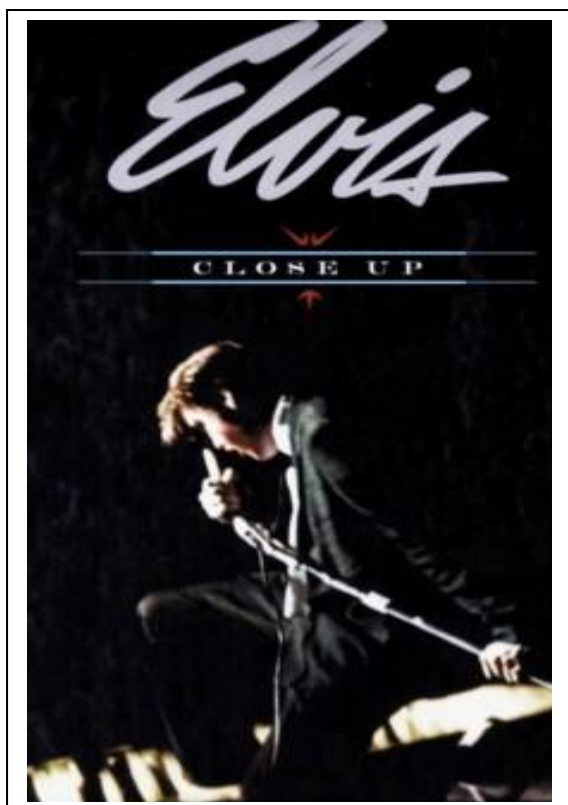


# Elvis the Blues artist



Can Elvis stand beside the likes of Bo Diddley, Big Mama Thornton, Muddy Waters, Taj Mahal or Keb' Mo and be called a *bona fide* Blues artist? All you have to hear is the introduction to *Hound Dog* as he performed it at Madison Square Garden to know the answer. This presentation will look at the influence of the Blues on Elvis, how he influenced the genre and Blues artists and his songs that can be listed in this category.

## What impact did the Blues have on Elvis?

The genre had a significant impact on his musical style, vocal techniques, and performance approach.

### Early exposure

1. **Cultural environment:** Growing up in Tupelo, Mississippi, and later Memphis, Tennessee, Elvis was surrounded by the rich musical traditions of the South, including the Blues. He absorbed these influences through local radio stations, juke joints, and live performances.
2. **Beale Street:** In Memphis, Elvis spent time on Beale Street, a hub for Blues music. He frequented venues where legendary Blues musicians performed, further immersing himself in the genre.

### Musical style

1. **Vocal techniques:** Elvis adopted various vocal techniques characteristic of Blues singers, such as the use of growls, moans, and dynamic emotional expression. His ability to convey deep emotion in his songs is a hallmark of the Blues' influence.
2. **Song selection:** Many of Elvis's early recordings were covers of Blues songs. For example, his rendition of Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right" and Junior Parker's "Mystery Train" are prime examples of how he blended Blues with rockabilly.
3. **Instrumentation:** The instrumentation in many of Elvis' songs features the typical Blues setup – electric guitar, bass, drums, and piano. Scotty Moore's guitar-playing, in particular, often incorporated Blues' licks and solos.

### Performance style

1. **Stage presence:** Elvis' energetic and passionate stage presence drew from the raw, expressive performance style of Blues musicians. His movement, use of the

microphone, and interaction with the audience reflected the influence of Blues performance traditions.

2. **Improvisation:** Like many Blues artists, Elvis was known for his improvisational skills during live performances. He often modified songs on the spot, adding unique vocal inflections and variations.

### **Inspiration from Blues Legends**

Elvis openly acknowledged the influence of Blues legends like B.B. King, Big Joe Turner, and Howlin' Wolf. He admired their music and often drew inspiration from their styles.

## **What impact did Elvis have on the Blues?**

Here are some key points on how Elvis influenced the Blues and Blues artists:

### **Bringing Blues to mainstream audiences**

1. **Popularising Blues-inspired music:** Elvis' success helped bring Blues-influenced music to a much wider, mainstream audience. His incorporation of Blues elements into his rock and roll songs made the genre more accessible to listeners who might not have otherwise been exposed to it.
2. **Crossing racial barriers:** By recording and performing songs originally by African American blues artists, Elvis played a role in breaking down racial barriers in music. His versions of songs by blues artists like Arthur Crudup, Big Mama Thornton, and others brought attention to the original artists and the genre as a whole.

### **Influence on Blues artists**

1. **Raising awareness:** Elvis' covers of Blues songs and his vocal acknowledgment of his Blues influences helped shine a spotlight on Blues musicians. This raised awareness of the genre and brought attention to the original Blues artists, thereby aiding their recognition and, in some cases, boosting their careers.
2. **Inspiration for future musicians:** While Elvis is more often credited with influencing rock and roll musicians, his impact on the music industry as a whole meant that many musicians, including those who pursued Blues, were inspired by his success and his musical style. His ability to blend genres showed future artists the potential for crossover success.

### **Specific artists and broader influence**

1. **Influence on rock musicians with Blues roots:** Many rock musicians who were influenced by Elvis also had deep connections to the Blues. Artists like Eric Clapton, who is known for his Blues guitar work, cited Elvis as a significant influence. Clapton's work, in turn, influenced many other Blues musicians.
2. **Blues Revival:** The Blues Revival of the 1960s, characterised by young, predominantly white musicians exploring and reviving traditional Blues music, was indirectly influenced by Elvis. His success helped establish the commercial viability of Blues-based music, encouraging record companies and promoters to invest in Blues artists and Blues rock bands.

The revival led to the emergence of blues-rock, a genre that combined the traditional blues structure with the amplified, energetic style of rock music. This fusion was epitomised by artists like Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin.

Many older Blues musicians, whose careers had waned, found new opportunities and audiences during the revival. Artists like Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, and Skip James enjoyed renewed popularity and recorded new albums.

The Blues revival wasn't confined to the United States. It spread to Europe, particularly the UK, where it influenced the British Invasion bands. These bands, in turn, reintroduced Blues to American audiences, creating a transatlantic exchange of musical ideas.

### Recognition and collaboration

1. **Collaborative respect:** Many Blues musicians respected Elvis for his musical talents and his ability to bring Blues to a broader audience. This mutual respect sometimes led to collaborations or tributes, further solidifying the connection between Elvis and the Blues genre.

For example, the Sun Records sessions: During his early days at Sun Records, Elvis was known to jam with other musicians who had strong Blues influences. These informal sessions, though not officially recorded as collaborations, were crucial in shaping his musical style and deepening his connection to the Blues.

2. **Acknowledgment by Blues artists:** Blues artists like B.B. King and Muddy Waters recognized Elvis's role in popularising Blues music and bringing attention to the genre. Their acknowledgment helped bridge the gap between different musical worlds.

Here are some **notable quotes** from prominent blues artists about Elvis:

#### B.B. King

**On Elvis' talent:** "Elvis was a great person and a great artist. He took black music and made it his own, which was the biggest compliment anyone could pay."

**On Elvis' impact:** "He helped to integrate black music and white music. He was a bundle of energy set to music."

#### Rufus Thomas

**On Elvis' popularity:** "A lot of people have accused Elvis of stealing the black man's music, when in fact, almost every black solo entertainer copied his stage mannerisms from Elvis."

#### Little Richard

**On Elvis' contribution:** "He was an integrator. Elvis was a blessing. They wouldn't let black music through. He opened the door for black music."

#### Big Mama Thornton

**On "Hound Dog":** "They didn't give me no money, no big pay-off for it, but I was glad they done it. I wanted to see my people get something out of it. But you know, good music belongs to everyone."

#### Chuck Berry

**On Elvis' influence:** "Elvis was an original. He had the voice, the moves, and the talent. He was just a natural, and he put his own style into it."



**Muddy Waters**

### **Muddy Waters**

**On Elvis' role:** "I was pleased that the white kids were getting turned on to the B lues. Elvis helped a lot of people understand it, helped it reach a wider audience."

### **John Lee Hooker**

**On Elvis' appeal:** "Elvis had an incredible range and genuine feel. He had everything, the looks, the moves, the talent."

### **James Brown**

**On Elvis' influence:** "I wasn't just a fan, I was his brother. Elvis had an influence on everybody with his musical approach. He broke the ice for all of us."

### **Bo Diddley**

**On Elvis' role:** "Elvis did a lot for the music, but he got a lot of credit for things that people like me had been doing for years."

### **Fats Domino**

**On Elvis' talent:** "I loved Elvis. He was an honest person who loved the Blues. His music was real, and it had a lot of heart."

### **Willie Dixon**

**On Elvis' impact:** "Elvis had a feel for the Blues that not many white artists had. He had that spirit in his voice that could reach out and touch people."

### **Sister Rosetta Tharpe**

**On Elvis' influence:** "Elvis took what we were doing and brought it to a whole new audience. He had a way of making the music his own."

### **Etta James**

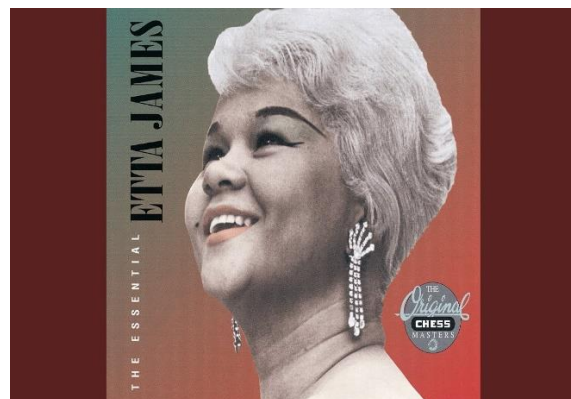
**On Elvis' voice:** "Elvis could sing the Blues with a rawness and emotion that came from deep inside. He had a way of making you feel the music."



**Willie Dixon**



**Elvis and Fats Domino**



## The songs and their origins

This table illustrates songs that Elvis recorded and performed, that can be considered as part of the Blues genre.

Song	Recorded by Elvis	Original artist	Original recording
<b>That's All Right</b>	1954	Arthur Crudup	1946
<b>Good Rockin' Tonight</b>	1954	Roy Brown	1947
<b>Milkcow Blues Boogie</b>	1954	Kokomo Arnold	1934 (Milkcow Blues)
<b>Baby Let's Play House</b>	1955	Arthur Gunter	1954
<b>Mystery Train</b>	1955	Junior Parker	1953
<b>Trying to Get to You</b>	1955	The Eagles (R&B group, not the rock band)	1954
<b>Heartbreak Hotel</b>	1956	Written by Mae Boren Axton, Tommy Durden, and Elvis Presley; Elvis was the first to record it.	1956
<b>My Baby Left Me</b>	1956	Arthur Crudup	1950
<b>So Glad You're Mine</b>	1956	Arthur Crudup	1946
<b>Lawdy Miss Clawdy</b>	1956	Lloyd Price	1952
<b>When It Rains, It Really Pours</b>	1957	Billy "The Kid" Emerson	1954
<b>One Night</b>	1958	Smiley Lewis	1956 (One Night (of Sin))
<b>Trouble</b>	1958	Written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller for Elvis	1958
<b>A Mess of Blues</b>	1960	Written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman for Elvis	1960
<b>Reconsider Baby</b>	1960	Lowell Fulson	1954
<b>Like a Baby</b>	1960	Vikki Nelson	1959
<b>Such a Night</b>	1960	The Drifters	1953
<b>I Feel So Bad</b>	1961	Chuck Willis	1953
<b>Give Me the Right</b>	1961	Written by Fred Wise and Norman Blagman for Elvis	1961
<b>Down in the Alley</b>	1966	The Clovers	1957
<b>Hi-Heel Sneakers</b>	1968	Tommy Tucker	1964
<b>Tiger Man</b>	1968	Rufus Thomas	1953
<b>Big Boss Man</b>	1967	Jimmy Reed	1960
<b>Guitar Man</b>	1968	Jerry Reed	1967
<b>U.S. Male</b>	1968	Jerry Reed	1968
<b>After Loving You</b>	1969	Eddy Arnold	1962
<b>Power of My Love</b>	1969	Written by Bernie Baum, Bill Giant, and Florence Kaye for Elvis	1969
<b>Stranger in My Own Hometown</b>	1969	Percy Mayfield	1964
<b>Got My Mojo Working</b>	1970	Ann Cole, Muddy Waters	1956 (Ann Cole), 1957 (Muddy Waters)
<b>Merry Christmas Baby</b>	1971	Johnny Moore's Three Blazers	1947

<b>See See Rider</b>	1970	Ma Rainey	1924
<b>My Babe</b>	1971	Little Walter	1955
<b>Steamroller Blues</b>	1973	James Taylor	1970
<b>I Got a Feelin' in My Body</b>	1973	Written by Dennis Linde for Elvis	1973
<b>If You Talk in Your Sleep</b>	1974	Written by Red West and Johnny Christopher for Elvis	1974
<b>Shake a Hand</b>	1975	Faye Adams	1953
<b>T-R-O-U-B-L-E</b>	1975	Written by Jerry Chesnut for Elvis	1975
<b>For the Heart</b>	1976	Written by Dennis Linde for Elvis	1976
<b>Hurt</b>	1976	Timi Yuro	1961
<b>Moody Blue</b>	1976	Written by Mark James for Elvis	1976
<b>Way Down</b>	1977	Written by Layng Martine Jr. for Elvis	1977
<b>Pledging My Love</b>	1977	Johnny Ace	1954

Who knows what might have happened had Elvis gone to Hawai'i in 1977, to rest and get well? His 4<sup>th</sup> decade in the music industry could have been very Bluesy. This author likes to think of him sitting on a smoky stage with a guitar and microphone and growling those Blues tunes!

