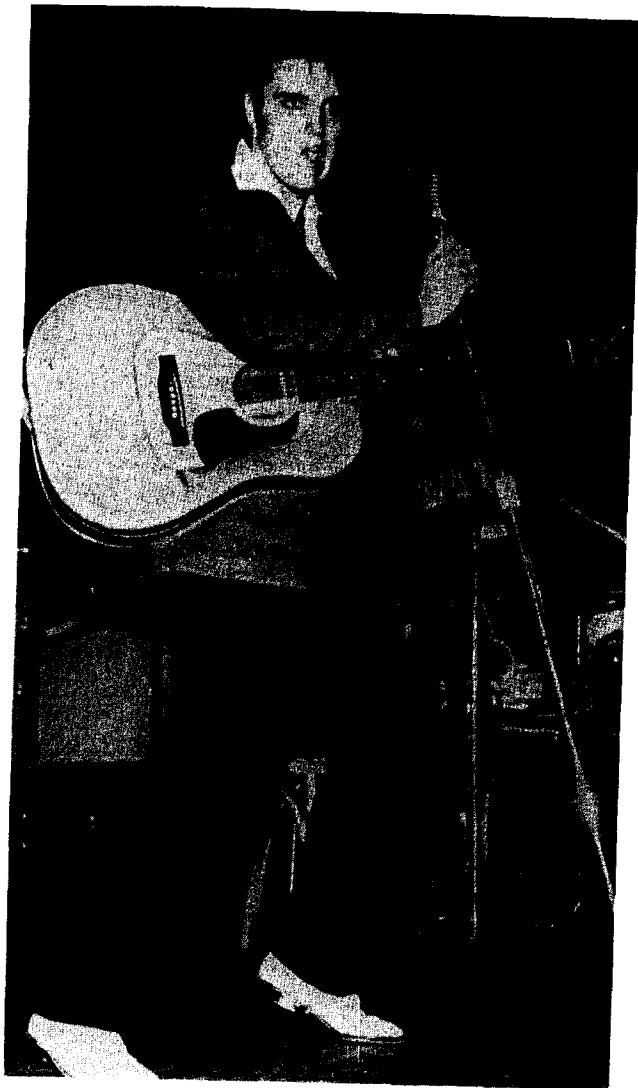
His taste in clothes suggests a fine disregard for impediments to social movement across lines of class and race. Indeed, the standard explanation for his contribution to American popular music is that Elvis brought a black rhythm and blues sound into the white mainstream and in the process, created the hybrid known as rock ‘n’ roll. But the characteristics of his wardrobe in the 50s, the obvious pleasure he derived from clothes, on stage and off, and his frequent fashion shifts (by 1957, for example, he was wearing tight black satin pants under sequined gold boudoir jackets and a \$10,000 gold lamé suit from Nudie’s of Hollywood) invite a more complex reading of the issue. The “Memphis Flash” earned his name for styles—black *or* white styles—that literally flashed across the field of vision like a two-toned Rocket 88 from Oldsmobile: high color contrasts, lots of shiny buckles and buttons, hidden details suddenly disclosed in motion, reflective and textural fabrics that engaged the sense of touch even as they caught the play of light. They were “Hey, look at me!” clothes, excessive and theatrical, even before Elvis cut his first record; movie costumes for real life, or vice versa.¹¹

Jac Tharpe recalls Elvis’s days as a teenage movie usher who spent



The young Elvis in performance, wearing a big jacket and an unbuttoned shirt. His open mouth and facial gestures were as offensive to his critics as the twitching of the Presley pelvis.

his paycheck on fancy duds and suggests that this overblown wardrobe provides a key to a personality in which the line between adorning and concealing was beginning to blur. Discussing his musical style, Greil Marcus calls Presley a “blues-singing swashbuckler



He loved wild clothes. Contrasts in color and texture delighted him.

[whose] style owed as much to Errol Flynn" as to black R&B artists. The clothes were a technicolor Hollywood fantasy from the beginning. If his hair moved and his taste often zoomed freely across the boundaries of social decorum, his dress propelled him toward a stunning transcendence, a mobility beyond mere hip-wagging motion. A boy in cherry-pink pants and cat boots with floppy tongues must really *be* somebody. A pirate. A movie star. The King of rock 'n' roll.¹²

Elvis's regal dandyism was the most extreme example of a new male fascination with color and finery. Nineteen fifty-five was "The Peak Year for Pink," according to *Life*: the popularity of pink apparel began with a Brooks Brothers shirt, suitable for Ivy League men or women, first introduced in 1949. But the delicate pink of the button-down, Oxford-cloth shirt (always worn with gray flannel), and the ladylike pink of *House and Garden's* 1953 "House of Ideas" were pallid blushes in comparison to the hot, sizzling hues favored by the young Elvis, whose pinks were overheated further by tonal juxtapositions with clashing reds, complementary greens, and the coolest, blackest of blacks. Elvis was not quite alone in his fondness for pink and Hollywood gold, either. The middle-class man in the street was also wearing louder colors in the mid-50s: at work, the occasional pastel shirt; at home, sports shirts in busy prints and multicolored appliqué. The association between leisure and the freedom to adopt brighter, more expressive color as a sign of the personal, non-corporate realm was strong. Market research noted an upsurge in the sale of colored sports shirts in the suburbs where leisure-time rituals, like the barbecue, clearly demanded new forms of attire. Men—or the wives who shopped for them—seldom resorted to the prewar expedient of reusing old items of business garb for in-home activities, however. Leisure was informal, festive, and fun: so were the clothes that demarcated work from play. New clothes were inherently pleasurable, also, like the weekend itself. And color announced the onset of enjoyment, just as surely as the sobriety of gray flannel defined a Monday in the workplace.¹³

In that sense, Elvis's outlandish get-ups represent feelings of personal liberation and pleasure in a visual language already understood by the culture at large. In an essay on Elvis and "The Myth of

America," the pop music historian Timothy Scheurer suggests that Presley's "greaser" look—the hairdo, the flashy outfits—posed a serious challenge to the work ethic. If a kid in a hot pink shirt and sideburns could earn enough to buy his Mom a new house in the Memphis suburbs just by twitching and looking strange, what use were all those moral lessons about hard work, grit, and pluck? But insofar as the costumes and colors were souped-up versions of contemporary leisurewear, Elvis's outfits celebrated the same values to which the suburban Dad subscribed when he took off his suit and put on a shirt printed with pictures of little pink flamingos or flying barbecue accessories. Freedom; sensual enjoyment; play; an inchoate sense that the guy who drove a truck or wore a suit on Friday afternoon might become a wholly new person by Saturday night—a pirate or a movie star.¹⁴

Color was the bright side of the leisurewear picture. Denim was the somewhat sinister reverse. While social critics made fun of men who wore flamingo shirts, they were a little suspicious, at first, of the fellow in blue jeans. In the 1950s denim began the slow transition from work clothes—the sailor's dungarees, the farmer's overalls, the cowboy's jeans—to play clothes. From *Shane* (1953) to TV's *Davy Crockett* (1954), the western hero enjoyed unprecedented popularity as a symbol of the freedom and individuality also associated with modern leisure. And while the durability, washability, and low cost of denim favored its adoption by men at their leisure, jeans entered suburbia first as ranchwear, or the adult equivalent of Hopalong Cassidy suits for children. Denim pants were the costume of choice for make-believe cowboys with quarter-acre ranches and picture windows.

The movies did provide an alternative iconography for blue jeans. That was the twitchy adolescent, the "crazy mixed-up kid," the biker, the mumbling method actor of the James Dean and Marlon Brando school, who wore rolled-up jeans, a black leather jacket, and a t-shirt. While Elvis almost never appeared in anything so commonplace and casual as denim trousers, his age, his on-stage demeanor, and even the quavering, bluesy delivery of his lyrics evoked Dean—and blue jeans. Among the first lines of special teen merchandise marketed

under the Presley name were distinctive "black . . . jeans with emerald green stitching [and] Elvis' signature stamped on a leather patch pocket." The president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America deplored the whole jean fad and blamed it squarely on Elvis: the under-dressed, he argued, were generally under-educated, and neither bought quantities of the fine garments his constituents made. Manufacturers, meanwhile, worried that Elvis jeans would go the way of the Davy Crockett hats currently piled up in warehouses thanks to a fad that faded overnight. But 72,000 pairs of emerald-trimmed jeans were snapped up even before the 1956 Christmas shopping season arrived: unlike their younger brothers and sisters, who had to beg indulgent grandparents for coonskin caps, high schoolers had plenty of their own money to spend on clothes with overtones of rebellion against the gray-flannel establishment.¹⁵

Like their fathers (and Elvis himself), they were also suckers for color and for the concept of self-expression through dress. Although nobody arrived at a coherent explanation for the menswear revolution of the 1950s, everybody sensed that the inner man was somehow struggling to emerge. To a well-known psychologist, garish sports shirts were modern-day equivalents of the silk waistcoats and high-heeled shoes worn by the founding fathers. Modern-day design had robbed the American man of the "emotional outlet" once provided by highly individualized costume and muffled him "in a gray cloak of anonymity." With his leisure garments, he was trying to regain his personal authenticity. To an eminent economist, clothing had lost its primary function as protection from exposure to become "like plumage, almost exclusively erotic." Clothes still made the man—but they were making him very sexy.¹⁶

Entertainment critics, youth experts, and guardians of public morals all felt uneasy about Presley's sexual persona. At a convention of high school principals held in Washington in 1957, for instance, members voted to suppress blue jeans, ducktail haircuts, and Elvis Presley records at future sock hops in the interests of decency: kids who dressed like their rock 'n' roll hero were practically certain to come to a bad end.¹⁷ But the educators managed to pussyfoot around the real issue, which was the way Elvis moved. In cities where he ap-

peared live, local reviewers were quick to condemn "Pelvis Presley" for lewd on-stage movements. A St. Paul columnist responded to his Midwestern tour in May of 1956 with an open letter calling the singer "nothing more than a male burlesque dancer . . . [with an] unnecessary bump and-grind routine" and told him to clean up his act. In a virulent review of the Presley spot on the Milton Berle show, TV critic Jack Gould dubbed him "the virtuoso of the hootchy-kootchy. His one specialty is an accented movement of the body that heretofore has been identified with the repertoire of the blonde bombshells of the burlesque runway." A rival television writer was even more explicit in his condemnation of the "'grunt and groin' antics of one Elvis Presley . . . [who] gave an exhibition that was suggestive and vulgar, tinged with the kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and bordellos." *Look* found his abdominal gyrations (and phallic byplay with the guitar) in shocking "bad taste."¹⁸ Catholic Cardinal Spellman joined a choir of clergy voices condemning his "suggestive dancing" on television as a symptom of a new teen "creed of dishonesty, violence, lust and degeneration."¹⁹

Presley's "strip-tease behavior" was particularly repugnant to TV watchers because his performance style was, in some perverse way, ideally suited to the new medium. The moving image was supposed to separate television from radio yet much of the standard programming in the 1950s showed static or almost static pictures to illustrate a sound track. Announcers and talk show participants sat rigidly at desks. On variety shows, the location of microphones kept singers and comics frozen to their marks. In drama, the small screen favored close-ups of faces over motion or action; bulky cameras, not easily adapted to location work, confined what action there was to a small set on the studio floor. The use of a portable camera by host Dave Garroway in 1950 to visit a dentist's office and let the viewer peer into a patient's mouth was widely hailed as a historic innovation, but even at that early date Garroway's admirers were forced to admit that the medium was failing to live up to its promise.²⁰

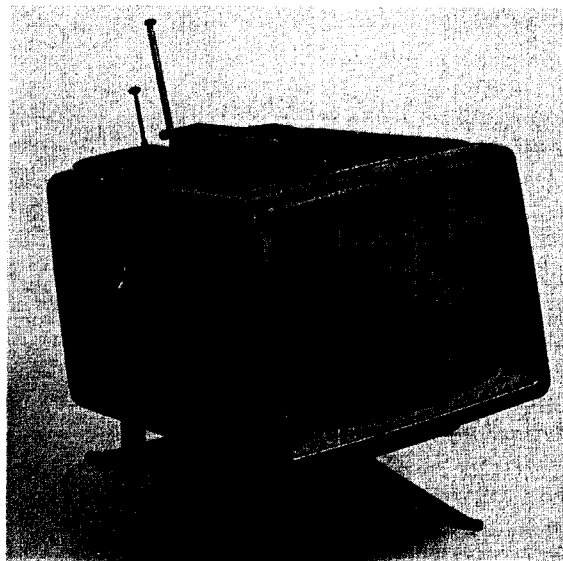
Until the advent of Martin and Lewis, the comedy team that virtually owned the airwaves in the early 1950s, TV remained little more than radio accompanied by black-and-white photographs. But Jerry

Lewis helped to change the aesthetic of television. While Martin (a romantic crooner much admired by Elvis Presley) stood still, in the prescribed manner, Jerry Lewis stomped around him, arms and legs akimbo, shouting, aping, and mugging the camera with mad abandon. Established chiefly by erratic movement, Lewis's emotional intensity was sometimes compared with method acting. More remarkable than the histrionics was the effect of his physical movements on an audience that howled in transports of unrestrained delight as Lewis circled his suave and motionless partner. Like Elvis, Jerry Lewis seemed rebellious because he wouldn't stand still; he both projected and aroused strong emotion through motion. When Elvis—the sex-hot, jelly-kneed, thigh-slinging Elvis who couldn't seem to stand still either—appeared opposite Ed Sullivan on Steve Allen's show in July 1956, it was the first time since Martin and Lewis had aired in the key Sunday night time slot that Sullivan's ratings were topped.²¹

Steve Allen was another bold explorer of the medium. Although he has been roundly condemned by Presley partisans for demeaning (or de-twitching) the singer by making him stand still during his act—the script also called for him to croon "Hound Dog" to a live basset hound and impersonate a cowboy/hillbilly in a silly skit—Allen's format was an ironic commentary of sorts on TV's presentation of Elvis to date. Elvis Presley's first national exposure had come on the *Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey Stage Show* in the spring of 1956. Despite the name, the *Stage Show* belonged to comedian Jackie Gleason. A means of lightening his own on-air duties, it extracted a half-hour of variety and musical numbers from Gleason's usual sixty-minute format to serve as a lead-in to his popular *Honeymooners* sketch. Convinced that he was "a guitar-playing Marlon Brando," Gleason booked Elvis over the objections of the Dorseys especially to cater to younger viewers: "He had the same sensuous, sweaty, T-shirt-and-jeans animal magnetism," said the star. As Ralph Kramden, bus-driver hero of *The Honeymooners*, Jackie Gleason had brought working-class culture to prime-time television. Elvis, he thought, might appeal on the same earthy grounds.²²

In six appearances alongside acrobats and ventriloquists, Elvis did

a dozen numbers in his usual style. Audience reaction to Elvis's manner and to the new rock 'n' roll music was intense—so strong, in fact, that the conservative Dorsey Brothers threatened to walk out if Gleason made good on his intention to bring him back. So Presley's next network engagements came on what would be Milton Berle's two final shows. Because Berle was "Mr. Television," the first great star of the small screen; because he agreed to pay Elvis the princely sum of \$50,000 per week; and because Ed Sullivan, the new king of variety television, had publicly vowed never to let Elvis on *his* stage, the Berle performances were closely watched. Because Berle himself was desperate to hold onto his series by making a splash, he deliberately exploited Presley's unconventional "dancing," first, in a series of head-to-toe shots broadcast live from the deck of the USS *Hancock* (as Elvis ground out "Shake, Rattle, and Roll"), and second, in a series



TV sets began to move in the 1950s, with the invention of the portable. So why not the performers who filled the little screen?

of suggestive skits, discussing Presley's animal magnetism (actress Debra Paget came on stage and screamed like a teenager at the mere sight of him). Packaged to direct attention to Presley's uninhibited movements and their electric effect on female fans, it was the Berle performances that finally brought down the wrath of the critics. The male answer to Marilyn Monroe. A peep-show dancer. A "sexhibitionist," in *Time's* snide coinage. A corrupter of youth. And all, essentially, because he moved on TV. "Ah don't see anything wrong with it. Ah just act the way Ah feel," Elvis told *Look* in the face of mounting outrage.²³

Rock 'n' roll and television were made for each other. In dancing blips of light, television registered the bobbing hanks of hair, the swinging jackets, the swiveling hips. Detail wasn't important: on the little living room screen, motion—new, exciting, and visually provocative in its own right—was the distilled essence of Elvishood. In that intimate setting, too, it became doubly shocking, as if a family friend had begun a series of bumps and grinds in front of the sofa. TV, suggested one cynical Presley-hater, was the real reason teens were so crazy about Elvis; having witnessed their parents' stunned disapproval at close range, over a TV dinner, kids figured he must be worth liking, if only to annoy their elders. But another channel-watcher, trying to reassure adults that Elvis-worship was just another adolescent fad, saw television as a major threat to the continued survival of rock. "You can easily foresee the process of absorption and standardization at the prevailing level," John Sharnik told the nervous Moms and Dads who flipped through *House and Garden* during commercial breaks. The culture of television bred a kind of solemn puffery: phony sets and production numbers, melodramatic lighting, and big bands. Eventually, after "a few more shots at guest starring," Elvis would have learned the drill. He'd wear a fancy costume and stand still—and rock 'n' roll would start to sound like Rodgers and Hammerstein.²⁴

That was the point Steve Allen was making when he dressed Elvis in white tie and tails, took away his guitar, plopped him down on a set full of pseudo-classical columns, and had him serenade a dog while standing perfectly still. In a critique directed as much at the

pretensions of the medium as at his hapless guest, the cool, understated Allen parodied the inertia of artsy, big-ticket television by deep-freezing the hottest act ever seen in prime time. "Allen was nervous," wrote John Lardner in *Newsweek*, "like a man trying to embalm a firecracker. Presley was distraught, like Huckleberry Finn, when the widow put him in a store suit and told him not to . . . scratch." Diehard fans never forgave Steve Allen. But Ed Sullivan noticed that Allen had trounced him in the ratings with the help of Elvis Presley. Suddenly, Sullivan's earlier moral reservations melted away. Suddenly, finding nothing objectionable in Presley's act, he signed him for three upcoming dates.²⁵

Elvis had not been redeemed by one stationary appearance in respectable evening wear, however. Nor did Sullivan apparently grasp the significance of Allen's satirical staging for, on the first two Sundays, he let Elvis rock his way through "Don't Be Cruel" and "Ready Teddy" in full, unobstructed view of the nation's living rooms. But when the critics started in again—Jack Gould attacked not only the familiar body language but certain "distasteful . . . movements of the tongue" visible in closeups—Sullivan told the cameramen to shoot Presley strictly from the waist up during the last show, on January 6, 1957. And then he told the studio audience what an exemplary young man this quiescent, half-an-Elvis was: "A real decent, fine boy."²⁶

By some estimates, 82.6 percent of the American viewing public saw Elvis on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. And critiques of the programs assumed that the Presley appeal was strictly telegenic—not vocal. Jack Gould, who led the charge to immobilize Elvis, was convinced, for example, that he had "no discernible singing ability," beyond an undistinguished whine sometimes uncorked to juice up the rhythm. But fans who never saw Elvis on TV bought his records and responded to the same qualities that electrified (or offended) viewers on the basis of sound alone. His vocal style, in fact, was every bit as mobile as his hips. Since most of journalists on the Elvis beat denied him any artistry, his two-and-one-third-octave range was never mentioned and the music itself was rarely analyzed.²⁷ There were happy exceptions, however. An early Elvis story in *Coronet* went beyond the usual list of dress code violations and possible obscenities to posit a



Ed Sullivan defined the spectrum of American culture for 1950s TV: guests ranged from opera stars to black bluesmen, from circus performers to Elvis Presley.

direct connection between his stage actions and an "irregular stress on syllables" that gave the typical Presley song "an urgent jerkiness" identical to the visual aspects of the performance. Others detected a breathless urgency, a freedom in his phrasing, the impatient syntax of

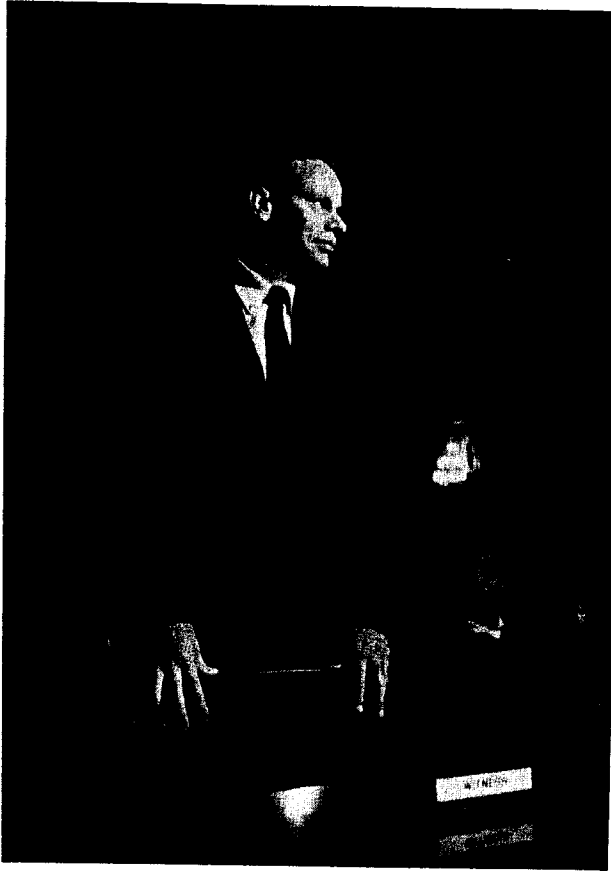
a young man going someplace in a terrific hurry. Or a whole vocabulary of howls, mumbles, coos, and cries, of drawn-out, bisected, and broken notes that made the music lurch and twitch and thrust like—well, like Elvis Presley! When he sang, the melody picked up speed and barreled along like a freight train on a midnight run to Memphis, like a pink Cadillac bound for glory: “Ah-h Wa-ha-hunt Yew-who, Ah Nee-hee-heed Yew-who!”²⁸

Of all the ink spilled over Elvis Presley in the 1950s, only one article—by James and Annette Baxter—credited Elvis with prodigious musical talent and a growing sense of how to manipulate his vocal pyrotechnics “into an organic whole.” Published by *Harper’s* in 1958, as most other journals were gearing up for heavy-handed Elvis-gets-a-haircut stories, the Baxter essay concentrated on shifts in mood and timing and twists in tonal quality, or what might be called the mobility of Presley’s voice. Later students of rock have labored to show precisely how these techniques propelled his singing and ultimately shaped his performance mode. Thus the musicologist Richard Middleton detects an off-beat quaver in Elvis’s interpretation of certain lyrics of the mid-50s; the unexpected accent produces cross rhythms and syncopation virtually demanding physical movement. In other words, his slurs and mumbles, his split syllables—all the linguistic tricks that made Elvis an easy target for parody—inject extra notes into the melodic line. The result is a sort of jittery vibrato simulating effort and speed. This rhythmic boogification has its lyrical equivalent in the delicate burps of appoggiatura heard in “Love Me Tender” (over the word “never” in “Never let me go . . .”) and other crooner ballads. The sound waffles and quavers and slithers and slides. It moves. And Elvis moved with his music, a sign, a symbol for a new and problematic American mobility.²⁹

The supposed transformation of Elvis from the rockin’ rebel of the 50s to the mainstream entertainer of 1960 was always couched in terms of movement, or the absence thereof. Hence the *TV Guide* review of Presley’s “comeback” television appearance focused on motion to underscore the contrast between Ed Sullivan’s X-rated Elvis and the glossy pop idol who traded quips with Frank Sinatra on ABC three years later. “Presley wiggled off to military service,” wrote

columnist Alan Levy, but “comes marching home . . . shorn of his sideburns and behaving the way a sedate, serious-minded youngster should.” Not that clean-cut American youth had fared particularly well on the home screen in the years of rampant Presleymania: there was, for instance, the sad case of Charles Van Doren. A tweedy young Columbia University instructor with a passable haircut and impeccable egghead connections, Van Doren debuted on TV in November of 1956, in the lull between Elvis’s second and third Sullivan spots, as a contestant on a quiz show. Pitted against a swarthy, surly fellow from Brooklyn in a cheap, ill-fitting suit—the Elvis or James Dean of this real-life melodrama—Van Doren sweated, stammered, and bit his lip in a glass booth (supposedly soundproof, it was a visual guarantee of the fairness of the proceedings) and emerged the winner. During his own long reign as the *Twenty-One* champ, Van Doren accumulated 129,000 pretax dollars and became a television celebrity, eventually signed to a contract with NBC, as cultural correspondent for Dave Garroway’s *Today* show. Then, in 1959, after years of rumors, the whole thing came apart. A congressional investigation revealed that Van Doren had been coached on the answers and had lied about it repeatedly under oath. He lost his post at Columbia and his new NBC job too.³⁰

In the aftermath of the quiz show scandal, sideburns and wiggling began to look pretty wholesome. But at the height of his popularity, Charlie Van Doren had provided an almost irresistible contrast to Elvis; he was articulate, conservative, neatly barbered—all the things Elvis appeared not to be. Unlike the sensual, some would say downright dirty Elvis, he was cool, restrained, and cerebral, the perfect hero, it would seem, for the American teen in the age of Sputnik. Van Doren himself waxed sanctimonious in the media about the good influence of quiz shows in promoting an “increased respect for knowledge” and education. Yet *he* didn’t watch TV, Charlie confessed in the pages of *Life*, nor did he know anybody who owned a set. On the contrary, before his own prime-time duel to the death with Herb Stempel, he’d been afraid of television: “I thought it could hurt people, that it could corrupt them, perhaps.” Van Doren’s own corruption gives his reservations about television an ironic wrinkle. He was by



Charles Van Doren, the eggheads' idol, confesses his televised misdeeds to Congress, 1959. Note the short hair and trim, conservative suit.

no means alone in his skepticism about the TV set, however—a wariness the quiz show scandal helped to expose and define.³¹

The quiz show format came to dominate television in the mid-50s for several reasons, not the least of which was the whole rags-to-riches premise, the idea that *anybody*—an Elvis type or a Charles Van

Doren—could strike it rich in America.³² On some shows, the consolation prizes for the losers were shiny new Cadillac convertibles!³³ In a backhanded way, the programs also affirmed the prestige of the expert or the increasingly hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of the workplace, but the experts on *Twenty-One* and the other hit shows were often comic-opera versions of professionals; the psychologist who knew everything about boxing and the Marine gourmet challenged the rigidity of conventional job descriptions at the same time as they exalted the purposefulness and seriousness of leisure. But it was the apparent lack of contrivance that won the quiz show its widest following. Unlike a movie or a dramatic show, this was real life, unrehearsed and spontaneous, fluid: what television was meant to be (and what a Presley appearance, coincidentally, always delivered). The isolation booths twirled around on stage to show that there were no hidden wires. The contestants perspired and grimaced and wrung their clammy hands. It all added up to immediacy and authenticity, a reality inside the picture tube that matched the tension and mumbling and fidgeting in the American living room, on the other side of the glass.

That all was not as it appeared to be, that what looked so real on TV could be contrived and false, was a terrible blow to viewers' faith in the medium. More than the duplicity of any given quiz show hero, the failure of television itself was what caused the public outcry in the Van Doren case. In the wake of the *Twenty-One* investigation, CBS executives even castigated Ed Murrow's at-home interview show, *Person to Person*, because the format aimed to preserve some sense of spontaneity even though it was obvious that cumbersome cameras, lights, and microphones did not, as Murrow retorted testily, "just wander around" a celebrity's house. The problem was as much aesthetic and structural as it was ethical. Gilbert Seldes, the most persuasive apologist for early television, thought TV was inherently different from the other public and popular arts. "The novel says: 'He walked,'" Seldes wrote, while "television says: 'Look, I am walking.'" Perhaps the movies say: "He was walking." The presentness of television was a function of its location, in the home: events witnessed there became part of the continuum of daily life, making it almost

impossible to believe, for example, that what was happening on screen might have occurred before the viewer saw it.³⁴

Fraudulent by nature, the illusory presentness of the moving image was one of several factors that made TV dangerous, especially to the young. From mid-decade on, the baleful effects of television on American life became a national obsession. Polls, surveys, and experts all agreed that something terrible was happening. People stayed in the house more and read good books less. Kids were glued to the set for three or four hours a day. The content of programming aroused "morbid emotions in children," stirred up "domestic quarrels, . . . loosed morals and ma[de] people lazy and sodden." The Kefauver Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee issued a report late in 1955 suggesting that TV caused juvenile delinquency by inuring teenagers to lawless and violent behavior.³⁵

The mechanism whereby clean-cut teens suddenly turned into blue-jeaned mobsters while watching TV was not specified in the report; perhaps moving pictures induced criminal restlessness in unformed characters. As the historian Merle Curti has observed, however, one consequence of World War II and the rise of the totalitarian state was to convince Americans that anybody could be manipulated by appeal to the non-rational self. Confirmed by the "brainwashing" of captured troops in Korea and by the plots of science fiction movies in which germs from Mars turned average citizens into obedient zombies in the twinkling of an eye, this insight formed the basis for much postwar advertising. The flirtation between Madison Avenue and the behavioral sciences climaxed in the summer of 1957 when ad executives tried out subliminal pitches—"Drink Coca-Cola!" and "Hungry: Eat Popcorn!" flashed over the picture for one three-hundredth of a second—in a selected group of movie theaters, and reported sales increases of 50 percent. The results were disputed, debated, and ultimately discredited, but the brouhaha about subliminals, motivational research, and the application of psychological voodoo to ad campaigns left the lingering suspicion that people were regularly induced to act against their own best instincts by what they saw. In 1957 and 1958 the acceptance of the sack dress by teenage girls was often cited as a prime example of how images—of Paris chic, of

something wild and new—could turn a whole class of consumers into mindless fashion robots wearing garments of an unprecedented hideousness.³⁶

At issue was the change from an accepted style to something unfamiliar, from the Saturday matinee to weeknight TV, from crew cuts to ducktails and sideburns, from Dean Martin and Charles Van Doren to Elvis Presley. Change. Speed. Movement. Presentness. What made Elvis transgressive on television and inseparable from it. The annual *Look* award for the best variety show of 1957 went to the editions of the Sullivan program on which he was featured, in all his subversive, subliminal, syncopated glory, twisting and twitching like a Waring blender full of testosterone. The essence of motion, Elvis was, in the words of a brand new hit recorded a week after his last Sullivan gig, "All Shook Up." In the abstract, at least, the cultural style of the 1950s tilted toward motion and away from stasis. Drive-ins, Oldsmobiles with jet-plane tail fins, the interstate highway system first proposed by the Eisenhower administration in 1954; Vladimir Nabokov's determination to put "the geography of the United States into motion" by visiting every tourist attraction his guidebook had to offer; Jack Kerouac, driving from Denver to Chicago in seventeen hours ("not counting . . . two hours with the police in Newton, Iowa") in a borrowed Cadillac at a mean speed of 70 mph; the lyrics of *all* the best rock and proto-rock songs, beginning with Willy Love's "V-8 Ford Blues" of 1951: to move was to live and breathe, to be an artist in America in the 1950s. The national spirit was all shook up even as the body politic reposed inert before the picture tube, waiting to be zapped by secret signals from networkland.³⁷

In 1955 designers at Chrysler Motors retooled the whole product line, lowering auto bodies, raking tail fins backward, extruding front bumpers in the opposite direction. McCann-Erickson, Chrysler's New York ad agency, called it "The Forward Look" and waxed poetic in TV commercials about the sort of car that had the "forward look of motion—even when it's stopped." Plymouths and Dodges became symbols as much as vehicles, signs of a new cultural engagement with movement. But just how the concept could best be marketed on television became a major problem. In 1956, utilizing the latest in

electronic techniques for testing audience reactions, the Central Research Department at McCann-Erickson conducted an in-depth study of actor William Lundigan, incumbent host of Chrysler's two weekly shows, *Climax* and *Shower of Stars*. The study disclosed that Lundigan was perceived as a passive figure, identified more closely with what he was—an actor, a personality—than with what he was doing for Chrysler. In Madison Avenue terms, he was a “soft sell,” largely because he stood still while the product moved. The agency therefore recommended a whole range of changes to correct this “basically inactive impression.” Lundigan was given stage business to do whenever possible—“more active chores as part of the commercial.”³⁸ The non-active announcer, whom the viewers surveyed preferred to the hard-sell type (Lundigan got fan mail!), was not as effective at actually moving the family toward the auto showroom, the ad men concluded. The act of movement alone, with no change in dialogue or content, was the psychological key to selling “The Forward Look” on TV, with nobody the wiser.

While Elvis and Bill Lundigan were moving the audience by sheer movement, the viewers themselves were shifting positions within the home. Lynn Spigel and Cecelia Tichi, in recent studies of television and domesticity in the 1940s and 50s, have both noted the disruption of traditional patterns of household space by a set that needed to be visible from a number of unobstructed vantage points. The television crept into many homes disguised as a kind of electronic version of the colonial fireplace because it invited the same radial arrangement of seating; period cabinets on some early sets helped to integrate a new technology with the time-honored repertory of chairs and sofas standard in the American living room. But it is also clear that televiewing entailed movement that called wholly new kinds of furniture into being. The TV tray-table is one good example. Manufactured by several companies, of which Cal-Dak of Illinois was the industry leader, the highly portable, fold-away, stackable, over-the-knees table for one first appeared in national advertising in 1952 and 1953: it was, read the copy, “Perfect for TV dining.”³⁹

Those were the years in which Mamie and Ike usually ate supper off matching tray-tables in front of a bank of special TV consoles built

CAL-DAK
Folding
TRAY TABLE

Perfect for
TV dining,
buffets,
bedside stand.

Choice of 8 colorful
trays. Fits over the
knees. Folds for storage.

at better stores
everywhere 2.95

Guaranteed by
Good Housekeeping
Send for folder showing all
work-saving Cal-Dak products

CAL-DAK, INC.
the great new name
in housewares
Colton, California • Chicago Heights, Illinois

The TV tray-table: perfect for eating in the living room, in front of the set—and so easy to move.

into one wall of the White House family quarters. Ordinary families followed suit: TV trays were inexpensive to purchase and frequently available as premiums. Niblets brand canned corn offered a pair of them, decorated with Norman Rockwell scenes, for just \$1 and a label in a supermarket promotion in the spring of 1953. The tray-tables had a recessed center well to secure the plates. This feature made them

handy and useful but it also meant that the form of the table mimicked the configuration of a TV screen. So the snack table was telecentric in its very shape, like a long list of other products, beginning with Swanson's TV Dinners, that capitalized on the attraction of the new medium. And it joined a whole family of home furnishings designed exclusively to be moved into positions close to the set: Servel's Electric Wonderbar, a "refrigerette" on casters, "so handy while watching TV!"; a roll-around "television plastic dinette set" from Virginia House in a choice of three woodgrain finishes; electrified serving carts of every description.⁴⁰

All these new furniture types made a virtue of necessity by bending the metallic legs into eccentric forms that tended to dominate the

NOW! TELEVISION Plastic DINETTE SET
ANOTHER FAMOUS VIRGINIA HOUSE *FIRST*

Here's "the smartest thing on wheels" — a beautiful Virginia House dinette you can move about the house at will . . . and so easily! Wonderful for snacks or even meals while you watch television . . . for sewing, homework, bedside and dozens of other uses. Self-locking, smooth-rolling casters . . . drop leaves (see inset) . . . five gorgeous colors in seafoam or natural wood grain pattern — mahogany, oak, maple. Write for the name of your nearest dealer.



Virginia House was first to bring you bedroom, dinette and occasional furniture in lovely, colorful Panelite Plastic — "the housewife's dream" because you can wipe it gleaming clean with only a damp cloth. Highly resistant to all stains and scratches!

Virginia House
MARION, VIRGINIA
PANELITE PLASTIC FURNITURE . . . BEDROOM • DINING ROOM • DINETTE • OCCASIONAL



New, perambulating furniture of the 1950s, adapted to the TV set, included pieces on wheels.

overall design. This artistic strategy expressed the altered function of a fixed piece suddenly on the move and the properties of nontraditional materials, such as steel tubing. But the leggy look in tables and chairs had already posed a real problem of clutter for high-style furniture designers in the postwar era: "modern" rooms by Charles Eames, George Nelson, and the other arbiters of home fashions for highbrows often looked like cocktail parties attended by swarms of long-legged insects because all the horizontal surfaces were borne aloft by thin, expressively angled supporting members.⁴¹ Such environments were virtual symphonies in legginess and potential movement. But, in a way, the wobbly little TV table in the average "colonial" living room carried the greater symbolic weight, since those spindly sawhorse legs had so little competition from the stodgy wooden cabinetry all around them. Their message was bold and plain: things associated with television moved, or looked as if they could and should go prancing across the room. And under the weight of a bowl of chip-dip, they wiggled like Elvis himself.

Many familiar appurtenances of domesticity took on a new mobility in the 1950s when television entered the picture. Teamed with a serving tray and four individual glass snack trays, Toastmaster's reliable old electric toaster became "Television's Twin." The idea was that "while the show is on," the hostess did not need to miss a minute of the fun if she whipped up toasted treats right in front of the set. Even simple serving bowls acquired hinges and ball bearings, so that a whole meal could be dispensed from a single unit that slid open to disclose hidden casserole wells and pop-up side dishes.⁴² The immediate consequence of all this movement in the living room was a radical change in American table manners and patterns of entertaining. Stiff, formal service, with everyone pinned in position by place cards, was replaced by the party at which hosts and guests moved as a matter of course: the stand-up cocktail party, the patio barbecue, or the TV party, with its moveable tables, portable bars, twirling lazy-susan servers, and viewers making their own meals buffet-style during the Lincoln commercials on the Ed Sullivan show. The television set itself helped to break down rigid patterns of social propriety. An agent of movement and change long before the rock 'n' roll images

Guests serve themselves
...you're free for fun
with this
Hospitality Set!



LOVELY LISTENING...
the nice things
you'll hear about your
new "Hospitality" Set.
Guests enjoy serving
themselves.
Gives you time for fun.

\$32.50†
Full Trade Price



TELEVISION'S TWINS!
Smart snack service—
with the stars & me!
Makes the simplest snacks so inviting
—the most unexpected guest
so easy to serve.

TEA TIME OR ANY TIME
Four self-service party places
of Viking crystal glassware
keep refreshments handy.
Keep you in on the talk—
out of the kitchen.



ACE-HIGH in home entertainment.
Handsome walnut-veneer tray
inlaid with rich simulated leather
invites self-service.
Has many everyday uses, too.

America's Most-Wanted Toaster,
the joy of guest-makers and fam-
ily alike, completes this new "Hospi-
tality" Set. Yes, here's the famous
"Toastermaster"™ Toaster that smoothly
pops up perfect toast every time—in
everybody's taste—light, dark, or in-
between. Faithful servant, for years,
of both hostess and housewife.
Toaster only, \$21.50†



Look for the TOASTMASTER Name on Your Toaster...Others Will!

The New TOASTMASTER Hospitality Set

"TOASTMASTER" and "HOSPITALITY" are registered trademarks of McGraw Electric Company, makers of "Toastermaster" Toaster, "Toastermaster" Electric Toasters and other "Toastermaster" Products. ©1957, TOASTMASTER PRODUCTS DIVISION, McGraw Electric Company, Rahon, Ill.
†Price subject to change

Even the toaster became a TV accessory.

flashing on the picture tube shook up America, TV was the perfect medium for a kid from Tupelo, Mississippi, on the move.

During his last appearance on the Ed Sullivan show, Elvis Presley thanked his fans for the carloads of birthday and Christmas presents (including 282 teddy bears) which had recently inundated his Memphis home. "I'd like to tell you that we deeply appreciate it," said the uncrowned King of Rock, invoking the royal plural. "We're sorry we couldn't give every one of you a new Lincoln, but they wouldn't sell us that many," he joked, with a genial bow to Sullivan's sponsor. The automobile industry was a dominant presence in television advertising. The medium showed off cars to best advantage in filmed motion sequences. But automakers also used television to associate their products with certain ideas and personalities. By sponsoring Sullivan's Sunday night variety package, for instance, Lincoln positioned itself near the middle of a sliding scale of taste that included performing chimps at one end and opera divas at the other. In that particular context, the car seemed elegant yet perhaps affordable some day, not so pretentious as to be irredeemably snooty but nice enough to make the neighbors take notice. It wasn't quite a Cadillac—that remained the Cinderella car, the give-away car of choice in contests and sweepstakes—but it was an acquisition that announced a major change in status, a big climb up the ladder of success. Bill Lundigan's Chrysler ads associated the "Forward Look" with established stars and "quality" drama, showing that progressive taste need not be too new for comfort. Automotive advertising coupled movement through space—driving to work, a Sunday spin—with precisely calibrated movements in social position and values. In that sense, the folks at Lincoln were probably relieved that Elvis had thus far bought only Cadillacs in quantity (he owned one purple Lincoln Continental and five brand new Caddies in January of 1957). Despite his off-the-cuff endorsement, Elvis Presley was too radical, too *fast* for Lincoln's middle-of-the-road image.⁴³

In 1955 Chevrolet marketed a special V-8 model "to create the image of a 'hot car'" and specifically to attract the young buyer. Research further suggested that even when the teen was not the owner, he or she was likely to be the taste-maker with the greatest

influence in the selection of the family car. As a result, Pat Boone, Elvis Presley's main pop rival, became the TV spokesman for Chevy. In 1956 and 1957 oddsmakers in the entertainment business were betting that the well-barbered balladeer, who was the father of three and a direct descendent of frontiersman Daniel Boone, would soon inherit the crown of "Top Singer." He was a perfect gentleman on stage. His most radical dress statement was a pair of immaculate white buck shoes. He didn't have sideburns. And adults seemed to like his music almost as much as teenagers did. Pat Boone was the perfect pitchman for an inexpensive, family car like a Chevy because he wasn't Elvis Presley. Boone gave the Chevy a youthful flair, beamed directly at the teen arbiter of car taste, but he was the essence of wholesome, family values—the rock without the roll, or a living denial of the several kinds of mobility (physical *and* social) that car commercials usually exploited. No wild teenager would ever speed to her doom in a car endorsed by Pat Boone! But neither would one of Boone's Chevrolets do much to enhance the rising status of the family that owned it.⁴⁴

Elvis Presley, on the other hand, was all about a rapid rise to fame, fortune, and whatever unmistakable marks thereof lots of new money could buy. The rock critic Simon Frith concludes that Elvis was the media archetype for a long line of working-class idols to come, "the poor Southern boy who escaped a life of truck-driving by remaking American music."⁴⁵ Elvis affirmed his success by buying garish pink and lemon-yellow Cadillacs, vehicles at the opposite end of the transportation spectrum from the trucks he used to drive for Crown Electric. He reaffirmed it in March of 1957 by buying Graceland, a two-story limestone mansion in suburban Memphis with a pediment over the front door and a brace of stately *Gone With the Wind* columns instead of a porch. As big houses went, Graceland was on the puny side. But it showed, with its screen of columns, that Elvis had moved beyond the ordinary American dream of a nice, new home in a good neighborhood toward a far grander vision of antebellum posh. Elvis's neighbors at the first house he bought with his windfall riches—his Ozzie and Harriet ranch house on Audubon Drive—complained about the flocks of intrepid girls who dipped cups of water out of the swimming pool and knelt with their ears pressed to the clapboards,

hoping to hear their master's voice. Yet Elvis's choice of Graceland with its spacious grounds and enclosure wall, seems influenced less by thoughts of fan control than by a hankering for rolling lawns and tall white columns. People who lived on Audubon Drive were Pat Boone or Ed Sullivan sorts of people: if they were headed up the long, steep road of status, they weren't going to make a big noise about it to the neighbors. Elvis Presley was different. He was bound for glory in a fleet of Cadillacs and wanted the whole world to sit up and take notice.

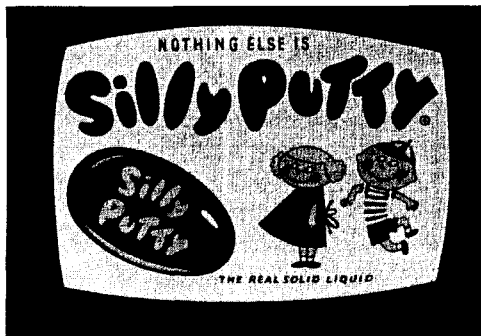
Elvis went too far, too fast, in the opinion of many. A media watch for signs of an impending plunge back into obscurity began in 1957 when speculation about Presley's draft status first made headlines. In November 1957 *Time* thought it sensed the "beginning of wilt [in those poodle-wool sideburns]," and a whiff of cautious austerity in the purchase of "a black, bankerish Cadillac limousine." To the consternation of those who wished him ill, however, Elvis simply added movie stardom to his list of accomplishments and kept on rockin'. But even his well-wishers thought that the rock 'n' roll might eventually have to go. Interviewed by *Variety* in the summer of 1957, as the draft loomed large, a noted dance expert predicted that Elvis would need to adapt, to tone things down in order to survive: "Much of [his] popularity can be attributed to teenagers, mostly girls. Elvis will last, but he'll change his style. Before long, I think you'll find, he'll swing to ballad style stuff. If he does that he'll be around for years and years." After all, by the time Elvis Presley got back from Army service in Germany, his teenage fans would be all grown up and married and settled down. They'd have Chevy station wagons, babies, and Pat Boone albums.⁴⁶

The Army was as nervous about a Presley hitch as Elvis was about a G.I. haircut. More than a year before his scheduled induction, military officials were said to be holding secret conclaves to plot the logistics of protecting a buck private from invading squadrons of fans. "Not since Eddie Fisher served his stint has the Army faced the star problem, and at that time Fisher was nowhere near the celebrity that Presley is," *Billboard* reported. The larger question was whether Elvis could safely be used as a Cold War bargaining chip. He was no answer to Sputnik, of course, but his lack of restraint and enormous

appetite for consumer goods could make Elvis a sort of pop paradigm of freedom, American style. Freedom and a frightful power, worth calling to the attention of allies and enemies: like America's nuclear arsenal, Elvis was "an atomic-age phenomenon . . . hotter than a radioactive yam."⁴⁷

The notion of making Elvis a NATO agent or unsecret weapon in Europe gained plausibility from Eastern Bloc hysteria over American teen culture. In 1958 Radio Moscow condemned excessive movement of the hips by women, blaming suspicious undulations recently seen in Russian streets on decadent Western practices: "This may be good training for girls of fashion abroad who shamelessly indulge in rock 'n' roll with its hideous stamping, wriggling and somersaulting but this is not at all suitable for our girls." When it was announced that Presley was bound for the U.S. base at Friedberg, the East German Communist Party accused the United States of plotting to undermine the morals of Red youth. To show that this act of provocation would not be tolerated, party boss Walter Ulbricht ordered the arrest and imprisonment of fifteen teenagers who marched through the streets of Leipzig in 1959 shouting, "Long live Elvis Presley!"⁴⁸

In the end, however, Elvis served the interests of Cold War strategy best by his virtual invisibility. He piloted a tank, stood guard duty,



Elvis (who liked the stuff) was as liquid as Silly Putty, a 1950s invention marketed through the pictorial evocation of a TV set.

drew his pay, and maintained no overt ties to his former show business life. With the exception of raucous press conferences at the beginning and the end of his military adventure, Elvis did what every other American soldier on duty abroad did, by the book. The man who had once moved like a scalded cat did not so much as twitch a muscle unless ordered to do so. G.I. newspapers in Europe speculated that Operation Elvis had been formulated at the very top: "Advance word from Washington ordered the military to keep Presley under restraint. [The division] was given the word not to go all out for him—no guest appearances, no Presley platter parties, etc."⁴⁹ Managed in this way, Pvt. Presley offered an object lesson in dramatic reversals: a khaki uniform instead of a gold tux and blue suede shoes, a crew cut instead of a head of hair that looked like a built-in Davy Crockett cap, an \$82 paycheck instead of a mansion, and temporary restraint as the price of freedom. In a democracy, everybody was equal under the law, commoners and rock 'n' roll kings. The moral of the story was that Elvis Presley was perfectly wholesome, too, an all-American boy underneath the hair and the spangles and the wild wiggling. His Army service validated the most threatening aspects of Elvisness and American popular culture by treating them as expendable matters of style.

There was some objection to the perfect-little-Private-Presley plan because it seemed to be an egregious waste of Army resources. Why not put Elvis in an entertainment unit and let him tour Europe as a goodwill ambassador? Why not have him perform for the troops at hardship bases in Lebanon and Turkey? But backroom scuttlebutt from Hollywood blamed Presley's manager for keeping him out of Special Services. Interviewed in his suite on the Paramount backlot, the cagey Colonel Tom Parker was quoted as saying that "a sure way to debase your merchandise is to give it away." Gossip columns also had Parker renegotiating existing movie contracts on the basis of the fact that Elvis Presley's exemplary conduct in the Army would pay off in greater boxoffice "appeal to adults."⁵⁰

In a way, however, the immobilization of Elvis completed by Parker and Uncle Sam began in 1956, in the publicity department of Twentieth Century-Fox, just after the release of his first movie, *Love Me*

Tender. In that costume piece, Elvis impersonated the youngest brother in a Civil War-era family, betrayed by a faithless wife. The part was romantic and conventional but the musical numbers added to appeal to the teen market spotlighted the difference between the dangerous rock 'n' roller and the benign role he played. As one savage review of *Love Me Tender* put it, there was Elvis, grotesquely enlarged on the big screen, doing 1956-style "bumps and grinds to raise money for [a] new school" in a make-believe old South. And because his on-screen movements in the darkened confines of motion picture theaters fed fresh fears of teen lawlessness and libidinousness, the studio opened discussions with Parker aimed at remaking the cinematic Elvis "into an influence for the good." How this was to be accomplished was outlined only in the vaguest of terms. Publicists were told to accent Presley's strong family ties and churchgoing background. There was talk of a Presley-sponsored charity for juvenile delinquents. Of a mild infusion of Continental culture with an eye to better overseas ticket sales. And special tutoring to support "his maturing orbit." So, before Draft Board 86 ever made a move to slow him down, a newer, calmer, quieter Elvis was in the works. An Elvis "hellbent on the mainstream," in the words of Greil Marcus. An Elvis who would, of his own volition, get two haircuts in preparation for a new role as a shining satellite in the fixed orbit of American stardom.⁵¹

In January of 1958, after his local board announced a brief deferment to permit Elvis to finish another movie, a draft official in Kentucky resigned in a huff, charging that stars were getting favors denied to ordinary boys in his state. How did rock 'n' roll stack up against the national defense? If a movie about a kid singer sweeping floors in a Bourbon Street nightclub was sufficient reason to put off induction, "then the Sputnik . . . age isn't as serious as represented," he reasoned. When Elvis came home from Germany, however, his handlers made the most of his status as a Cold Warrior, guarding the frontiers of freedom. Paramount sent a crew to Europe to film authentic backgrounds for *G.I. Blues*, the thinly disguised autobiography of a young American tank driver/singer stationed in West Germany; publicity hit hard on the many parallels between Elvis and the fictional "Tulsa McLean," who attains a new maturity from his tourist's-eye-view of Germany. *Life* showed him in costume (uniform)



March 1960: Elvis comes home from the Army, a Cold War hero in a uniform.

tending a baby that figured in the flimsy plot. Perhaps the real Elvis—the one who had "come back from the Army easygoing, unassuming, fatherly . . ."—had traded rock for rock-a-byes, too. The *New York Times* met Presley on the set, looking and sounding as relaxed as Bing Crosby, the very model of the successful singer/actor. And in the telling, at least, *G.I. Blues* sounded like an old Bing Crosby musical. Of the eleven songs slated for the picture, only three or four had a rock beat. "If things change," said the young star, "I'll change too. You have to. That's show business." Show biz to the core, he was dating Frank Sinatra's ex-girlfriend, according to the trade papers. "The Army made an adult of him," his producer was quoted as saying. "This film will show people a grown-up Presley."⁵²

The new, adult Elvis had all but lost his Southern accent; he sounded like a movie star, like a pre-packaged American idol. He was



The new, respectable Elvis tends a baby in *G.I. Blues*.



When Elvis got his hair wet, in this beefcake scene from *G.I. Blues*, it wiggled in the old Presley style.

still wearing the regulation Army "convertible cut," flat on top, a little longer on the sides, and didn't intend to change that coiffure much once the movie was finished. Meanwhile, between takes, he wore a hat: no matter what he did, not a hair was supposed to move. Neither was Elvis, for that matter. "I can't change my style," he complained to an interviewer the day they shot the star-in-the-shower scene for *G.I. Blues*. "If I feel like moving around, I still move."⁵³ But a director told him when to do it now. The camera looked at his soapy head in close up and ignored the rest. They used fake steam and cold water in the beefcake shot so as not to ruin his makeup. And it made his hair stand up in stiff, evocative spikes that wiggled, just a little, under the icy spray.