

Understanding Star Appeal: The Power of Elvis¹

Abstract

From Memphis to Hollywood and Vegas, Elvis Presley embodied the meaning of stardom during his lifetime. The thirtieth anniversary of his death, next year, will see a predictable resurgence in coverage of his phenomenon. In this talk I aim to present a framework that escapes the reductionist pitfalls of more established perspectives and directly explains the power of Elvis. By reductionism I mean the economism of the Frankfurt tradition, the pathologizing nature of psychology, the semiotic relativism of Fiskean cultural studies and the naivety and obfuscation of popular approaches. Drawing on P. David Marshall's book *Celebrity and Power*, I contend that to understand Elvis we have to start with pre-existing assumptions in the heads of individual fans. We must then move beyond, to see the star's image, talent and performance as vehicles that convey power from his fame back to every fan. In other words, we have to understand a web of energy flows and feelings under-girded by assumptions - a symbolic economy of stardom experienced by fans in a way that brings together the ideology of the culture industry and the uniqueness of the individual performer.

More than a star, and perhaps more than an icon, in the popular imagination Elvis Presley evokes memories of a unique singer, humble personality and intoxicating presence. He was a singer gifted with an electrifying talent. In 1999 I completed a PhD looking into the relationship between Elvis and his fans. During my research I interviewed a London-based Elvis impersonator called Liberty Mounten who reminisced about his own fandom by saying, "I always thought I would like to meet Elvis... He had power, he had visual presence and he had that voice. And to me he was a big hero...What talent! Who could do that today, at that age, have that power? He used to hit some high notes." In a sense, to call a star like Elvis a powerful person is to examine something glaringly obvious. Despite Francesco Alberoni's

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description of stars as “the powerless elite,” figures like Elvis have a stratospheric fetish value and lofty public privilege. In 1998 Sid Shaw’s merchandising company *Elvisly Yours* joined forces with the bank of Scotland to create a credit card promoted as “the King of cards [with] 11.9% APR, no fee and the power of Elvis.” Female fans would constantly rush up and hug the singer so tenaciously that they had to be peeled off by his entourage. In the 1950s fans would use tissues to take swabs of dirt from his car (Flippo 1994, 68). Elvis’s music has got fans through their illness and divorce, and even bought some back from the brink of suicide (Geller 1989, 232). He was treated like a king beyond his fan base too. Before the singer had his own private jet, he was given the last seat on charter aircraft. When he asked why, he was told it was so that he would not have to turn round to talk to anyone (Hodge 1988, 74). According to music writer Chet Flippo (1994, 8), with Elvis we know more than we understand. So what does it mean to say that the singer embodied ‘star power’? How should his phenomenon be understood? And how can an understanding Elvis help us to unravel the mystery of star appeal? Drawing on my work during and after my PhD, I will answer these questions in two ways: the first is to challenge some existing approaches. The second is to expose the symbolic framework within which the power of Elvis manifests itself to his legions of followers.

Anyone researching stardom faces two initial difficulties. On one hand, an array of popular terms like “aura,” “charisma,” “magic” and “showmanship” capture audience feelings but mystify their source. On the other hand they are faced with a series of academic explanations that seem to miss out something though their allegiance to grand theory. In the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno’s work admitted the overwhelming fetish power of popular music, but lost something meaningful in explaining it solely as a function of capitalism (Adorno 1978 [1938]). Half a century later cultural studies gave fans the agency to make their own meanings, but said little about why those meanings were so often used reinforce the star’s privilege (see Jenkins 1992). Approaches in psychology have tended to pathologize fandom as a universal disorder verging on abnormal obsession. Donald Horton and Richard Wohl’s classic 1956 paper pointed out the dangers of para-social interaction and set a tone that has continued more recently with discussions of celebrity worship syndrome. Meanwhile Film studies has made serious inroads that explain stardom and celebrity in terms of their ideological function and industrial role, but relatively little of this work has ever considered audience perceptions and responses (for an overview see Fischer and Landy 2004, 1-2). As Richard Dyer said in 1991, “Virtually all sociological theories of stars ignore the specificities of another aspect of the phenomenon – the audience” (Dyer 1991, 59).

So how might be approach the issue? My interest in star power began when I read Fred and Judy Vermorel's seminal 1985 book *Starlust*. *Starlust* is a compilation of real fan mail to various pop stars. The relentless accumulation of letters from fans saying similar things to different stars led me to realize that it was not possible to understand how audiences see musical performers without thinking about power, and in particular the routine reproduction of star power. The problem with Vermorel's approach was that this revelation about star power became used reductively. First, following Adorno, he suggested that fans are end products of the culture industry. Second, Vermorel implied that fans partake in a zero sum game, eventually resenting the star for over-powering them. Once power became a central concern of mine, Michel Foucault's influential perspectives on the mechanisms of power in social institutions seemed appropriate to examine, but they are generally altogether too pessimistic and managerial to encompass the process of mutual empowerment that Elvis shares with his fans. In fact most frameworks from the social sciences and media and cultural studies, tend to highlight issues of authority, territorial struggle, concession and resistance. These seemed inadequate ways to talk about the adulation of stars and the flows of fans' desires.

While it does have objective consequences, the power of a star is a collective product: the result of something going on inside the heads of their followers. Adorno said in 1938 that it was pointless talking to music consumers because they were already saturated by the ideology of the culture industry and could not explain their own engagement. As Adorno said:

If someone tried to ‘verify’ the fetish character of music by investigating the reactions of listeners with interviews and questionnaires, he might meet with unexpected puzzles... The unconscious of the listeners are... so exclusively orientated to the dominant fetish categories that every answer one receives conforms in advance to the surface of that music business which is attacked by the theory being ‘verified.’ (Adorno 1978 [1938], 285)

To an extent I agree with Adorno’s claim here. However, if fans’ statements are perused for their unexamined *assumptions*, a kind of epistemological framework starts to emerge that defines how their feelings come about. This schema is ideological in that it upholds a consented inequality between the star and their fans, and, rather than something that can be proven to be true or false in any objective sense, it would be fairer to say that fans bring a personal and social reality into being, by accepting certain shared assumptions. The way this happens can

best be explained if we conceptualize the symbolic economy in two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. Analysis of the vertical dimension illuminates the perceived flow of power between the fans and their star. This is the part that constantly gets reconstructed, exploited and routinized by the culture industry. Attention to it explains, also, why fans of different stars often behave in quite similar ways. Conversely, the star's unique image, talent and performance constitutes the horizontal dimension of their economy. Performance's symbolic function is to cascade the star's power back down to individual fans through gestures, words and whispers that seductively feign intimacy. The star does not have to be alive for this to happen – Elvis has been dead for three decades. Nevertheless, fans must at least come into contact with some trace of their performance.

To take the vertical dimension first, in his book *Celebrity and Power*, P. David Marshall (1997) explains, “The close connection and apparent commitment of the audience in popular music bestows the popular music celebrity a connection to the power of the crowd... Apart from the performer, there is a reduction of the individuals in the crowd into some organized collective force.” From cultural studies, John Frow (1998, 207) has added to this by saying that each fan is “swollen with the energy and presence they absorb from the star made big by the crowd.” What emerges here, then, is a kind of hidden circuit,

flowing from the crowd as a collective, through the individual performer, back to each individual fan. This vertical dimension is epitomized by the pleasure that an audience feels when greeted by a famous person. The star's popularity therefore matters in an *apriori* sense; a realization that explains why fans are constantly lobbying to get new Elvis product released and promoted. It also explains why 'Elvisology' works. 'Elvisology' is the statistical dissection and measurement of Elvis's success. The trivia section of Elvis's estate's corporation's internet home page covers his sales figures, chart placings, global reception, television and movie appearances (see O'Neal 1996, 111). Elvis Presley Enterprises trains Graceland tour guides in 'Elvisology' and the corporation's first figurehead, Elvis's ex-wife Priscilla, once noted that its employees usually end up as fans (Rothman 1997, 2A). The value of Elvis's popularity also comes through in Gilbert Rodman's assertion that the visible presence of fans at Graceland helps keep the Elvis phenomenon alive. Comparing Elvis fans to Barry Manilow fans he explains:

For example, the woman who will 'never be unfaithful to Barry' knows, at the very least, that millions of other people have bought his albums... Unlike most Elvis fans, however, she can't assume that the general public will recognize the existence of the fan community to which she

belongs or its depth of collective feeling for the star at its centre. By way of contrast, even though the average Elvis fan may not be surrounded by like-minded folks in his or her daily life, such a fan can safely point to Graceland – and the fan-based community that (re)manifests itself there on a daily basis – as public evidence that his or her devotion is more than just an obsessive... personality quirk. (Rodman 1996, 128)

Such indications of Elvis's popularity become part of fans pre-performance knowledge, convincing them, not because they are sheep following whatever is popular, but because huge audiences (like the reported billion and a half global viewers for Elvis's televised *Aloha from Hawaii* concert in January 1973) put the singer's performance at stake. Knowing that Elvis is a very famous person leaves us insatiably eager to scour on his performance for traces that show he might also be humble, needy, tragic, or in some way personally inferior to us. During his last televised appearance, *The CBS Special*, Elvis received tremendous applause after saying, "And if you think I'm nervous, you're right" (Geller 1989, 290). To quote one of Nietzsche's most perceptive statements about performance, You will never get the crowd to cry Hosanna until you ride into town on a donkey (Nietzsche 1977, 278). This is where the horizontal dimension comes in.

It has been widely noted that Elvis's image and performance were characterized by their contradictions. The natural ease with which the singer encompassed what seemed like gaping contradictions actually became one of his hallmarks. For example he was tough but tender, a virile Southern gentleman and a shy mother's boy; he would command his band with electric stage moves and yet his legs often shook nervously or jerked as if he were a giant puppet controlled by the music. My point here is that, in the context of the vertical dimension, the contradictions of his performance mattered because they acted as points of entry that could symbolically position potential followers in a role superior to their icon. That meaningful style of performance is continued in the fans' experience of Graceland. As they walk into the mansion's plush interior, in contrast a voice from their headsets explains that "it all began with the dreams of a poor boy in Tupelo, Mississippi." These days no visitor is as poor as the Presleys were, and none as rich as Elvis became. At one and the same once time they can feel sorry for the humble country boy, but also thrilled by the superstar. It is their position above the lower Elvis that allows them to receive his power, and this can occur in any variety of ways and rouse a wide range of emotions. Interesting here is how Elvis's own performance set the tone for a kind of counter-performance enacted by his fans. For example, when he sang,

the physicality of his breath - what Barthes (1977, 157) called the grain of the voice – attracted listeners. When he thrust his hips, sexual excitement became the way to connect with his power. When he said he loved his mother, women could see him as a boy and use their own maturity as a way to connect with him. And when he died, grief became the way to receive his power, precisely because almost anyone alive perceives themselves to be more fortunate than a corpse.

The vertical and horizontal explanation of Elvis's power allows us to solve a number of puzzles that relate to his phenomenon. First, it seems clear that the performer does not have to be living (or even be real) to function like this, because the economy is a structure of feeling that collectively exists inside the heads of fans. Its locus of authentication is not in the performer themselves. However, it should be noted here that fans are only *consciously* aware of part of the economy. In fact they see the star as a starting point. To them the power of Elvis springs from his talent, which in turn commands the attention of the masses, rather than acts as an efficient way to circulate his power. Another thing that the schema can explain is the variety of ways in which people become fans. Some people become fans when they are reminded about the horizontal dimension and see Elvis's performance itself. Others, who always quite liked Elvis, may need reminding of the vertical dimension of his power.

Some of these fans develop their connections long after knowing that Elvis can give back power: either because they suddenly need it, or because they are slow to realize he channels so much. Fan club rituals serve an important role in that regard. One fan club branch leader that I interviewed said that he had listened to his wife playing Elvis records for many years before he became hooked. He explained:

If I actually name the day I became an Elvis fan, the moment I became an Elvis fan was at the Leicester convention... They played *American Trilogy*. Some guy grabbed my hand and pulled me up to my feet. I felt this adrenaline go through from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet and it was just an astonishing feeling of brotherhood, almost, in the room. Just this family, you were in amongst this family.

Such feelings of brotherhood and family manifest the vertical dimension that channels Elvis's power back through his performance. The star, then, is a catalyst to who channels the power of their audience. It is equally important to realize that not everybody connects to the star's performance or perceives their aura in consequence. Patsy Lacker, for example, was the wife of Marty Lacker, a man who worked as a member of

Elvis's retinue, the Memphis Mafia. Patsy was singularly unimpressed with Elvis and saw him as a threat to her relationship with her husband. In effect, although she had seen Elvis on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956, she felt little connection with his performance. Consequently, despite recognizing his fame, she did not perceive his aura, and was happy, for example, to have arguments with him (Lacker et al 1979, 208).

Writing about punk music, the ethnographer Phil Corrigan (1989, 80) has said, "Everything is connected, but we cannot write it like this." I beg to differ. Once we understand the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Elvis's symbolic economy, more things start to make sense. For instance, it seems odd to think about Elvis ever struggling to win a music audience, but when he was playing the New Frontier hotel in Las Vegas in April 1956, his star was nearly dimmed. Middle-aged uptown diners remained skeptical about the talent of the dynamic new teen sensation they saw before them. In an effort to salvage his declining run of shows, a representative of his record company RCA was enlisted to come up live on stage in the middle of a show and presented Elvis with a gold disc *that they had already given him before*. This gesture might have seemed inexplicable and hyper-real, but it succeeded in picking up business and turning his audience around. RCA's strategy only seems to make sense once we understand that we must

focus on the intersection of the vertical and horizontal – ie. Elvis’s fame *and* his performance. By reminding the Las Vegas crowd of his fame, his record company was increasingly making his performance matter. What I have suggested, then, is that we cannot understand stars without their followers, and we cannot understand their followers without thinking about how their shared assumptions facilitate their strong feelings. The next step is to unpack all the hype, publicity, myth, biography, commentary, image, talent and traces of performance to see how they facilitate movement between the different dimensions of the symbolic economy.

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