



Elvis Presley in the South African musical imaginary

Harry Sewlall

Prof H Sewlall, University of Venda, Private Bag X5050, Thohoyandor 0950; email: Haripersad.Sewlall@univen.ac.za

First submission: 20 June 2014

Acceptance date: 2 June 2015

This paper derives its impetus from a question an elderly American woman once asked me: “Do people in South Africa know Elvis?” “Of course we South Africans know Elvis!” I replied. Or do we, really? Using a historiographic approach, this paper is an attempt to explore how Elvis Presley’s image was first imported into South Africa, especially during the Apartheid era when there was no television and media censorship was a fact of daily life. Additionally, this essay will reflect on the impact of the media – then and now – in creating images, fantasies and illusions in constituting the subjectivity of the Elvis of real life and the Elvis of sound, stage and celluloid in the South African musical imaginary.

1. Introduction: postmodern technologies and the marketing of Elvis's image

This paper has its genesis in my encounter with an elderly American couple on my first visit to Graceland, the home of Elvis Presley in Memphis, Tennessee in 2002 – the 25th anniversary of the death of the singer. Graceland, incidentally, was opened to the public on June 7, 1982 and on March 27, 2006 was declared a National Historic Landmark (Graceland). According to this online source, Graceland is said to be the second most visited edifice in the USA after the White House. Standing in a queue at one of the gift shops opposite the Graceland mansion, across Elvis Presley Boulevard, I came across a couple whom I had befriended earlier in the restaurant. Seeing that I had chosen a number of Elvis T-shirts, the woman asked if I was buying them all for myself. I replied that I was taking some for my two adult children as well as for some close friends back home in South Africa. The woman then asked me if people in South Africa knew of Elvis – a question I regarded with incredulity. Mercifully it was my turn at the till so I avoided answering what I felt to be an inane question and we hastily parted company. I had heard about the average American's lack of knowledge about Africa in general so I regarded the woman's question as benignly ignorant though I must confess it did annoy me at first.

Come to think of it, how did I, at the age of nine or so, born in the coastal city of Durban, a cultural backwater comparatively speaking, hear of Elvis for the first time in 1957, a year after he had conquered the world of popular entertainment with his early hits such as "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Jailhouse Rock"? South Africans today take for granted the proliferation of visual media that bring celebrities like Beyoncé, Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber to their homes and workplaces. But how did my generation of South Africans, historically designated as Whites, Coloureds, Africans and Indians, growing up in apartheid, pre-televisual South Africa, hear of Elvis Presley? So the elderly American's question was not so inane after all, considering that in the same year, 2002, while I was in the USA, I read a report in the respected *New York Times* that described the World Summit on Sustainable Development as taking place in the "mining town" of Johannesburg in South Africa. I was more offended than surprised by the reporter's ignorance about Johannesburg, my adopted home, which boasts the tallest building in Africa, namely, the Carlton Centre. A mining town? Indeed! Needless to say that since 2002 much has changed in how the general American public perceives South Africa, especially after the visits by the President of the USA, Barack Obama, to South Africa in 2012 and 2013 – the first a state visit, and the second to attend Nelson Mandela's memorial service.

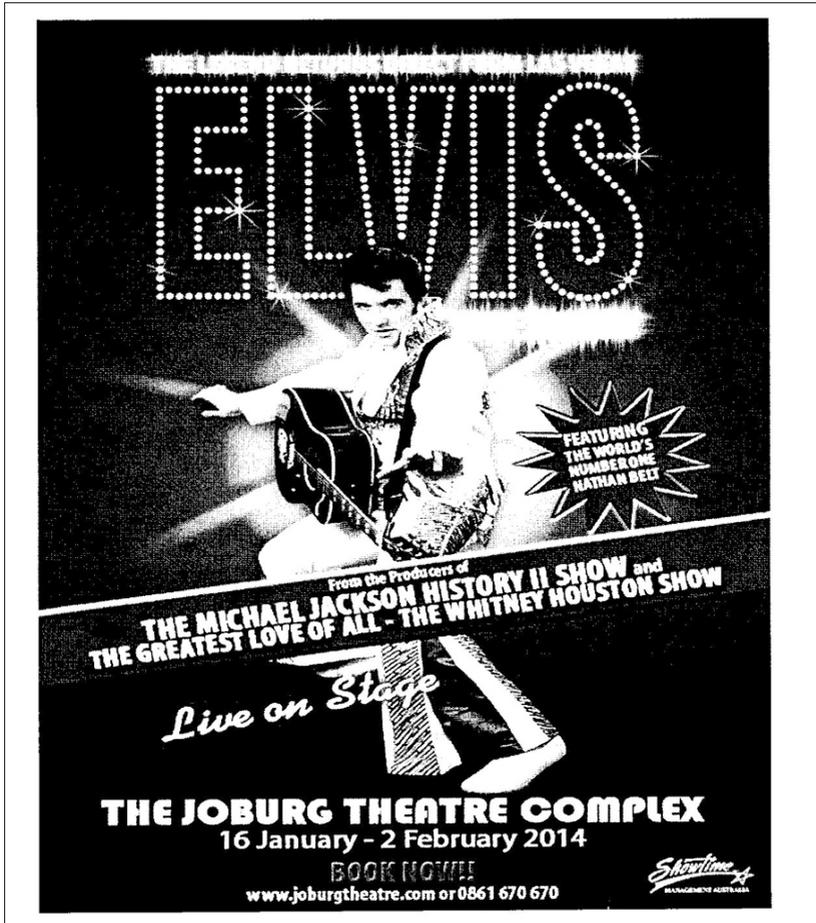


Figure 1: Poster advertising “Elvis the Show”, featuring Nathan Belt as Elvis, at the Joburg Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa in January – February 2014.

Popular music in the 20th Century depended for its commercial appeal on postmodern technologies such as the radio, the vinyl record and television, the latter playing a pivotal role when it came to promoting star power, especially if the star had charisma, or sex appeal as the tabloids say. A case in point is the late singer Rick (Ricky) Nelson, who was a teenage star on his parents’ TV sitcom *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, a regular feature on American television

from 1952 to 1966, watched by millions of viewers, including Elvis Presley. Ann Kaplan (1987: 32), in her analysis of MTV, the 24-hour music channel, refers to the televisual apparatus as a

postmodernist phenomenon in its very construction of a decentered historical spectator, and its obliteration of hitherto sacrosanct boundaries, such as those between 'fiction' and 'reality', or between the space of the viewing-subject and that within the TV screen.

The art of Elvis is imbricated in the postmodern world of the vinyl record, television and film technology. As a semiological text, his vocal and corporeal image was conveyed almost instantaneously across the world, aided by what Walter Benjamin refers to as the "age of mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin 2004 [1998]: 1236).

Television was the first medium to convey the corporeal image of Elvis nationally and internationally, making him the exemplar of the postmodern phenomenon of star power. David Halberstam, in his definitive work *The Fifties*, comments on the impact of the new medium of television on that decade:

It was in the fifties that the nation became wired for television, a new medium experimented with by various politicians and social groups. Ten years later television began to alter the political and social fabric of the country, with stunning consequences. (Halberstam 1993: ix)

According to Halberstam (1993: 456), there were two events that defined 1950s America: one was the Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* [which declared separate schools for black and white students unconstitutional] and the other was the arrival of Elvis Presley, whose "coming was nothing less than the start of a revolution" (*ibid.*). It was through his TV appearances on the Dorsey Brothers Show, the Milton Berle Show, and most significantly, the influential Ed Sullivan Show on which he appeared for a record-breaking three times in 1956, that the fame of the singer was founded and etched into the American imagination. It would take almost three decades after that before South Africans could experience the miracle of television owing to the ideological policies of the Nationalist Government, which came into power in 1948. The politician responsible for South Africa's late entry into the global village of television was Albert Hertzog. Barry Ronge, South African film critic and columnist, wrote:

He was a racist and tyrant who feared the future and its technology. He fought against the arrival of television in South Africa and told Parliament: 'Television is a destroyer of the human spirit and a bigger menace than the atom and

hydrogen bombs'. (Ronge, *Sunday Times Lifestyle Magazine*, August 7, 2011, p. 31)¹

Television was introduced to South Africans on a trial basis in 1976 with “safe” locally-produced programmes as a substitute for international programmes. By this time Elvis was past his prime as an entertainer and what South Africans saw on TV would have been through the medium of the video cassette, which brought about the near extinction of mega cinemas in South Africa in the 1980s. These videos would have included some of Elvis’s movies as well as the famous 1968 *NBC-TV Special*, which could be regarded as Elvis’s “Second Coming”, and the epoch-making *Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii* filmed in 1973, which had been relayed across the globe by satellite and watched by more than a billion people in 40 countries.

2. Elvis on radio

In the absence of television in South Africa, the radio – which not every household could afford in the 1950s and 60s – served as the most important link with the outside world, and for the teenager, the world of popular music. There were basically two radio stations that young people in the 1950s and 1960s tuned in to for their music, one being the state-run Springbok Radio, and the other, far more popular, LM Radio broadcast from outside South Africa. LM Radio, an abbreviation for Lourenço Marques Radio, was broadcast from the city of Lourenço Marques in the neighbouring Portuguese colony of Mozambique. In its heyday, LM Radio invited comparison with the renowned Radio Luxembourg because of its popularity and radical musical programming. If a song was deemed unfit for broadcast by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which controlled radio in the country, LM Radio would not hesitate to give it airplay. To illustrate this, after John Lennon made the remark about the Beatles being more popular than Jesus Christ, their music was banned by the SABC for a while.

Unlike Springbok Radio, LM Radio was a privately-owned station broadcasting to South Africa from 1933 to 1975. In 1975, after Mozambique’s independence from Portugal, Lourenço Marques was re-named Maputo and the radio station was taken over by Frelimo and subsequently nationalised. For popular culture in South Africa, that marked the end of LM Radio and an illustrious era of broadcasting, with popular deejays such as David Davies and

1 Another reason for the government to proscribe television is that the banned African National Congress, in exile at the time, was making use of television in Europe and Africa to advance their political cause for freedom.

Evelyn Martin and a host of South African broadcasters who had cut their teeth on LM Radio. LM Radio was famous for the *LM Hit Parade* – nothing could take its place on the social calendar of a pre-teen or teenager on a Sunday. The singer whose music ruled the airwaves on both Springbok Radio and LM Radio in the 1950s and early 1960s was, of course, Elvis Presley. The May 3, 1962 issue of *Personality*, a South African magazine, reported in its column “Elvis’s Corner” that “Elvis was king on the LM Hit Parade for 28 out of 53 weeks, with nine different #1 hits” (p. 97). The song “Little Sister” was #1 for seven consecutive weeks. On Springbok Radio, Elvis occupied #1 position for 14 consecutive weeks.

According to an online source Elvis Presley was first introduced to South African listeners in a programme titled “The Voice of America”, a series featuring popular American artists. It was aired on Springbok Radio from 1956 to 1960 (Springbok Radio Sound). Another programme on Springbok Radio, broadcast in the late 1950s, showcased Elvis. Titled “King of Rock”, the 15-minute programme was sponsored by Simba, a company that made, and still makes, what South Africans call potato “chips” as opposed to “crisps”. The legend on a packet of Simba chips was “King of Chips”, with a logo of a lion, the King of the Beasts, wearing a crown. So, Simba, the King of Chips, appropriately presented “King of Rock”, which began and ended with a few bars of its signature Elvis tune, “I Got Stung”. In between there would be two to three male contenders for the “crown” of the King of Rock. These were artists such as Cliff Richard (a big name in South Africa then and even now judging by his sold-out concerts in 2010), Johnny Restivo, Ricky Nelson, Marty Wilde, Buddy Holly, Tommy Steele, Roy Orbison and Pat Boone. Of course by the end of the 15-minute show it was quite obvious that none of these contenders was ever likely to topple the King from his throne despite the fact that from March 1958 till the end of February 1960 he was serving in the United States’ armed forces in Germany.

3. Elvis at the movies

For South Africans, Elvis’s vocal presence, provided by the vinyl record and the radio, was strongly complemented by his prolific output of films, beginning with his rise to international stardom in 1956. Before the army in March 1958, he had appeared in four films, co-starring with Richard Egan and Debra Paget in *Love me Tender* (1956), then as the main attraction in *Loving You* (1957), *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) and *King Creole* (1958). After the army came *G.I. Blues* (1960), *Flaming Star* (1960), *Blue Hawaii* (1961), *Wild in the Country* (1961), followed by 23 more, all made in the 1960s and most of them forgettable, or as Douglas Brode (2006: 273)

has written, “embarrassing artifacts – sad, silly reminders of a serious career we didn’t get to witness”. What we “didn’t get to witness” are the serious film projects that came Elvis’s way but which he declined under pressure from his manager, the bogus “Colonel” Tom Parker, who wanted his protégé to earn more and more money at the box office by making an average of three formulaic song-action-girl movies a year.

A child of the 1950s, and a teenager of the 1960s, I can only report on the early impact of Elvis on members of my community, a minority ethnic group in South Africa, from my own life world and experience. Apartheid laws drastically circumscribed social life in the country, as it did all other aspects of life, decreeing that places of entertainment, such as cinemas, be segregated. Fortunately for me and my friends, Durban, where we were born and where we received our early education, had a thriving cinema industry fostered by one or two wealthy business families from the local community. Thanks to one such family, the Rajabs, comprising six brothers who belonged to the Islamic faith, there were more cinemas catering to the Indian community than there were for the white community. Kalim Rajab, a great-grand nephew of the Rajabs, remembers the eldest of the dynasty, A K Rajab:

AK was simply the Godfather – still remembered as a peerless showman, dispensing favour and patronage in his world of cinema, music and entertainment. Under him, our cinemas the Shah Jehan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Naaz and Shahrezade thrived and became great cultural outlets for the community at a time when non-whites were the recipients of precious few cultural amenities (The Casbah).

The Shah Jehan, established in 1956, was the jewel of them all, boasting the largest screen in the Southern Hemisphere. Other luxurious cinemas in central Durban, showing mainly English-language films (as distinct from those dedicated to the exclusive screening of Indian films) were the Raj, Avalon and Scala. It was at some of these movie houses where the image of Elvis Presley, both outside the cinema and inside, regularly took on a form larger than life and transfixed his adoring fans for many years, irrespective of the quality of the films. These grand old cinemas, first the victims of the video industry, finally succumbed to inner city decay and no longer exist as cinemas. These once majestic buildings have been converted into warehouses, business premises and even churches.

A powerful regulatory body of the government of the day was its Board of Censors, which acted as the moral guardians of the citizens of South Africa. Any form of entertainment or reading matter that the state considered improper

was censored or banned outright. Films depicting interracial relationships or containing politically inflammatory material were routinely banned – sometimes only in Indian or “non-white” cinemas, sometimes only in white cinemas and sometimes in both. Not even Elvis Presley could escape the repressive machinery of South Africa’s censorship board. His film *Flaming Star*, in which the character played by Elvis is the product of an interracial marriage between an American-Indian woman and a white man, was banned in the country. Based on the novel *Flaming Lance* by Clair Huffaker, the film, directed by Don Siegel, a Hollywood stalwart, was released in December 1960 and was considered one of Elvis’s best dramatic performances. The movie was banned, according to one source, “due to its interracial theme” (Elvis Presley *Flaming Star*). Apart from interracial mixing, the film would have been banned for another good reason – “good” from the government’s point of view. According to Douglas Brode, in a critical study on Elvis’s films,

Flaming Star is a relic of an era of hope as to the integrationist dream that had been initiated by President Eisenhower and articulated by Dr. King. ... In its second half, *Flaming Star* anticipates the violent racial clashes of the new decade’s latter half. (Brody 2006: 79).²

Fortunately for South African Elvis fans, it seems that the Board of Censors was unaware of one biographical, and ironic, fact about Elvis at the time, otherwise – considering the kind of logic at work in the decisions of the censor board – the image of Elvis might have been totally banned in this country. Elaine Dundy reminds us that Elvis’s great-great-great maternal grandmother, named Morning Dove White, was a “full-blooded Cherokee Indian” (Dundy 1995 [1985]: 13).

4. Elvis in personality – a fortnightly magazine

The profiles of popular musicians, sports celebrities and movie stars have always been enhanced, embroidered and enriched by the tabloid press. An example of a popular tabloid in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s was the magazine *Personality*, the blurb of which was “A fortnightly magazine mainly about people”. By the 1970s the magazine had morphed into its more sensational version, *Scope Magazine*. In the late 1950s to the early 1960s, *Personality* brought Elvis to the homes of South Africans through “Elvis’s Corner”, written by Don MacFarlane, secretary of the Elvis Presley Fan Club of South Africa.

2 I saw *Flaming Star* about 40 years later after acquiring the DVD at Graceland in 2002. The character of the “half-breed” Pacer (Elvis), as well as that of his mother, dies in a conflict with white settlers.

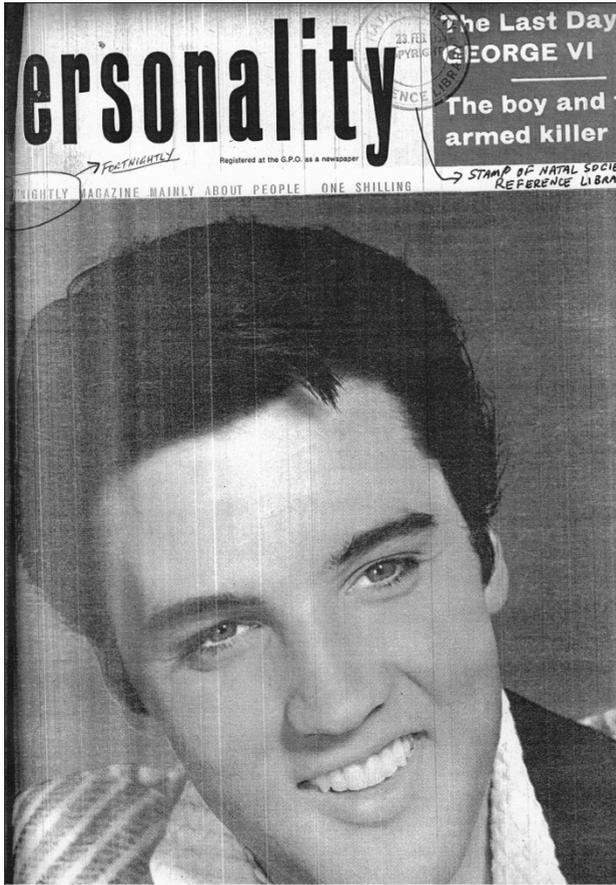


Figure 2: Elvis on the cover of the fortnightly South African magazine *Personality*

Remembering this magazine from my late childhood, I phoned several media houses and finally managed to track down several issues of *Personality* dating from 1959 to 1962 in the archives of the Pietermaritzburg Municipal Library in KwaZulu-Natal (Church Street, Pietermaritzburg). “Elvis’s Corner” was a sincere effort to keep Elvis fans informed, thrilled and titillated by news and gossip about Elvis. I say “sincere” because with hindsight one could regard some of the so-called facts about Elvis as naïve, perhaps simplistic, or at worst misinformed. Here is a question asked by a group of fans calling themselves “The Strandfontein

Rebels” of Cape Town: “Why did they remove Elvis’s tonsils? We are so worried!” The writer of the column replies: “Stop worrying, ‘Rebels’ ... El still has his tonsils. He had two attacks of tonsillitis during the past six months, but there was no operation. The attacks were mild” (*Personality*, January 14, 1960, p.59). The writer ends his column in a typically chatty tone: “And with that it is time to say goodbye once more – until next time. Thanks for your continued interest!” A month before Elvis’s release from the US Army in March 1960, Don MacFarlane says in a column titled “When our boy returns”: “He will also visit Australia for five days and do two shows a day shortly after his release. South Africa? Sorry, fans. No hope for at least five to six years. Britain, yes ... but that’s about all” (*Personality*, February 11, p. 63). We know that Elvis never toured Australia or Britain, no matter how much he might have longed to do so. I do not think the writer meant to mislead his readers, but as a tween I was gullible enough to believe every word about my idol! And so were others.

One particular myth that “Elvis’s Corner” perpetuated is that Graceland is “the home [Elvis] built for his mother” (*Personality*, April 7, 1960, p. 45). In the next issue we read: “As I write these words, Elvis is probably relaxing at his home just outside Memphis, Tennessee; the home he had built for his late mother; the home his friends are referring to as ‘Elvis’s Heartbreak House’ these days, because it is filled with so many sad and bittersweet memories for him” (*Personality*, April 21, 1960, pagination damaged). We know that Graceland was bought by Elvis and not “built” by him for his mother. The present Graceland mansion, according to one source, was built in 1939 by a Dr Thomas Moore and his wife Ruth Moore (Elvis Presley’s Graceland). When Elvis bought it in March 1957 for just under US\$102 000, it was being used by the Graceland Christian Church for prayer services.

Personality, June 2, 1960
69



What Elvis believes in

by DON MacFARLANE, secretary of the Johannesburg Elvis Presley Fan Club

A LITTLE old man stood along with the rest of the mob outside the Hollywood hotel where Elvis was staying just before Easter this year. And as the famous young man’s big white car came down the long, palm-lined street, the mob surged forward, carrying the old man with it.

Elvis stepped out of the hotel, into the car, and the old man thrust a pamphlet into his hand. Elvis’s bodyguard were for throwing it away, but the singer took it and read the message “Easter is coming. Are you going to church?”

He remembered an Easter many years ago His mother and father, had bought a new suit for him, from money they had been saving for more than a year. And they had dressed him up and then, each holding him by a hand, they had walked a couple of miles down the dusty road towards the church.

He remembered another Sunday morning in 1956. He and his people had walked into church and that bunch of kids, standing just inside the church doors—actually inside the church—had begun to shout and scream and squeal. He and his people hadn’t even been able to get beyond where they stood.

* * *

It was a few minutes after 10 o’clock the following morning when Elvis, alone, pulled up at the church, an Assembly Church of God, in downtown Los Angeles. Her got out of the car, walked to the entrance and went inside, too.

From the rear of the Church he could see that the services had already begun. The church was full.

He had just turned to walk to the side of the church when from the corner of his eye, he saw someone signalling him. And then, suddenly, it began—the murmuring, the turning of more heads, and more and more. Until, finally, the entire congregation was facing Elvis, and the minister, shaming at first, then realising what was going on, stopped what he was saying and called out instead: “Young man?”

Elvis looked up at him.

“Would you,” the minister asked, “prefer to continue standing there? Or—?” He smiled “—would you like to take advantage of this free space up here?”

THIS little incident in El’s life (it happened at Easter this year, while he was in Hollywood to discuss his next picture—this time for 20th Century Fox and to be called *Live Wire!*) should answer the questions so many of his fans have sent in to this page concerning El’s religious beliefs. ●

Figure 3: The column “Elvis’s Corner” in the June 2, 1960 issue of *Personality*.

An episode in Elvis's love life of special interest to South Africans and *Personality* was his relationship with his leading lady in the movie *G.I. Blues*. During and after Elvis's filming of the movie, South Africans were titillated by the reported love affair between Elvis and the South African-born Juliet Prowse. The July 28, 1960 issue of *Personality* carries the following headline: "Elvis has found love ... and the girl who has captured his heart is a South African" (p. 59). The article begins,

It should be a well-known fact by now that Elvis Presley has never really been in love with any girl. He has known many, and Anita Wood and a few others came as close to winning his heart as any girl – until now. ... *And now it has happened.* And the girl of his choice happens to be a girl from Vanderbijlpark, near Vereeniging here in the Union [which is what South Africa was referred to before it became a Republic]; a girl who in one short year has achieved stardom in Hollywood" (p. 59).

But there seems to be one hitch in the relationship: "Juliet is, at this moment, very friendly with Frank Sinatra. ... but [Elvis] hopes to capture her by himself and Frank Sinatra had better look out!" However, on September 22, 1960, "Elvis's Corner" informed readers that while Elvis and Juliet Prowse were still close, the singer had another love interest in the person of "a blonde beauty by name of Tuesday Weld" (p.63). Don MacFarlane concludes his column: "This is the friendship all Hollywood is watching at the moment – and on this page you'll find the real inside story, direct from Hollywood" (p.63). To the writer's credit, he acknowledges in a subsequent column that he might have been duped about these stories: "Concerning his girl friends: Fans who have told me their worries about Elvis's dates with Juliet Prowse and Tuesday Weld can stop worrying. Investigations show that publicity is at the back of the stories. I am convinced that Elvis hasn't yet found *the girl*" (No pagination: page damaged but most likely the October issue of 1960). I can only sympathise with the writer who, as the secretary of the Johannesburg Elvis Presley Fan Club, must have had the unenviable task of trying to sift fact from fiction to keep Elvis fans entertained month after month after month for several years.

5. The Elvis-Cliff wars

No account of Elvis's impact in South Africa would be complete without mention of some of his rivals in his South African fan base as well as his arch-rival, the "British Elvis" – Cliff Richard. Apart from singers such as Eddie Cochran, Ricky Nelson, Buddy Holly, Bill Haley and Pat Boone – all those who had filled the vacuum when Elvis went into the army – the one artiste who garnered almost as many fans in South Africa as Presley was the British rocker Cliff Richard. This is

unsurprising as Cliff, according to a survey by *New Musical Express* for the decade from 1959 to 1968, was Britain's best male singer for eight of those 10 years in the British Male Singer category (Frith 1978: 148). In the World Male category for the same period, Elvis was number one for nine years. The only year he missed was 1963, when Cliff Richard beat him.

Cliff Richard has always had a huge following in South Africa. His popularity at times eclipsed that of Elvis, especially in the Indian community of Durban where allegedly racist remarks attributed to Elvis cost him many fans. Another factor inimical to Elvis's image was his seeming reluctance to visit South Africa, which made him look standoffish, alienating some people who otherwise admired him. Cliff, on the other hand, endeared himself to audiences across the racial spectrum. Capitalising on the notion that the somatic presence of the rock star is what appeals more to fans than just the records, Cliff had the edge over Elvis because he began touring the world almost from the beginning of his career.

Cliff was a regular visitor to South Africa, with his first tour with the Shadows in March 1961 when he performed to a segregated Indian audience in Durban's Raj Cinema despite the objections of Indian intellectuals and political leaders. In the 1970s, when Cliff was deeply involved in Christian evangelism, he visited the country and performed mainly gospel music free of charge at a sports stadium in the impoverished Indian group area of Chatsworth (Durban). The fact that Cliff (or Harry Webb) had been born in India was indeed a factor that (illogically) influenced his Indian fan base in South Africa. If the naïve masses of Indian fans thought that Cliff Richard shared a common ancestry with them, they were not the only ones to be deceived. Cliff's biographer, Steve Turner, commented on the singer's "dark good looks" (Turner 2008 [1993]: 21):

When he was a teenager in Cheshunt [England] the question for his friends was not whether he had Indian blood, but from which parent it came. Most of them plumped for Mrs Webb [Cliff's mother] because she was most like Cliff in appearance and had the same darker skin tone. (*ibid.*)

During playtime at school it was not uncommon for Elvis and Cliff fans to argue loudly about the merits of their respective idols! The rivalry between Elvis fans and Cliff fans was not confined to the Indian community in Durban. It was apparent in other parts of South Africa such as when the magazine *Personality* introduced a "Cliff's Corner" to alternate with "Elvis's Corner". Responding to fan letters, Don Thomas, writer of "Cliff's Corner", wrote on September 7, 1961:

And now, here are a few of your letters: Magdalene Pelsler of Germiston is strongly against a Cliff Richard corner. She writes: 'To have a Cliff Corner one fortnight and an Elvis Corner the next,

is really expecting too much of Elvis fans. As it is, Elvis's Corner is very often only half a page'. (*Personality*, p. 63).

To appease irate Elvis fans, in the December 14, 1961 issue of *Personality*, Don Thomas writes in "Cliff's Corner": "Relax, Elvis fans! There'll be a big, big feature on your boy next fortnight – and after that he and Cliff will have their Corners in a ratio of three Elvis's to one Cliff's Corner" (p.39). So Elvis is King again!"

6. Elvis in the South African media in recent times

The sign of Elvis in the South African media is very rarely, if ever, inscribed as the "Hillbilly Cat" of 1956. Nor is he represented as the clean-cut, post-army figure of his 1960s movie career – the one in jacket and tie as in *It Happened at the World's Fair*, or *Girls, Girls, Girls* or *Girl Happy*. He is usually presented as the Las Vegas Elvis in his high-collared, rhinestone-studded jumpsuits, performing songs such as "Blue Suede Shoes", "A Big Hunk of Love", or "Suspicious Minds", his last international #1 hit recorded in 1969. He is quintessentially the hip-swivelling, lip-pouting, growling King of Rock 'n' Roll, notwithstanding that three of the four Grammy Awards he won were for gospel music and not Rock 'n' Roll. He is seldom remembered as the crooner who once set up Dean Martin as his musical exemplar and who sang numbers like "It's Now or Never" (a huge hit in South Africa at that time), or "Sentimental Me", or "Loving You".

From time to time now, the name of Elvis, in a news report, pastiche or caricature, features in the South African media. The name or image of Elvis is sometimes conjured in the most bizarre manner as instanced in a front-page report on 14 June 2011 in *The Star*, a widely circulated Johannesburg daily. The banner headline reads, "Police Day Splurge Probe". The report is on the excessive money spent by the Minister of Police on food when he hosted a day in honour of the South African Police in 2010. Interrogating such wanton expenditure, Dianne Barnard, spokesperson for the opposition party, asks: "Did they resurrect Elvis Presley?" One can only infer that in the mind of this politician Elvis represents excess, even gluttony. She would not be the only one who thinks so. Albert Goldman, noted for his two scurrilous books on Elvis, wrote:

Once likened to a young Dionysus, driving his demented followers into screaming ecstasies, Elvis is actually a lot closer to the infant Gargantua, that giant baby whose prodigious appetites for food and drink are matched by an equally awesome craving for creature comforts, like the voluptuous satisfaction of using the soft, downy neck of a goose to wipe his ass. (Goldman 1991: 8)



Figure 4: Editorial cartoon that appeared in the Johannesburg daily *The Star* on 3 July 2009, a week after Michael Jackson's death.

The sign of Elvis, as Roland Barthes might have said, is arbitrary; it means different things to different people. A week after Michael Jackson's death in 2009, *The Star* featured an editorial cartoon in which the central figure of Elvis welcomes a deathly-pale and emaciated Michael Jackson to the Pearly Gates of rock 'n' roll Heaven.³ Elvis is behind a wrought-iron gate adorned with the word "Graceland" and Jackson is behind a gate named "Neverland". The Elvis figure, with exaggeratedly curled lips, says, "...And another great thing about this place – No paparazzi". At the bottom right-hand side of the cartoon is a newspaper vendor holding a placard that reads "From a King to a Jacko". One can speculate whether the average young South African reader, raised on rap music, hip hop and *kwaito*, would have made much sense of the cartoon. However, it is likely that in the mind of the informed reader of *The Star*, notwithstanding his or her age, the various elements in the cartoon would cohere sufficiently to summon up a smile. Such a reader would be able to link the drug-related deaths of these two superstars and appreciate the significance of Elvis's welcoming words that there would be no paparazzi to hound them in rock 'n' roll heaven. Apart from the hairstyle, curled lips and Napoleonic collar in the representation of the Elvis figure, the only textual clue that points to the Elvis personality is the word "King"

3 Drawn by Dov Fedler, the cartoon appeared on page 14 of *The Star* on 03 July 2009, a week after Jackson's death on 26 June. This newspaper had reported that Jackson's remains might be moved to his residence, Neverland, if the legal obstacles incurred by the late singer's debts were removed.

on the placard, “From a King to a Jacko”, alluding to his enduring sobriquet “The King of Rock”. The initiated reader would revel in the paronomasia on the placard, an inversion of the title of the popular song “From a Jack to a King”, which Elvis also covered in the last phase of his career.

To return to the question posed by the elderly American woman in Graceland, Memphis, “Do people in South Africa know Elvis?” the answer would be a resounding “Yes!” But which Elvis are we speaking of? The early hip-gyrating Elvis? The Elvis of the movies? The Las Vegas Elvis in his jumpsuits executing karate moves as part of his stage routine? Or the bloated and pathetic-looking Elvis we saw a few months before his death? If we appealed to Lacan’s theoretical notion of the imaginary as being constituted of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, then all the above options assume relevance when we speak of Elvis in the South African musical imaginary. To paraphrase Ilana Mountian (2009: 205), the imaginary would encompass aspects such as images, fantasies and illusions that could be viewed as elements that both constitute and are constituted by society. At this juncture, the image of Elvis, or how South Africans constitute the gestalt of Elvis, exists in several modalities.

Firstly, there is his vast discography, which continues to impress musicologists with its wide vocal range. This is the real Elvis, the singer whose talent has few parallels in the history of popular music. Compact disks of Elvis’s greatest hits, or the “essential” Elvis, or the “Christmas” Elvis, continue to keep record companies in business. Secondly, we have the Elvis of our fantasy in his filmography. However, present day South Africans are exposed to a limited range of generally inferior Elvis films that are screened repeatedly by those who purport to entertain us: pay channel DSTV and state-controlled channels SABC 1, 2, and 3. Thirdly, we have a vibrant culture of Elvis impersonators, both Elvis look-alikes and sing-alikes. The *Sunday Times* of 16 May 2010 carried a report and a picture of an Elvis impersonator from Cape Town by the name of James Marais, aged 37, who was set to participate in an Elvis world cup in Cardiff, Wales on July 4. James Marais had won a local competition of Elvis tribute artists organised by Ann and Jan du Rand of Storms River in the Eastern Cape. I finally traced Ann du Rand and here is what she says in an email dated 20 May 2011:

Every second year there is a competition overseas for the best Elvis Tribute Artists in the world and we had a competition amongst some of the SA Elvis Tribute Artists and sponsored the South African Elvis Tribute Artist, James Marais from Cape Town. James did very well, came 4th in the Elvis World Cup in

Cardiff, Wales in 2010. (Ann du Rand – Email correspondence, 20 May 2011)⁴

Since Elvis's death in 1977, there have been one or two Elvis impersonators from abroad visiting South Africa. The first one, whom I saw at the Playhouse Theatre in Durban, was simply called Alan. His show was titled "Alan is Elvis". He was a credible sound-alike and not too bad as a look-alike. One impersonator who has visited South Africa three times – a good look-alike and an excellent sound-alike – is the American musician Nathan Belt, reputed to be one of the best Elvis impersonators in the world. I have seen him twice: on his second visit in Johannesburg at the Joburg Theatre in December 2013 – January 2014 and in March 2015, when he changed most of the songs in his repertoire in response to requests from his fans. It was at the first performance in 2014 when I discovered that there are Elvis Presley fan clubs in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Leaflets promoting the fan club Blue Suede Heaven (bluesuedeheaven@gmail.com) were on the seats of the theatre. A facsimile of the poster advertising the performer, who has an uncanny likeness to the real Elvis Presley in his thirties, appears in the introductory section of this paper.

7. Conclusion

Timothy Scheurer (1989: 110), in summing up his tribute in an essay titled "Elvis Presley and the Myth of America", writes:

Elvis's image and music reconciled some troubling currents in the culture of the 1950s and in the process negated the prejudices and conventions of the past while reaffirming the positive regenerative forces of the myth of America.

For Americans, even in the second decade of the 21st Century, Elvis is a mythical figure who has inspired an army of rock stars. Almost 60 years after Elvis took America and the world by storm, his image and what he represents are a part of history and he himself has become an artefact and subject for study in the field of Popular Culture. In South Africa, where there is no academic journal dedicated to Popular Culture *per se*, studies related to popular musicians, including jazz, are making inroads into journals traditionally focusing on literary studies. *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*, for example, featured two articles on musicians in its June 2010 issue, one on the South African singer-songwriter

4 Ann and Jan owned an Elvis-themed diner in Storms River. When revising this article in March 2015, I tried to contact Ann to get an update on their Elvis-centred activities but failed to do so. I phoned the diner and discovered that the couple had sold the business. I could not get a contact number from the waitron I spoke to.

David Kramer, written by Dawid de Villiers, and the other on Elvis Presley, written by me. Titled “‘Image, Music, Text’: Elvis Presley as a Postmodern, Semiotic Text”, my article explores the mystique of the Elvis image as a ubiquitous semiotic text.

If there is a dearth of scholarship on Elvis Presley or the rock ‘n’ roll era of the 1950s in South Africa, it is because Elvis is neither an immediately recognisable cultural template nor a musical role model for the majority of South Africans. However, many indigenous South Africans are familiar with Elvis (and other Western performers of the past five decades) and they are the ones – admittedly comprising a tiny minority – who attend live shows at large venues such as sport stadiums and casinos across the country. Just as Elvis Presley embodied in his musical persona the racial contradictions of American society – a white man who sounded like a black man – his music has always transcended the racial, national and international boundaries that exist in modern societies. While many black South Africans were put off from listening to Elvis in the 1950s because of his rumoured racist statements about blacks, it is quite a different story today. Here is an excerpt from a theatre review of a show titled *Elvis Presley: The Wonder of You* staged at the Guild Theatre in East London (South Africa) in March 2008:

It shook, rattled and rolled my stoic perception of Elvis as being a white male with dark hair and a funky smile. Let me explain. Although former Idols contestant Rory McLaren did the main Elvis songs, each member of the backing band got a chance to do their version of the ‘King’s’ greatest hits. ... Of course the singers wore the appropriate attire as well. There was the golden [lamé] jacket, the comeback special black leather suit and the flamboyant Las Vegas-era suits (Van Zyl, *Daily Dispatch*, 4 March 2008: 12).

For the average American, South Africa may be a blip somewhere in Africa so he or she could be forgiven for thinking that Elvis’s fame has not spread to this part of “darkest Africa”. But the semiotic sign of Elvis in South Africa, varied as it may be in its modality, is very much alive and vibrant in the South African musical imaginary despite the country’s late entry into the global village of television. Apart from the ubiquitous image of Elvis appearing in a multiplicity of forms – from cartoons to impersonators – South Africa can even boast its own version of Graceland, albeit as “kitsch architecture” (Sewlall 2010: 54). A two-hour drive from Johannesburg would bring the visitor to an edifice named “Graceland”, in the province of Mpumalanga. This imposing structure, with a colonnaded façade inspired by Elvis’s Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee, is a hotel and casino resort with photos and other memorabilia of Elvis in the foyer of the complex, including the famed photo of Elvis sparring with his guest, Muhammad Ali. In his biography of Elvis, Albert Goldman (1991: 14) writes: “An American king, Elvis saw his empire extend around the globe, until it comprised even the remotest regions, the most

exotic peoples." There is an unintended irony in Goldman's metaphor: Elvis's empire did indeed extend around the globe, including South Africa where it was established in 1956 and is still going strong almost 60 years later.

Bibliography

- BENJAMIN W (2004 [1998]) The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Rivkin J and Ryan M (eds) *Literary theory: an anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- BRODE D (2006) *Elvis cinema and popular culture*. London: McFarland & Co.
- DU RAND A (2011) Email correspondence on 20 May 2011. <ann@elvisfestival.co.za>
- DUNDY E (1995 [1985]) *Elvis and Gladys*. London: Pimlico.
- ELVIS PRESLEY FLAMING STAR. <[HTTP://WWW.XTIMELINE.COM/EVT/VIEW.ASPSX?ID=22694](http://www.xtimeline.com/EVT/VIEW.ASPSX?ID=22694)> DATE ACCESSED: 8 JUNE 2011.
- ELVIS PRESLEY'S GRACELAND. <[WWW.ELVIS.COM.AU](http://www.elvis.com.au)> DATE ACCESSED: 21 JUNE 2011
- FRITH S (1978) *The sociology of rock*. London: Constable.
- GOLDMAN A (1982 [1981]) *Elvis*. New York: Penguin.
- GRACELAND. <[HTTP://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG](http://en.wikipedia.org)> DATE ACCESSED: 27 FEBRUARY 2014.
- HALBERSTAM D (1993) *The Fifties*. New York: Villard Books.
- KAPLAN AE (1987) *Rocking around the clock: music television, postmodernism, and consumer culture*. London: Methuen.
- LM RADIO <[HTTP://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/LM_RADIO](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LM_RADIO)> DATE ACCESSED: 25 SEPTEMBER 2007.
- MOUNTIAN I (2009) Some questions around social imaginary and discourse analysis for critical research. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 7: 205-222.
- RONGE B (2011) Local residents would like to reopen the Brixton Tower. Let's hope the bureaucrats don't get in the way. *Sunday Times Lifestyle Magazine*, August 7: 31. Published by Avusa Media Ltd.
- SCHEURER T (ed) (1989) Elvis Presley and the Myth of America. In: *American Popular Music: Readings from the Popular Press, Vol. II - The Age of Rock*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- SEWLLALL H (2010) "Image, music, text": Elvis Presley as a postmodern, semiotic construct. *Journal of Literary Studies* 26 (2): 44 - 57.
- SPRINGBOK RADIO SOUND <[HTTP://WWW.SPRINGBOKRADIO.COM/VOA.HTML](http://www.springsbokradio.com/VOA.html)> DATE ACCESSED: 11 MAY 2011.
- THE CASBAH (2015) Grey Street Casbah & Surrounding News, 01 March 2015. greystreetcasbah@gmail.com
- TURNER S (2008 [1993]) *Cliff Richard: The Biography*. Oxford, England: Lion Books.
- VAN ZYL R (2008) Elvis wows EL. *Daily Dispatch*, East London (South Africa). 4 March: p 12.