

# The Dave Godin Column

## Presley's perspectives

THE RECENT death of Elvis Presley is a sad event, just as the death of anyone is, but if we mourn the person (and let's face it, in his own way, Presley was as enigmatic a figure as Howard Hughes or Greta Garbo; the types about whom the whole truth seldom emerges until several years after their deaths), that should not blind us to a logical summation of Presley the Phenomena.

I have been quite amazed to see how a combination of shock and, apparently, grief, has quite thrown the objectivity of many writers who generally deal with the music of black America. As I see it, we are in serious danger of adding more to the Presley Myth, (myths never really get underway until their subject is dead and thus unable to correct or alter the fanciful embroidery of latter day disciples), and in particular, the implied suggestion that but for Presley there would have been no **Fats Domino**, no **Little Richard**, no **Chuck Berry** etc. etc. etc.

Presley in myth is being hailed as the Great White Hope who, in fact, by taking onto his shoulders part of the mantle of black music, became the advance guard whose "whiteness" forded the drawbridge and thus opened up the route for ethnic minorities to get across too. All very simplistic to my mind, and sadly, rather typical of the way the true (often complex) facts of history are honed down to story-book level.

Now before I proceed any further, I should stress that I am NOT anti-Presley. "Heartbreak Hotel" was certainly a unique creation at the time it came

(although many now forget that it did owe more to **Johnnie Ray** than Memphis's black community), but let's also remember that nobody who is under the age of 30 could really have been aware of it when it was a new release.

His version of "Blue Moon" is certainly a single I would never want to part with, but commenting on the public persona should not be taken as a personal attack on the guy himself. Like Jean Harlow and Marilyn Monroe before him, he was obviously a person as much damned by his fame and fortune as blessed by it.

In the mid-50s when Presley rose to fame, the social pot of America was already beginning to boil a bit. Change was in the air, and a degree of inevitability was conceded even in the most reactionary circles. Not that the price that was going to have to be paid wouldn't be grim in real terms. Presley could hardly have been unaware of any of this.

Deemed to be "white trash" by respectable Memphis society, he consciously and deliberately chose to cross the colour line. In those days no white kid just "happened" into Memphis's black quarter — to BE there was a conscious act.

Much of his early background was in fact related to me by the wife of a well known black performer who was living in Memphis at the time, and who actually knew about Presley before he was famous.

His presence in black juke-joints and cafes was so unusual an occurrence that it couldn't escape comment. And too, his interest in black music which, in those times, was unusual. But the climate of the

50s in Memphis was very different from that of today.

To even carry a membership card of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was, in the 50s, in the words of this lady who not only had one, but was also area organiser, "a potential death warrant". Presley knew this because NAACP activity was generally talked about in the sort of places he frequented, and he must to some degree or other have championed the reasonableness of the black "cause" in the South for his hanging-around to have been blessed by it.

My informant actually went much further and told me that Presley positively identified, and how in her opinion it was his association with **Colonel Tom Parker** that persuaded him to play down this aspect of his thinking.

Maybe now we shall never know the truth, but the facts are all that historians are left to deal with, and it is patently ridiculous in my view to give Presley the credit for any of the advances that the music of black America made from the 50s onwards.

Nor indeed was he the first white singer to use black characteristics; **Johnnie Ray** had gone to **LaVerne Baker** for singing lessons before him.

In my view, black music happened DESPITE the handicaps that people like Presley (and latter day parasites, like **the Rolling Stones** etc etc) imposed upon it, and in retrospect I have to express my own view that far from helping the music of black America gain universal acceptance and under-

standing, people like Presley were in fact responsible for ensuring that when it DID break through it was in a slightly diluted and toned-down form.

The drudest, most basic and virile Rhythm & Blues (the type Presley would have heard in the juke-joints of his youth) never did make the big time, and as present day musical phenomena prove, there is one heck of a gap between healthy crudity and mere degeneracy!

Presley was never degenerate, but neither then was he ever really crude enough for my taste either.

His debt to black music may well have been an enormous one (but then, how many recording artists today do not similarly have such a debt?), but even though the account was never settled, I don't think black music must in any way feel that without Presley things would have gone any differently to the way they did.

To put any other perspective on it not only demeans black music, but also diminishes Presley's own unique contribution to the international music scene.

## Run-out groove

THE EVER growing impact of Jazz on public consciousness is reflected by the announcement that a new Jazz club is opening in London. Named "McKinley's", it's set to commence business on Friday September 16th, and is situated at 210a Haverstock Hill, Hampstead, NW3. Open from 9 pm to 3 am, they hope to feature many top flight Jazz performers in addition to their resident trio, and I certainly wish them all possible success in their venture. For further information ring 01-451 1161.

● It was recently written that "Rumour has it that **Dave Godin** is compiling a list of shops that deal in bootlegs". Like most rumours, it is not true, and if it were it would probably save time and trouble to compile a list of Soul shops that DON'T deal in bootlegs!

● Seeing a fleeting glimpse of the guy on TV the other night it suddenly dawned on me that modern disco music probably owes more to **James Last** than to Soul music proper!

● Intriguing mystery on **Bob Marley's** "Birth of A Legend" LP in that the track "I Made A Mistake" is given a composer credit to **Bob Marley**. Some of you may remember that a same titled song was recorded both by **the Impressions** and **the Five Steps** with a composer credit to **Curtis Mayfield**. And, it's the same song...so will the real composer please stand up?

● **Until next time then. Keep the faith — right on now!**



Presley: not the first to use Black characteristics. LaVerne Baker (right) helped Johnnie Ray