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# The high priest of rock and roll

The reception of Elvis Presley in Denmark, 1956-1960

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## **Abstract**

Through early Danish receptions of Presley we may draw the contours of what he and rock and roll music signified to mainstream public opinion at a transnational level: a unique discursive condensation of challenges to deep-seated class, race, gender and class lines in dominant conceptions of civilization, along with transgressions of the boundaries between proper speech and mere noise, reason and affect, music as a pure listening experience and music as a bodily experience. Yet, within a few years he was effectively integrated into readjusted conceptions of mainstream popular culture.

## **Keywords**

Elvis Presley; Rock and roll; Celebrity; Popular culture; Youth culture.

# The High Priest of Rock and Roll

The Reception of Elvis Presley in Denmark, 1956-1960

On May 13, 1955, a young Elvis Presley performed at the new baseball stadium in Jacksonville Florida as part of the Hank Snow All Star Jamboree.<sup>1</sup> After the show, dozens of teenage girls entered his makeshift dressing room, touching him and tearing off most of his clothes to carry home as souvenirs. Mae Boren Axton, who was there as part of the management crew, later recalled discovering the singer “on top of one of the showers looking sheepish and scared, like ‘What’d I do?’ and his shirt was shredded and his coat was torn to pieces (...), he was up there with nothing but his pants on and they were trying to pull at *them* up on the shower” (qtd. in Guralnick 190).

As riots go, this was a miniature. Nobody was really harmed, the room was peacefully cleared by the arriving police officers in a few moments, and the incident was little noticed by the press in the following days, since Elvis’s fame was still limited to a few southern US states. But when such incidents became regular at later Presley performances, the Jacksonville incident of May 1955 began to seem foundational to the legends of rock and roll and Elvis Presley in particular: the first occurrence that revealed the basic choreography of a true Presley fan riot.

This narrative of the May 1955 Jacksonville incident as a foundational event became obvious about a year later, in August 1956, when Elvis was performing in Jacksonville once again, greeted by a judge threatening to arrest him if he did not immediately modify his body movements on stage. Elvis obliged, standing still during his evening performance of August 10, while occasionally wiggling his little finger to emphasize the high points of rock-and-roll-energy. The response was wilder than ever (Guralnick 321-22). Another piece of the Elvis legend was born immediately. A feature article on Elvis Presley in *Life Magazine* a fortnight later combined both Jacksonville events (“Elvis – A Different”).

Along with his string of hit records and TV performances during the same year, such sensational, illustrated stories published in mass-circulated magazines secured his swift rise to fame throughout the United States. But there were repercussions abroad, too. In late September 1956, a local newspaper in the faraway Danish small town of Nykøbing Falster introduced its readers to the most recent – and most shocking – American teen idol. The centerpiece of the article was a highly inflated account of the events in Jacksonville sixteen months before:

“We are ashamed to report more about Presley, but some things should be brought to light as an example. When he appeared in Jacksonville, a small city in Florida,

practically all of his female listeners took off their clothes in hysterical fits, attempted to storm the stage to get a scrap of his clothing or a lock of his hair, and caused so much commotion that the authorities had to intervene. Afterwards, the young people gathered in the Methodist church to pray for his soul.” (“Amerikansk”)

With its bizarre, cultish scene of lustful, naked teenage girls’ yearning for their male idol, this newspaper article provides an example of how early fearful narratives of Elvis were transferred and rewritten, sometimes even amplified, beyond the US. While retaining a basic conception of the cultural and social meanings of Elvis Presley – obscenity, female physical desire, a basic challenge to preordained roles of men and women, musicians and their audiences, etc. – the anonymous Danish journalist also altered these meanings to fit dominant European perspectives.

This fanciful contemporary retelling of an important piece of the Elvis narrative of 1956, containing all the ingredients of what is often sociologically labelled a ‘moral panic’,<sup>ii</sup> may also indicate a gap in our current understanding of Elvis Presley as a part of the cultural history of the twentieth century. There are numerous valuable interpretations of Elvis as a part of the cultural history of the USA, particularly in the context of the race relations of the South (Jeansonne, Lührssen, and Sokolovic; Bertrand; Aquila; Williamson; Doll; Cantor). But Elvis’s influence was not limited to the USA; from an early point in his career, he was also an international cultural phenomenon. Studies of different Elvis receptions from non-US vantage points may yield important insights into the relations between popular culture, modern conceptions of celebrity, as well as several categories and distinctions that underpin modern social orders, such as age, race, gender, class and geopolitical elements. However, there are few such studies on the international historical significance of Elvis Presley as a cultural symbol of the late 1950s, and the studies that do exist tend to prioritize the particular in each case (esp. Toivonen and Laiho; Poiger).

This article adopts a Danish perspective, not in order to emphasize the particularity of the early Danish Elvis reception, but rather to establish a vantage point from which to study general themes within non-US Western receptions and uses of Elvis Presley as a cultural phenomenon during the late 1950s. The following pages will emphasize 1) how Elvis Presley came to personify rock and roll as a general concept and cultural form associated with a new youth generation; 2) how the distinctive features of rock and roll added to the general concept and its associated discourses and conceptions; and 3) how Elvis Presley achieved this cultural position not primarily through his music or the direct effects of his TV appearances or motion pictures, which were mainly known from hearsay in Denmark during the late 1950s, but rather through internationally circulating stories and discourses that revealed his significance in challenging several deep-seated social categories and distinctions, including race and gender.

## Mediated Reception

It is perhaps wise to begin with a preliminary consideration of the context: Why study Denmark? Not because the Danish Elvis Presley reception differed essentially from that of other countries, but to a certain extent because it did not. Being on the receiving end in a long chain of cultural import from US youth culture, the Danish case presents us with a useful vantage point of international cultural and discursive transfer, but also with an example of a relatively specific type of mediated reception and use, allowing us to highlight some of the complexities and quirks of such cultural transfer. While the larger, more powerful European countries developed their own modes of directly receiving and appropriating the Elvis phenomenon, balancing reactions of openness and rejection in each their own way (see Poiger 168-205; Stabursvik and Engvold; Klang; Lundberg), Denmark was among a range of Western European countries in which the early Elvis reception was less direct, often belated and mediated through receptions in other countries. To some extent, this was due to the effects of the small-state nature of twentieth-century Denmark as well as its position as semi-impooverished country for the first dozen years after the German occupation during World War II (Pedersen 416-455).

This marked a clear contrast with two significant neighboring countries: Though ravaged by the war, of course, West Germany reestablished its economy through close relations with the US, and young West Germans had access to US popular culture via the US soldiers stationed in parts of the country, even if they had to overcome antipathies to American culture as the culture of the new occupiers. Sweden had managed to keep out of the war and thus was more affluent and had stronger commercial and cultural ties to the US, and in fact, Sweden was among the first European countries to develop an effective demand for Elvis products, importing German-manufactured Elvis records in 1956, even before such records were marketed in Germany (Stabursvik and Engvold 114-121).

While West Germans and Swedes gained access to Elvis's movies and records during 1956 and 1957, and while small groups of dedicated followers in the Copenhagen area obtained Elvis records in the nearby Swedish town of Malmö (see, e.g., Abrahamsen 13), the Danes at large were unable to buy Elvis records and watch Elvis movies before late 1958. To some extent, the reasons for this were accidental: While his record company RCA Victor had licensees in other Western European countries, relations between the American company and its Danish distributor cooled off to the point where RCA records had practically no distribution in Denmark during 1956 and 1957. At the same time, there was a conflict between Danish movie theaters and the American Motion Picture Export Association concerning prices and conditions of film distribution, so American films could not reach Danish moviegoers for a long time. Both of these circumstances had deeper roots in restrictions on international trade due to the lack of foreign currency in Denmark, which combined with dominant cultural preferences to limit the dissemination of American rock and roll culture (Dinnesen and Kau 210ff; Stabursvik and Engvold 294-301; Pedersen 421-28). Also, apart

from a few notable exceptions during the fall of 1956 (esp. *Rullekongen*), the public radio of Denmark did not play rock and roll music, especially not Elvis Presley records (Iarm.fm, search “Elvis Presley”). Again, in some areas it was possible to hear rock and roll on foreign radio stations, but it was certainly not prevalent on airwaves anywhere in the country.

Thus, the primary exposure to Elvis for the Danes during the first two years, from the fall of 1956 until the fall of 1958, occurred through newspapers and magazines. Among these publications, only one weekly magazine, *Tempo*, was aimed exclusively at young people, primarily young women. For most of the fifties, *Tempo* remained a decidedly conservative publication, generally remaining silent about controversial topics, including Elvis Presley. It was only with the arrival in 1958 of a competing youth magazine (*Filmjournalen*, later *Vi Unge*) with a markedly more US-influenced style and a more receptive attitude to new trends in teenage fan culture that the former journal revised its own attitude, since it too wished to embrace certain aspects of the new teenage culture first deemed too rebellious. However, in short, for most of the fifties, young people were generally taught to assimilate into a cultural world defined by the parent generation.

The lack of direct access to Elvis products only reinforced the first, very negative impressions of Elvis given in the Danish public sphere. This situation gradually changed during the sixties. The Danish Elvis reception was gradually synchronized with that of other Western countries, shedding some of its original relative peculiarities. Still, the element of delay in early Danish Elvis reception and the early narratives of him as a rebel or a menace to civilization all continued to haunt his image in peculiar ways through most of his process of normalization during the 1960s.

### **Rock and Roll: Music, Dance, Concept**

The discourse on Elvis was to a large extent an emblematic part of the general discourse on rock and roll, so, in order to examine Elvis reception, it is first necessary to critically reflect on how to approach the phenomenon of rock and roll historically. Rock and roll is a style of music that has become widely associated with a distinct youth culture often regarded as an early type of youth rebellion. Thus, it would seem intuitive that studies of rock and roll history should take the music (the tunes, rhythms, records, musicians, audiences, concert venues, etc.) as a starting point and then proceed to highlight the ensuing conflicts between young rock and roll fans representing the new and the social establishment representing the old. This approach, which resonates well with the imaginaries and discourses in much rock and roll music and among its supporters, has shaped studies of early Danish rock-and-roll history since the 1970s (esp. Jacobsen, Mose and Nielsen; also Jensen *Dansk* 61-66).

On the other hand, several recent studies of early Danish rock and roll have emphasized how the music as well as its reception were also rooted in older traditions and

were not greeted with unanimous rejection from the establishment. Such contributions have also stressed how early Danish debates on rock and roll tended to regard the phenomenon primarily as a new dance trend signifying youth in more or less the same manner as the well-known (and stylistically similar) jitterbug had done during the 1940s. Thus, these studies challenge rock and roll mythology by de-emphasizing the elements of innovation, conflict, and youth rebellion and instead discovering elements of a more liberal-minded public discourse on rock and roll that paved the way for its gradual acceptance as a legitimate expression of a distinctive youth culture (Bjerrum; Rosenørn; Michelsen).

However, neither of these main trends in Danish rock and roll historiography explains how or when rock and roll came to be regarded as controversial in the first place. Perhaps we should begin our search for an answer to this question not in the music or dance as such, nor in the later imaginaries of rock and roll culture, but at the level of concepts as they first appeared and evolved in specific historical contexts: Even before anyone in Denmark associated rock and roll with specific dance movements or musical characteristics, rock and roll was imported as a foreign concept and an associated set of discursive and narrative elements circulated by international press agencies and American publications with international readerships. In these early newspaper stories, often published anonymously as opaque amalgams of borrowed elements and the syntheses and reflections of Danish journalists, rock and roll was associated vaguely, but fearsomely, with youth, madness and violence, often also with rebellion, blackness, combinations of savagery and hypermodernity as well as a sense of American-ness.

Thus, in the spring of 1956, three months prior to the first descriptions of rock-and-roll dance steps and almost six months before this dance was actually presented to Danish audiences, a politically conservative Danish newspaper told readers about rock and roll, “a new madness capturing American youth, causing concerns to parents as well as authorities.” With its “hypnotic” repetition of simple blues-inspired phrases, rock and roll music made the young people go berserk, the paper reported, citing a recent example of a rock and roll concert in New York followed by a riot in which a subway train had been vandalized, bystanders frightened, several young rock and rollers arrested by the police, and a few of them even admitted to hospital (“Rock- and Roll-Vanvidet”).

The alleged hypnotic and violent effects of rock and roll were thus at least partly explained here by its musical features. However, tellingly, no-one had noted such effects in the music before the arrival of the concepts and narratives of rock and roll. Though Elvis Presley’s records were largely unavailable in the first two years of rock and roll in Denmark, other examples of the sounds that soon came to define rock and roll had been played for quite some time without anyone sensing danger.

We may see this in the early Danish reception of Bill Haley and His Comets, now considered pioneering rock and roll music, but at first readily accepted into preexisting categories, especially that of jazz music. Haley’s first international hit, “Crazy Man, Crazy” (its

faulty punctuation unchangeable as soon as it was a success), was played regularly on public Danish radio during 1954 and 1955 (*larm.fm*). Even the tune “Rock Around the Clock,” which became emblematic to rock-and-roll culture during 1956 (see Dawson), was initially greeted as jazz music or as a “a mixture of jazz, cowboy and *Schlager* music,” characterized by “joy of life and high spirits” (“Kometerne”). In one review from 1955, “Rock Around the Clock” was briefly characterized as “a very fascinating record – a bit hard, perhaps, but absolutely worth noticing” (Bærentzen). At that point, nobody noted anything radically innovative, let alone menacing, or even particularly remarkable, in the festive music of Bill Haley and His Comets.

That changed with the debate on rock and roll during the summer and fall of 1956. Then, the same record was revalorized as *the* emblematic rock-and-roll song (to a large degree by virtue of it being the only widely available and well-known American rock-and-roll song in the Danish public sphere). All of a sudden, Haley’s band was described as “the ‘worst’ Rock band” – meaning: the most harmful among all terrible proponents of rock and roll music (“Heksedans”). And one weekly magazine reported from a jazz club in Copenhagen, where young people vehemently rejected rock and roll music, claiming that it was suitable only for jukeboxes in low-life nightclubs. In an accompanying picture, readers could see a 78 rpm record (by implication, “Rock Around the Clock”) being trampled to pieces by the young jazz enthusiasts (“Ud”).

As the above-mentioned recent studies in Danish rock-and-roll history have emphasized, some media expressed other, more open-minded attitudes, questioning the exaggerated tales of the effects of rock and roll as such on youth, often also belittling the newness of rock and roll and stressing the similarities between rock-and-roll dance and well-known, accepted dances such as the jitterbug (e.g., “De fleste”; “Rok”; “One”). On the initiative of a liberal-minded dance teacher Børge Kisbye, the new rock-and-roll dances were presented in front of big, curious audiences around the country in September 1956 (Jacobsen, Mose, and Nielsen 105-113; Bjerrum 82-87). Even a few early attempts at rock-and-roll music in Danish appeared in late 1956, including a translated version of “Heartbreak Hotel” with a Danish text satirically mocking the “Pharisees” who were frightened by rock and roll (*Dansk*; cf. Michelsen 72-73).

But mocking the enemies of rock and roll was not the same as befriending or welcoming rock and roll. The Danish version of “Heartbreak Hotel” just mentioned is telling in this regard: Recorded by well-established actor Preben Uglebjerg to a conventional big band accompaniment, this attempt to emulate American rock and roll and to cash in on the hype clearly deprived the music of the attack and verve marking the original. Thus, in effect, this and other early examples of early Danish rock and roll were attempts to sanitize the new music by reducing it to a new sub-genre of light novelty jazz.

Such tolerance towards rock and roll was clearly on the defensive, too. Not a single Danish voice went so far as to actually praise rock and roll in public during the first couple of years. In fact, even the boldest attempts to embrace the new style seem rather guarded. One

member of the audience at Kisbye's first dance event in Copenhagen later remembered how the organizers only dared to play the first part of Bill Haley's record "Rock Around the Clock" to the audience, before a suitably well-established local big band took over, playing much more conventional versions of rock and roll, but also featuring a hitherto unknown amateur singer Ib Jensen, whose scat-like singing style and lively stage movements suggested rock and roll wildness (Nielsen 7). This caused instant media sensation, the press promptly dubbing the singer Ib "Rock" Jensen and "the Danish Elvis Presley" – though Jensen and most of the journalists had most likely never heard the real Elvis Presley and had certainly not seen him perform ("One").

If the anecdote about the interrupted presentation of the Haley recording is correct, it might indicate that even the organizers of this event shared some of the general fear of rock and roll. Also, like other early Danish replications of rock and roll, Ib Jensen's performances were all in good fun and, even more importantly, firmly under adult control. Jensen presented what was imagined as rock and roll antics as amusement to the grown-up audiences and perhaps also a sort of safety valve for the generational longings of Danish teenagers, though the voices of young rock-and-roll fans were yet unheard in public media – and thus, regrettably, also largely unavailable to present-day historians of this early phase of rock-and-roll reception.

So, despite the more relaxed and relatively open-minded attitude adopted by significant parts of Danish media, the agenda was set by the demonizing discourse of rock and roll as a menace to civilization and morality. This fact is particularly obvious when we shift our views from Danish novelty rock and roll to the contemporary reception of Elvis Presley.

### **The High Priest**

Bill Haley became the international pioneer of rock and roll music. But the somewhat square-jawed veteran musician, already in his thirties, with a receding hairline and one blind eye, was a rather unlikely teen idol, and his position declined with the arrival of younger rivals. By comparison, the 21 year-old Elvis Presley personified the concept of rock and roll. Echoing American designations of him as the king of rock and roll, Danish journalists dubbed him "the 'high priest' of rock-madness," or "the king of roll," ("Rock'n'roll feberen"; *Rullekongen*).

Not only did his version of rock and roll music transcend Haley's light western swing idiom in favor of much more varied, often significantly harder, musical expressions. He also had the looks and manners associated with the new cultural phenomenon as a totality. This was obvious to his American fans as well as European commentators. Danish journalists emphasized his "sulky face", framed by "sideburns and long hair ending in a 'ducktail'", and how he wriggled his hips during performances, allegedly wearing "his shirt open down to the belt" ("Patetisk"; "Afgud"; "Rock- and Roll-Dillen"). When his first movie *Love Me Tender*

finally premiered in Denmark in the early fall of 1958, almost two years after its US premiere and about 18 months after its first showings in countries such as West Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Ireland (“Love”), one reviewer found all his suspicions verified and thus summarized his impressions of Elvis: “From the long sideburns, the surly pout, which is often open, and the girl’s blouse with baggy sleeves above his fatty hands to the legs shaking like jelly below him in obscene movements, he is exactly as unappealing as the vulgar voice suggests” (“Daarligt”).

Such invectives were signs of a relatively peculiar discourse on Elvis, rock and roll and the phenomena associated with them. Other celebrities of popular culture were occasionally described derisively, but none of them became the targets of quite such vehemently derogatory discourse. Reporting news that Elvis Presley had broken a finger, one newspaper sighed with relief: “Finally!” Now, the star would be unable to play guitar. The next day, the satirical column of the same newspaper repeated the news with an additional remark: “When will that man break his neck?” (“Endelig”; “At”).

Equally significant was the fact that newspaper and magazine illustrations of Elvis typically showed him in stage movements implying savagery and obscenity: his pomade hair in disarray, his face grimacing, his arms and legs spread out, and his whole body often positioned diagonally in the picture frame – a position otherwise reserved for juvenile delinquents, signaling chaos and disruption (cf. Rosenørn 326-328; Rasmussen 148-150). Briefer notices calling for a small, up-close picture often repeated a photograph of Elvis making a kissing gesture towards the camera, suggesting naughtiness and vulgarity even in the absence of a visible body. Even when using more subdued illustrations, captions often revealed the assumption that readers would find this new idol repulsive-looking (see, e.g., “Teen-age”).

Elvis was first presented to the Danish public in early July 1956, in a feature article on rock and roll in general, Elvis in particular, following the uproar in the US after his performance of “Hound Dog” on the Milton Berle Show one month before. At the center of the rock and roll craze, wrote the US correspondent of the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, was a former “village boy” named Elvis Presley who was credited with having “created the new madness.” And the journalist told of a recent Presley concert in San Diego: “The very moment that Presley had played the last song in the program, he was mobbed by a crowd of excited [*ophidsede*, also translatable as *aroused*] teenage girls. At the same time, riots broke out throughout the concert hall, and additional police forces had to be summoned in order to reinstate order” (Jensen “Rokke”).

So there were ecstasy and riots, as befitted a rock and roll concert. But there was something else going on, too: female spectators aggressively acting on their physical desire for the new singing idol. As in the brief description by the US correspondent, reports on Elvis concerts tended to redirect the public eye: While news stories about rock-and-roll events without Elvis were mostly centered on violent young fans, tacitly assumed to be male, stories about Elvis came with a discovery of the female part of the audience, driven by a sexually

tinged desire rather than raw violence (cf., on equivalents in the German press, Poiger 171). This reappeared ritually in subsequent writings on Elvis, sometimes in quite bizarre forms, as I indicated in the introduction to this article.

### **Male Marilyn?**

Perceptions of sexually tinged hysteria among female Elvis fans also largely determined the conception of the singer himself as a male person defying legitimate masculinity by appealing to the denied sexual desire of teenage girls. This was a highly provocative reversion of the age-old direction of eroticizing vision, that is, the hegemonic male gaze, “men looking at women” who, in turn, watched “themselves being looked at,” as art historian John Berger put it (Berger 47). Elvis’s 1950s performances violated “the taboo against male sexuality” and feminized him in the eyes of many contemporary commentators by “display[ing] his body as a sexualized object” (Shumway 40, 30), turning his body into a site of social protest against the ruling social control of female as well as male bodies (Fiske 94-103). This was already hinted at in the above-mentioned media concern with the details of his looks, tending to reduce his looks to a display of individual body parts on display – hips, lips, legs, hands, sideburns, ducktail, etc. – in a manner usually reserved for patriarchal views of women (see Rodman 70-71).

This should be seen against the fact that Danish media of the 1950s usually proceeded from a self-perception of European open-mindedness, mocking what was typically regarded as American “superficial puritanism and prudishness” (Bjerrum 85). Thus, one characteristic story in a Danish illustrated magazine (otherwise closely molded after American magazines such as *Life* and *Look*) told of how a European motion picture had to have some of its scenes redone, because the necklines of the female actor were deemed too low for American “mentality” (“Martine”; cf. Rasmussen 163-64). This probably also implied a more general conception of European cultural and moral superiority to the Americans.

Yet, somehow this open-mindedness vanished when it was no longer a woman’s skin and body parts on display, but those of a young American man. In the latter case, Danish journalists not only echoed the more conservative voices of American public opinion. They even came up with sensationalized accounts of Elvis’s stage clothing and his physical performance on stage.

In early newspaper stories, Elvis was routinely described as a “male Marilyn Monroe,” doing the belly dance in front of hysterical teenagers, particularly females (“Det allernyeste”, see also “Afgud”; “Rock’n’roll vil”). Some Danish journalists even fantasized that he actually undressed in front of his audience – or conversely, that his female fans undressed in unison, as it was claimed in the above-quoted account of his Jacksonville shows (“Rock’n’roll feberen”; “Amerikansk”). In other words, his sexualized body movements during performances represented, among other things, the danger of feminization and crossing of gender lines.

Several early commentators emphasized his androgynous looks, reporting that he was “girlish” in appearance or that he was wearing eye makeup (“Det er for”; “Søde”; see also ”Helten”). One early reviewer of the film *Jailhouse Rock* bluntly stated that, in terms of gender, Elvis seemed “somewhat ambiguous” (“Læderjakkernes”).

Analyzing a range of similar American comments, literary theorist Marjorie Garber has argued that the public figure Elvis moved along “a curious continuum from androgyne to tranvestite” and should thus also be conceived as part of a wider “*unconscious* of transvestism, [...] transvestism as a language that can be read, and double-read, like a dream, a fantasy, or a slip of the tongue” (368, 354). It is perhaps too much to conclude this from the Danish material, and Elvis Presley was certainly never a cross-dresser in the usual sense of the term, nor did he ever perceive himself as anything other than heterosexual. Nonetheless, his transgressions of conventional gendered norms and hierarchies of mind and body were indeed understood as a crucial part of what made him appear so provocative.

### **Angry Young Man**

It is possible to identify a peculiar dialectic in the gendered 1950s discourse on Elvis. His gender ambiguity arguably concerned not only the relationship between his biological maleness and elements of cultural feminization, but also the complex interplay between two controversial constructions of gender: that of feminization and that of an all-too assertive masculinity, implying uncontrolled aggressiveness, physical violence and macho sexuality. These opposing constructions of gender could even be said to share some of the same cultural elements, since the overly assertive masculinity was typically conceived as rooted in emotional fragility, lack of intellectual control of bodily affect, and a new type of macho vanity (the clothes, the constant combing of the hair, etc.) that was somehow reminiscent of the traditional type of patriarchal parcelization of women’s looks – a crisis of masculinity being redefined in part through a female gaze as well as gazes from other men.

The cultural parameters of this contradictory, crisis-ridden masculinity were largely in place before the arrival of Elvis Presley, of course. James Dean had personified the new type vulnerable, explosive masculinity on movie screens (Springer 33-36). And 1950’s media was much concerned with the figure of *greaser* or *rocker* subculture, named *raggare* in Swedish and *læderjækker* (literally: leather jackets) in Danish, meeting practically universal condemnation (see, e.g. “En anden”; Andersen and Baisgaard). As the personification of rock and roll, Elvis was associated with these emblems of social fear, even though he rarely wore blue jeans and leather, and all the photographs of him circulating in the international press showed him wearing a slightly oversized coat and trousers more reminiscent of *zoot suit*-style fashionable among young African Americans at the time (cf. Goto 26-33).

Two of his early motion pictures, *King Creole* and *Jailhouse Rock*, received Danish titles meaning, respectively, *Angry Young Man* and *With Clenched Fists*, thus accentuating the line of continuity from films about male-centered youth rebellion, such as *Rebel Without a Cause* starring Dean, or *The Wild One* starring Marlon Brando, a genre with many echoes also in Danish films and public debates (Rosenørn 258). One Danish newspaper in 1957 quoted a foreign expert as saying: “Since Marlon Brando has turned out to be a gentleman, and James Dean died, Presley has become the main symbol of the rebel” (“Teenager-afguden”). Another journalist stated in 1959 that Elvis Presley was “the Robin Hood of the greasers [*Læderjakkernes Robin Hood*]” – while at the same time noting his gender ambiguity (“Læderjakkernes”).

Thus, Elvis could be conceived as too feminine and too masculine at once – or, at least, masculine in the wrong way, which, by being too emotional and undisciplined, had paradoxical affinities with the stereotype of female emotionality.

### **Crossing Race Stereotypes**

Concerns about Elvis Presley’s body movements and gender ambiguities were intertwined with crucial issues of race. But while the issue of gender ambiguity was rather specific to Elvis within the discourse on American rock and roll, the question of race permeated the rock and roll discourse in general. Being strongly influenced by African American music but performed by white as well as black artists and in front of increasingly desegregated audiences, rock-and-roll music signified a transgression of what historian Karl Hagstrom Miller terms “the musical color line,” that is, the racial distinctions between (white) popular music and “race” music, the latter of which had been conventionally associated with specific rhythmic qualities and their “bodily affecting powers” since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and whose most recent reincarnation was renamed rhythm and blues around 1950 (Miller; Bertrand; Radano 234; Wexler and Ritz).

In a USA characterized by segregation and other forms of tangible racism, this element of transgression was clearly a crucial element in the controversies surrounding the entire phenomenon of rock and roll (Martin and Segrave 15-26, 41-43). Denmark, on the other hand, was characterized by not only ethnic homogeneity, but also a widely shared set of liberal and socially egalitarian values (along with a propensity to deny or belittle the history of Danish colonialism). And although the country had seen some negative responses to the racial aspect of emerging jazz music during the 1920s and 1930s, such responses had been comparatively marginal, and the dominant attitudes towards jazz had been either color-blindness or even positive attitudes towards blackness and its symbols as antidotes to European traditionalism and rationalism (Wiedemann). Such rejections of negative racial prejudice were strengthened after the defeat of Nazism in 1945 and were thus integral to collective Danish self-perceptions during the 1950s. It was customary for Danish media at that time to take pride in a Danish or European lack of racial prejudice, condemning the offensive forms of racism as seen in Southern US segregation policies (Rasmussen 166-67; Hansen; Thing).

Yet, in debates on rock and roll, Danish media often reproduced important elements of US discourse on racial distinctions and the illegitimacy of their transgression. The very first Danish article to mention rock and roll seemed to imply that rock and roll had been relatively harmless (or simply unworthy of attention) as long as it was confined to its original “black” habitats, but now it constituted a problem because it infected white teenagers. The journalist even quoted a North Alabama White Citizens’ Council statement claiming that the rock and roll beat was “created by the negroes to infiltrate the white population” (“Rock- and Roll-Vanvidet”, cf. Martin and Segrave 41). Without citing dissenting views, the journalist made it easy enough for the reader to dot the racist i’s. And while such (ambiguous) openings towards offensive white supremacism remained exceptional in the Danish press, it quickly became customary to associate rock and roll events with racial stereotypes: “the ritual feasts of faraway natives,” or “a secret cult of a native tribe,” or “African orgies of dance and drums” now allegedly transposed into “the youth of civilized countries” (“Amerika”; “Panik”; “Rock’n’roll vil”).

Just as Elvis personified rock and roll in general, his appearance incarnated this element of transgressing musical color lines. Even if Danish reporters were hardly able to sense all racialized subtleties of the US music scene, it was clear enough to them that Elvis, too, had borrowed musical elements directly from rhythm and blues as well as country and western music. Moreover, his peculiar style, his sexualized body, his flamboyant performance, and his gender ambiguity – all in front of young white women – could easily be taken as signs of a particularly aggravated sense of racial transgression (cf. Fiske 104-107; Shumway 36-38). Such perceptions did not add up to straightforward condemnations of blackness in the Danish press. On the contrary, commentators seemed tacitly to accept the wilder and more outrageous performance of African American performers Little Richard, whose records and filmed performances were readily available in Denmark from 1957 onwards. Thus, what was controversial was not blackness as such, but rather the very act of transgressing essentialized racial identities, as Elvis did.

### **Presley the American Proletarian**

In addition to issues of gender and race, the image of Elvis as an inarticulate body performer, bereft of proper musicality and speech – rhythm rather than melody, mere noise rather than proper phrasing – connoted issues of social class, often conceived along rural-urban distinctions. Such points were made in numerous ways. Thus, Danish newspapers and magazines repeatedly borrowed a point often made by US reporters: that Elvis would syncopate single syllables in a way that was deemed obviously ridiculous: “Hi want you, hi need you, hi luh-huh-huh-huv yew-hew,” as one Danish newspaper copied from *Time*. Or even worse, as another Danish newspaper copied from *Life*’s version of the same utterance: “Ah wa-ha-hunt yew-who, Ah nee-hee-heed yew-who” (“Det allernyeste”; “Rock’n’roll feberen”; “Elvis Presley: A Teener’s”; “Elvis – A Different”).

While the Danish retelling of such anecdotes was devoid of some of the more specific cultural connotations, that is, the derogatory attitude of these New York-based magazines towards Elvis as a Southerner – a central feature of numerous early comments on Presley, whom Northern US journalists would often quote with phonetic approximations of his Memphis accent, especially when showing his lack of proper rationality: ”*Ab jus’ feel that way when Ab sing*” (Hanson) – the general message of inarticulateness certainly got through. Elvis was not singing, but “yelling his lyrics while swinging his hips to the beat,” one Danish journalist remarked early on (“Rock’n’roll vil”). And a longer feature article on Elvis summed up this attitude:

“Elvis Presley [is] a deafening center of noise, with a hard, brutal rhythm and a most unstable timbre, ranging from a hissing grunt to a piercing screech. (...) What is he singing? We may ignore the words, since he is unable to express them intelligibly, only the song titles are known. And the melodies are a tough mixture of the best of the old blues singers, combined with moonshine and a bit of hillbilly songs, along with different sounds of an animal nature.” (“Teenager-afguden”)

Thus, by challenging the delimitations between music and noise, Elvis Presley also seemed to threaten the long-standing centrality of reason and proper speech or discourse in conceptions of human (or Western) civilization itself – a menace to the predominant “partition of the sensible” privileging white male bourgeois rationality and speech, to borrow Jacques Rancière’s category (13). Elvis was presented as an uncontrolled body seemingly under the influence of pure affect or emotionality (Fiske 94-107).

Similar ideas were also frequently communicated in more straightforward class terms: Time and again, it was repeated how Elvis was either a simple “country boy” from the unheard-of town of Tupelo, Mississippi (Jensen “Rokke”) or a common “truck driver” from Memphis, Tennessee (“Rock’n’roll vil”), a city that more people had heard of in Denmark but hardly associated with anything specific, and least of all with phenomena of cultural significance. Either way, this young, simple worker was suddenly defying his class identity by making unimaginable fortunes with his obscenities. Danish newspapers routinely repeated stories of how much money Elvis was making, and how he had accumulated flashy material wealth: Elvis was born in poverty in Tupelo 21 years earlier, but now “that boy can buy most of what money can get. Speaking merely of cars, he has four: three Cadillacs and one giant, silver sparkling Lincoln” (“Afgud”).

To a certain extent, such fascinations were in tune with wide-spread conceptions of the United States as a land of almost unimaginable riches and progress, but also a propensity towards individualism, restlessness, shallowness, and general over-the-top attitude (see, e.g.

Salomon 154). However, in Elvis's case, both of these contradictory conceptions were reinforced and supplemented by the emphasis on his working-class roots and his flashy appearance as sure sign of his lack of what would today be termed symbolic or cultural capital. He was conceived as an upstart, a *parvenu*, at once a rural idiot and an urban proletarian individually rebelling against his class roots, but devoid of any legitimate claim to riches or cultural recognition, perhaps even closer to an animal than to a proper human being.

This element of anti-Americanism in Danish characterizations of Presley the proletarian *parvenu* was haunted by contradictions, however. For one thing, it was obvious throughout the entire early Elvis discourse in Denmark that the dominant critical perspectives identified with and often echoed the attitudes expressed by cultural establishment figures in the US itself. Also, a crucial premise of the entire concern with American rock and roll was the sense that this was far from being an exclusively American problem. One particularly conservative newspaper explicitly warned against conceiving Elvis Presley and the rock-and-roll phenomenon as specifically American phenomena, claiming that they were really integral parts of a general resurgence of barbarism in the midst of "the neon-lit world of modern civilization" that had lost its connection to the ancient Christian roots of the West ("Ved barbariets"). While few commentators held quite such bleak Spengler-like conservative views of modern civilization, many shared the double view of the USA as not only different but also a marker of more general trends in modern society, as witnessed by the rising popularity of rock-and-roll music among European teenagers as well.

### **Overcoming the Fear**

Thus, even if Elvis Presley was only known from newspaper and magazine articles during the first two years of his US-wide and international fame, he was clearly perceived as a symbol of disruption and an unsettling factor, simultaneously challenging an entire range of binary opposites constitutive of Western conceptions of civilization, especially in the modern era: white/non-white, male/female, human/non-human, music/noise, mind/body, reason/affect, and middle class/proletarian – all of which were, in this case, combined with the overall opposition mature/young. While his particular sociocultural rootedness in the US South had no specific connotations in the Danish setting, the elements from the US press suggesting his Southern roots (most often in a derogatory manner) were translated roughly in terms of these more general categorical distinctions, giving a somewhat vaguer impression of Elvis as a primitive, inarticulate body performer closer to feminine affect, animalistic intuition or black expressiveness than to true (male, white, rational) humanity. His association with a USA regarded from a relatively impoverished post-World War II European country mainly served to amplify these oppositions.

As remarkably wide-spread and dominant this conception of Elvis as a symbol of disruption was in Denmark during the first few years of his international fame, it began to

crumble soon afterwards. Already towards the end of the 1950s, new, more positive conceptions of Elvis were emerging, while the older, demonizing views of him as a menace to civilization rapidly faded from view. During the 1960s, Elvis was resituated much less ambiguously within the very same categories he seemed to threaten in the previous decade: recast as white, as male, and as a musical performer in a traditional sense rather than a body performer. One reviewer of his first post-army film, the loosely autobiographical lightweight musical comedy *G.I. Blues*, was clearly relieved to note what was interpreted as his new sense of “masculinity and maturity” (“Ny Elvis”). While he certainly remained outside the boundaries of high culture throughout his life, and while he would continue to provoke a great deal of animosity in many quarters, 1960s Elvis left much of his Southern and working-class connotations behind in favor of a polished Hollywood image.

Numerous biographies and studies of Elvis’s music have conceived this simply as a stylistic change or as a reflection of shifting preferences among the music-buying public towards softer pop music rather than hard rock and roll. These elements were certainly real enough, but, as the earlier receptions of Elvis in Denmark demonstrated, it was perfectly feasible to publicly demonize a cultural form and a set of cultural products that practically no-one in the country really knew about. In other words, it did not necessarily make much difference what Elvis did, or what type of music he performed, or how he did it. The new receptiveness to Elvis and readiness to situate him safely within the preexisting (if slightly modified) categories of masculinity, whiteness, and so on, should essentially be explained as a result of contextual changes along with the ability of Elvis products to find a place within the new context.

At the risk of being schematic, I would like to identify four interacting factors that all paved the way for the relatively rapid de-demonization of Elvis. The first factor is the large amount of *Ersatz*-Elvises that gained notoriety in Denmark. Ib ‘Rock’ Jensen was the earliest example, but he retired from the music scene very quickly. Then, in 1957, came the first big foreign name associated with rock and roll as a concept: Tommy Steele, first presented in Denmark as the British counterpart to Elvis Presley – only in a much more acceptable form, with Steele himself being widely presented by Danish media as a nice, down-home British boy whose rock and roll performance was considered more theatrics than real, Presley-like, affective abandon (see, e.g. “Baggårds-drengen”; and Larsen). Steele quickly became enough of a star in his own right to generate his own counterparts, with Danish singer James Rasmussen (whose actual first name was the much more Danish-sounding Flemming), who actually preferred Elvis Presley himself, being marketed as a Danish Tommy Steele (see “Den danske Tommy Steele”; Rasmussen and Kofoed 89 and 105-117). Later came other successful Danish and European performers whose music was often conceptualized as rock and roll and who were more directly inspired by Elvis Presley’s early records but whose own music was invariably on the soft side of the genre: the German singer Peter Kraus, the Swedish performer Little Gerhard as well as the Dane Otto Brandenburg, who launched his career in the late 1950s copying some of Elvis’s softer material (including the gospel song “I Believe”) before

developing into a sort of Danish Sinatra, at ease in both light pop music and jazz. While Elvis's own performances were still less readily available, these other much less controversial figures gradually paved the way for the acceptance of what was then termed rock and roll (regardless of the fact that little of their music would qualify as rock and roll by today's standards or by the standards set by American rock and roll artists at the same time). Thus, the whole phenomenon of early *Ersatz*-Elvises might be said to function collectively akin to what cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has termed a vanishing mediator, that is, a historical entity who mediates between two opposing principles while a transition occurs between them but then vanishes once the old principle has been replaced by the new. (Jameson 331-33).

The second factor was the increasing accessibility of Elvis products from the summer of 1958, which went along with increasing buying power among Danish teenagers. Finally, in September 1958, the movie *Love Me Tender* premiered in Copenhagen and, subsequently, in other parts of Denmark too. During the same month, the press began to take note of the new availability of Elvis records in stores around the country, one reviewer announcing in doomsday discourse: "Elvis is upon us." Listening to "Hard Headed Woman" as well as the ballads "Don't Ask Me Why" and "Any Way You Want Me," the reviewer noted that Elvis's records were beginning to sell, even if Elvis was a "musical fraud," and his music was composed of "synthetic ingredients" only superficially reminiscent of blues and gospel. (Stabursvik and Engvold, 326-355; "Elvis er"). This was still a very negative reception, of course, but it introduced a new way of discussing Elvis: Reviewers would continue to pan his music, his looks and his demeanor, but now that everyone was able to hear or see Elvis, the older demonizing conceptions of him as a menace to civilization seemed to lose credibility.

The third factor, which may be characterized as much more fundamental, was the gradual realization that rock and roll as well as Elvis could be mobilized as cultural weapons – what political scientists and historians of today have termed 'soft power' – in the cold war. Elvis' army stint from 1958 till 1960 proved him to be on the right side on the cold war and contributed to the emergence of tolerance and acceptance of him and rock and roll in the mainstream public sphere. Reporting on Elvis' arrival in Germany in the fall of 1958, one Danish journalist now remarked that Elvis was "not as bad as some believe, judging from his looks." Actually, he was "a nice guy, a good comrade, an eager recruit, and a modest human being" ("Verdens"). This was followed by numerous instances of a new type of writing on Elvis: the glorifying portrait of the good boy serving on 'our' side in the cold war (see, e.g., "Presley paa vintermanøvre").

Thus, Elvis was now inscribed at the center of a different discourse on rock and roll, championing it as a sign of Western liberty, youth, and joy of life, contrasted with the fear of rock and roll among the Communist rulers of Eastern Europe, signifying the oppression of liberty, etc., by the latter regimes (cf. Poiger 193-204). Even if no-one in the Danish media had actually made explicit connections between the Elvis menace and the communist menace, this new reassurance of Elvis being on the right side of the sharp dividing lines seemed to spill over

into the dominant perspectives on those categorical distinctions in Western civilization which Elvis had initially seemed to threaten. Larger sections of the public sphere now also appeared to be more ready, at least, to regard Elvis as being on the right side of other issues, including questions of gender, sexuality, and race. In other words, Elvis and the type of youth culture he symbolized could now be assimilated into cold war mentalities.

The fourth factor in Elvis's gradual normalization, was, of course, his own ability and willingness to adapt to a 'safer' image (along with the determination of his management that he should adapt rather than remain in the increasingly marginalized position of a rock and roll rebel). While Danish music and film critics around 1960 could still condemn Elvis's rock and roll products of the 1950s, it was also immediately clear to many commentators that a new Elvis was emerging in his post-army recordings – a “neat young man,” a “crooner [*skønsanger*] in the traditional style” (“Historien om”). The explosive success of his record “It's Now Or Never” in the summer of 1960 served to establish his new status as an acknowledged pop star in Denmark as well as numerous other countries (Stabursvik and Engvold 312).

Around the same time, a new type of youth culture product developed, specifically aimed at teenagers. Striving to capitalize on an emerging teenage culture following US examples, one Danish magazine oriented towards the youth started a fan club in which members could choose from a list of 12 Danish and international idols, including Elvis, now remarkably re-described as belonging to “all of us” ([untitled]). This was the first public acknowledgment of the existence of Elvis fandom in Denmark, and this attempt to organize a fan club was soon followed by a whole string of local and national fan clubs specifically devoted to Elvis from 1960 onwards.

Thus, Elvis Presley was no longer demonized, but was now integrated into a somewhat expanded, more flexible and hybrid sense of culture, in which a specific youth culture was acknowledged, at least as long as it was inoffensive. And this all took place in just about four years.

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<sup>ii</sup> The category of moral panic was first developed by Stanley Cohen, and its specific applicability to early Elvis debates has been noted by Shayla Thiel-Stern. As has been argued in the extensive debates on the category, however, theories of moral panic tend to assume binary oppositions between categories such as rationality and irrationality, and proportionality and disproportionality, which might hamper endeavors to grasp historically specific criteria of judgment and varying 'truth regimes'. For this reason, I prefer to defer judgment on the usefulness of the sociological category in this case.