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Flashes in the Pan: Short Lived Trends, Television Star Specials, and the Transmedia Contexts of Elvis Presley's 1968 "Comeback"

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Using Elvis Presley as a case study, this essay examines the maintenance of transmedia star presence in 1960s America. In December 1968, NBC broadcast the *Elvis* special, a programme widely understood to be Elvis's return from obscurity, so much so that it is now better known as the *Comeback Special*. This essay argues that Elvis's supposed cultural absence during the 1960s has been overstated, and that he maintained a strong media presence throughout the decade by capitalising on a series of short-lived trends.

Once America's appetite for rock and roll abated, Elvis found success as an actor in pre-pill musical sex comedies; later, rock and roll's mid-1960s rejuvenation renewed interest in Elvis as a rock and roll legacy artist. Subsequently, as Elvis's films grew less successful in cinemas, Hollywood studios' sale of screening rights to broadcast networks saw Elvis's movies become immensely popular on television and, when that selling bubble burst, networks began investing heavily in star specials, another bubble that Elvis caught in its "exuberant" stage.

Moving beyond traditional understandings of star image construction, most notably creative agency and distinctiveness, this essay examines the roles industrial forces and cultural trends play in maintaining star presence in uncertain periods. It concludes that, far from being a comeback from nowhere, the 1968 *Elvis* special presented its audience with a format to which it was accustomed, featuring a personality who was familiar, whose fragmented star image had remained in the public imagination via a series of short-lived trends.

Introduction

Recent studies of transmedia stardom, such as Felicity Chaplin's study of Charlotte Gainsbourg (2020) and Ana Cristina Mendes and Lisa Perrott's special issue of *Celebrity Studies* focusing on David Bowie (2019), often emphasise the agency of the star in question. Landon Palmer's work on Elvis Presley, meanwhile, emphasises the industrial forces that shaped Elvis's star persona in the 1950s (2015). Building on such work, while also departing from it, this essay investigates Elvis's transmedia presence in the mid-1960s, a time when his creative agency was arguably compromised, and his star was dimmed, especially in comparison with Elvis the exploding cultural phenomenon of the 1950s explored by Palmer. However, as this essay argues, Elvis's cultural invisibility in the years leading to the *1968 Comeback Special* has been greatly overstated. His star persona as it existed at the intersection of various media at this time stands as an ideal case study for understanding the interrelationship between media in maintaining fame by providing a more nuanced exploration of Elvis's cultural position in the 1960s. That said, I have chosen to temper the more conventional understanding of transmedia stardom by investigating Elvis's transmedia *presence* to reflect his admittedly diminished status, and the fact that Elvis's star image was less defined in the 1960s that it was in the 1950s or as it would be in the 1970s.

The mythology of the *Elvis* 1968 television special is widely known and well established in popular culture, scholarship, and Elvis-lore: Elvis Presley, who revolutionised popular music in the 1950s, had lost his edge and his relevance; this changed on December 3rd 1968 with the broadcast of an hour-long special, *Elvis*, which saw the King retake his crown. It was watched by 42 percent of the viewing audience. Thus, a simple question is begged: if Elvis was so culturally absent, why did so many people watch it? The answer is that Elvis maintained a presence in the media and popular culture far more than is generally recognised.

The notion of the *Elvis* special being a triumphant resurgence is so well established that it has been incorporated into the very title of the show. Originally titled *Elvis*, or *Singer Presents … Elvis* if one wishes to incorporate the appliance manufacturer that sponsored the show, the special is now more commonly known as the *1968 Comeback Special*. Prior to the broadcast, argues Ian Inglis, Elvis was "widely regarded as a historical relic or kitsch curiosity" by the rock and roll cognoscenti (2006, 43); for Eric Wolfson, "In 1968, Elvis Presley was worse than dead – he was irrelevant" (2021, 1); the special and its aftermath, by contrast, represented a "sudden and dramatic" (46) comeback, according to Inglis, while Gillian G. Gaar contends that Elvis came "back into the charts, back into the ratings, back into the public eye, back into contemporary relevance" (2010, 102–3). Tales of artistic forfeiture, redemption, and the '68 Special inform Baz

Lurhmann's recent *ELVIS* biopic (2002), Simon Goddard's noirish novelisation of Elvis in the 1960's (2018), and even children's books (Edgers 2007, 76–7). It is an attractive story, but an exaggeration, and assertions of Elvis's cultural invisibility in the 1960s do not stand up to scrutiny; throughout the 1960s, Elvis was able to capitalise on a series of trends that kept him in the public eye. It is, however, important to emphasise that it was Elvis the star construction that benefitted from these trends, not necessarily Elvis the human being, who was notoriously frustrated by many elements of his career, not least his 1960s movie output. This distinction may seem obvious, but it speaks to Elvis's diminishing creative agency during the 1960s acknowledged earlier.

This essay is split into two sections. The first investigates how, having come to prominence as a pioneer of American rock and roll in the 1950s, Elvis emerged from a two-year stint in the US Army and found success as an actor in the romantic comedies of the pre-counterculture era; subsequently, when rock and roll was rejuvenated in the mid-1960s by The Beatles and other acts of the British Invasion, Elvis capitalised on his cachet as a rock and roll legacy artist. My contention here is that the phenomena of American rock and roll, the 1960s Hollywood sex comedy, and the mid-1960s rejuvenation of rock and roll were all short-lived trends that kept Elvis in the public eye.

The second section analyses what I consider to be two scholarly blind-spots in terms of the maintenance of Elvis's presence in the public eye in the latter half of the 1960s. Firstly, as his films grew less successful at the box office, Elvis benefitted from the boom in the selling of screening rights to films to television networks, during which time his earlier films were immensely successful on television. Elvis's 1960s movies have been largely ignored by film scholars, despite their commercial success, and this, in turn, has led to the overlooking of their success on television. Secondly, the movie-selling boom turned to a bust because Hollywood studios charged ever increasing prices to television networks; this led to the networks making more of their own content: specials. Despite the success of one-off television events in the late-1960s, of which *Elvis* was a part, it is a format that has escaped scholarly attention. This gap in popular history and scholarship further fortifies the erroneous notion that the *Elvis* special was a one-off event as opposed to an entry into a popular television format. The specials boom of the late 1960s was also short-lived, but the *Elvis* special was screened at its peak, once again to Elvis's benefit.

As noted, Elvis's star persona was less distinctive in the 1960s, and this may be why his transmedia presence in the media at this time has been so overlooked. Indeed, when examining notions of creative agency, it must be recognised that two of the phenomena I discuss herein – Elvis as a rock and roll legacy artist, and the popularity of his films on television – required little to no contemporaneous creative input from Elvis, being, as

they were, recycled from earlier artistic outputs and media products; they did, however, maintain his fame. Consequently, my argument is that Elvis's supposed cultural invisibility throughout the 1960s has been overstated and his transmedia presence underestimated. As this article shows, the "comeback" was the result of a particular set of cultural and industrial circumstances that meant that both Elvis and the "star special" formula were familiar to audiences, which explains, at least in part, the large viewing audience for the transmission.

A legacy artist and matinee idol

The suggestion that the 1968 Special marked Elvis's "comeback" is easily disputed. His gospel album, *How Great Thou Art*, marked the beginning of an artistic rebirth two and a half years before the 1968 Special. The 1966 sessions that produced *How Great Thou Art*, also provided further gems, such as Elvis's tender take on Bob Dylan's Tomorrow is a Long Time, and a bluesy cover of the Clovers' 1957 hit, Down in the Alley, which were both tucked away as Bonus Songs on the mostly mediocre *Spinout* (Norman Taurog, 1966) soundtrack album. Moreover, in the eighteen months or so prior to the special, Elvis had got married (to Priscilla Beaulieu), had a daughter (Lisa Marie), and won a Grammy (for *How Great Thou Art*); all these events were widely reported.

It is worth noting the range of media that kept Elvis in the public eye during the 1960s as mentioned in the previous paragraph: press and publicity regarding personal events and triumphs, movies and their soundtrack albums, and new studio recordings. In his work on Elvis's transmedia stardom in the 1950s, Palmer instructively argues:

> Presley's divided star labour produced a transmedia star text – an organisational nexus of early convergence between media industries mutually invested in manifesting a legible star system profitable for multiple media platforms (187)

Palmer highlights music, movies, and television, as being the "multiple media platforms" of the 1950s. This continued through the 1960s; however, whereas Palmer observes mutually reinforcing platforms projecting Elvis's star image, the situation in the 1960s was more fluid, with changing emphases. With Elvis making twenty-seven of his thirty-one movies in the 1960s, Elvis the movie star was the more emphatic media presence of the 1960s, when compared to Elvis the musician and/or performer. That said, where Elvis was concerned, the distinctions between music, movies, and television were less defined by the 1960s, and barriers more porous, as Elvis movies bled into other media such as soundtrack LPs and screenings of his films on television. Moreover, while it is strictly true to say that the special marked Elvis's first television

appearance since 1960, Elvis was a presence on television for much of the 1960s. His movies were popular on television, and he still had pulling power as a rock and roll icon.

It is important to remember that Elvis's extraordinary impact on popular culture did not simply come to an end the day he joined the Army. The impact continued to resonate, leading to continued significance as a rock and roll legacy artist. In 1965, the music show *Shindig* ran an hour-long Elvis special. Its host, Jimmy O'Neil, introduced the show's theme:

> Tonight, we celebrate an important tenth anniversary. It's ten years since Elvis Presley zoomed to international stardom (sic). And that, of course, is really what started the whole ball rolling. The music business predicted that the Elvis Presley craze was all a flash-in-the-pan. Well, ten years later, we here at *Shindig* say that Elvis is still the King.

What is interesting here is that American rock and roll was, in many ways, a "flash-in-the-pan" which had all but petered out by the turn of the decade, and the *Shindig* Elvis special came during the similarly fleeting pre-Vietnam, pre-counterculture rock and roll rejuvenation: another brief trend that kept Elvis prominent in the public eye.

One could persuasively argue that the energy that powered America rock and roll was so potent that it could only burn itself out. However, many factors hastened rock and roll's early demise By the 1959, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper were all dead, Elvis was in the army, Little Richard had returned to the church, Jerry Lee Lewis was in disgrace for marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin, Chuck Berry was facing jail for white slavery, and the payola scandal had all but destroyed the reputation of significant figures such as the rock and roll DJ Alan Freed (McKenna, 2025). By the time of the *Shindig* broadcast, however, rock and roll had been rejuvenated by the acts of the British Invasion and the success of black record labels such as Motown and Stax. The *Shindig* special placed Elvis within this vibrant and youthful context and spoke to his ongoing influence.

The *Shindig* special is a raucous, frantic show, which crams thirty songs made famous by Elvis into less than an hour. Elvis does not appear, but his songs are performed by up-and-coming stars and *Shindig* regulars. Most of the material in the show is taken from Elvis's 1950s output, and the performances are mostly respectful cover versions, such as Glenn Campbell's 'Surrender' or Ray Peterson's 'I Can't Help Falling in Love With You', interspersed with frenetic reworkings, such as the Chambers Brothers' 'Jailhouse Rock', goofy comedy, such as Sonny and Cher's 'Wooden Heart', and wacky camp, as in Maria Ghava's appearance as a lovelorn teen singing a re-jigged version of

'Little Sister' titled 'Hey Elvis', which both emphasises and satirises Elvis's heartthrob credentials. Later in the show O'Neil reads a congratulatory telegram to Elvis from The Beatles ("We hope we will be somewhere in ten years' time"), and producer Jack Good informs the audience of future guests, which include The Rolling Stones, Motown's Brenda Holloway, and another legacy artist, Ray Charles.[1] The *Shindig* special, then, places Elvis in a very modern context, which both emphasises his cultural relevance and elevates him, *in absentia*, to the status of founding father.

The *Shindig* special demonstrates how Elvis had remained in the public imagination, and how he benefitted from shifting trends to remain visible. The boom in American rock and roll established Elvis as a star, and the rejuvenation of rock and roll in the mid-1960s renewed interest in his work. This is not to say that the maintenance of Elvis iconography in the public imagination translated into contemporaneous cultural relevance. When the Beatles and Beatlemania arrived in America in 1964, the adolescents that had screamed for Elvis were entering their twenties, and the progression of the post-war baby boom meant that Beatles' boomer fans of the 1960s far outnumbered Elvis's boomer fans of the 1950s.

There were material differences in objects of worship too. As Barbara Ehrenriech, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs observe, "Compared to Elvis, the Beatles were almost respectable. They wore suits; they did not thrust their bodies suggestively; and to most Americans, who couldn't tell a blue collar, Liverpudlian accent from Oxbridge English, they might have been upper class" (1992, 101). The Beatles may have played rock and roll, but their image owed much to the clean teen idols that preceded them, mop top haircuts notwithstanding.[2] Indeed, the *Shindig* Elvis tribute also contained little that could be understood as sexual, suggestive, or in any way offensive, with its raucous wholesomeness serving as a testament to the ways rock and roll had changed post-Elvis. Marketing to teenagers had also become much more sophisticated, and, as Ehrenriech et al observe, the slick marketing of The Beatles made the 1950s promotion of Elvis look "oafish" in comparison (99). Moreover, rock and roll's chaste rejuvenation was quickly followed by massive changes in popular music, as genres such as garage rock, psychedelia, and funk, seemed to turn rock and roll inside out. However, as popular

[1] Jack Good was a noted Elvis fan. When rock and roll began changing in the late-1960s, he complained that "giant individualists Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard and Chuck Berry" were being replaced by "one vast, hairy, paisley patterned uniformity" (qtd. Coates 2013: 316). Good later conceived and co-wrote *Elvis: The Musical*, which opened on the West End stage in November 1977, shortly after Elvis's death. The production helped launch the career of Welsh rock and roll revivalist, Shakin' Stevens, who starred in the production.

[2] In addition, the acts of the aforementioned Motown and Stax were highly manicured at this time, though the former more so than the latter. The more sexualised music from these labels came a little later, as did many of the artists' move towards heavier sound and the avant-garde. Even the bad boy pose of the Rolling Stones appeared rather quaint in the mid-1960s, especially when compared to the Elvis of the 1950s; controversy and scandals would follow, though.

music mutated throughout the 1960s, Elvis's image was benefitting from passing screen trends.

Televised Movies and the Rise of the Specials

When Elvis emerged from his army stint into a post-rock and roll world, his gift for light comedy allowed him to capitalise on the popularity of the post-war, pre-counterculture romantic comedy. Elvis vehicles such as *Blue Hawaii* (Norman Taurog, 1961) and *Viva Las Vegas* (George Sidney, 1964) contained assorted genre elements from popular forms such as the sex comedy, clean teen pic, beach movie, and musical. These films may have compromised Elvis's artistry as a musician, but they ensured that Elvis retained his fame, if not his cutting-edge, via a cycle of sex comedies, which were, once again, a short-lived trend. In many of these films, Elvis plays an unrepentant playboy who, through the course of the film, gains maturity by achieving a goal and getting the girl. For Tamar Jeffers McDonald, the comedy of the sex comedy lies in delayed gratification: the man wants sex without commitment while the woman insists on marriage before sex (2007, 45–6). Many of Elvis's 1960s films follow this formula, and end with his character either marrying the female love interest, or with a happy-ever-after implied marriage. This cycle of films came to an end, argues Jeffers McDonald with emergence of the counterculture, the popularisation of the female contraceptive pill (55), and a genre shift to a more countercultural form (Grindon 2011, 139–49),

If the romantic comedy was being transformed in the 1960s, the musical was in serious decline (Altman, 352–364; Basinger, 477–528). Musical successes of the 1960s, such as *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964) and *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) were big budget roadshow productions which, as Jeanine Basinger argues, hastened the death of the musical by being on the wrong side of the widening generation gap (489).[3] Todd Berliner and Philip Furia also note a self-fuelling slump for the musical, "without the steady stream of musicals and with changes in song styles and film styles, audiences soon lost touch with the convention of the 'spontaneous song'" (2002). Before the audience "lost touch", and for a little while after, Elvis found success by bursting into spontaneous song by making a string of fairly cheap, critically derided, but attractively bubbly star vehicles.

For many commentators and historians, Elvis's 1960s movies present him "tamed" or even "castrated" (Lobalzo Wright 2018, 61) and are thus divergent from other developments in 1960s pop culture. In the midst of Beatlemania and the clean-teen idol craze, it may have been easy to overlook the Beatles' musical talent, but they would

[3] Basinger also provides a short but compelling account of Elvis's film career, 169–81.

soon prove themselves to be influential innovators and subverters. By contrast, Elvis quickly achieved worldwide recognition as an innovator of music and style, before losing that status, and settling, post-Army, into a more conformist trend of, if not quite clean-teen idol, then clean young adult heartthrob. Colonel Tom Parker is often credited, more often blamed, for sanitising Elvis's rebel image, but it is more likely that the pressure came from Hollywood, particularly producer Hal Wallis and his partner Joseph Hazen, following disappointing box office returns for *King Creole* (Michael Curtiz, 1958), Elvis's most violent cinematic role (McKenna 2025). For his part, Parker warned: "to paint any artist too good can kickback" (Parker 1958).

That the pressure for an image overhaul should come from the movie world gives a strong indication of transmedia fluidity and the shifting priorities in media representation of Elvis's star image. Moreover, while it may be unlikely that Parker's concerns were related to Elvis's posthumous reputation, it is there that the "kickback" is most keenly felt. Anne-Marie Fleming, for example, contends that the Elvis Presley estate seeks to "suppress discussion" of Elvis's movies in merchandise and exhibits (2019, 189). Douglas Brode also criticises academia for failing to recognise the cultural and industrial value of Elvis's films (2006, 1–11), while Lobalzo Wright argues:

> Presley's lost film stardom and … his industrial position as a commercially successful star … is usurped in favour of prioritising the meaning of his star image … Presley's films are disdained due to their formulaic premises, economical production, but mainly viewed as inferior products in comparison to Presley's music, television, and film outputs of the 1950s (46–7)

Moreover, Elvis's most important biographers, Jerry Hopkins and Peter Guralnick, come from a music journalism/historian background, so Elvis's movies, particularly of the 1960s, are not as foregrounded as they might be in their work (2007; 2020). If the success of Elvis's movies can be so easily overlooked, then the popularity of their television broadcasts is unlikely to warrant attention. But this popularity is important to understand how Elvis remained in the public eye throughout the 1960s, and it was occasioned by another flash in the pan: the selling of screening rights by movie studios to television. By 1968, Elvis's films, which had once been so profitable, were declining in popularity at cinemas; but the popularity of his films on television ensured that he was a presence for home viewers, even as his star waned at the box office.

Colonel Parker was wary of television, and angry when Mirisch Films sold the results of a two picture deal with Elvis, *Follow That Dream* (Gordon Douglas, 1962) and *Kid Galahad* (Phil Karlson, 1962), for television broadcast (Wallis 1964); when Paramount sought to sell *Loving You* (Hal Kantner, 1957) and *King Creole* (Michael Curtiz, 1958) to

television, Parker was furious: "we do not mix our motion picture career in any way with a television career", Parker told Wallis's partner, Joseph Hazen "it would not be good business to go into competition with a motion picture being shown in theaters throughout the country" (1963). Further protestations came from Roger Davis, Elvis's representative at the William Morris agency, "Colonel Parker has long held that the showing of motion pictures on television is contrary to the best interest of the studio and producer, in that it puts the artist in competition with his own pictures in current release and contributes towards over exposure" (1964); while Wallis concluded that Parker was "bitter about the television deal … all of which leads me to believe that I am in for a rough time with Parker and Presley on the next picture" (Wallis 1964).

Where Palmer discerns co-ordination between media and manager, as he does in his account of Elvis's third and final appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on 6th January 1957 (177–8), the evidence regarding the broadcasting of Elvis's films on television suggests a protectionist approach. Indeed, Elvis's appearance on 6th January was his last television appearance for more than three years; later in 1957 he was praised by movie exhibitors for not appearing on television, with exhibitors fearing that appearing for free on television would undermine their efforts to attract paying customers to Elvis's films (Sanders 1963). Such rivalries between media demonstrate that, while Elvis may have been a transmedia star, and barriers between media were often porous, they were not free flowing.

To add to the recriminations, the results of the television broadcasts of *Follow That Dream* and *Kid Galahad*, were disappointing. Paul Raibourne, a former executive at Paramount, wrote to Hazen, "there is some indication that … Presley pictures are not among the top attractions on television" (1965); but the events of subsequent years disproved this. In September 1967 *Variety* ran an item about the big three networks (ABC, NBC and CBS) "mounting something like an Elvis Presley Festival," with four Elvis films being broadcast in the coming days. Having proved popular among viewers, the article reports, Elvis movies were also strategically useful "because the networks like to front load the movie showcases in September and October so that the big Nielson numbers will come up when it counts" (There's Elvis Fest in Nets' backlog). "Front loading", in this context, means placing premium content before the film. For example, the 9pm (PST) screening of *Fun in Acapulco* (Richard Thorpe, 1963) on NBC on 12th September 1967 was preceded by the season three premiere of *I Dream of Jeannie* and the network premiere of *The Jerry Lewis Show*.[4] Thus, just as in *Shindig*, Elvis's presence on television was in a prime-time context and associated with fresh, contemporary material, albeit more family orientated.

[4] *The Jerry Lewis Show* had previously been on ABC in 1963 and was cancelled part way through its run. The NBC version followed a different format, and the guest for the network premiere was Barbara Eden, the star of *I Dream of Jeannie*.

Technological advancements are also important to consider when assessing Elvis's presence on television. Rising sales of colour television sets had encouraged the big three networks to adopt colour programming, and, by the 1966–7 season, all three were broadcasting full colour prime time schedules. This is important because all the films of the unofficial Elvis festival mentioned above are colourful: *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (Norman Taurog, 1962) and *Paradise Hawaiian Style* (Michael D. Moore, 1966) were both filmed in Hawaii, and contain all the bright visual ingredients of the Elvis genre, such as blue skies, pretty girls, sun, sea, outdoor swimming pools, and so on; *Fun in Acapulco* follows a similar formula, and is set in an exotic locale (though mostly filmed in California), and *Viva Las Vegas* (George Sidney, 1964), featuring the bright lights of the titular town, displays a similarly vibrant Technicolor palate. Moreover, the Elvis in these films is tanned, youthful, and full of masculine charm, as opposed to the paler, puffier Presley to be found in contemporaneous theatrical offerings such as *Double Trouble* (Norman Taurog, 1967) or *Clambake* (Arthur H. Nadel, 1967).

With studios demanding high prices for their films in the mid-1960s, networks were keen to acquire an understanding of what movies were working best on television to inform choices when purchasing films. To that end, in 1970 *Broadcasting* published details of a study conducted by the research department of J. Walter Co., which sought to ascertain which types of film were most popular with audiences in terms of viewing figures, with a view to using the information to benefit both networks and advertisers; the study confirmed the popularity of Elvis films. Using data about all films broadcast on the big three networks between September 1961 and September 1969, the researchers observed that the most popular films for broadcast included comedies or "well-known, highly publicised drama", colour films of more than two hours, and films featuring a "box office favourite" star. Given that most Elvis films screened on network television were highly publicised light comedies in colour, it follows that Elvis is cited as the most popular star for movies on network television, with all seven of his films broadcast during the research period being "high-rated" (Special Report). The success of these films also shows divergent tastes across media; "the business of bursting into song out of context in the middle of a scene" (*Kissin' Cousins*, 1964), as one reviewer put it, may have been jarring for critics, the counterculture, and cinemagoers, but the television audience clearly enjoyed it.

The popularity of movies on television also helped to set the industrial context that would lead to the *Elvis* Special. Hollywood studios' over-reliance on revenue from sales to television, combined with networks becoming increasingly selective about the films they wanted to show, led to the bursting of the selling bubble. Television networks became frustrated by the exorbitant fees demanded for popular films and, by the end of 1968, with movie nights running on television every night of the week, the networks

sought ways to mitigate the loss of profit resulting from the inflated prices of popular movies. This led to another trend that benefitted Elvis: an energetic new focus on films made exclusively for television (Balio 1985, 437–8). Such content was known as "Specials" and like the selling of movies to TV, it was another bubble, but Elvis caught the bubble at what economists call the "exuberant" stage.

"Specials" was a catch-all term for a wide variety of one-off programmes produced specifically for television, as opposed to regular programming such as series, news, soaps, and so on. Specials included televised events (such as Miss World or Macy's Thanksgiving Parade), back-door pilots (such as *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In* which became a series following the success of the 1967 special), documentaries (such as the maritime documentaries of Jacques Cousteau), one-off dramas or made-for-television movies, and, most relevantly here, star specials, such as *Elvis*.

While made-for television movies and the industrial conditions that led to their popularity in the 1960s and 70s have been the subjects of some research (Gomery 1983; Edgerton 1991; Stone 2017), star specials have escaped scholarly attention, despite their importance for television networks in the late 1960s. Indeed, television networks were also increasing their involvement in theatrical film production at this time, and the *Elvis* special was a consequence of this. Parker was seeking production funding for a new Elvis film, and a one-million-dollar payday for his client, and NBC agreed to produce *A Change of Habit* (William A. Graham, 1969), on condition that *Elvis* agree to a star special in addition, which was directed by Steve Binder.[5]

In April 1967, *Variety* reported on the networks' increasing emphasis on specials:

> Never have the networks been as active in the specials field as they are now. Never have advertisers responded as favourably to specs as they do today. Never have ratings been as good for specs as currently … It costs an advertiser from $600,000 to $700,000 to put a typical hour special on air. Such an hour, with name stars, has become a coveted item along Madison Ave. The demand is greater than the supply of acceptable properties and stars. Advertisers flock … for ratings milage, for prestige, for promotion, for dealer relations, for product identification and other values that cannot be secured in having a minute in the movies along with 13 other advertisers (Omnibus of Specials).

[5] Binder's involvement leads to what little contextualising information there is about the industrial and broadcast context of *Elvis*. Binder is notable for having directed *Petula*, a star special featuring the British singer Petula Clarke. During a performance of the song On the Path of Glory, Clarke touched the forearm of her black guest star, Harry Belafonte, causing some controversy from the sponsors, Chrysler. Binder refused a demand to cut "the touch". But this context is more usually deployed to emphasise Binder's progressive credentials (e.g. Guralnick, 2000: 294), and does not fully speak to the importance of specials at this time.

In the 1960s, NBC defined itself, in part, through its specials, and faced little competition from the other two majors. In the mid-1960s, however, NBC began to see its hold over the specials market challenged: "For years," ran a 1967 report in *Variety*, "NBC-TV had the field of specials practically to itself. CBS and ABC remained aloof, while NBC mined the rich vein zealously. All that has changed the past two seasons. CBS and ABC have caught the fever and are in there competing for attractions" (Ibid). In the 1966–7 season, CBS's specials garnered higher viewing figures overall than NBC's or ABC's specials (Horowitz).

CBS's triumph led to greater inter-network competition, and the resulting proliferation of specials across the networks drew praise from industry commentators: David Loffert, writing in a December 1967 issue of *Back Stage*, suggested, "in the spirit of the holiday season, it might not be a bad idea to give the networks a pat on the back for once ... it is clear that the networks are at least trying to give the viewer more diversified and engrossing fare" (1–6). Nonetheless, in the same issue, there were rumblings of discontent in a report which highlighted the networks' scheduling of specials to conflict with their rivals, which, the report concludes, leaves "the hapless viewer as the real loser." The report highlights not only competition between the networks, but also competing attitudes towards competition, with NBC appearing more aggressive:

> Specials slotted against each other have irritated viewers for many seasons ... CBS call 'irresponsible' and 'destructive' ... ABC-TV has for some time sought a three-web anti-conflict consensus ... NBC defends such moves as beneficial to both viewers and the involved networks on the grounds that forced feeding promoted interest and viewing ... of 48 specials aired from Sept. thru Dec. 15, NBC was involved in nine of the ten conflicts, CBS in seven, ABC in only four (Opposing Specials).

It was into this atmosphere of aggressive competition that the *Elvis* special was broadcast, sponsored by Singer.

A curious piece in the *New York Times* from 1956 seeks to draw comic distinction between rock and roll music and Singer's sewing machine business:

> More and more teenaged girls are being lured away from rock 'n' roll and back to the gentle art of sewing ... So says the Singer Sewing Machine Company, a motherly concern that attracted 60,000 young needlewomen to its Fourth Annual Junior Dressmaking Contest. (Sewing Popular with Teenagers)

Lurhmann's *ELVIS* also has some fun with the apparent incongruity of the King of rock and roll performing in a show sponsored by a company most famous for manufacturing sewing machines; but the sponsorship, in context, is not quite so discordant as it appears.

Cynthia B. Meyers argues that, in the early days of television, "sponsors believed their purpose was to elevate the cultural tastes they assumed needed elevating and, in doing so, associate their companies with the good taste those audiences would acquire" (2021, 13). This approach changed during the 1960s with sponsors keener to align themselves more with popular culture, Meyers cites Armstrong World Industries' sponsoring the clean teen TV show *Gidget* as an example of this (24). In the 1960s, Singer was also moving into the entertainment field. The first star special sponsored by the company was the 1966 NBC Tony Bennett special, which was accompanied by a soundtrack LP. In the early 1970s, Singer sponsored a Burt Bacharach NBC special, and a series of concerts on the newly formed album-oriented-rock (AOR) radio station, WPLJ. Moreover, the company had diversified during the 1960s, and sold a range of products, including record players and televisions, which were heavily plugged to Christmas shoppers during interstitials of the *Elvis* special with the voguish slogan: "What's new for tomorrow is at SINGER today!" With its modish image, diversified product range, and interventions in the entertainment field, the Elvis/Singer brand alignment is broadly consistent with Singer's ambitions and trajectory.

The *Elvis* special was further promoted in ways that highlight both Elvis's transmedia presence, and his indistinct star image. There were Elvis displays in Singer shops, which also sold the souvenir album, the clumsily titled *Elvis Sings Flaming Star and Others* (1968). Logical brand alignment aside, as a promotional paratext the LP lacks coherence. The contents are drawn from across Elvis's 1960s work and range from the sublime (a rollicking version of Chuck Berry's Too Much Monkey Business, recorded informally in 1968) to the banal (Do the Vega, a song dropped from the *Viva Las Vegas* soundtrack) and the embarrassing (Yellow Rose of Texas/The Eyes of Texas, also from *Viva Las Vegas*). Also sublime is the live version of Rufus Thomas's Tiger Man, the only song taken from the Special, but which was cut before the initial broadcast.[6] Meanwhile, the title song and publicity still on the cover come from *Flaming Star* (Don Siegal, 1960), one of Elvis's least successful films, which had been released eight years earlier, lending the LP the air of a cash-in that had been thrown together in a lackadaisical manner. NBC's trailers for the special, however, were more sophisticated, with Elvis staring at the camera and singing the "uh-huh-huh" refrain from All Shook Up, referencing his status as a rock and roll legacy artist and mimicking NBC's three-tone ident, with more than a hint of self-parody.

Taken together, these two paratexts may lack an internal logic, but they do evidence a generalised familiarity for Singer and NBC to capitalise on. They reference Elvis's

[6] This song was cut from the original December 1968 broadcast because Parker wanted to include a Christmas song, so it was replaced with Blue Christmas. Subsequently, Tiger Man replaced Blue Christmas in the August 1969 repeat broadcast.

status as a matinee idol, along with the mediocre soundtracks, while also positioning him as rock and rock pioneer, performing the work of other influential originators, who can confidently lampoon his own public image. Unrefined it may be, but Elvis's transmedia presence was such that it could be used to generate curiosity.

Apart from the specific promotion of the *Elvis* special lay a much broader context. *Elvis* was one of around a hundred specials broadcast in the 1968–69 season on NBC alone. Of these hundred, twenty-nine were star specials; alongside *Elvis*, NBC announced specials featuring Elizabeth Montgomery, Bill Cosby, Julie Andrews, Perry Como, and others, with Bob Hope appearing in nine specials, and Andy Williams two (Brown). *Elvis* gained a Nielson rating of 32 and was the third most watched special of the September 1968 – March 1969 season, beaten only by the more traditional fare of *The Bob Hope Christmas Show* and the January broadcast of *The Bob Hope Show*, both of which were produced in Vietnam, marking the fifth consecutive year Hope had been filmed entertaining the American troops fighting in that country. For other specials, the fourth most popular special was an adaptation of *Heidi*, notorious because NBC cut into a live American football game which had overrun its three-hour slot to show it. Of the other big star specials, *The Andy Williams Christmas Show* achieved a rating of 28.5, Ann-Margret got 27.3, Frank Sinatra 24.9, Bing Crosby 23.5, and Perry Como 20.7. (1969, Top Primetime Specials). For further context, the most watched show of the year, the second Super Bowl, saw a rating of 36.8 (n.d. Super Bowl Ratings History), while the most watched regular programme, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In*, had an average rating of 31.5 (1969, How They Ranked). So, with a rating of 32, Elvis did quite well for somebody who had been forgotten.

The *Elvis* special may have been built around a remarkable performance from its eponymous star, but its success was aided by industrial conditions. Elvis had been able to sustain a successful and profitable post-rock and roll career in Hollywood, thanks to the industrial and audience trends of the early 1960s; then, the declining interest in Elvis's movies in cinemas overlapped with the television audience's developing appetite for seeing his films on the small screen. Concurrently, the boom in sales of movies to television and the accompanying inflated prices led to the specials boom. Indeed, much of the content of the special is delivered with readily identifiable frames of reference. In the informal jam-session section of the special, for example, Elvis self-deprecatingly lampoons his film career, the gospel section references his recent Grammy win, and the narrative medley section positions Elvis as a lost itinerant musician (as in *Loving You*), who seeks work on a carnival (as in *Roustabout* (John Rich, 1964)), and ends up as a nightclub singer (as in *King Creole*, *Fun in Acapulco*, and *Girls! Girls! Girls!*)

Like American rock and roll, the pre-pill sex comedy, and the movie selling bull market before it, the specials boom was another bubble, though one that deflated rather than burst, though made-for-TV movies continued in rude health throughout the 1970s. Less than two weeks after the broadcast of the *Elvis* special, *Back Stage* ran a front-page article with the headline "SPECIALS HIT PEAK" in which Tom Tolnay observed: "There are so many specs on the old dial these days that it may not be long before they wear out their glitter", and argued, "fewer specials in general … would be a good way to begin loosening the 'specialized stranglehold' on TV. For if past trends are any indication – such as the movie binge – the specials caper may be heading for a fall, and then TV will have to find a new toy to play with" (1968, 1–3). His comments proved prescient, and the specials boom slowly declined over the next few years.

ABC was the first of the networks to announce a cutback on specials. In April 1969 *Variety* reported "nix on unspecial specials and a green-light for specials-with-a-purpose" (ABC Nix) at the network, meaning a cutback on one-offs and a focus on specials that could be developed into series, i.e. back-door pilots. The following year, CBS followed suit, reducing the number of specials because of a sharp decline in profitability (Special Getting Near-Freeze Cure at CBS). NBC, the network most associated with specials, also followed the trend. In 1970, the Federal Communications Commission passed the Prime-Time Access rule, which limited the amount of network output that could be broadcast on affiliated stations, which led to NBC decreasing specials production, "because the amount of time networks have to work with has been reduced, the manoeuvrability necessary to pre-empt a program for a special was lost," reported *Broadcast* (Durgin Sees Specials Cut, 1971).

Although the *Elvis* special may have been misrepresented as the beginning of an artistic rebirth, it was certainly an important factor in accelerating Elvis's creative renaissance. It led to an extraordinary run of new recorded material, and the superlative shows in Vegas and elsewhere in the late 1960s and early 1970s. That said, contrary to received wisdom, the 1968 special was not a comeback from nowhere, but the culmination of an uncertain decade in which Elvis's adaptability had allowed him, or his star image, to traverse quickly vanishing stepping-stones to remain in the public eye.

Conclusion

In accounts and dramatizations of the 1968 special, much attention is paid to the belief that the special was originally conceived, by Parker, as a Christmas special, with Elvis singing Christmas carols as opposed to performing hits and new material; Luhrmann's recent film and the Netflix series *Agent Elvis* lampoon this notion, *ad absurdum*. The truth of the matter, however, is difficult to know.

According to Binder, Parker had a Christmas-themed script and audiotape for distribution to radio stations, featuring Elvis singing Christmas songs and answering interview questions (which the DJ asked before the recorded answer). Parker proposed using this as the skeleton on which to build the special (Hopkins 2007: 208–9; Binder 2021: 6–7). The proposal was rejected by everyone concerned, including Elvis. For Parker's detractors, this is used as evidence of his philistinism and his desire to keep Elvis playing the role of the wholesome performer – the same charge levelled at him regarding Elvis's 1960s cinematic output which, as we have seen, is a charge that can be contested. But the proposal for a Christmas show can also be understood as evidence of Parker's business savvy and understanding of the contemporaneous mediascape. Parker had been encouraging Elvis to record a second Christmas album (the first, *Elvis' Christmas Album*, was released in 1957) since the mid-1960s because developments in popular music meant that Elvis had difficulty getting radio airplay. As Ernst Jorgenson has noted, Christmas on American radio was wall-to-wall festive songs, so new Christmas material from Elvis would certainly be played (1998, 203).

It is also worth noting that Guralnick credits Parker with engineering Elvis's artistic rebirth. Fully conscious of low record sales and declining box office takings, and acutely aware that his client was bored and depressed, it was Parker who understood that one of the few ways to truly inspire Elvis into action was to suggest recording a gospel record: *How Great Thou Art* (2020, 293). Once again, business savvy appears to be factor, with the album being released on 27th February 1967, just ahead of Easter, which fell on 26th March, a time when sacred music was prominent on US radio.

The point of these anecdotes is that they take us further into the mediascape of the 1960s, to further understand Elvis's transmedia presence, and to highlight radio, a medium that remains undiscussed in the essay. Also important is print media. Fleming's work, cited earlier, explores the importance of British Elvis fandom during the 1960s through a study of *Elvis Monthly*, which not only demonstrates the importance of fan magazines in maintaining media star presence, but also takes us beyond the confines of the United States to emphasise the importance of international fandom. By focussing on music, movies, and television in this essay, I fully admit there are more elements of the media ecosystem that require further exploration, and I hope that future scholarship will investigate the interrelationships between media to provide more nuanced views of star image construction and maintenance.

As this essay has shown, the *Elvis* special was a product of an amalgamation of sets of cultural and industrial circumstances. The American rock and roll craze of the 1950s had subsided by 1960, thus Elvis turned to Hollywood; during this time, developments such as the British invasion led to a rekindling of rock and roll, and a resurgence of

interest in its King, as evidenced by the *Shindig* special. As Elvis's movie career flagged in the late 1960s, his films from the early 1960s found a new home on colour television sets in the American home thanks to the Hollywood studios' strategy of cashing in on their back-catalogues; and, when the movie selling bubble began to burst, the specials boom began to peak.

Elvis caught the specials boom at its apex, just as he had been able to capitalise on the other phenomena examined in this essay. This is not to say that he was lucky; his ability to capitalise on an assortment of trends is a testament to his versatility as an entertainer, performer, and artist. Whereas Palmer discerns a "legible star system" in the 1950s, Elvis's star image was more pluralised in the following decade, which saw Elvis the rock and roll pioneer, matinee idol, and American icon, maintained through recycled media forms and legacy pedigree, creating a multiplicity of star images that clash and contradict as opposed to complement and blend. This fracturing of the star image can pose problems for historians, leading to a romantic understanding of a "comeback", which has, in turn, created a simplified understanding of the preceding years, allowing the image of Elvis the washed-up has-been to become overly dominant.

Elvis's performance in the '68 special is terrific, but the audience would not have known this before tuning in to watch it. Thus, the very success of the special on its initial broadcast in terms of viewership contradicts the mythology of a comeback from nowhere. An understanding of the industrial contexts surrounding the *Elvis* special show that it was a broadcast that focussed on an artist who was familiar, in a star-special format to which the audience were accustomed, even if Elvis's extraordinary performance was one that many were unprepared for.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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