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The King as Proletarian: Thinking about Elvis Presley as a Worker

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ABSTRACT

What are the implications of conceiving of musicians as first and foremost being particular forms of workers? This article argues that such an approach leads to a greater understanding of musical lives and soon necessitates a consideration of the industries within which musicians seek to work. In order to justify such claims the article looks at the working life of one of the most famous popular musicians of all—Elvis Presley, someone often referred to as the "King of Rock 'n' Roll." It argues that an examination of Elvis Presley's working life reveals that rather than being that of a king it was that of a proletarian.

KEYWORDS

Musicians; music industries; Elvis Presley; musicians as workers; musical work

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed renewed interest in musicians' working lives. Such interest has included special editions of journals,[1] edited collections (Golding), the development of a research network (*Working in Music*), my own work (Williamson and Cloonan, *Players*'), and a consideration of musicians working in film and television (Taylor). Such interest has built on previous studies that have charted the ups and downs of "the profession" and the social status accorded to musicians (see Becker, Ehrlich, Finnegan, Kraft, Loft, Nott, Preston, Roberts, Rohr).

In all this, one key theme to emerge has been the consideration of musicians as workers. For example, in writing the history of the British Musicians' Union John Williamson and I wrote:

> Our approach is to treat musicians as workers, or, more accurately, as particular sorts of workers seeking paid employment. They may also be creators, performers, celebrities and stars, but what matters to us is that they are people seeking to do jobs. (*Players*' 8)

In effect this was an invitation to imagine, to think of musicians in different ways. Our history of the Union largely dealt with its role in representing musical workers at a national level, with the Union serving as a prism through which to consider those issues which have affected British musicians' working lives since its formation in 1893.

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This was a *collective* history which left open the question of what examining the career of individual musicians as workers might reveal. This article attempts to illuminate that concern via a case study of one of the most famous popular musicians of all—Elvis Presley. The article thus moves my work from the general to the particular. It argues that when considering musicians as workers it is necessary to examine the industries such people work in and those they work with and that to view the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" as a proletarian offers new insights into his working life and the music it produced. What follows is an account of Elvis Presley as a worker, that is, as someone who can only exist via the selling of his/her labor power. It is necessary here to distinguish between a worker and an employee. While all musicians can be seen as workers, relatively few are employed by employers with such instances generally occurring in places such as orchestras and within education. The vast majority are self-employed workers, subcontracting out their services. As will be shown, this has important implications, especially within extremely competitive fields such as music.

Inevitably this is a secondhand account, which draws heavily on previous writing. This suggests a need for caution, as much of the story has become mythologized. Basic facts are in dispute (Simpson)[2] and many of the public statements made by Presley during his life were made exactly for public consumption, rather than truth-telling. Nevertheless, the extant story remains illuminative.

What follows suggests that understanding Elvis as a worker can illuminate his art. Importantly, musicians are particular sorts of workers. Moreover, as will be shown, they work in particularly cutthroat industries with high casualty rates and low success rates. Thus, while it is tempting to see Elvis' psychology as the key determinant in his story, his background and location as a worker are far more telling. In order to explore this, I begin by looking at that key determinant of working life—class—before going on to consider the music industries, the jobs which Elvis Presley did, those he worked with, what sort of worker he was, and, finally, the importance of being a trailblazer. Overall, the aim is to provide a new contextualization of someone who "may be the most written about figure of all time" (Guralnick, *Careless* xii).

Class

Class is central to the Presley story and a vital component in understanding his life. When Elvis Aaron Presley was born on 8 January 1935 in Tupelo, Mississippi, it was into a very poor family where both parents did whatever work came their way. In common with many working class people, Elvis's early life was dominated by his parents' search for work. In Tupelo his mother, Gladys, picked cotton and his father, Vernon, had numerous menial jobs. One illustration of how this was a life dominated by the availability or not of work is the family's move from Presley's birthplace to the larger city of Memphis 1948, something undertaken because, in his words, "We were broke man, broke" (qtd. in Simpson 13). When Vernon was jailed in May 1938 it was for petty fraud—a worker's crime. There are also accounts of the family being referred to as "poor White trash" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 23–24). In short, Elvis's family worked because they *had* to in order to survive. This was not a life of luxury, but one of necessity. In Marxist terms, lacking control of the means of production, in order simply to survive, the Presleys were compelled to sell the one thing they had—their labor power.

The working class nature of Elvis's early life is also vividly illustrated by examining the extra-musical labor which he undertook. As he became a youth, Elvis did what a lot of working class kids have to do—look for work to supplement the family income. He began his working life doing basic gardening work, before working variously as a cinema attendant, machinist, and truck driver. Marion Keisker at Sun Records—where he made his first recordings—recalled him wearing overalls and having grease under his fingernails when they first met (Simpson 15).

Unsurprisingly, besides his period in the US army (see below) there is little written about Elvis's work outside of music, with Guralnick offering the most detailed accounts. Many of the working class attitudes which were drummed into Elvis as a child remained with him in adult life, particularly that of deference to his supposed "betters." Various accounts refer to his politeness and the diligence with which he carried out his tasks. For example, at his last job, for Crown Electric, the owners, the Tiplers were "won over by his polite manner and by his clear devotion to his mother" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 81). Meanwhile his early ambition is limited to wanting to do what many working class kids want—to buy their parents a house (Guralnick, *Last Train* 67).

Despite his parents' poverty, it is, of course, important to acknowledge that as a *white* working class *man*, Elvis was *comparatively* privileged. Unlike those of his black neighbors, none of Elvis's ancestors had been owned by other human beings. Elvis's parents were very poor, but they could at least move to look for work. Meanwhile the proximity with which they lived to Black Americans meant that Elvis was exposed to their culture in ways not experienced by most of his white peers. Elvis was also male, another distinct advantage in the 1950s US labor market.

In his later life the gifts for which Elvis became famous for giving can also be seen through the lens of class, as a means by which to compensate for capitalism's failure to provide sufficiently for all. Presley justified them on the grounds that he knew what it was like to be poor and seemed to believe that God had put him in a position where he could make things better for people (Simpson 45). Gifts were a way to temporarily overcome the disadvantages which class had assigned.

Class not only affected Elvis' early life, it remained an indelible marker throughout. The Memphis Mafia, as his posse become known, were working class men to whom Elvis could relate. Here is the dichotomy of the rich celebrity living a "showbiz" lifestyle, but unable to escape his class origins. Presley's choice of music to make was hardly coincidental. This was working class music, made by the dispossessed. If becoming the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" was unlikely, then it was even more unlikely that Presley would have become a concert pianist or opera singer. Importantly, Elvis's class position meant his status as "king" was hardly an hereditary one. He had to *work* for it, and examining the nature of his working life can tell us much about Presley's subsequent fate. In order to do this, it is necessary to start with *where* he worked.

Characterizing the Music Industries

Elvis Presley was a worker seeking to sell his labor power in various markets. Here, rather than talking of a singular "music industry," I have helped to developed the model of pluralistic *music industries* (Williamson and Cloonan, "Rethinking"). In part this is an attempt to move analysis on from the singular, record-company dominated, accounts

which have been to the fore elsewhere (see Negus, *Music Genres*; *Producing Pop*) and to stress plurality. Such an orientation has important implications for an analysis of musicians as workers, broadening out the object of study from just the recording sector to encompass areas such as live music, copyright, and broadcasting. The latter is particularly important in Presley's case, as he was the first major music star of the television era.

So, in order to understand Elvis as a worker, we need to realize that popular musicians work within, and have their work disseminated by, a number of interrelated industries. These industries have particular working patterns, which affect those working within them. In Becker's famous formulation musicians are "deviants," because their working patterns take them outside of the "9–5" norm. As live performers, musicians work at exactly the time that their coworkers in the audience are relaxing. Musicians thus perform key roles in the reproduction of labor by helping it to enjoy the leisure time necessary for its reproduction. The term for such work is, ironically, "playing." There are a number of implications for this, including the fact that musical work *per se* is often seen as not being a "proper" form of work (Cottrell; Williamson and Cloonan, "Players") as its practitioners seem to be enjoying what they are doing.

It is important to recognize that most popular musicians do *not* have employers. They are workers for hire, subcontracting out their labor/services to whomever can pay. The pluralistic industries model recognizes that musicians have diverse sources of income—such as fees for performing, recording sales, performance rights, broadcasting fees, etc. Like most popular musicians, Elvis was self-employed and this necessitates some entrepreneurial nouse on behalf of either musicians, or—as we shall see in Elvis's case—someone working on their behalf.

In addition, the industries that Elvis worked in were (and are) capitalist, with all that implies. At least two aspects of this bear further consideration—exploitation of labor and cycles of boom and slump. Capitalism is founded on the exploitation of labor, something which is easier in circumstances—such as those of the music industries—where the supply of labor generally exceeds the demand for it. If it is difficult now to imagine Elvis as an exploited proletarian, it should also be borne in mind that commercial success of the sort he achieved is extremely rare (Osborne). When supply of labor exceeds demand, the tendency is to drive wages down and one way of countering this is to restrict the labor market via organizing workers in trade unions. When Elvis began his career, certain musical work was only available to American Federation of Musicians (AFM) members; the union oversaw recording arrangements in many studios and some live fees appearances were paid via it (Guralnick, *Last Train* 106, 118). So, in order to work, Elvis was a union member, joining the local Musicians' Union and remaining an AFM member throughout his life (albeit with periods where dues went unpaid).[3] This worker needed union protection.

Another important characteristic of capitalism is that it is subject to processes of boom and slump. The state of the global economy has implications for *all* workers and the entertainment industries can be seen as particularly vulnerable to economic downturn, as often the first thing many people stop spending on is "luxuries"—such as records and live gigs. Here, Presley can be seen as having that essential component of a successful career—luck. The bulk of his professional career coincided with the "long boom" of postwar prosperity which lasted in to the early 1970s. Presley benefitted from a period in which

consumers often had money to spend on leisure, including popular music and its associated trappings. While the boom did not make him a star, the economic context within which Elvis's success took place has to be considered. This is not to deny the (superstructural) talent which Elvis had, simply to acknowledge that without the machinations of the economic base, the commercial success which Elvis enjoyed would have probably been somewhat more constrained. In short, the right circumstances existed within which to enjoy popular success. As Simpson noted, "If you wanted to create a teen idol who could synthesize all these different musical strands, you couldn't have picked a better time and place to put him than Memphis in the early 1950s" (95).

Elvis's brilliance was to exploit those circumstances in unprecedented ways. However, the route to stardom still necessitated a lot of extremely hard work and there are numerous accounts of the hectic working pace of Elvis's early musical career. For example, his guitarist Scotty Moore recalled that in early 1956, "We were working near every day. We'd pull into some town, go to the hotel room and get washed up or go right to the auditorium or movie house, and after we'd played our shows, we'd get back in the cars and start driving to the next town" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 251).

In February 1956, Presley collapsed in Jacksonville after a first show at the Gator Bowl and was kept under observation for two hours. By his own account, he was informed by medical staff that, "I was doing as much work in twenty minutes as the average laborer does in eight hours." He was told that if he didn't slow down, he would need two years off to recover. He responded by checking himself out and being onstage again within hours (Guralnick, *Last Train* 254). Guralnick describes long, overnight drives to gigs and Elvis putting his career before his first love, Dixie Lott. He quotes Justin Tubb saying of an early television appearance that, "He worked hard and he put everything he had into it" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 251). Such work characterized his music career. This was the man who would later play 837 shows in Las Vegas between 1969 and 1975 (Nash 5).

There is nothing "natural" about such work routines. They are brought into being within the music industries by a desire to create, maintain, and expand market demand. Elvis worked hard because doing so has long been a working class way to try to overcome capitalist boom and slump. A tendency to make hay while the sun shines is underlain by the knowledge that economic downturn is perennially around the corner—especially in industries as precarious as music.

Elvis's Jobs

As noted above, the young Presley performed jobs such as gardener, cinema attendant, machinist, and truck driver—a succession of mundane jobs, which were at best, what might be termed "semi-skilled"—a phrase Presley himself used to describe his status on a tax return in March 1954 (*Elvis Australia*, "Elvis"). None appears to have stretched this young man. However, one later job did.

Famously, Elvis joined the army in 1958 and worked as a soldier. His manager, "Colonel" Tom Parker, resisted advances from the military to use Elvis as a singing ambassador, as well as attempts by his record company RCA to get him to record while serving (Guralnick, *Last Train* 4). While there were some performances and a celebrity lifestyle which included nightly autograph signing outside his rented apartment (Brown and Broeske 178), Parker tried to ensure that as far as possible Presley was treated the

same as every other GI. His job was to be resolutely "normal" (Guralnick, *Careless* 9), enlisting as thousands of others did and serving to the best of his ability. He was quoted as saying, "I don't want to be different from anyone else" (qtd. in Fortas and Nash 84). However, it was also clear that he was scared of both the army itself and the effect it would have on his career (Guralnick, *Last Train* 463–67). Moreover, army service stretched him "because it was something he knew he had to succeed at both for himself and for others" (Guralnick, *Careless* xii).

By all accounts he was a very good soldier. According to Sergeant Ira Jones, "His test scores were phenomenal" (qtd. in Brown and Broeske 175). Colonel William J. Taylor Jr. described him as "the roughest, toughest, most gung-ho solider I ever had under my command" (qtd. in Brown and Broeske 176). During maneuvers on the Czech border, Presley proved himself to be highly resourceful, with his tactics leading to the capture of prisoners during a mock exercise (Guralnick, *Careless* 14).

While the immediate success of his period in the army is shown by his promotion to sergeant, the longer term legacy of this time became evident in two areas. First, it cemented the idea that Presley was "one of us"—an ordinary guy, albeit one with extraordinary talent. Moreover, unlike his earlier years he was no longer associated with teenage rebellion. Cohn suggested that "[b]y the time he came back to civilian life, he was almost as respectable as [family entertainers] Andy Williams or Perry Como" (28), while Harker argued that "[w]hen he came out . . . with short hair, sergeant's stripes and a generally clean-cut demeanor, he was *safe*" (58). While such accounts fail to distinguish between Presley's public and private personas, there is little doubt that the army period helped to cement a public image which was much more about family entertainment than it was youthful rebellion.

Secondly, most accounts suggest that it is in the army that Elvis began the sustained use of amphetamines, which were to lead to the (proscribed) drug addiction which plagued his later years. While some accounts say that his drug use began when he began touring and taking his mother's diet pills (Brown and Broeske 179), it is clear that taking drugs became routine in the army. Using amphetamines was one way to deal with sustained periods on maneuvers with Elvis indulging, and insisting that those around him also did so (Guralnick, *Careless* 21). Thus, at the same time that Parker was promoting Elvis as a clean-cut youth, his client's response to his own working life was pushing him toward drug dependency.

Meanwhile the army pay that Presley received was to be his last as an employee. As noted earlier, popular musicians generally subcontract out their labor to various hirers with different contractual arrangements covering the different kinds of work undertaken —recording, live performer, broadcasting etc. Thus in order to understand Elvis, it is necessary to understand the different working environments he was in.

Presley was relatively unusual in that his recording period largely preceded his public performances. Famously, Elvis dropped in to the Sun recording studio in July 1953 and cut two songs: "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin." This event had been preceded by a few informal public performances but *not* a sustained live career. (By comparison, by the time the Beatles came to record they were a highly accomplished and popular live act, having honed their art in Hamburg).

It is when Marion Keisker passes the recordings to Sun Records owner Sam Philips that Elvis's career takes off. It is the recording studio owner Philips who unites Presley

with guitarist Scotty Moore and drummer Bill Black and starts to develop them in the studio. Proper gigs took place from July 1954 onwards, a year following the first recordings (Guralnick, *Last Train* 109–11). However, more important for Presley's long-term success is the fact that the musicians get the chance to refine their art in Philips' recording studio. The sounds they subsequently made changed the course of popular music history.

Presley's recording career was, of course, dominated by his voice. Right from the start it was the *sound* of Elvis himself which captivated. As Guralnick notes, the voice on the Sun recordings "conveyed a sense of limitless possibilities" (*Careless* 661) and, for Simon Frith, Presley "celebrated—more sensually, more voluptuously than any other rock 'n' roll singer the act of symbol creation itself" (165).

Presley remained a largely instinctive worker in the studio. There are numerous accounts of him delaying such work until he felt in the mood, and then recording numerous versions of tracks until he *felt* things were right. Guralnick says that when musicians worked in the studio with Presley, "Everything, they soon realized, came down to feel," while record producer Bones Howe reported that in the studio, "It was always whether . . . you felt what he felt" (*Last Train*" 379, qtd. on 335). Presley's friend Cliff Greaves commented, "He didn't know about the tricks, the 'worldly ways,' he operated on sheer instinct" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 358), and Kiesker reported that when asked to repeat something he had done in the studio he would often say, "'What did I do?' Because it was all so instinctive that he simply didn't know" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 133). In short, Presley's *working methods* (i.e. the particular ways in which he labored) help to explain the sounds which were subsequently produced.

Importantly, while at Sun, Philips allowed Presley to take as long as he wanted to get the right sound. Keisker recalled, "The sessions would go on and on" until this was achieved (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 131). This practice continued after he moved to RCA, where "the pace, the momentum, the feel of the session, were all with the boy." Overall, "Time meant nothing to him in the studio" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 335). If the selection of songs was initially determined by a practice whereby only songs represented by companies which Presley and Parker part-owned were recorded, once chosen they were often reworked until they shined. However, this was not always true as, for example, the seemingly endless soundtracks for films saw quality drop. As Elvis's song selector Freddy Bienstock noted, once three movies a year were being made "there was no way to have better music, because from the moment one picture was finished, we would get started on the next one" (qtd. in Nash 211). Nevertheless, as a worker in the recording studio, Elvis was frequently the best in his field. As Simpson notes, "The studio was Elvis' domain" and "the tragedy was that no one after Philips pushed as hard again" (90, 99). Once he took over as Elvis's manager it is conceivable that Col. Tom Parker could have pushed Presley as a recording artist, but, as will be shown, Parker cared less about the sound of a recording than he did about its commercial appeal.

As a *live performer*, it is possible to see Elvis as having undertaken different types of work. Early gigs are reported as being extremely physical and exciting, with Presley's natural instincts and his ability to learn quickly combining in an utterly compelling manner. According to Guralnick "every minute he was on stage was like an incendiary device" (*Last Train* 173). Following the return to live performance in 1968, things got more mixed. The triumph of the live part of the televised *Elvis* show plus several

contemporaneous gigs showed that Presley retained an incredible stage presence. However, the latter years also witnessed far too many shows—and far too many poor ones—by a working man who was obviously ill and overworked. For example, in 1974, Elvis played 152 shows in addition to a two-months residency in Las Vegas (Brown and Broeske 394). By 1975 the shows were often perfunctory, with fans indulging him (Guralnick, *Careless* 601, 605, 616, 617). By May 1977, "There was no longer any pretense of keeping up appearances. The idea was simply to get Elvis out onstage and keep him upright for the hour he was scheduled to perform" (Guralnick, *Careless* 634). Here was a worker clearly not fit for work, but continuing to do so seemingly out of a mixture of professional pride and business pressure.

Much of this was due to Parker, whose undue influence can also be discerned in perhaps the least accomplished part of Presley's working life—that as an *actor*. Certainly, he had some acting ability and desire to be a serious actor. In 1956, Presley said that "all my life I wanted to be an actor . . . my greatest ambition" (Simpson 295). On arrival in Hollywood, "He spoke hopefully about the artistic movies he hoped to make, and the accomplished actor *he* hoped to become" (Simpson 102). Notably, he did not want to sing in films (Guralnick, *Last Train* 260), but was soon persuaded that this was what audiences would expect. As was customary, Elvis threw himself into the work for "this was a job like any other" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 330), something which he acknowledged in a 1972 interview (Guralnick, *Careless* 468). He was disappointed to be described as a good actor, because he wanted to be a *great* one (Guralnick, *Last Train* 349).

However, the decision to put Elvis in the movies was always a commercial one and his film career was much more concerned with quick profits than it was about artistic aspiration. The Colonel initially negotiated a good deal with director Hal Wallis, ensuring that it was non-exclusive so that Presley could make other films wherever and whenever he wanted (Nash 137–41). Parker then tried to improve every subsequent deal. The result was three films a year and low standards for both the films and their accompanying soundtracks, as according to Freddy Bienstock, "there was never enough time to do them properly" (*Elvis Australia*, "Freddy"). Yet, as Simpson notes, the films were successful at two levels—they made money and negated the need to do a world tour (306).

Typecast, trapped in repetitive formulas and always made to sing, Presley found that his work in films offered him little scope for serious artistic fulfillment. When he balked at the scripts or songs, Parker placated him by saying that that this was the best way to make money (Fortas and Nash 247; Nash 146). Presley's film work made him richer, but diminished his art to a point where "he was embarrassed to listen to his own music, to watch his own films" (Guralnick, *Careless* 207), which were described by his own British fan club as being "puppet shows for not over bright children" (qtd. in Fortas and Nash 246). Added to this was the fact that drugs were often available (Brown and Broeske 243, 252) and, overall, the work made him ill (Nash 206).

Reports have suggested that Presley's one chance to exert himself on the big screen—when Barbara Streisand offered him the chance to perform as co-lead in *A Star Is Born*—was frustrated by Parker's wrangling and excessive demands (Guralnick, *Carless* 563–64; Nash 289). Similarly, an offer by Robert Mitchum to costar in *Thunder Road* was scuppered by Presley's feeling that Parker would disapprove (Brown and Broeske 125). Fortas and Nash suggest that various worthwhile projects were turned down as they wouldn't make enough money (244) and that MGM was complicit with the Colonel's

view that "quality was hardly of utmost importance in the Presley vehicles" (Fortas and Nash 213). Nevertheless, Elvis was a major movie star, at times being the highest paid actor in Hollywood (Guralnick, *Careless* 189; Nash 217). Indeed, Presley remained a *star* throughout his career and this can be seen as another form of work.

The idea of stardom in popular music and the associated star-making machinery have been discussed in a number of places (see Mäkelä; Loy et al.). Such accounts do not suggest that this work is easy. Dyer has shown that stardom requires workers to be simultaneously both ordinary—"one of us"—and *extra*ordinary, something remote from us. This requires *work*. Indeed the persona of Elvis Presley was itself a *creation*; it did not simply exist. It was a performance, part of "his determination to *become* Elvis Presley" (Brown and Broeske 304, emphasis added). The boy born Elvis Aaron Presley had to *work* in order to both *become* "Elvis Presley" and then to maintain that status. Doing this was stressful and caused him to complain in the mid-1970s that he was "so tired of being Elvis Presley" (qtd. in Brown and Broeske 400). The work of being a star was both complex—involving questions of where the private and public personas began and ended—and taxing, ultimately demanding a very high price.

Meanwhile back in music, it is important to note that one role which Presley did *not* take on was that of a songwriter, generally performing songs written by others. In some instances he made contributions which were significant such as changing lyrics (*Elvis Australia*, "Freddy") although in later years he mainly selected from songs which had been brought to him. He once commented that "I've never written a song in my life. . . . It's all a big hoax" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 387). While this meant that he did not get songwriting royalties, income from songs was guaranteed via the fact that—at Parker's insistence—Presley would only record songs after the songwriters agreed to assign part of their royalties to Hill and Range, the publishing company which looked after song rights. As Guralnick notes,

> What this meant was that the songwriter signed a document surrendering one third of his [sic] songwriter's royalties, which were paid by the record company to the song publishers. Once the publisher received them, they were split, under ordinary circumstances, 50–50 with the writer(s), but in this case one third was to be reserved out, to be "paid to Elvis Presley personally." As a result, the writers ended up getting 33 1/3 percent, instead of 50 percent of these "mechanical royalties." (*Last Train* 387)

According to Nash (147), Presley himself eventually owned 15% of two publishing companies which were set up, Elvis Presley Music and Gladys Music, with Hill and Range's owners, Jean and Julian Aberlach, owning 45% and Parker 40%. In addition, Parker took 25% of Presley's publishing income. While this was shrewd dealing from Parker, it has also been suggested that he did not fully understand copyright and so lost millions by not registering Elvis with either of America's songwriter collecting agencies, ASCAP and BMI (Nash 322–23).

Songwriters wanting Presley to record their songs effectively had to surrender part of their income, while knowing that the song could be expected to sell extremely well and so earn them more than would be the case had it been recorded by another artist. Nevertheless, having to hand over a large percentage of their income often rankled songwriters, sometimes resulting in protracted negotiations before settlements were reached. Examples of this include wrangles with Jerry Reed for "Guitar Man" and with

Chips Moman for "Suspicious Minds" (Guralnick, *Careless* 251, 279, 285; Fortas and Nash 290).

Presley himself appears to have been almost indifferent to business practices. He simply followed Parker's advice and seemed to be happy as long as he had money to spend (Nash 128). According to Nash, he "remained isolated from the business dealings, both by choice and by his manager's design" (146). While this may have not been the most judicious approach, it was one born from a working class attitude of living for the moment, because the future was so uncertain. That this made Presley act in ways detrimental to his fellow workers was not something which would have caused those around him undue concern.

Overall, a consideration of Elvis's jobs serves the object of further understanding his artistic career. From being a boy looking to support his family, he progressed to being a dynamic *performer*. It was this act of performing which came to dominate his working life. His records mixed spontaneity with consideration; the live shows moved from being exciting to being shambolic, while the film career saw too much routine and the work of being a star was exhausting. If within classical music scholarship attention is directed toward "the work itself"—that is toward a composed piece of music—then within popular music studies it may well be that the study of *work* itself—that is, of the practices of selling labor power—assumes greater importance and offers fresh perspectives.

Co-Working

Like any successful musician, Elvis worked with numerous people during his working life, including many fellow musicians, music industries personnel, broadcasters, and others. As an actor he worked with directors, producers, fellow actors, and crew. However, one working relationship came to dominate all the others—that with his manager, "Colonel" Tom Parker. This relationship was the only constant from Presley's time at Sun, until his untimely demise. Once Parker saw Presley in 1955, he started to take over his career, being appointed his Special Adviser that summer and becoming his manager in March 1956. Henceforth, increasingly "nothing happened without the Colonel's OK" (Guralnick, *Careless* 83).

If practices of popular music can be seen as an interaction between art and commerce, then rarely have these two poles been personified in such dramatic ways. Throughout their working relationship, Presley took care of the art and Parker the commerce. There was, however, also an important intertwining. Presley's rise came at a time when popular singers were conceived of as entertainers, rather than artists. Not until the mid 1960s—well in to Presley's career—did popular musicians become commonly referred to as artists rather than entertainers. There are many important differences in such terms. Somewhat simplistically, artists concern themselves with art in and of itself, while implicit in the notion of entertainment are considerations of the market, of the potential audience. Artists create, entertainers work. Artists should not be concerned with their audiences; entertainers *have* to be. While Presley was undoubtedly an artist—he created great art—his overwhelming impulse was to *entertain*—via hard work. He was an artist keen to entertain his audience, and in Parker he found a business man highly attuned to that aspiration.

There is not space here to go in to the complex relationship between Presley (a naïve young man whose stardom coincided with the death of his beloved mother) and Parker (a cynical wheeler dealer whose eyes were always on the prize). To say the least, Parker earned a mixed reputation. To musician Chet Atkins he was "the best manager I ever saw" (qtd. in Nash 5). Brown and Broeske call him "shrewd and brilliant" (x), Fortas "a genius" (40), and Nash "a skilled tactician who approached any negotiation with the foresight of a master chess player" (118). Musician Hank Snow labeled Parker "the most egotistical and obnoxious human being I ever met" (qtd. in Brown and Broeske 59), while Freddy Bienstock simply described him as "difficult" (qtd. in *Elvis Australia*, "Freddy"). However, it is hard to disagree with Nash's contention: "The probability is that neither man would have been as big in his field without the other" (5).

Importantly, understanding Presley as a worker, requires understanding that much of his working life involved subordinating himself to the demands of a manager whom he trusted, but rarely challenged. The 1968 *Elvis* television special was one of the few occasions when Presley stood up to Parker on artistic grounds, resisting his attempts to make it a Christmas show called *Elvis Presley and the Wonderful World of Christmas*. It is certainly noteworthy that the biggest influence on the conduct of Presley's career was not a fellow musician, but an utterly determined business man.

Parker drove hard bargains with everyone, including Presley from whom he eventually took 50% of some earnings (Guralnick, *Careless* 248). However, if the deals which Parker brokered on behalf of his client often resulted in Parker making more money than his artist, apparently Presley did not balk at them (Nash 102). He seemingly viewed Parker as his good luck charm and was generally scared that if Parker went, so would his career (Guralnick, *Careless* 448). For Bienstock, Parker was Presley's "security blanket" (*Elvis Australia*, "Freddy"). However, Presley's inability to confront Parker was also something which also contributed to his drug usage (Nash 209).

Parker was undoubtedly a hustler. To read accounts of his business dealings is to be confronted by a bewildering array of constant renegotiations and demands for more (see Guralnick, *Careless* 123). Parker made millions—and subsequently lost them gambling at the Las Vegas Hilton. In short, "no manager before Tom Parker had [been] … so brilliantly, or blatantly, capitalistic" (Nash 119).

An artist manager's work can be compared usefully to that of the representative role of a trade union official. As musicians are generally freelance workers who are contracted to provide services, they generally need representing to those wishing to employ them. It is a manager's job to do this. The manager is the one person overseeing every contract that the artist signs, something which makes them uniquely powerful within an artist's career. A working manager-artist relationship needs to be based on trust and the assumption that the manager always puts the artist's interest first. While often both interests will coincide, where they do not, the artist's needs must be paramount—something Parker did not respect. However, while he had many faults—and Nash suggests that one might have been being a murderer—Parker made Elvis rich (39–44). The problem was that there was no one who could intervene between Presley and Parker. Generally lacking the wherewithal to challenge his manager himself, this worker deferred to his management in ways which were ultimately harmful. For example, the Las Vegas years—1969 to 1977—of relentless live performances, were obviously hugely detrimental to Presley's health and contributed to his early death.

If early on Parker got Elvis the money his talent deserved, then later Parker milked that talent for his own ends—especially to pay off his gambling debts. As Presley deteriorated toward the end of his life, despite some attempts by Parker to deal with various problems, it was the Colonel who arranged a touring schedule which exacerbated the problems and made Presley more ill. In early 1977, after Presley collapsed, Parker was quoted as saying, "The only thing that's is important is that he's on stage tonight. Nothing else matters" (qtd. in Brown and Broeske 409). The effects of such an attitude on Presley can hardly be imagined. Part of what finally killed him appears to have been the boredom of a work routine which revolved around Parker's plans and never stretched the artist (Simpson 110). According to Memphis Mafia member Jerry Schilling, "It was self-destructive because what happened to Elvis later was what happened to any creative artist who isn't faced with a challenge" (qtd. in Simpson 119).

Meanwhile it is important to note that Elvis also became an employer of musicians, hiring them for recording sessions and live shows. The importance of Parker in mediating such relationships was again apparent from early on. As Presley's career took off, band members Scotty Moore and Bill Black were soon complaining at being kept on low retainers while Presley's earnings soared (Guralnick, *Last Train* 204). This ultimately led to them becoming alienated from Presley, to the indifference of Parker who seemingly regarded them as replaceable hirelings who represented a threat to his power base (Guralnick, *Last Train* 266).

Henceforth the relations which Presley had with his fellow musical workers were shaped by both commercial concerns and hierarchy. A tight rein was kept on finances, with, for example, members of Presley's Las Vegas band denied guest passes for the shows and provided with minimal food and drinks (Nash 272). Presley was routinely referred to as "The Boss" and accounts of his authority being challenged are rare (Brown and Broeske 401). To an extent, this might be what is expected in a relationship where Presley was *paying*. However, one result was that Elvis had no extended working relationship with any other musician. If Sinatra had Nelson Riddle, later Lennon had McCartney, and Jagger had Richards, ultimately Presley had no musical sparring partner, just his own intuition mixed with Parker's determination to minimize costs. Meanwhile Presley had other dispositions as a worker.

Deference

Considering Presley as a worker involves a consideration of the *type* of worker he was. Here it is possible to characterize Presley as being a *deferential worker*. This concept was developed by Lockwood (1966) and has been used to explain why British working class voters whose interests as workers might best be represented by the Labour Party, voted for the Conservative Party, which overwhelmingly represented the interests of Capital (see Piepe et al.). Working class Conservative voters seemingly *deferred* to those whom they regarded as their social betters and whose judgment they therefore trusted. Thus, the notion of the deferential worker is used to explain why people act in ways which seem, objectively, to be against their own (class) interests.

Such an idea is useful in helping to explain a career which saw numerous bad films with mediocre soundtracks and ended with a deadly touring schedule. Presley's early days in the public eye elicited numerous accounts of a nervous

young man who was earnestly polite to those he encountered. His class background would allow him little scope for alternative strategies. He referred to himself as having been brought up to consider "*other peoples'* feelings" (Guralnick, *Careless* 661, emphasis added). When his father was jailed, his mother "taught her young son to fear authority so that he might survive in a hostile world" (Nash 209). He was routinely referred to as being polite on film sets (Guralnick, *Last Train* 394). The autographs he willingly signed throughout his career were evidence that he "reached out to fans in a way that no star has done before or since" (Brown and Broeske 435). He was also willing to shape his art for others' benefit, saying of rock and roll in June 1956, "When it's gone, I'll switch to something else" (qtd. in Kays). After being accused by musicians Ira Louvin of being a "White nigger" for singing rock and roll while saying backstage that his favorite music was hymns, he replied, "When I'm out there, I do what they want to hear—when I'm back here I can do what I want to do" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 253).

Toward the end, Elvis allegedly confided to backing singer Kathy Westmoreland, that "I'm so tired. . . . I don't want to go out on this tour, but I have to: The Colonel owes $8 million" (qtd. in Nash 302). It is again with Parker that deference is most evidenced. Presley routinely deferred to the judgment of a man whose business acumen was always to the fore and whose aesthetic skills have yet to be discerned. When Elvis became a film star, he deferred to Parker and accepted a draining schedule, minimal budgets, and plotlines designed more to make money than art. According to Gordon Stoker of the Jordanaires, Presley's attitude became, "Well, regardless of what I say (they're) going to demand that I do this song, so I'll just do the best I can" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Careless* 122). Parker took little interest in Elvis as a person, famously opining when he died that, "It don't mean a damned thing. It's just like when he was away in the army. . . . This changes nothing" (qtd. in Nash 312). Indeed, for Parker a dead worker was perhaps the best of all —totally deferential. Byron Raphael suggested that, as the living Elvis was harder to control, a dead one was better for Parker (Nash 127). But, ironically, deference was underpinned by another key facet helping us understand Elvis as a worker—his innovation.

The Conservatism of Trailblazing

For someone whose personal politics were seemingly reactionary (see Miss Cellenia), Elvis's art and, especially his early music, can be seen as highly innovative and unprecedented. He was a new "cultural force" in popular music,[4] rising with a musical form which had not previously featured in the American musical mainstream and which was widely viewed as being a short-term craze. This is vital to understanding what happens to Presley. Once he is a major star making significant amounts of money, no one involved thinks that it will last. This included Presley himself, who initially believed that his success "is like a dream . . . he will wake from" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 162). It also included RCA who, according to Joan Deary from the label, thought, "He was good for only a handful of hit singles and an album before the public grew tired of this new 'fad' rock 'n' roll" (qtd. in Brown and Broeske 64). Parker was also concerned that the success would not last (Vellenga 102–03). However, Guralnick says that by mid 1955 Presley was more assured and "no longer believed that it was all just going to go away—even though

in interviews he was still inclined, with becoming modesty, to say that he did" (*Last Train* 220). Nevertheless, uncertainty was ever present. When, in 1956, he said that he is only sleeping four hours a night and is then asked why he didn't take things easier, Presley replied, "The Lord can give . . . and the Lord can take away. I might be herding sheep next year" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 344).

Part of Elvis's appeal was an almost infinite flexibility. He famously told Marion Keisker that "I don't sound like nobody" but also that "I sing all kinds" (qtd. in Brown and Broeske 30). Moreover, Presley was always astute enough to know that he had to sound like *somebody*. In other words, his success was built on being innovative enough to arouse interest, whilst simultaneously familiar enough to reassure. He knew what to do, but in his own way. This was a man who recorded albums with titles such as *Something for Everybody* and *Elvis for Everyone!* so that, as Simpson noted, "his very versatility became harnessed to a marketing plan" (86). For Sam Philips, Elvis's audiences recognized in him "the desire to please" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 141).

Most previous accounts portray Presley as someone willing to do whatever was necessary for success and whose class background provided him with no preparation for his subsequent working life. He was not a middle class kid, with well-connected parents paying for music lessons. This was a self-taught poor boy with raw talent. In order to realize that talent, he relied on the directions of others. It was Sam Philips who had the vision to develop that talent and Parker who had the vision to commercialize it. Within all this Elvis's role was to be a compliant worker. He did *not* display militancy, but humility and obedience.

There is no doubt that toward the end of his life Elvis Presley was a sick man. Putting aside the various theories about his death (see Simpson 61–66) there are numerous accounts of the range of pills he was taking, of weight fluctuations, and bizarre behavior (Simpson 52). Elvis's position as a worker clearly exacerbated his problems. Being outside the "9 to 5" norm, having no regular work patterns, and subjected to ever-changing market conditions has numerous implications for musicians. In Presley's case, there was no workplace health scheme, no one to represent him to Parker, nobody with whom he could swap shifts. In short, no work-based support mechanism. Moreover, there was no precedent, no road map to follow. When illness came to this worker, he was poorly equipped to cope with it. Effectively he was reliant on his manager and his inner circle—all of whom depended on *him* for their livings. Such reliance makes it very hard for employees to say "No," or even to offer the sort of advice which is most needed. Medical advice can be given, but easily overruled if it contradicts the demands of the music industries for more product. So, while in theory, Elvis may have been able to take more responsibility for his health, his class disposition and newly found status in a peculiar form of work (being both "star" and "boss"), made it increasingly unlikely they would do so. Add to this the status of being a "King" from an extremely humble background, and the impact was always likely to be combustible. Given all this, the surprise is less that Elvis died young, but more that he lived for so long.

The fact that Presley was at the forefront of a musical movement which wasn't expected to last resulted in two interrelated phenomena. The first was a tendency to milk the market, with Parker especially perennially keen to exploit Presley commercially. As a music star whose national emergence coincided with the rise of television and who became a film star, Elvis's visual appeal was always an essential part of his success. The

importance of this was strengthened further by Parker's astute merchandizing deals which saw Presley products flood the market and make unprecedented amounts of money (Brown and Broeske 145–46; Guralnick, *Last Train*" 354; Nash 289–90). Elvis Presley became *the* iconic face of rock and roll and his image remains one of popular culture's most enduring ones. But it came at a price, as this worker took diet pills to try to maintain his weight.

The other aspect of a feeling that "this won't last" was a tendency toward artistic conservatism. Following the Sun era (1953–55), Presley's career can be seen as a succession of attempts to repeat winning formulas, rather than to innovate. This is not to diminish Presley's art—there are moments of brilliance throughout. However, this is not a story of constant—or even regular—artistic innovation. On the contrary, there are numerous examples of Parker preventing potential innovations which he deemed too risky. Nash provides several examples of lucrative offers to play outside the U.S.A., which Parker turned down (89–90). Parker worried that "In the Ghetto" was too political (Guralnick, *Careless* 331) and originally opposed using the quasi-political "If I Can Dream" at the end of the *Elvis* television special, relaxing once the copyright was secured (Nash 60). While the *Elvis* and *Aloha From Hawaii* (1973) television specials were innovative television, musical innovation was rare. For Fortas and Nash, "He was afraid to alter the essence of who he was because he was afraid of losing it all" (146). As Guralnick notes, Presley "never recaptured the verve of those first Sun sessions [which] were seriously, passionately, and joyously pure and timeless" (qtd. in Barker and Taylor 142). Innovation thereafter was generally lacking.

Presley has frequently been portrayed as a lonely figure. As early as 1957 he told Memphis pastor Reverend Hammill that he was "the most miserable young man you have ever seen" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 441). RCA's Bill Bowder described him as "an intensely lonely person" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 561) and his physician, George C. Nichopoulos, described Presley's loneliness as "almost frightening to comprehend" (qtd. in 386). Books about him have titles such as *Down at the End of Lonely Street* (Brown and Broeske) and *Being Elvis: A Lonely Life* (Connolly).

His numerous affairs seemed to be more about having company more than enjoying sexual conquests (Nash 293) and Presley's own claim, that rock and roll would not let him have a wife (Brown and Broeske 355) was a decision based on his career, his work. Importantly, he seemed to have nowhere to go for advice. Fortas said, "If Elvis had a best friend he never told anyone" (Fortas and Nash 55). Guralnick shows how the star had nowhere to go to discuss Parker's machinations, as his father took little interest, and dropping "veiled allusions" to the issue aroused no interest from "the guys" around him (*Last Train* 137). His entire career was seemingly based on instinct and doing what was right in the given circumstances. He felt that he *had* to please others. The nearest thing to an adviser was Parker whose instincts were always toward the bottom line. But it would have been very hard for anyone to advise Elvis what to do. Once a trail is blazed, redirecting is hard—seemingly harder than Elvis ever managed.

Elvis Presley had no role models to base any strategy upon. Frank Sinatra and other big stars who preceded him were different *types* of star, different *types* of worker. They did not have to deal with the notoriety of rock and roll and being on television early in their careers. His career choices can also be compared to those of

later stars. In the late 1960s, the Beatles used their money to set up the Apple record label, gain artistic control, and get better financial deals. In short, they tried to gain control of the means of production. During the same period, Presley signed deals which increasingly favored Parker more than him. Here, being a trailblazer entailed commerce triumphing over art and the worker paying the price while remaining thoroughly proletarian.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the evidence gathered here justifies the claim that conceptualizing Elvis Presley *as a worker* can provide new insights into his art, his career, and the working lives of musicians. Like many musicians, Elvis was a man who sought the opportunity to work doing something he loved. Unlike most musicians, he was highly successful commercially. This had implications. Presley's entire career can be seen as a response to both his class origins and his later working conditions. In order to explain his story, understanding those conditions is a necessary, if not a sufficient, step to take. It reveals influences on the music itself, its recordings, and its live manifestations, and examining other popular musicians in this way could well be a fruitful exercise.

Elvis was both a great artist and a star, but these are not necessarily the best ways to understand him. In order to do that it is necessary to examine what he did—work. That entails understanding the circumstances which brought his success about and the relationships he forged along the way. It also means understanding that proletarians have to sell their labor power—and the only way to get rich is to sell more of it at a higher price. Presley became rich because of the *type* of worker he was—a unique product in a buoyant market.

I have intended to neither praise nor bury Presley, but to try to *understand* him and his work, that is, to try, as Guralnick indicates, to walk in his shoes (*Last Train* 377). There have been countless attempts to understand Elvis Presley's art, but it is clear that underpinning it was a working class ethic which culminated in a working lifestyle which contributed to his early demise. Far more than royalty, it is workers who tend to die young. Ultimately, then, the fate of the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" was far more proletarian than it was regal. He was simply worked to death.

Notes

1. See *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 40, no., 2017, and *Musicultures*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2014.
2. Also see, for example, the divergent accounts of Presley's visit to Richard Nixon in Brown and Boeske (353–56) and Guralnick (*Careless* 415–23).
3. For more on Presley's membership in various unions see the discussion following Daryl.
4. This quotation is attributable to Leonard Bernstein, who claimed Presley was "the greatest cultural force in the 20th Century" (qtd. in Meacham).

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