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Olga Argeros

Peter Warren DeMatteo

Mandira Ray

Nuanprang Snitbhan

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The Mystery of Elvis and Madonna

OLGA ARGEROS, PETER WARREN
DEMATTEO, MANDIRA RAY, AND
NUANPRANG SNITBHAN

If there is one obvious and strange truth about Elvis Presley, it is that he's amazingly ubiquitous for a dead man. It is this aspect of the Elvis phenomenon in popular culture that has been called the "Elvis Mystery." Why is Elvis so ubiquitous, so ever present in both serious and silly ways? Why was he the chosen one? What made him so special? Why is he remembered and revered so much today? Why do people refuse to believe that he is dead? And could he possibly become the focal point of an actual religious movement?

How can this mystery be solved? Most college students today were not even alive during Elvis' reign on earth. It's exceedingly hard for this generation to take Elvis seriously. After all, didn't Elvis die on the toilet? Did he not make cheesy movies? Did he not make corny music in the 1960s and 70s? So the question persists: why does the Elvis myth continue so powerfully in American culture? For that matter, why has Elvis gone on to become a figure remembered and worshiped throughout the world.

For members of Generation X to understand these issues, the whole Elvis Mystery must be related to something better known today. Perhaps, therefore, there is some merit in comparing Elvis with someone like Madonna. Besides the fact that they are both pop singers, they share several other important traits. Both can be associated with their humble roots, bad movies, and great music. Both also share a history of sparking sexual controversy, gender bending, solipsism, and sensuality. In the best sense, their music challenged physical and societal conventions. They both have been manipulated by fame. And of course, they have a kind of charisma that seems eternal. In the rest of this paper, we will explore these and other similarities as a way to address the overall mystery of the contemporary Elvis cult.

Elvis Aaron Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi in the tender hours of the morning on January 8, 1935. After making it big on the record charts and in the movies, Elvis' career took a dive throughout the 1960s. However, he reclaimed himself as King after his 1968 comeback special when went back to his rockabilly roots. But his career then descended into his bloated jump suited phase associated with his Las Vegas concerts. Finally and tragically, he died of a drug-related heart failure on

the toilet of his master bedroom at Graceland between the hours of 7 A.M. and noon on August 16, 1977, leaving a legacy of music and entertainment the world has never known since.

Interestingly enough, August 16th is an important date in Madonna's history. On that day in 1958, Madonna Louise Ciccone was born in Rochester, Michigan. For the past few decades, Madonna has been one of the top female performers. "Since year 1985, Madonna is known as a person who can do anything: she is a singer, an actor, a composer, a producer and an executive" (Schwichtenberg 1993, 302). In 1999, she won a Grammy for Best Pop Album. Like Elvis, she is one of the most successful singers in the world.

Madonna, like Elvis in 1968, has transformed herself. Just as Elvis tried to recapture some of his spiritual and musical roots, Madonna has recently sought to recreate her original karma and charisma. Thus in 1998, Madonna's album *Ray of Light* was released. In this new album, Madonna's music is very different: new lyrics, new rhythms, and a new spirituality. She has an entirely new look. Like Elvis, Madonna has many different faces. When the Japanese couple is looking through a photo album in the movie *Mystery Train*, the woman shows her boyfriend a picture of Elvis and Madonna juxtaposed to prove they are the one and the same. Her boyfriend just rolls his eyes. Yet is the idea so ridiculous? After all, both Elvis and Madonna are musicians with a long, famous history. They both generate much controversy and gender bending in addition to their music. Even if Elvis and Madonna are not the same person, their lives as "celebrities" or "stars" display similar mythic themes. As the culture studies scholar, Gilbert Rodman, explains, "Like Elvis, Madonna is an unavoidable and inescapable presence across the cultural terrain: you may love her, you may hate her, but unless you can successfully dismiss the entire field of popular culture as irrelevant, it is virtually impossible to ignore her" (Rodman 1996, 65). Rodman notes that "both have achieved sufficient worldwide popularity that they are readily identifiable by their first names alone, both have been the focal points for national moral panics over their 'outrageous' public displays of sexuality, both attracted sizable following of 'silly, screaming girls' in the early parts of their careers, both are known for making great music and bad movies, and so on" (Rodman 1996, 65). Pamela Robertson also shares Rodman's view when she observes that "Madonna is as ubiquitous in academic discourse as she is in the popular media" (Robertson 1996, 117). Again the question is: what accounts for this ubiquity?

Of course, there are Elvis fans who would never concede that he could have anything in common with Madonna. But who is to say that Elvis was not the Madonna of his time? And vice versa? In his obituary for Elvis in *The Village Voice*, Lester Bangs eloquently concluded, "If love is truly going out of fashion, which I do not believe, then along with our nurtured indifference to each other will be an even more contemptuous indifference to each other's objects of reverence . . . We will continue to fragment in this manner, because solipsism holds all of the cards at present; it is a king whose domain engulfs even Elvis'" (Bangs 1987, 216). However, in the book,

The Madonna Connection, it is said that “in almost every regard here, Bangs got it right . . . But what if Lester Bangs got one minor detail wrong? What if, as it turns out, solipsism isn’t a king but a queen?” (Schwichtenberg 1993, 293). This queen is Madonna. But both king and queen reign because of their obsessive love of Self.

Let us consider some of the other parallels more closely. Musically, “Madonna has 16 consecutive top-five hits (only *Elvis* had more)” (Schwichtenberg 1993, 15). Even though *Elvis* and Madonna’s music come from different genres, they share one common element: their music encourages the body to move. As Susan McClary writes, “The particular popular discourse within which Madonna works—that of dance—is the genre of music most closely associated with physical motion” (McClary 1990, 152-3). And Michael Ventura expresses the same observation about *Elvis*: “*Elvis*’ singing was so extraordinary because you can hear the moves, infer the movies in his singing. No white man and few blacks have ever sung so completely with the whole body” (Ventura 1985, 152). Even Bono from U2 adds, “I believe *Elvis* was a genius . . . He acted on gut instinct and expressed himself by the way he moved his hips, by the way he sang down the microphone. That was his genius . . .” (Rodman 1996, 67). Both *Elvis* and Madonna encourage listeners to start dancing and moving. They both accomplish this through a style of rock music laced with sexuality.

Because they use sexuality to augment the emotion in their music, both *Elvis* and Madonna were at the center of controversy. Since they spark such debate, they are constantly in the public eye. Maybe it is because they are chronically criticized that the public embraces them so passionately. When her “Express Yourself” music video was released, many people were outraged since Madonna appeared in the video chained to a bed. It was not the sexual innuendo that was criticized, but that some fans felt her actions were the antithesis of feminism. This incident caused so much outrage that Madonna actually appeared on national television in an interview with Forrest Sawyer to defend herself. Madonna claims that since she chained herself to the bed, she was in control of her body (Robertson 1996, 134). The point is that Madonna continuously challenges the boundaries, and her audience never fails to respond. Even though Madonna is branded by some as “unworthy” of emulation, the public adores her. Why?

Part of the answer may be related to the fact that Madonna and *Elvis* encourage us to test conventional cultural boundaries. People may not be able to push the boundaries themselves, but they enjoy living vicariously through Madonna or *Elvis*. Even William McCranor Henderson, a fifty-two year old English professor and part-time *Elvis* impersonator, realized this when he noted that “Like many impersonators, I’ve learned that being *Elvis* promises to take me places I’d never go otherwise” (Henderson 1997, 294). The early *Elvis* also sparked much conflict over his choice of music. As Rodman says, “To be sure, in the eyes of many people the fact that *Elvis* was a white boy singing the blues was in itself a serious threat to the nation’s moral fiber. Similarly, the sexually charged mania that *Elvis* induced in legions of teenage fans struck many observers as more than enough reason to be alarmed by his rising star. Argu-

ably, however, it was the fact that he did both these things at once—that he excited *white* girls with *black* music—that resulted in the intensity of the moral panic surrounding him” (Rodman 1996, 57). Because of this controversy, Elvis received much media attention. His sexual gyrations, his stage presence, and raw sexuality caused much outrage in the conservative 1950s. Yet, like Madonna, Elvis may be branded as unworthy of emulation, but his popularity increases everyday. Perhaps one of the keys to the mystery of both Elvis and Madonna is that they embrace controversy in a way that frees all of us.

Besides raw sexuality, another trademark of Madonna is the blurring of gender distinctions. According to Robertson, “Madonna has sometimes been compared to performance rock stars, especially David Bowie, because of her shifting images play with gender roles. Gender bending in performance rock was, however, primarily a masculine privilege” (Robertson 1996, 127). So the simple fact that Madonna employs gender bending is itself a masculine trait! Madonna illustrates this gender bending in many of her music videos, including “Vogue.” In this video, Madonna cross dresses while the men do not. As Robertson explains, “Moreover, in Madonna’s gender bending, she identifies herself with a wide range of sex and gender roles, expanding the range of erotic representation and identification” (Robertson 1996, 131). Madonna’s gender bending appeals to the public because quite frankly, she has balls. She challenges the traditional lines of what is feminine and what is masculine. This gender bending makes her appealing to both men and women.

Ironically enough, Elvis was one of the first gender benders of the 1950s. According to Rodman, “Elvis’ major transgression against the sexual mores of the 1950s US culture was not that he persuaded a sexually repressed population to fuck more, but that his style, his fashion sense, and his onstage behavior celebrated the ‘feminine’ pleasures of the body over the more ‘masculine’ practices of the mind” (Rodman 1996, 67). As Rodman goes on to say, “Given the ways that Elvis challenged the traditional gender roles of the 1950s, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he is the Madonna of his era as much as she is the Elvis of hers” (Rodman 1996, 67). Elvis’ gender bending and sexuality were great scandals during the “innocent” 1950s just as Madonna’s actions were in the 1980s and 1990s.

There appears to be one basic difference between Madonna and Elvis. Thus Elvis seemed to be manipulated by others in his rise to stardom whereas Madonna always seems to know exactly what she is doing. Many critics cite her music videos as examples. For example, “Material Girl” shows quite clearly that she was “trying to intervene in and influence the shape that her own emerging mythology would take” (Schwichtenberg 1993, 308). Unlike Elvis, Madonna was trying to gain control of her career. For some critics, “Madonna is not just a star; she is about being a star. Her whole image is a constant reference to the process of stardom” (Schwichtenberg 1993, 308).

However, it is worth investigating this issue in more detail. It is a well-accepted fact that Colonel Parker controlled Elvis’ career. Yet even with Colonel Parker at the helm, Elvis was driven to despair. What about Madonna? Although it may appear

that Madonna controls her career and is content with it, there is evidence to the contrary. In her new *Ray of Light* album, Madonna sings, "I traded fame for love without a second thought. It all became a silly game, some things cannot be bought. Got exactly what I asked for, wanted it so badly. Running, rushing back for more I suffered fools, so gladly. *And now I find I've changed my mind*" (Drowned World/Substitute for Love). According to these words, Madonna does not really have complete control of her career. Obviously there are things about fame that are hard to handle. Many people interpret Elvis' song "Hurt" for the deep suffering he felt at the end of his life. In this song, Elvis sings, "I'm hurt, much more than you'll ever know. Yes darling, I'm so hurt." Both Elvis and Madonna have experienced pain and suffering in addition to fame and wealth. For Elvis, his story "seemingly begs for a correct retelling because somewhere along the line it went drastically, tragically, off course" (Schwichtenberg 1993, 304). Madonna's career has not tragically gone off course, but it is clear that she has felt pain and the absence of any true love. It seems as if Madonna is facing the same problems of fame that Elvis did. Because of his tragic downfall, much of Elvis' life has been made into a mythic story and it is clear that Madonna's career has many of the same mythic elements.

Madonna can be used to understand Elvis, but it is also possible to use Elvis to understand Madonna. Even Rodman argues, "What I want to suggest . . . is that the comparisons between Elvis and Madonna only work because the similarities between them flow in *both* directions, and that Madonna can be used as a means by which we might come to a new and better understanding of Elvis at least as well as he can be (and has been) used to help explain her" (Rodman 1996, 66). Madonna is still alive and producing new music. By watching her career, it is possible to find a deeper understanding of the processes of cultural myth making. They make great music, spark controversies, employ gender bending, and have been manipulated to some extent by becoming famous. They both came from humble backgrounds, yet are now the most famous people in the world. They both had *something* about them that makes them quasi-divine figures. Perhaps this mysterious "something" can be understood by examining the curious phenomenon of impersonation.

It is important to know that both Madonna and Elvis are impersonated, even though Elvis impersonators are better known. Elvis was popular because he had a certain charisma that people need to feel: he touched people. Because he is gone, people miss his physical presence and the thrill of his spiritual touch. Therefore, impersonators create a physical imitation of Elvis that has the power to again "touch" people in a direct and powerful way. Similarly, the importance of Madonna's charisma can be seen through her impersonators. The difference between Madonna and Elvis is that Elvis is dead, so we are left with only the impersonation of his spirit. Madonna still performs and makes public appearances, so people naturally tend to favor seeing the real thing. However, what will happen after Madonna dies? It is quite possible that her impersonators will continue to keep her charisma alive. People need to believe that their star is alive in some form.

What can be learned by comparing Elvis and Madonna? Both Elvis and Madonna challenged the people of their times to move their bodies. They sparked sexual controversy and both were also gender benders. Madonna has a very masculine sexuality while Elvis was the pretty mama's boy. Both push cultural boundaries. Elvis' pelvic gyrations were censored from television and Madonna's videos were also banned. By pushing these sexual and cultural boundaries, Elvis and Madonna helped to transform and liberate American societal mores. Both have received the ultimate tribute by attracting a group of impersonators who attempt to extend and continue the physical power of charisma.

In conclusion, it may be accurate to say Madonna is the Elvis of the 80s and 90s. And it may be permissible to say that Elvis in some ways was the Madonna of the 50s. What cannot be fully explained, however, is the quasi-religious power of fame in popular culture and the source and nature of charisma. An examination of Madonna only partially explains some of the strangeness of the Elvis cult. Finally it can simply be said that the meaning of both Madonna and Elvis remains truly mysterious.

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