

## How Elvis became a movie star—by playing himself

The rock 'n' roll icon saw acting as the natural next step to his musical career, but soon became disillusioned with the repetitive cookie-cutter roles.



Rock 'n' roll icon Elvis Presley made **31 movies** between 1956 and 1969, of which **27 were produced in the 1960s**. Almost all of Presley's films were **box-office smashes** that made him, his manager and movie studios **a lot of money**. However, these films were critically derided, and Presley **disdained** most of them. After he left Hollywood behind, he **said** in private, "It was just that Hollywood's image of me was wrong, and I knew it and couldn't say anything about it."



Presley made his film debut in *Love Me Tender* (1956), a Civil War western. He took the job seriously enough to **memorise** the entire script before shooting. The movie became a hit and was quickly followed by other films, including *Jailhouse Rock* (1957).

### Elvis leaves Hollywood for the Army

In 1957, **the U.S. Army drafted Presley**. He was able to **delay** his enlistment to finish *King Creole*, a film in which he **portrayed** a young singer who must overcome poverty and organized crime.

Presley was **concerned** that being away in the army would damage his career. Parker, his manager, **reassured** the star: "Elvis, you have records that haven't been released and a movie in the can. We can stretch out the product we have. There'll be a certain dark period, but that will only double the demand for your records and movies once you get out of the service."

In **March 1958**, Presley began serving in the army. In the meantime, his movies helped keep him in the public eye. *King Creole* was released in 1958, then was **re-released along with** *Love Me Tender* in 1959. And while Presley was in Germany, he **got** the script for his next movie, *G.I. Blues* (1960). Producer Hal Wallis also arranged for footage to be **filmed in Germany**—though Presley himself didn't film any scenes.

### Elvis returns to Hollywood

After Presley's discharge in 1960, Parker **wanted** the star to focus on movies, which offered the largest paychecks. The only question was: What kind of films was Presley going to make? He'd **acquitted himself well** in *King Creole*. Costar Walter Matthau later **said**, "He was intelligent enough to understand what a character was and how to play the character simply by being himself through the means of the story."

For the 1960s film *Flaming Star*, Presley took on a **role that had been written** for Marlon Brando and delivered a **respectable performance** as a half-white, half-Indian man. After making *Flaming Star*, Presley **said**, "I'd like to do a little more of a serious role. Because my ambition is to progress as an actor."

However, *Flaming Star* was not as successful as *G.I. Blues*, which came out the same year. As a result, Parker **encouraged** Presley to focus on the successful movie **formula** that called for him to sing in various exotic locations; this resulted in a **huge success** with *Blue Hawaii* (1961).

### Elvis was disappointed by his films

Presley was aware that pictures like *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (1962) were not great cinema and **dubbed** his films "travelogues." He **wanted** better roles, but Parker **reportedly** turned down parts in movies such as *West Side Story* and *Midnight Cowboy*. However, Presley **never took** acting lessons and was perhaps not entirely focused on altering the arc of his career.

Presley continued to appear in **formulaic** movies, for which the studios paid him well. He **earned \$500,000 or more** per picture and a percentage of the net profits. The **lackluster** *Kissin' Cousins* (1963), which starred Presley in dual roles, demonstrated that an Elvis film would make money even when production was rushed. The movie shot in 17 days under the aegis of a producer nicknamed "**King of the Quickies.**"

Though still part of the "Elvis genre," *Viva Las Vegas* (1964) was a **higher-quality affair**. However, that shoot ran long, which cut into the movie's profits. After this, Parker **pushed for short productions**, with just two or three weeks of filming, because it **boosted** the bottom line. This resulted in pictures like *Harum Scarum* (1965), which exhibitors deemed "**Presley's worst movie yet**" (and that was without the talking camel that Parker had **unsuccessfully tried** to add to the film). Still, being seen as a bad movie didn't prevent it from being **profitable**.

### Elvis movies made Hollywood money

Presley's movies performed so well that they **spared** the studio Allied Artists from bankruptcy. Producer Wallis also said Presley's films were bankrolling more "**artistic pictures.**" Presley **didn't like** hearing this, but he **needed Hollywood money** to fund his lifestyle.

Hollywood had Presley **compromise his artistic integrity** in other ways. Though he made a few non-film recordings, most of his musical talent was used to create soundtracks with **subpar** songs. He **stopped giving live performances** around 1961. As **rock music changed in the 1960s** with the Beatles, the Beach Boys and Bob Dylan, Presley's **creativity floundered**.

In 1965, Presley met with the Beatles. In one version of their encounter, John Lennon **asked**, "Why don't you go back to making rock 'n' roll records?" Presley supposedly **answered**, "It's my movie schedule. It's so tight."

### Why did Elvis stop acting?

By 1968, box-office revenue declined as audiences finally tired of Presley's low-quality films. Presley, who'd become **dissatisfied** with his Hollywood career, **told** Parker he wanted to re-focus on music. In December 1968, Presley's TV Christmas special **demonstrated** the talent and musical ability that had made him a star in the first place.

*Change of Habit* (1969) was Presley's **last** feature film. He was later **offered** a starring role opposite Barbra Streisand in *A Star Is Born* (1976), but the part fell through. It's unsure what exactly went wrong; in one version of the story, Parker **undermined** his star by making unreasonable demands.

Presley spent much of the 1970s singing to devoted crowds. Yet as the decade progressed, there were more and more **cancellations**. Presley died on August 16, 1977 at the age of 42. His time spent in Hollywood, good and bad, is now one of the ways his legacy lives on.

## Elvis' ddventures in Hollywood

In a tribute to Elvis Presley that aired on Turner Classic Movies, Kurt Russell says that “an Elvis movie is always worth watching because of Elvis.” This insight gets at a core truth about a much maligned and mostly dismissed body of work. From his big-screen debut in 1956 to his final film in 1969, the rock-and-roll superstar appeared in thirty-one feature films, and partly due to the breakneck pace at which they were made (about three a year), some of them are flimsy. But most were, in fact, box-office hits, and almost every one of them brims with Elvis’s charisma and humor. He was a unique cinematic figure, with a self-invented movie persona all his own.

More than half a century removed from their original context, these films can be appreciated on their own terms—and for the rare thing Elvis achieved with them. Few stars can single-handedly justify a film’s existence, in the way Kurt Russell (who appeared on-screen alongside Elvis as a kid and went on to play him in a 1979 television movie) described. John Wayne could be compelling in any film he was in, but he contributed to a preexisting genre—the western—and without him, those movies would still make sense. Elvis, on the other hand, created his own genre, and the genre died with him. Perhaps the closest antecedent to the “Elvis movie” is the on-screen collaboration of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis: sixteen films that all created their own self-contained reality and traded on the audience’s familiarity with the stars’ personas. Martin and Lewis were a duo, though. Elvis stood alone.

There also had never been anyone like him. He started as a vital and controversial regional star, but in 1955, when RCA bought him from Sun Records for \$40,000 (an unprecedented sum at the time), he was on the verge of global superstardom. The year 1956 was a whirlwind: television appearances, riots, pandemonium. Protests from priests, PTA mothers, disc jockeys, and racists weren’t successful in dampening his popularity. His songs dominated the charts, but could this typhoon be harnessed by a movie? Elvis’s evolution into a Hollywood star began when famed producer Hal Wallis signed him to a contract that same year. He wanted to ease Elvis into acting, so he arranged for him to play a supporting role in the ensemble drama *Love Me Tender*.

Directed by Robert D. Webb, the film tells the story of four brothers, and Elvis plays Clint, the baby of the Reno family. It opens with the older brothers holding up a train, followed by endless scenes of horses galloping from right to left and back. Imagine a teenage fan in 1956 sitting through all this galloping, with no Elvis in sight. Finally, at eighteen minutes and thirty-two seconds, a small, muddy figure enters from the right, struggling behind a handheld plow. It’s the opposite of a star entrance. Elvis is obviously green in *Love Me Tender*, hesitating before lines, a little self-conscious. But Mildred Dunnock, who plays the matriarch, once told a story that reveals his unconscious understanding of what acting is—or should be—even in this early role. For one scene, he was instructed to pick up a gun and ignore Dunnock’s plea to put it down. On the day of filming, Elvis, a devoted mama’s boy, obeyed her command instead of following the script. Though he’d made a mistake, he *was* listening. Dunnock explained the anecdote like this: “It’s a story about a beginner who had one of the essentials of acting, which is to believe.”

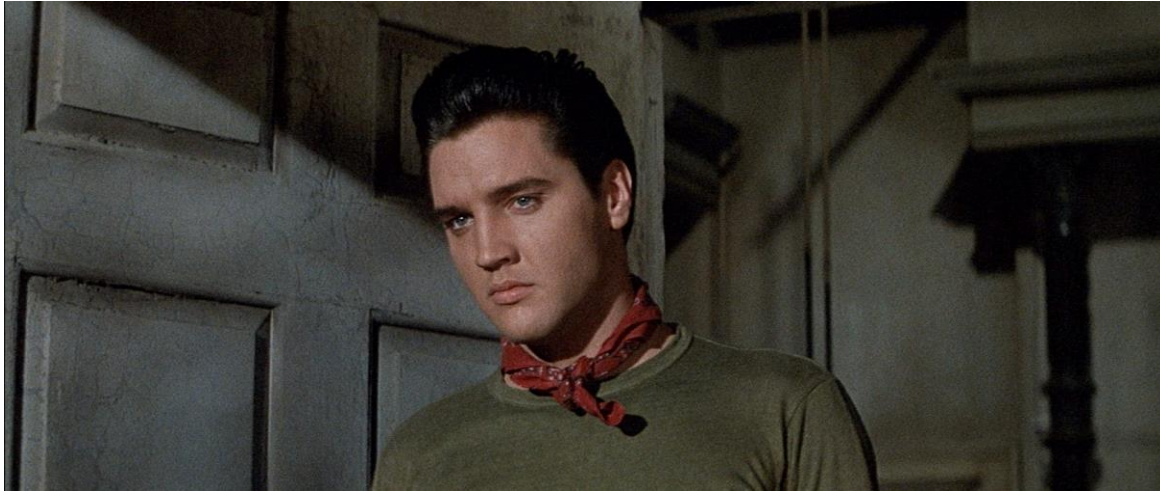


*Love Me Tender*

Elvis commits admirably in *Love Me Tender*. In one scene, he doesn't just hug his costar Richard Egan, he flings himself at him. He also comes to vibrant life in four musical numbers that were shoehorned into the film, even though he had made it clear he did not want to sing in his movies. The songs are Hollywood-hillbilly, and his moves are anachronistic, but it doesn't matter. What you get in these moments is a sense of Elvis's joy in himself, his innocent pleasure in entertaining people. "And introducing Elvis Presley" is how his credit reads in *Love Me Tender*. But in his subsequent movies, his name would appear above the title, in a font size that expanded to absurd extremes as the years went on. There would be no waiting around for Elvis's presence anymore; he would be there from the first scene. Some of the films revolved around well-known elements of his own biography: the ending of *Jailhouse Rock*, for instance, is taken directly from an incident in Elvis's life that made headlines, in which he swallowed a tooth cap and needed to have an emergency surgery. The first phase of his film career stretched from 1956 to 1958, and it established him as a force to be reckoned with at the box office, and also as a unique figure in the burgeoning teenage-rebel movie landscape (Martin Sheen said that, when he was a kid, he had hoped Elvis could fill the gap left by James Dean's untimely death). This era closed out with *King Creole*, which has probably the best production values of any Elvis movie. Adapted from a best-selling novel by Harold Robbins, and featuring songs written by rock-and-roll visionaries Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller (who wrote "Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock"), the film was helmed by the most high-profile director Elvis would ever work with: Michael Curtiz. The Hollywood veteran respected Elvis as a phenom and thought carefully about how to frame and light him. And for his part, Elvis handles this meaty role as a rebellious high-school student—and the difficult scenes it required him to bring to life—without pushing. He's comfortable in his own skin; he listens and reacts, the building blocks of any good performance. The inexperience evident in *Love Me Tender* is gone.

Elvis's career paused in 1958, after he was drafted into the Army and shipped off to Germany for two years. When he returned to the U.S., he struggled to find his footing again at the box office, but also managed to make some of his best movies. One of these is *Wild in the Country*, a film that stands as an outlier in his career. Like *King Creole*, it comes with some pedigree: the screenplay is by the great American playwright Clifford Odets. Though it's hard to know how much tinkering was done to the script, many lines ring with his unmistakable prosody, and Elvis does an expert job riding the rhythms

of Odets's language. Elvis plays a troubled kid who has dreams of being a writer and attends therapy sessions to avoid jailtime. The character gives a speech in which he remembers his mother working in the fields, rubbing buttermilk on her arms to stave off sunburn, and Elvis's delivery is riveting. He's quiet and pained. It's personal work.



*Wild in the Country*

*King Creole* and *Wild in the Country* show Elvis could handle complex material. But in the early sixties, a shift occurred that would end up defining his on-screen legacy. After the runaway success of 1961's *Blue Hawaii*, what later became known as the "Elvis formula" coalesced, perpetuating itself in *Girls! Girls! Girls!*, *It Happened at the World's Fair*, *Fun in Acapulco*, *Viva Las Vegas*, and *Girl Happy*, before calcifying in the best-forgotten *Clambake*, *Double Trouble*, and *Paradise, Hawaiian Style*. These movies may not have earned much critical acclaim, but at their best they exude pure, uncomplicated pleasure in a way that feels more extraordinary today than it did when they were released. These formula movies are unembarrassed by their own silliness and triviality, and there is something relaxing about this, particularly in our self-serious cinematic present. Elvis being at the centre makes it all okay. When people refer to "Elvis movies," it's the formula movies they're talking about. And it's within the context of these silly narratives that Elvis's sui generis status is most clearly seen, where he shines most brightly.

The Elvis formula movie usually boils down to these parts:

1. An "exotic" location (Hawaii, Las Vegas, Acapulco)
2. Elvis playing a singer moonlighting as a race-car driver or pilot or boat captain
3. The "triangulation" of Elvis by numerous women (except in *Viva Las Vegas*, Elvis rarely appeared in a one-on-one love story)
4. A song in every scene
5. Low stakes
6. Extreme chastity (lots of kissus-interruptus, coitus interruptus being totally off the table)
7. A goofy sidekick, there to accentuate Elvis's beauty and competence
8. The nonexistence of real-world problems

Watching these movies alone in your apartment can be a surreal experience. They are meant to be seen in a drive-in on a hot summer night. There, they make perfect sense.

*Viva Las Vegas* is the high-water mark of this group of films. George Sidney, an experienced director of musicals, treated it as a legitimate musical, as opposed to just another Elvis formula movie. The film includes elaborate production numbers and choreography. Elvis is paired with Ann-Margret, a performer of equal fire and passion. Their chemistry sizzles, as does their obvious mutual appreciation. Elvis had to work to hold the screen with her, and he loved the challenge. Unlike in any other movie in Elvis's career, his costar is given two solo songs, as well as a duet with him (the charming "The Lady Loves Me"). *Viva Las Vegas* doesn't feel like a formula. It feels like sheer fun. The movie inspires fans to ponder a few what-might-have-beens, one of them being: What if he and Ann-Margret had gone on to make a series of films together, capitalizing on their chemistry? (A probable reason this never came to be: his controversial manager, Colonel Tom Parker, disapproved of how much screen time Ann-Margret received in *Viva Las Vegas*; it "took away" from Elvis.)



*Viva Las Vegas*

Despite his commercial triumphs, Elvis did not have the film career he envisioned for himself—he had hoped to become a serious actor. Though he may have been naive about the viability of his ambitions, he wasn't entirely delusional; after all, several pop stars before him had found success and respect in Hollywood. Bing Crosby won an Oscar in 1945, and Frank Sinatra had received one too, just three years before Elvis made his film debut. Elvis wanted to follow in their footsteps. He had what F. Scott Fitzgerald called "a mystical conception of destiny," and it's not hard to see why. He came into the world with a stillborn twin brother and wondered if he had been spared for a special purpose. He achieved his unprecedented fame so quickly, as if it was meant to be. As music critic Dave Marsh observed, if there was anything Elvis really wanted it was to be "an unignorable man."

Formulaic movies were not the only option that had been available to him. For one of his early screen tests, Elvis performed a scene from N. Richard Nash's play *The Rainmaker*, and there was talk of him playing the lead role in the film version, which ultimately went to Burt Lancaster. But there was way too much money on the table to allow him to handle risky material. Colonel Parker—listed

as “technical adviser” on most of his films—wanted the movies to be made as cheaply as possible, with Elvis front and centre in every scene. The star’s public image became a paradox. The man who epitomized the provocative spirit of modern American music—who, in Lester Bangs’s words, “alerted America to the fact that it had a groin with imperatives that had been stifled,” and who caused riots at his concerts just by wiggling his hips—was now the face of safe, unthreatening, conventional filmmaking.

In the late sixties, as Elvis neared the end of his contract, the Elvis formula fell apart, and some really interesting films were the result, two of which were the screwball comedy *Live a Little, Love a Little*, and the misleadingly titled *The Trouble with Girls*, a really interesting ensemble film in which Elvis, surrounded by character actors like Dabney Coleman and Vincent Price, is at the center but is not the lead. These are fine films, and they’ve been unfairly forgotten.

It’s hard not to think wistfully about missed opportunities in Elvis’s movie career, the most well-known of which is the male lead role in the 1976 *A Star Is Born* remake (Barbra Streisand wanted him to star alongside her). Even more intriguing is the idea of him playing Val in Tennessee Williams’s *Orpheus Descending*, a play eventually made into *The Fugitive Kind*, directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani. Years after the film’s release, Lumet had this to say about that possibility:

*What would it have been like if Val had had Presley’s simplicity, lyricism, and rather strange otherworldly quality? There’s a speech in the play [in which] Val talks about this mythical bird that has no legs and can therefore never come to rest and just hovers in the sky until it dies because there was no place for it to land. In content it evoked such a memory of what I felt of Presley when I watched him work: something otherworldly, unhuman (not inhuman), a kind of restless spirit that could never rest anywhere . . . And I thought how extraordinary it might have been to hear it from someone exactly like that but totally unaware of his own separation from the rest of us.*

Elvis was indeed “separated” from us, in life and in the movies. And certainly, none of the films fully evoke the explosiveness of his live performances. But here and there, his on-screen work does capture the flame, and that’s what makes it timeless. I think of the “Young Dreams” number in *King Creole*, in which he sits at the edge of the nightclub stage, gleaming in a white shirt and silky neckerchief. As he sings, he glances around him, searching for connection in the audience. His physical response to the music is fluid, his neck undulating, his whole body in gentle, continuous motion, even though he never stands up. It’s almost a shock, how easily he inhabits his unreal situation, how freely he shares himself. Elvis is in the spotlight alone, unembarrassed, unironic, justifying the film’s existence by his presence, giving pleasure to the people who seek it.



*King Creole*

Not a shabby legacy, when you think about it.