

The Man Who Would Be King

By Michael Potts

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WHEN ELVIS PRESLEY STROLLED onto the stage for his last performance, there was something different about him. His face had swelled, and his gut was pregnant with obesity. His hair and signature sideburns overran his head and face, and his movements, karate kicks, and hip swivels, were no longer crisp or energetic. He could still sing—he never lost that—and he still had a charismatic stage presence, and he could still send fans into a frenzy. But for years leading up to his death, it seemed the brightness that once shone from this superstar came more from his sequin-adorned jumpsuits than from the man himself.

Today it seems Presley is worth more dead than alive. In the first three years after Presley's death, his estate earned more money than in his entire career. His Graceland mansion is second only to the White House as the most-visited home in the nation. And each year, Elvis books and commemorative merchandise are produced, new Elvis CDs are released, and Elvis documentaries and TV movies are aired.

Recent years prove January and August to be the “months of Elvis,” when countless movies and television specials mark Presley's birthday and anniversary of death. But May is making the competition stiff. This month Sony BMG will release a new two-CD set commemorating the legendary singer. Complementing the set will be a new book from Crown Publishers. Both share the title: *Elvis By The Presleys*.

The CD set should be well received by Presley fans. It features a very playful rendition of *Too Much Monkey Business*, several takes of *Jailhouse Rock*, revealing how the rock anthem developed, and private recordings by Presley. The book should be just as successful. It is chock full of anecdotes from friends and family, as well as rare photographs. A close-up photo of a bullet riddled television captures just one of Presley's moods.

Then comes a two-hour television special, also entitled *Elvis By The Presleys*, set to air on CBS on May 13. The special will feature never-before-seen footage of Presley's performances and family home movies, along with photographs from the Presley Estate

archives. Interviews with Presley family members, including former wife Priscilla and daughter Lisa Marie, will also highlight the special.

Just when you thought the show was over, Presley is back for another encore. Enter *Elvis*, an upcoming CBS miniseries chronicling Presley's life and rise to stardom. The two-part, four-hour miniseries will air on May 8 and 11. What makes this project so rare is that it has acquired the endorsement and cooperation of the Presley Estate; it also gained access to Presley's master recordings. It is the largest of the four Presley projects this month; Todd Morgan, Director of Media and Creative Development for Elvis Presley Enterprises, hopes *Elvis* "will be a ratings champ."

More than likely, Morgan's wish will come true. Twenty-eight years after his death, Presley is still a gold mine. But will this new installment to Everything Elvis present anything different from what we've seen so far? Val Kilmer, Harvey Keitel, and Don Johnson have already taken on the role of the famed rock'n'roller, and a pre-teen Kurt Russell appeared with Presley in *It Happened at the World's Fair* before taking on the role himself in a 1979 TV movie. Russell donned a jumpsuit again some twenty years later in *3,000 Miles to Graceland*.

Although there have been satisfactory portrayals—Russell's version is perhaps the highest praised—the bad far outweigh the good. In fact, none has accurately captured Presley in full—not his career, not his personal life. Minor details to the average viewer are enormous to fervent Presley fans. For instance, many past films cast a star with too young or too old an appearance to play both phases of Presley's life. There's the actor-turned-Elvis on stage (poorly) lip-syncing songs from the wrong era, handing out sweat drenched scarves while in the famous black leather suit (wrong era again), or wearing Hawaiian lei while sporting the Butterfly jumpsuit (wrong suit, wrong concert, and wrong year). Again, to Elvis fans, these are serious mistakes.

Then there are the lights in which Presley is shown. There have been very few balanced biopics. He is either shown as a flawless rock god, or as a drug induced, gun wielding madman obsessed with peanut butter and banana sandwiches. As an Elvis fan myself, I do not cheer the glossed-over versions, nor do I scoff at the darker ones. As a true Elvis fan, I hope for both.

Todd Morgan agrees, saying, "A whitewash of Elvis would do almost as much a disservice to his legacy as a hatchet job." Neither the Estate nor the producers wanted that. "The estate did not want us to sugar-coat the details of Elvis's life," said Robert Greenblatt, one of the movie's four executive producers. Instead, they wanted an "honest and accurate" account. "We think the movie is very balanced in showing the

human side," Greenblatt continued, "as well as the side of Elvis that was somehow touched by a force that few people experience."

Greenblatt and David Janollari (*Six Feet Under*), along with Howard Braunstein and Michael Jaffe (*It Must Be Love*), are the executive producers of the CBS miniseries. *Bend It Like Beckham* star Jonathan Rhys Meyers took on the tall order of filling Presley's blue suede shoes for the movie. Asked whether casting an Irishman for the part of one of America's most beloved Southerners was a concern, Greenblatt responded that the concern lasted only "until we heard him speak in Elvis's southern dialect."

Indeed, Rhys Meyers should be the least concern for the project. He nails the dialect and possesses an uncanny likeness to Presley. Rounding out the cast is Rose McGowan (*Charmed*) as the singer-actress and Presley intimate Ann-Margret; Randy Quaid, perhaps best known for his roles in the *National Lampoon's Vacation* series, as Presley's manager Colonel Tom Parker; and Camryn Manheim (*The Practice*) and Robert Patrick (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*) as Presley's parents.

Elvis will cover Presley's life up to 1968, when he staged a historic comeback from a long string of B-movies. In doing so, the movie covers Presley's meteoric rise and ends "on a hopeful note." When William Shakespeare wrote of Hamlet: "He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again," he could have easily been writing about Presley.

It is true. We will never see another Elvis Presley. The closest we will get is on May 8, when *Elvis* takes the stage. But will they get it right? Here's what we should see: We should see a shy kid, awkward with girls, and a cocky rebel who had all the girls. We should see a loose-bodied, slick-haired singer, a poor, working-class kid who made it big and changed the world. If we see him as the American original he is—a folk hero, a country boy, a mamma's boy, a southerner, an entertainer, a musician, a revolutionary, a triumphant superstar and a defeated man—than *Elvis* will surely hit its mark when the curtain rises.

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