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Rock 'n' Roll and German Teenagers (Retrospective Account, 1980)

Musician Udo Lindenberg describes the electrifying impact that Elvis's music had on him the first time he heard it on the radio. For Lindenberg, then a teenager, it was an introduction to the still unfamiliar rhythms of rock 'n' roll music. This was the beginning of an infatuation that would eventually lead him to a career as one of Germany's leading pop stars.

An Obituary for Elvis

It was 1957, I was eleven, and Elvis Presley's "Tutti Frutti" came blaring out of the radio; the very first beats banished from my young heart my favorite songs up to that point: "Ave Maria," "What did Hans do with Gretel?" ["Was hat der Hans mit der Grete getan"], "The Laughing Vagabond" ["Der lachende Vagabund"], and even "Marina." I didn't understand what it was about, but this hiccupy singing and electrifying music rocked right through me, and I ran into the kitchen, grabbed some pots and wooden spoons and drummed along for the final minute of "Tutti Frutti." With that, the decision about my choice of career – sailor or drummer – was made. Elvis Presley had ignited me, and I thought: This is an earthquake.

Up to that point, only corny German songs had been able to transport me into daydreams, albeit in a slightly odd way, but now I knew what was what. After I had also seen the film in which Elvis, as a rather slender youth, leaps onto the stage at a club and starts singing into the face of the brawny club owner: "If you're looking for trouble, look straight into my face," I had an ever greater tendency to associate the stock repertoire of German songs and pop music with nightmares. This hasn't changed up to this day.

Back then, I didn't really understand what was going on with Elvis's hips either, but the girls who spoke of him with gleaming eyes rose in my esteem because their taste in music was just as good as mine. Not until later did I realize what else was important about rock-and-rollers aside from their music. Elvis had it down pat. With built-in ball bearings in his joints and the dreamy-defiant-vulnerable look of Cupid, he made it into the underwear of even the upstanding Westphalian girls in my small hometown of Gronau.

He gave us something to use against our parents – who owned everything else, after all – something of our own. Until then, all we heard was, “You’re too young for that.” With Elvis in our ears we could shout back: “And you’re too old for this.”

Where did this dynamite come from? Where was there more of it? Through Elvis, I heard about Bill Haley, who had been around earlier, and soon I had a whole collection of records of “Yankee howling” and “Negro music,” and my grandmother fainted. I also still remember how difficult it was to learn the shake-flap-rubber-legs-dance, which also involved a partner to fling around. I do admit that I still can’t quite achieve Elvis’s bravura.

Gospel-country-blues-Elvis. I pulled myself up by his example. His fast numbers were like black pepper, and I couldn’t get enough of them. The slow ones often moved me just as much, but not all of them; I found some of them too sappy. Whereas black gospel songs were penetrating, heart-wrenching, but somehow modest, Elvis’s were sometimes a bit too bombastic, as artificial as a Negro in a dirndl and as over-the-top as a bishop’s robe in violet brocade.

There were some things about him that remained forever foreign to me, maybe because America was so far away. After a good-boy, clean-cut Elvis was embraced by the adults of his country as a “good American,” after he completed his military service in Germany in exemplary fashion and his movies became ever more saccharine-sweet and worse than James Dean’s, he stopped being the greatest thing ever for me. Not entirely: He took his place among the musicians I liked, and rock ‘n’ roll music itself became a sensation for me. Elvis helped pave the runway from which many musicians, myself included, eventually took off in their own jets.

Source: Udo Lindenberg, “Nachruf auf Elvis” [“An Obituary for Elvis”]; reprinted in Götz Eisenberg and Hans-Jürgen Linke, eds., *Fuffziger Jahre [The Fifties]*. Giessen, 1980, p. 235f.

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