

The Research Paper



Sample Essay MLA Format

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Updated by the Communications Area of the
TCC Learning Commons
(September, 2012)

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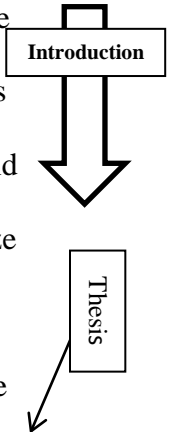
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ENC 1101

19 May 2010

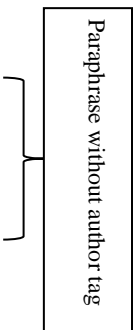
Elvis's Impact on Popular Culture

The foundations of today's popular music were built by an unlikely source: a poor white boy from Tupelo, Mississippi. Elvis Presley's country roots would become a major factor in his success as the King of Rock and Roll. While it is true that Elvis was not the inventor of rock and roll music, he was the first man to introduce postwar youth to the genre that would revolutionize American culture. The role Elvis Presley played in the evolution of popular music is unprecedented. His style has been impersonated, and his music is still revered by young people all over the world. Elvis's impact can be understood through the music he performed, his status as a pop icon, and the lingering presence of his legacy in today's society.



The cultural importance of rock and roll has been long-lasting. From the early 1950s until now, rock has been the vehicle of expression for many around the world. It has been the voice of rebellion, political justice, and sexual revolution. Generation after generation, rock music evolves, yet keeps its values intact. To many, rock music is an essential element of culture. Elvis was the embodiment of rock and roll and, therefore, a significant part of 20th century culture.

When Elvis first appeared in the consciousness of America, rock and roll was still a new kind of music. A few successful ventures, such as Bill Haley and His Comets' "Rock Around The Clock," hailed as one of the first songs of the genre, preceded Elvis's rockabilly emergence in the mid-1950s (Unterberger). However, it was not until Elvis that society, and teens in



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particular, started being swept up by the musical craze. People began looking to Elvis as the driving force behind popular music. Everything from his hairstyle to his stage presence represented the genre. In 1956, Elvis's self-titled debut album was released; the cover would both define the accepted rock and roll persona and determine the important positioning of the genre's lead instrument, the guitar (Rodman 28). The image of Elvis as the epitome of rock and roll emerged in the 1950s as his good looks and dynamic stage performances brought him national fame. With his music, Elvis was able to establish himself as the King of Rock and Roll.

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Throughout his career, Elvis had 114 songs on the Billboard Top 40 and 18 number one pop hits (Scrivani-Tidd). Modern rockers can trace their roots to the music and style of Elvis Presley; legendary rock musicians, such as The Beatles, Keith Richards, Jimmy Page, and Jimi Hendrix, have all cited Elvis as a major influence in their musical careers. Elvis was one of the pioneers of the most popular musical genres of the 20th century. This music would change the environment of the Southern United States forever.

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During the decades that followed World War II, Americans faced drastic social transformations. One of these was the integration of the South. It was no coincidence that these monumental changes occurred during the decade that Elvis popularized rock music. America was ready for change, and Elvis capitalized on this desire. Growing up in the South, Elvis came from a family that accepted segregation but, at the same time, felt comfortable with African American music and style (Daniel 134). Such contradictions were an integral part of a fading Southern culture. In time, these contradictions would blur the social and racial boundaries that would be broken down with integration, eroding the definitions of whiteness and blackness that were important in retaining the falsehood of segregation. English professor and Elvis essayist Linda Ray Pratt claims that Elvis and his music played an important role in exposing those

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definitions as inaccurate by crossing such cultural boundaries (98). Civil Rights advocates would cross similar lines in fighting for equal rights.

Elvis's unique blend of influences, including rhythm and blues, country, and gospel, helped establish the sound of rock and roll. Elvis's rock predecessors were mostly influenced by rhythm and blues and jazz. Elvis, however, had the unique ability and opportunity to merge a wider range of influences to create a new sound with the guitar serving as the primary instrument. This blend originated in his childhood and was the result of the mixing of both black and white cultures. Elvis grew up in Memphis listening to black artists such as Sister Rosetta Thorpe and Arthur Crudup. He was fascinated by black music and fashion and often bought his clothes at black boutiques (Pratt 98). Elvis's musical identity was greatly impacted by the influence of African American music and culture; however, he was equally influenced by his white gospel and country roots. He brought, on some level, black music and white music together.

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While many celebrate this musical fusion, not everyone feels this blending had a positive impact on black artists; however, *U.S. News & World Report* writer Dan McGraw claims,

“Though some would argue that he stole black music and sold it to a white audience, what Elvis did was daring and dangerous, and American music has never been quite the same.”

Furthermore, others argue that without Elvis introducing white America to the music of black America, black musicians in the 1950s would not have been able to be as successful as they were. Rock and roll royalty, Little Richard, has commented that “Elvis was an integrator. Elvis was a blessing. They wouldn't let black music through. He opened that door for black music” (qtd. in “What Did They Say”). According to many, Elvis created a path toward economic success for those artists that were denied access to the ever-growing white market.

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The new market to be broken into consisted of white teens who were having an increased influence on the economics of the day. They were no longer being thought of as children, but as important consumers of goods. Teens bought products such as records and tickets to movies and concerts. Entertainers made teens their marketing target. This was the beginning of the teen idol craze that is still so predominant in today's youth culture. Elvis had the looks, the sound, and the desire to become what few others had. It was because of these attributes that he was able to become so popular. Although others had established themselves as popular entertainers, none were as successful as Elvis in becoming larger than life. Elvis was not only the driving force behind the world's most popular music, but also a movie star.

Elvis often referred to his movies as “worthless,” but they were his way of being visually accessible to his teen fans. They could see what he was wearing and how his hair was styled, but, more importantly, the movies served as physical evidence of his superstar status. As corny as they might have been, they were also extremely profitable (Brode 5). During a time when being seen was becoming as important as being heard, Elvis blazed the trail for such musicians-turned-actors as Barbara Streisand, Cher, Will Smith, Jennifer Lopez, and Justin Timberlake.

During the mid to late 1950s, Elvis and his clever managing machine, Colonel Parker, produced a slew of rock and roll classics; they also took advantage of the teen market by selling products such as Elvis lipsticks, soft drinks, blouses, pants, and socks. Elvis turned into a product to be sold; Colonel Parker made sure he capitalized on this fact. After his return from the army, Elvis was not to appear on any television program until his *Comeback Special* in 1968. Parker wanted Elvis fans to pay to see him. Journalist and film historian, Douglas Brode suggests:



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If you wanted to see Elvis, you had to *pay*-which meant attending live concerts for those few able to do so. For the millions of other fans, this meant buying a ticket to the movies. An impressive number of people were willing to do just that (the quality, or lack thereof, of any one film temporarily set aside) owing to their implicit understanding that a full appreciation of Elvis demanded he be viewed as well as heard. (5)

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This was the beginning of Elvis’s lucrative film career. He used his popularity to change the role of superstar, much as he did to change popular music.

Even thirty-three years after his death, it seems as though Elvis is still an ever-present member of American society. His influence is apparent even by today’s economic standards.

Elvis Presley continues to make \$55 million a year posthumously (Katz 73). Contemporary stars like Kobe Bryant, Brad Pitt, and Stephen King are making less money per year than the Elvis Presley estate; it is also more than twice as much as Lil Wayne made in 2009 (“The Celebrity 100”; Katz 73). Likewise, in 2002, one fan paid \$115,000 for a jar of Elvis’s hair

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(“What They Got it For”). In addition, each year over 600,000 people visit Elvis’s national landmark mansion, Graceland (Bain). At Graceland, fans can visit the Elvis Lives exhibit,

which allows them to “experience how Elvis has influenced pop culture as we know it today through videos, photos, and special displays” (*Graceland*). Equally, in 2006, *The Atlantic*

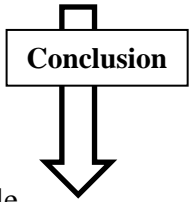
dubbed Elvis one of the most influential figures in American history and secured his spot among presidents such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and inventors such as

Thomas Edison. Elvis’s impact on American culture is more than obvious when one considers the icon’s staying power.

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Elvis Presley has shaped American popular culture through the revolutionary music he made and his status as one of the first mega superstars. His lasting legacy is testament to these facts; however, the tale of Elvis should be a cautionary one. Society's ideas of indulging in superficial extravagance can be harmful, and one can be loved and hated all at once. From his enormous fame came crushing responsibility and constant excess. Country music legend Merle Haggard claims, "[W]e loved Elvis to death" ("Johnny Cash"). Perhaps this is so, but Elvis does not need to be alive to be loved; his iconic status continues to keep him in the spotlight.



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