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Susan Doll, PhD

Film and pop culture historian

Elvis
FOR
DUMMIES®

by Susan Doll, PhD



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Susan Doll, PhD, is a film and popular culture historian who has written several books on Elvis Presley. Born in Ohio, she received a B.A. in Art History from Kent State University and an MA in Art History from Ohio State University before seeing the light and changing her career path to focus on art forms from the 20th century. She then received an MA and PhD in Radio, Television, & Film Studies from Northwestern University.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Bill Burk (1933–2008), a Memphis newspaper reporter who covered Elvis for over 20 years before founding *Elvis World* magazine. In 13 books on Elvis, Bill specialized in uncovering information no one else could get or in finding the truth behind the myth. A mentor, supporter, and friend to me, Bill Burk is missed in the world of Elvis's fans, writers, and colleagues.

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Introduction

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Elvis Presley needs no introduction, but he does need an updated evaluation of his life and career and a sincere appreciation of his contributions to popular American music. After years of fan hyperbole, accusations and rumors by former friends and associates, and bad jokes about fried banana sandwiches, it's time to give Elvis his due — and that's just what this book does.

Even though Elvis died at age 42, he managed to accomplish more than several entertainers combined. Elvis integrated different styles of music to create the sound called “rockabilly,” a musical thread that made up the fabric of a then-new genre referred to as “rock 'n' roll.” Openly singing the songs of African Americans (and properly acknowledging their influence on his sound), Elvis helped focus industry and audience attention on blues and R&B. He achieved integration musically, but the country struggled with the concept socially.

Drop-dead handsome and charismatic, Elvis parlayed his rock 'n' roll notoriety into movie stardom. A decade later, after a new generation of rock 'n' rollers had forgotten him, and the mainstream press had written him off as obsolete, Elvis reinvented himself to take the stage once more to become a 1970s superstar. Gaudy, glamorous, and glorious, Elvis filled Vegas hotel showrooms and huge concert venues with old and new fans who wanted to see a legend.

Elvis's career evolved through many phases, absorbed a variety of musical styles, and involved all arenas of entertainment. Some people are fans of his early rock 'n' roll music; others are fans of his movies; still others prefer the gaudy splendor of the Vegas concert performer. Elvis's widespread appeal developed from a diverse career that as the title of one of his albums suggests truly held something for everybody. Likewise, this book about Elvis contains something of interest for everyone, whether you're an Elvis fan, a pop culture enthusiast, a lover of indigenous American music, or someone looking for a fascinating story about fame and fortune.

Elvis left behind no autobiography, memoirs, or even a definitive interview. Throughout much of his career, any interaction with the media was through press conferences, which aren't conducive to revealing personal information. As a matter of fact, you could say that Elvis's approach to the press was to conceal information more than to reveal it. Consequently, direct access to Elvis's personal feelings, beliefs, and opinions on any given topic is rare. Most of the time, information on his feelings and opinions has come to us secondhand through memoirs by former associates and family members, many of whom have agendas or, at the very least, fuzzy memories. I have made every effort to include Elvis's perspective on important aspects of his

life and career, but in many cases, it just isn't possible. Ironically, for one of the most written-about entertainers of the 20th century, Elvis lacks a direct voice in his own story.

About This Book

Elvis For Dummies covers all phases of Elvis's career, from his musical influences as a teenager in Memphis and his first recordings for Sun Studio to his final concert and continued popularity even in death. All the celebrated events that everyone knows about are featured as well — his controversial hip-swiveling performing style, the famous *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance, his much-maligned movie career, his marriage to Priscilla Beaulieu, and his fascination with jumpsuits. In addition, I shine a spotlight on little-known details about his life to provide you with a well-rounded portrait of the 20th century's most famous personality.

Also covered are the anniversary celebrations, memorial events, important posthumous record releases, and other post-death phenomena that keep his memory alive and introduce his music to new generations. Most importantly, I explain the significance of the events of his career, analyze the meaning of the music, and put Elvis into a cultural perspective. The question most often asked about Elvis is "why." Why is he still so famous; why does he still sell records; why does he continue to draw new fans; and why does he continue to be the number-one moneymaking celebrity. By the end of this book, you'll understand why Elvis remains such a presence in our culture.

You don't need to read this book in chronological order to discover Elvis. Though the structure follows the chronology of Elvis's life, each chapter is written to stand on its own. Feel free to select any chapter in any part and start reading without worrying about becoming confused. You can move around the book as you like, picking your favorite Elvis topics to read first.

Conventions Used in This Book

I use several conventions consistently throughout this book, including the following:

- ✔ Most of the time, I refer to Elvis by his first name because the entertainment industry, fans, the media, and average Americans tend to recognize him by his first name. Partly because of his level of fame and partly because of the uniqueness of his first name, Elvis usually is the only name needed. However, when making formal declarations (or just for the sake of variety), I sometimes use the full name Elvis Presley and, occasionally, Presley.

- ✔ Elvis's longtime manager, Colonel Tom Parker, goes by many names, befitting an old-school carnival manager who was always working an angle. Like those who knew him, I refer to him as the Colonel, Colonel Parker, or simply Parker.
- ✔ When chronicling the success of Elvis's records, I refer to their chart status, which refers to *Billboard* magazine's music charts. *Billboard* has been devoted to the music industry since the 1930s, and its charts track the popularity of recordings. The methods of calculation have evolved with the ever-changing music industry, but the *Billboard* charts remain the standard measure for rating songs in the U.S. The two most important charts are the Hot 100, or Top 100, which ranks the top 100 songs, and the *Billboard* 200, formerly called the Top LPs or Top Albums chart, which tracks album sales. When I mention that an Elvis song became number one, or that he enjoyed many number-one records, I'm referring to the first position on the Hot 100.
- ✔ Another measure of success for a recording artist is the number of gold, platinum, and multi-platinum records accumulated during a career. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) awards (or certifies) gold, platinum, or multi-platinum status based on the number of records sold through retail and other ancillary markets. Certification isn't automatic, however. The record company must request it and pay to have sales of a given album or single audited. To receive gold status, a single or album must sell 500,000 units. In 1976, platinum status was instituted by the RIAA for albums selling one million units. In 1984, multi-platinum status was announced for records that doubled, tripled, or quadrupled their platinum amounts. Even though Elvis died in 1977, the Elvis Presley Estate and RCA (his record label) asked the RIAA to audit sales of his records to keep his statistics up-to-date.
- ✔ I use **bold** text to highlight key words in bulleted lists.
- ✔ When I introduce a new term that you may not be familiar with, I use *italics* and define the term within the text.

What You're Not to Read

My fondest hope is that you pore over every word in this book, but if you're short on time (perhaps because you're busy listening to Elvis's albums and planning your next trip to Graceland), feel free to skip the following:

- ✔ **Sidebars:** If you're reading in a hurry or skimming for essential information, you can skip over the sidebars, which appear in gray boxes throughout the book. Although the information I include in the sidebars is fun and interesting, it isn't essential to the main points.

- ✓ **Any text accompanied by the Trivia icon:** You can amaze your friends and family with the details of Elvis's life and career if you read the text next to the Trivia icons (see the icon pictures at the end of this introduction), but these tidbits aren't essential to understanding Elvis's importance.

Foolish Assumptions

As I started writing *Elvis For Dummies*, I made some assumptions about the folks who would be interested in this book. First and foremost, I assume the obvious — that you're interested in discovering something about Elvis. I also made some other assumptions. Perhaps one of the following applies to you:

- ✓ You recognize Elvis Presley and can sing along to "Jailhouse Rock" or another famous tune, but you want to know why he warrants such fame.
- ✓ You have seen dozens of books on Elvis Presley and were looking for the one that really explains the meaning of Elvis.
- ✓ You have always wanted to go to Graceland but don't know what to expect.

How This Book Is Organized

Elvis For Dummies is divided into five parts. Four sections relate to the phases of Elvis's career, and one consists of useful reference lists.

Part I: From Rockabilly to Rock 'n' Roll

Starting at the beginning with Elvis's childhood in Tupelo, Mississippi, this part discusses the importance of his Southern background in the development of his sound. That sound was evident from his very first recordings in 1954 for tiny Sun Records, a regionally based company owned and operated by Sam Phillips. Phillips helped develop Elvis's musical style, eventually dubbed "rockabilly," which represents the start of Presley's career. Elvis's regional success led to a nationally based record contract in 1956 with RCA, which tweaked his style and called it rock 'n' roll. Elvis's association with rock 'n' roll, combined with his unique performing style, created a furor in the mainstream press and inflamed the public.

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