Could Fifty Million Record-Buyers Have Been Irrelevant?
Understanding the Post-World War II Past through Popular Music[1]
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By
Dr. Michael T. Bertrand
Tennessee State University
Nashville, TN

On January 16, 1971, the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce, commonly known as the Jaycees, recognized performer Elvis Presley as one of the nation's Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Year. The civic organization had been granting the annual award to individuals thirty-five and under in all fields since 1939. Past honorees included Arthur Ashe, Leonard Bernstein, Howard Hughes, Jesse Jackson, John, Robert, and Ted Kennedy, Joe Louis, Ralph Nader, Rudy Vallee, Orson Wells, and the only historian in the bunch, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., suggesting perhaps that we heirs of Herodotus do not become outstanding until we get old. (A Supreme Court ruling in 1984 compelled the group to include women; soon after, the Jaycees changed the name of the prize to "The Ten Outstanding Young Americans of the Year." It also bumped the maximum age requirement for group membership and award conferees to forty, thus doing its part with others in the late twentieth century to delay adulthood and extend adolescence into middle age.) On the night that the Jaycees honored the thirty-five-year-old Presley, when thirty-five still served as the cutoff age for consideration, nine other individuals shared the dais. There was one of Richard Nixon's presidential aides, a communication czar, a Medal of Honor winner, an American Basketball Association owner, a cancer scientist, a Harvard biophysicist, the first African American to be elected to the Boston city council, the founder of a domestic social-action agency, the Revitalization Corps, and one of the developers of the United States Postal System. Preceding the awards ceremony, which was being held in Memphis, Tennessee, United Nations ambassador-appointee George Herbert Walker Bush delivered the keynote address.[2]

When he walked to the lectern to accept the honor, Presley gestured to the other recipients and then addressed the audience: "I am very humbled by this award, not so much in receiving it but receiving it in the company of the other nine men honored here today...[For] when I was a child, ladies and gentlemen, I was a dreamer. I read comic books, and I was the hero of the comic book. I saw movies, and I was the hero in the movie. So every dream I ever dreamed has come true a hundred times….I'd like to say that I learned very early in life that 'without a song, the day would never end. Without a song, a man ain't got a friend. Without a song, the road would never bend. Without a song.' So I'll keep singing a song. Good night. Thank you."[3]

Elvis's brief Jaycee's acceptance speech provided revealing insight into one of the twentieth century's most acclaimed yet elusive celebrities. It also may tell us a great deal about the implications of popular culture and music consumption during an era when the songs of Johnny Mercer dominated *Your Hit Parade*. Examining Presley and the generation he represented within a forum devoted to the significance of Mercer understandably may seem strange to scholars and fans of the man who wrote such classic compositions as "You Must Have

Been a Beautiful Baby," Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive," and "On the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe." Even if one recognizes that both Mercer and Presley hailed from the South and possessed an affinity for African American music, it would be difficult to forget that the so-called rock 'n' roll revolution threatened to undermine the popular music establishment of which the Savannah native was an architect. Certainly there was no love lost at the time between ASCAP mavens who stood on the corners of Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood and the BMI-oriented mavericks who travelled along the outlying Memphis, Nashville, and New Orleans corridor. As one friend of Mercer recalled, rock 'n' roll changed everything for Mercer, forcing the music business to move, "not beyond him, but away from him."[4]

Thus it is understandable if Elvis may not be most popular person in the room today. And perhaps this feeling might carry over to someone with the gall to present a paper on Elvis at a Johnny Mercer conference. But as a figure who so thoroughly encompassed within his celebrity the issues of race, class, gender, generation, region, taste, and consumerism, Presley has the exceptional ability to shed light on the popular music process. Focusing on Elvis and the rock 'n' roll generation in a setting dedicated to discussing pop music in the Mercer era can help us understand the complex relationships that routinely exist between popular music and popular music audiences, regardless of the genre or artist involved. More importantly, such an examination has the potential to contextualize the production and consumption of popular music within the larger society that supports it. For whether they were purchasing "Moon River" or "Blue Moon of Kentucky," record buyers in the post-World War II era, far from being irrelevant, have a great deal to tell us about the world in which they lived.

Although Elvis Presley had accumulated several honors during a career that had spanned over fifteen years, the Jaycee's award ceremony in 1971 represented the first such event he had attended, thus providing him a rare opportunity to speak publicly about numerous aspects of his life. Interestingly, despite the intense media scrutiny that he had aroused from the moment he stepped onto a national stage, Presley in the years since the mid-1950s had granted the press relatively few interviews. His manager, Colonel Tom Parker, generally adhered to a policy that kept journalists away from "his boy," believing that a dearth of personal information would create greater demand and an upsurge in the fees that he could charge for Presley's services (Parker likewise feared that his working-class client might utter something that would damage his reputation within the mainstream, thus diminishing his ability to generate revenue. He was livid, for instance, at the response Elvis furnished in 1956 to a curious journalist who asked if the singer had any plans for marriage. The twenty-one-year-old, an only child often chided as being a "mama's boy," had replied rather mischievously: "Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free from underneath the fence?" From that point forward, Parker carefully monitored the singer's access to the media. The meteoric ascent and even more spectacular crash-and-burn fall of Presley's Sun Records contemporary Jerry Lee Lewis due to unacceptable offstage behavior and public miscommunication no doubt later served to justify the Colonel's caution). For various reasons, then, Elvis (or those around him) seldom allowed outsiders entry into his innermost thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, reporters often did not take seriously the artist or his craft, and therefore asked mostly inane questions; for his part, Presley routinely sidestepped the "deep" or profound inquiry infrequently put to him, apparently preferring or finding it necessary to compartmentalize his public and private spheres.[5]

Thus it is significant that on one of the few occasions where he did reveal himself to the public, he would so transparently reference popular culture. His emphasis on magically transforming into the hero of the comic book or the motion picture leading man proved to be particularly instructive. One biographer even has suggested that the singer's later Las Vegas utilization of jumpsuits, capes, and lightning bolt logos represented a subconscious allusion to Captain Marvel. Uh, maybe. There is no doubt that Presley, at least since adolescence, had maintained a penchant for flashy and flamboyant attire. On more solid footing, anyone even vaguely familiar with the Presley biography can recall accounts where he recited to Hollywood directors and colleagues the complete dialogue of James Dean and Marlon Brando movies. And neither was his imagination limited to memorizing from the Silver Screen while sitting in a darkened theater; he repeatedly astounded various contemporaries, for instance, by delivering from memory the full text of Douglas MacArthur's 1951 "Farewell Address to Congress." (that of "old soldiers never die, they just fade away" infamy). This may take on added consequence upon the realization that the speech was recorded and released commercially as an extended play album that entered and climbed *Billboard*'s radio popularity charts in the same year. Friends and casual acquaintances alike recounted that Elvis loved the radio and listened to it constantly.[6]

The second half of the singer's succinct acceptance speech dealt with the importance of music in his life. And while the sentiment he would articulate was undoubtedly heartfelt, it also was superficial, lyrics borrowed from Tin Pan Alley. One can only imagine what a nervous and surely intimidated Presley must have thought while listening to his fellow honorees -- eminent scientists, physicists, entrepreneurs, political insiders, and real-life military heroes -- put into larger perspective their achievements. (This is the same man, who when told less than a year earlier that he was going to be the focus of a major biography written by Jerry Hopkins, responded incredulously, "Why would anyone want to write a biography about me?"). Likewise, one probably can guess with a fair degree of certainty what his fellow luminaries thought about their all sharing the same stage. Presley's brevity and seeming vacuity at the podium no doubt confirmed their negative predilections. Given the opportunity to address why he was being honored by the Jaycees, Elvis seemed uncomfortable and out of place -- or maybe he just seemed to be what he was – a passionate fan of music and movies who felt fortunate to have escaped high school, an individual that most in his community ordinarily would have seen as a regular or average guy. As the director of his draft board had concluded years earlier, so too had many others, the singer included: "We've drafted people who are far more important than he is. After all, when you take him out of the entertainment business, what have you got left? A truck driver."[7]

As isolated as he may have felt among the other honorees, one could argue that his feelings of alienation that evening had began long before he stepped to the podium. Forced to address his seeming disaffection before an audience not there to hear him sing, Presley leaned upon that which had provided him support his entire life: popular culture and popular music. With no attribution or background information to serve as a transition, Presley seamlessly presented the lyrics of a song as though they emanated from the core of his being, as if they were words distinctive to him and his life experiences. Perhaps the point is that to him, they were. In reality, the musical composition "Without a Song" had emanated in 1929 from the pens of Billy Rose, Edward Elisen, and Vincent Youmans. Bing Crosby, Mario Lanza, Perry Como, Frank Sinatra, Billy Eckstine, and a host of others had recorded the piece. Early versions, including that

of Sinatra in 1941, contained lyrics that were racially derogatory: "A darkie's born, but he's no good no how, without a song." The original sheet music, published by Miller Music Incorporated of New York City, included a cover that featured an Uncle Remus-like figure looking wistfully toward a big house sitting at the end of a tree and fence-lined lane. There is little doubt that Joel Chandler Harris would have approved of the nostalgic image; whether or not Presley was aware of the song's original racial content, however, is unknown. Elvis was a huge fan of R&B and pop performer Roy Hamilton, and it is likely that it was Hamilton's 1955 recording, sans the racial reference (the racially-neutral "man" had replaced the offensive "darkie") that had served as the source for Presley's Jaycee presentation.[8]

It is appropriate, of course, that the issue of race should stalk Presley, even when it did not appear, at least on the surface, to have been part of the equation. For anyone interested in understanding Elvis must place him in a context that recognizes his regional racial roots, a milieu made up of rules, attitudes, and etiquette that constantly emphasized white supremacy and black degradation. Many often have perceived that Presley's maturation within a jim crow segregationist system left him permanently prejudiced and racially intolerant. All of his actions and affinities accordingly would be tarred with the brush of racism. And they would be magnified (and distorted) in a setting where cultural and commercial forces collided, as in a popular music business that both rewarded and profited from racial appropriation, thus making it difficult for many to view Elvis as anything other than a bigoted usurper of African American music and expressive style. Combined with the contentious issues of class and region, tangible realities that cast a giant shadow of suspicion over his contributions, the volatile topic of race reiterated that Presley's legacy indeed represented a controversial and contested one.[9]

This is not the place or time to debate *that* legacy; I have addressed Elvis's relationship to race elsewhere, asserting that it is much more complicated than many have suggested. Still, it is unlikely that the issue will go away anytime soon or that the Presley phenomenon ever will be able to create complete separation from unsubstantiated charges of racial misappropriation. With that being said, perhaps it is time to consider the side-burned troubadour from another perspective. His Jaycee award acceptance speech, for instance, reminds us that before he became "Elvis," Presley was a teenage consumer. In this sense, he was, in the broadest meaning of the term, "Everyman." In fact, it could be argued that the adolescent Mississippi migrant exemplified the "perfect consumer," someone who embraced popular culture so thoroughly that he had a difficult time distinguishing between what was real and what was fantasy. Or perhaps he had succeeded in flip flopping the two so completely that there actually was no distinction. Equipped with the tools of popular culture, Presley had, for all intents and purposes, empowered his inner Walter Mitty. Daydreamers of the world, unite!

As historians are well aware, however, popular culture, or more precisely, commercial culture, is subservient to corporate prerogatives and market forces, not Walter Mitty, and its agenda is purely mercenary. The word "popular" in popular culture does not necessarily equate with *vox populi* or "voice of the people." At least not without some qualification. Some would maintain, for instance, that the young man who dreamed of becoming Captain Marvel or Jim Stark (the teenage protagonist played by James Dean in the movie *Rebel Without a Cause*) had had a limited imaginative resource base from which to work, a pre-fabricated dream determined by comic book publishers and motion picture magnates. After all, consumers can consume only

that which is made available to them. Writing in 1950, cultural anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker perhaps put it best when she depicted Hollywood as a "dream factory." Her assessment could have been applied to all of popular culture: "the unromantic picture of an industry churning out mass-produced dreams with all the cold efficiency of a Detroit auto plant."[10]

The well-known post-World War II debates over mass culture and music, of which Powdermaker contributed, provided a rather pessimistic view of the entire process, one in which a monolithic culture industry tended to manipulate passive consumers. More recent interpretations of the popular culture dynamic, however, have focused on the symbiotic relationship between those that distribute and those that utilize mass-produced products. The authority of the corporate few, scholars recognize, is not absolute. The domain in which media moguls operate is chronically unsettled, fragmented, and derivative. Empowered to colonize, standardize, mass produce and distribute literally all forms of existing expression, such cultural imperialists actually create very little. Theirs is a power sustained by effectively locating and transforming local and often unruly raw materials (songs, artists, and styles, for instance) into manageable and marketable mainstream commodities. It is no coincidence that the industry cyclically regularly infuses American pop music with the strains of blues, country, rap, or similar "grassroots" manifestations. It also is not by happenstance that what becomes a mainstream mainstay generally represents something less than what originated in the rural, urban, or suburban hinterlands. And despite attempts to guarantee the long-term profitability of their products, particularly through the use of formula, planned obsolescence, and manufactured desire through advertising, the outcome is far from inevitable. They do not know definitively if, when, or why consumers will purchase what they sell. At the height of the rock 'n' roll explosion, for instance, in the mid-1950s, between 300 and 400 recorded singles were released per month. Obviously not all of those attained success. In fact, the large majority barely saw the light of day. Relatively few made it onto the *Honor Roll of Hits* or a teenager's portable phonograph record player. And industry attempts to initiate new fads from above – polka and calypso, specifically – failed miserably or met only moderate success at best. As one record executive complained to *The Wall Street Journal*, "The singles business is like shooting craps – you never know if you'll come up with a winner."[11]

Conversely, it is not always clear as to what audiences or consumers are "receiving" when they do consume popular entertainment and popular culture products. Customer reception and application do not necessarily correspond to producer intention or market surveys. Moreover, sometimes responses border on the seemingly irrational, suggesting that consumers have their own notions and preconceptions that historians must address when analyzing the popular culture process. Consider, for instance, the following example. In 1992, the United States Postal Service, in an unprecedented move, initiated a nationwide contest to choose one from between two images of Elvis Presley that eventually would grace a commemorative postage stamp. The two likenesses (one officially entitled the "Young Elvis" and the other the "Old Elvis") were placed on a postcard-size ballot that could be obtained at any local post office. Over 1.2 million people participated in this "election," with more than seventy-five percent of the participants voting for the "young Elvis." Media attention had been extensive, and no doubt helped the contest devolve into an inconsequential and ironically flawed (not to mention tacky) exhibition pitting a "thin Elvis" (a representation from the 1950s where he weighed

approximately 175 pounds) against a "fat Elvis" (an image from a 1973 Hawaii satellite program in which Presley tipped the scales at about 165). Despite the fact that the visual evidence showcased a "thin" Elvis from the 1950s in competition with an even "thinner" Elvis from the 1970s, negative predispositions relating to an overweight jumpsuit-clad Presley of Las Vegas lore apparently compelled many to "see" an image that was not even there.[12]

Clearly what you see with popular culture is not necessarily always what you get. This paradox obviously provides a daunting task for historians seeking to comprehend the meaning and significance of popular culture and music. Yet it is not an impossible one. Lawrence Levine once advised that we who take the popular arts seriously must be more diligent than our colleagues who work with more traditional themes and topics, particularly in contextualizing the subjects that we study. For no matter from what direction one inspects it, popular culture generally does not yield the orderly, explicit, or irrefutable results to which historians are accustomed. Yet careful scrutiny of the popular culture process often uncovers trends or patterns that historians can place into a larger social and political context. In citing the Presley stamp snafu described above, there is a reason why people chose to regard with disdain the older Elvis image. Obviously it had nothing to do with the likeness itself. One can better understand this phenomenon by examining it through a lens that focuses on historical perceptions of the South and its white working-class natives. Such views, as historian Bill Malone has observed, have historically diagnosed a "whole range of ills" among the region's white folk, with "racism and bigotry and ignorance and degeneracy" being the most viral. And it was not as if Presley's reputation only had to contend with the burdens of a less-than-perfect southern past; throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the national and international news media beamed horrifying images of brutality emanating from a very modern Dixie. All did not seem quite progressive or enlightened in Uncle Sam's other province below the Mason-Dixon Line. Thus despite achieving tremendous fame and fortune, Presley's distinctive behavior, dialect, tastes, mores, and disposition – cultural characteristics that identified him on the surface as just another unreconstructed "southerner" -- ensured his alienation from the mainstream. Simply stated (and a more elaborate discussion will have to wait for another day), the former sharecropper's son may have undergone an economic transformation, but he seemingly never underwent the all-important cultural makeover implicit in achieving the American dream. Elvis remained a Horatio Alger in drawl.[13]

Presley's considerable cultural baggage moored him to a socially-shunned region and folk that both shackled and sustained him. He never would truly abandon either (and rarely would outsiders mentally sever him from his unfashionable origins and kin -- he forever would remain the exotic and repulsive Other). Such perceptions of Presley, of course, were pervasive in the 1950s, and ironically may have contributed to his appeal. Or perhaps the wave of rock 'n' roll's popularity that carried him and his rockabilly cousins overwhelmed or neutralized any concerns about their class and regional roots. Such origins, however, would not stay overlooked for long. They eventually would work to cast doubt on everything that he achieved. Once likened to a "jug of corn liquor at a champagne party," the hip-swiveling "Hillbilly Cat"-turned-B-movie star-turned-Las Vegas spectacle clearly never obtained the credentials necessary to attain legitimacy and rise above caricature. Within a larger national culture that adhered to a success ethic that called for each generation to move beyond and away from the one that preceded it, Presley committed the ultimate sin of never getting above his raisin'. The implication, at least according to the guardians protecting the sanctity of America's cultural standards, was apparent. As

historian Jon Wiener has noted: "To the mainstream, the culture Elvis came out of was dumb and degraded, and Elvis was a stupid hillbilly, a redneck who came from white trash." Indeed, according to Simon Frith, Presley "was not just working class but, worse, southern working class, [the object of] a class contempt which, among other things, assumed that someone like Elvis was incapable of artistry."[14]

Granting serious attention to the various responses that a pop phenomenon like Elvis Presley and the later Presley "stamp act" generated arguably affords a glimpse of the tensions and conflicts that have long dwelled below the American societal surface. William Leuchtenburg once pronounced that Elvis was nothing more than a "consumer culture hero" who "sang tunes that were instantly forgettable." With all due respect to Professor Leuchtenburg, his assessment was wrong. The study of an era's popular culture, popular music, and "consumer culture heroes," including someone like Presley, can enlighten us a great deal. In fact, such an examination often has the potential to complicate a past that many often assume is uncomplicated. Anyone familiar with the various twists and turns of blackface minstrelsy, weaving and winding its way through time in antebellum stage performances, segregation-era coon songs, Grand Ole Opry corn pone humor, Hollywood musical comedies, Amos 'n' Andy radio skits, and countless Rotary Club fundraisers across the country can testify to the ubiquity and significance of popular culture.[15]

Hortense Powdermaker wrote in 1950 that it would be difficult to underestimate the psychological and social significance of popular culture. As she asserted, popular entertainment in various forms, "touches the lives of 85,000,000 American men, women, and children" who make up its audience. "Wisely or unwisely, [it meets their] need for escape from [their] anxieties; [it] help[s] assuage [their] loneliness, [it] give[s them] vicarious experiences beyond [their] own activities, [it] portray[s] solutions to problems; [it] provide[s] models for human relationships, a set of values and new folk heroes." Certainly anyone familiar with reality television programs and shows such as *American Idol* (and my academic elitism, uh, I mean sensibility, prevents me from presenting anything other than a second or third hand perspective on such things) certainly can comprehend that Powdermaker's assessment possessed a timelessness that seems as relevant today as it did over half a century ago. And surely it is not merely coincidence that Powdermaker, some four years before Presley began his recording career, accurately seemed to be describing the same young man we heard earlier depicting himself as a dreamer who longed to be the hero of the prefabricated fantasies he had so eagerly consumed.[16]

Powdermaker's observations provide an interesting and novel vantage point from which to ascertain Presley's historical significance. But first we must set aside almost sixty years of history. For if we can forget who or what Elvis became and focus instead on what he was, we may be able to gain greater insight into the times that produced him. As a teenager, Elvis had behaved like many of the other 800 or so working-class white male students who attended L.C. Humes High School in Memphis. A voracious consumer of popular culture, he loved working on and driving cars and motorcycles, playing rough-and-tumble sports like football, going to the movies, and listening to the radio. An untrained and amateur musician who later would make choices in the recording studio as if he were a patron in a record store, Presley parlayed a fan's eclectic and undisciplined approach to music into an enormously successful entertainment career. Until his untimely demise at forty-two, Elvis firmly believed that he owed his success to a Christian God that had inexplicably plucked him out of the crowd. Consequently, despite

attaining vast wealth and fame, he remained a perpetual member of the very audience he entertained. He epitomized the aspirations, frustrations, tastes, and especially the contradictions of his generation. Arguably, the singer's greatest significance may have been in his blurring of the racial boundaries that had for so long constricted his world, making him a representational figure for those seeking to comprehend postwar regional dynamics between race, class, gender, generation, and popular culture. Like other white working-class southern youngsters who had been listening to black radio programming and attending rhythm and blues concerts, an adolescent Presley had come under the influence of African American culture. And like many, he did not see anything wrong with such an inclination. That he eventually became enormously popular performing in a manner associated with black rhythm and blues artists simply confirmed a cultural insurgency that had been quietly developing in the South for quite some time.

As important as Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll may be in informing us about racial attitudes in the post-World War II era, we must not forget that they also can tell us much about various other aspects of their time and place. For Elvis and rock 'n roll did not erupt out of a social and cultural vacuum. It emerged from the still-shifting gravel of a "bulldozer revolution" that had induced regional instability and readjustment. An isolated rural world of hierarchy, status, poverty, and deference hesitantly yielded to one of industrialization, urbanization, affluence, and possibility. In many ways, the South, by the century's midpoint, finally was set to enter the twentieth century. Although the tumultuous process as a whole engendered varying degrees of friction and discord, it was the challenges presented to the region's segregationist system that caused the most contention and controversy. Natives, especially those who were older, confronted the new realities with reluctance and trepidation.

Younger inhabitants, including those born just before and during the Second World War, Presley's generation, were not as deeply rooted in the South's rural past. They generally came of age in a modern setting that forced them to develop a different world outlook. Not as likely as their elders to long for what they had *left* behind, adolescents growing up in faster-paced urban areas were apt to scan ahead so as not to *fall* behind. Unlike that of their parents, their first brush with modernity signaled promise, not failure, the future, not the past. Though never perfect or comprehensive in their course or scope, the ensuing negotiations divulged that the attitudes of younger working-class white southerners during the postwar period were neither monolithic nor uncomplicated. They were under construction.

The building materials available to southerners reaching adolescence in the post-World War II years were distinctive. Natives were exposed to a national youth culture that would encourage and challenge them to think beyond their local surroundings. It is significant that by the middle of the 1940s, the nation's youth represented a potentially lucrative yet virtually untapped consumer market. As the 1950s came to a close, the embryonic adolescent consumer industry already had reached its promise. Consumers were spending more than $10 billion a year on merchandise aimed directly at teenagers. The mass media played a large role in nurturing and exploiting this market. The radio, recording, motion picture, and television industries all designed products and programming to meet and create the needs and desires of the nation's adolescents, a large segment of whom resided in the former Confederacy.[17]

Searching for stability and status within an unfamiliar environment, southern teenagers began exploring the exciting new cultural avenues suddenly open to them. The media—motion pictures, radio, commercial music, and later television—provided them with an invaluable resource. Such resources furnished the means both to develop individual personalities and to participate in a community that shared similar tastes, interests, and anxieties. Importantly, it was a community that knew no local or regional boundaries. Participation in this community of teenage consumers exposed them to newer realities that had to be reconciled with older conventions. Making valid, though sometimes-ambiguous statements through their choice of clothes, hairstyles, radio stations, heroes, music, and various crossings of the color line, Southern youth indeed would demonstrate that revolutions per minute did not simply refer to 33, 45, or 78 r.p.m. records.

Conventional historians often overlook the role of popular music in their interpretations of the past. They generally treat the subject, when they consider it at all, as if it existed on the periphery of everyday life, a sentimental souvenir best left in the attic among other personal yet ultimately inconsequential mementoes. Such an approach removes popular music from its social, cultural, and historical environment and places it within a vacuum where it predictably retains little meaning except as trivia.

Yet the place that music has occupied in the southern experience is far from trivial. In a region legendary for restrictions affecting race, class, and gender, music historically provided, as Bill Malone so aptly realized, "a means of release and a form of self-expression which required neither power, status, nor affluence." For a people who traditionally enjoyed few gratifications associated with material success or political prerogative, music could furnish a significant source of personal satisfaction and creative sustenance. Consequently, in order to appreciate fully how the majority of southerners worked, played, and worshipped, loved, laughed, and cried, celebrated, mourned, lived, and died, it is necessary to integrate issues relating to music into a larger historical context. In other words, any examination of southern history that seeks to be complete must acknowledge that music affected people and how they saw themselves and the world around them.[18]

The working-class southerners who reached adolescence in the post-World War II era, including Elvis Presley, adhered to a regional tradition that privileged music as a form of expression. Like their ancestors, they turned to music as a means to articulate feelings and viewpoints that linked them with others. As consumers, they turned to the tools that were available to them, no matter how limited or imperfect those tools may have been, so that they could imagine a world in which they belonged and one that belonged to them. When I was growing up during the late 1970s, I remember a popular catchphrase that seemed to be everywhere: "You are what you eat." If this is true, we should give serious consideration to those southern teenagers of the postwar era who found themselves engaged so thoroughly with a national consumer culture. Did what they consume have an impact on who they were?

As historians, we concern ourselves with documenting and interpreting responses to change. In examining the South, change often has to be measured in degrees rather than in absolutes. Anyone familiar with the region's history would concede that the South of 1960, while no doubt distinctive, was different from what it had been in 1920 or 1930 or even 1940, just as

the South of today differs from the one of fifty years ago. There were many causes for the series of transformations that took place in the creation of what became known as the Sunbelt South. One area that has not received much attention in relation to this phenomenon is popular music. In his book, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*, George Lipsitz writes of the "long fetch," a term used to describe the evolution and culmination of oceanic waves. As he explains, what we see when a wave crashes onto shore is only the end result of an extended process that began long before, somewhere undetected in the middle of the ocean. According to Lipsitz, popular music's relationship to societal change may work in the same way. Given the lengthy and storied association of music to southern history and culture, the "long fetch" should provide us with much food for thought. Indeed, we may discover that rather than a long-lost and forgotten attic occupant, the music of Johnny Mercer, Elvis Presley, and countless others provides an important key to unlocking an often unfathomable southern past.[19]

ENDNOTES

[1] The title of the chapter is a play on the title of an Elvis Presley album from 1959 entitled "50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong."

[2] For a history of the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce, as well as a listing of past recipients of the "Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Year" award, see the organization's webpage, http://www.usjaycees.org/. For the Supreme Court's decision on allowing women to be members of the organization, see Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, and Jeffrey Paul, eds., *Freedom of Speech, Part 2, vol. 21*(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 199. For coverage of the awards ceremony, including a list of the recipients who shared the award with Presley, see the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and *Memphis Press-Scimitar* from January 16-17, 1971.

[3]Presley's acceptance speech can be seen and heard in various locations. For this study, I relied on the video version included in the motion picture documentary *This is Elvis. This is Elvis, DVD,* Directed by Andrew Solt and Malcolm Leo (1981; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007).

[4] Quotation can be found in Philip Furia, *Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 174.

[5] The cow under the fence story was related by Gabe Tucker, an assistant to Parker in the 1950s. Tucker describes the ramifications in Marge Crumbaker, with Gabe Tucker, *Up and Down with Elvis Presley* (New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 1981), 88.

[6] The emphasis on Captain Marvel can be found in Elaine Dundy, *Elvis and Gladys* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1985).

[77] For truckdriver quotation, see Alan Levy, *Operation Elvis* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1960), 17.

[8] For a history of "Without a Song," see Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 2nd ed.), 305; Philip Furia, *America's Songs:The Stories Behind the Songs of Broadway, Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 80.

[9] For an interpretation on Presley and racial appropriation that views the phenomenon as part and pardcel of southern culture, see Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005, 2nd ed.). For the responses of African Americans to Elvis, see Michael T. Bertrand, "Elvis Presley and The Politics of Popular Memory" *Southern Cultures* 13 (3) (Fall 2007): 62-86.

[10] For quotation, see Caryn James, "Critic's Notebook; Romanticizing Hollywood's Dream Factory," *New York Times* 7 November 1989, C17.

[11] For "shooting craps" analogy, see Stanley Penn, "Slipping Discs," *Wall Street Journal* 31 August 1959, 1. *Billboard Magazine* provided in each issue a table entitled "Records Released this Week." It broke down the releases by record label and genre.

[12] For some background information on the United States Postal Service issuing the Elvis stamp, see Bobbie Ann Mason, *Elvis Presley: A Penguin Life* (New York: Penguin Groups, 2003), 3, 2; Gilbert Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (New York: Routledge, Incorporated, 1996), 89; Patrick A. Reebel, *United States Post Office: Current Issues and Historical*

Background (Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishing, 2002), 94. To view the two stamps that were in competition with each other, go to the U.S. Postal Museum website: http://postalmuseum.si.edu/artofthestamp/SubPage%20table%20images/artwork/rarities/Elvis%20Ballot/ballot.htm

[13] Cecelia Tichi, ed., *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky Tonk Bars* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), 300. On Levine, see Lawrence Levine, The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *American Historical Review* 97 (1992): 1369-1399.

[14] For "jug" aspersion, see "Hillbilly on a Pedestal," Newsweek 14 May 1956, 82. For Wiener and Frith perspectives, Jon Wiener, *Come Together: John Lennon and his Time* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, 2nd ed.), 299 and Simon Frith, "The Academic Elvis," in Richard H. King and Helen Taylor, eds., *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 100. Also see Gael Sweeney, "The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess," in Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 249-266. Linda Ray Pratt, "Elvis, or the Ironies of a Southern Identity," *Southern Quarterly* 18 (1979), 44.

[15] William Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1983, 3rd ed.), 65-66.

[16]Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, The Dream Factory* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), 11-14.

[17] For a look at the origins of the youth consumer industry, see James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Also see Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

[18] Bill Malone, *Southern Music/American Music: New Perspectives on the South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 3.

[19] George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), vii-xxv.