

Elvis Presley died twenty years ago The King is dead but the malady lingers on

By Jim Denham

ON Saturday 16 August you could, if you wished, have spent an entire night watching TV programmes devoted to Elvis Presley. For this was the 20th anniversary of the death of the King.

There are, of course, plenty of people who refuse to believe that their hero really perished, bloated and doped, on the john twenty years ago. Sightings of the King are more common (if somewhat less believable) than those of Lord Lucan, the Loch Ness monster and all the UFO's combined. There are folk who believe he was abducted by aliens, while others apparently believe he was (is?) the new Jesus — or that Jesus was but John the Baptist to Elvis's Christ. Then there are the people who claim to be Elvis...

There are also those who like to camp it up in silly clothes and perpetuate an interminable, straight-faced joke. But in this post-modern age, when cultural icons can assume a multiplicity of meanings, how are we to distinguish the true believers from the ironists? And does it matter anyway? This problem beset the TV coverage, which veered between the reverential and the tongue in cheek.

When the definitive history of truly preposterous 20th century cults is written, Elvis will surely top the list. When the roster of great popular singers of the century is finally drawn up, he most assuredly won't. Armstrong, Crosby Fitzgerald, Sinatra and dozens of other "pop" singers brought a dignity and artistry to material that often really didn't deserve it. Presley did the opposite: he took a rich musical tradition (R&B) and turned it into garbage. As a direct result, the entire globe is now saturated by phoney, over-hyped commercial pop whose intellectual and emotional depth is an insult even to the American adolescent market that originally spawned it. The additional twist is that this stuff has also virtually wiped out the black blues/R&B tradition that Presley started out emulating.

At the hands of Presley (or, more to the point, his lowlife manager, the repugnant "Colonel" Tom Parker) R&B degenerated into "Rock 'n' Roll", a form and a term now so debased as to be virtually meaningless. It is no coincidence

that the two most vacuous politicians on this earth — Bill Clinton and Tony Blair — both proclaim their "rock 'n' roll" credentials at every opportunity.

It would be unfair to blame Presley alone for what happened. He started out as a good R&B singer with the essential quality of being white. The "Colonel" and all the other sharks, gangsters and con-men who even in the 1950s controlled the music industry were looking for just that: a white boy who sang like a black. Big Joe Turner, Louis Jordan, Amos Milburn and a hundred others were making better music than Elvis, but they were the wrong colour. Bill Haley was white but he looked too

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much like your favourite uncle. Young Elvis looked a little like Marlon Brando and exuded just enough danger and sex appeal to hit the spot in the new teenage market that the "Colonel" and the other money-men had identified.

Before completely sold out, joined the army and turned into a grinning all-American parody, Elvis made some decent records (*Heartbreak Hotel*, for instance) and even one film (*King Cre-*



ole) that can pass muster (though, unlike Sinatra, he couldn't act to save his life).

But it wasn't Presley's innate, though limited talent that the "Colonel" and the industry was interested in. It was the supposedly "sexy" gimmickry, the pouting and hip-swivelling, that became the trashy hall-mark of rock 'n' roll and remains a blight on pop music to this day.

The strange thing about all the contemporary Elvis clones (both serious and ironic) is that they almost invariably go for the gross, un-sexy, trailer-trash Las Vegas image rather than the young R&B Elvis. On second thoughts, maybe it isn't so strange: the trashy gimmicks are what can be cloned, which is why the industry concentrated on that side of the image.

I sometimes indulge in idle speculation that the world would be like if Louis Jordan or Big Joe Turner had hit the bit time in the 1950s instead of Elvis. It could never have happened, of course. The world would have had to have been a better place already for it to have happened.