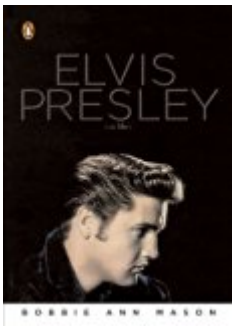
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bobbie Ann Mason. *Elvis Presley.* New York: Penguin, 2007. x + 178 pp. $13.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-14-303889-4.



Reviewed by Donald Johns

Published on H-Amstdy (May, 2008)

This paperback edition of Mason's 2003 biography of Elvis Presley appears under the rubric of Penguin Lives, a series of concise biographies, sans footnotes, of notable persons written by accomplished writers (e.g., Jane Smiley on Charles Dickens). As a southerner who came of age during the headiest days of Presley mania, Mason delivers an empathetic eyewitness perspective on both the young truck driver who enthralled the masses and the admirers who embraced him. As a gifted novelist, she provides the texture and contour that rule out a rehash of the familiar and distressing saga. In short, given her talent and her background, Mason was an inspired choice on the part of Penguin's editorial staff.

The result is a fluent narrative that should go down well with Presley devotees. The question remains as to what it offers scholarly readers already well acquainted with the lore. As Presley scholars read this biography, they may find themselves cycling through their stores of mental data and wondering whether Mason provides the uninitiated with sufficient information to illuminate the numerous key events in the singer's forty-two years--the first recordings at Sun Studios in Memphis, the signing with "Colonel" Tom Parker, the visit with Richard Nixon in the White House, and the rest. That is a difficult judgment to make. But therein may lie the value of this biography for the Presley scholar. It not only offers fresh perspectives by giving novelistic shape to the life at issue. It also compels the informed reader to weigh Mason's choices against the extensive range of available information--to, in effect, carry on an imaginary conversation with her about the nature, breadth, and depth of detail needed to put across the indispensable fundamentals of a life that caused biographer Peter Guralnick to declare, "I know of no sadder story."[1]

Elvis Presley was born January 8, 1935, in a shotgun shack on rented property in East Tupelo, Mississippi, to Vernon and Gladys Presley, a young couple scratching out a hardscrabble living on the poor side of town. He died August 16, 1977, at Graceland as his girlfriend, daughter, and retinue of assistants slumbered in the classic-revival mansion set on 13.8 acres in Memphis, Tennessee. The career spanned twenty-three years, from the

recording of Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's All Right, Mama" and Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" in the Sun Studios to the death at Graceland, as the ailing singer struggled to prepare for yet another concert tour.

Now, with Presley's time fading steadily away, what he was and what he meant is as open to question as ever. He is recalled by annual observations of his death, accompanied by a variety of rituals in Memphis. Elvis Presley Enterprises earns greater profits than singer and manager were able to garner during their lifetimes. Scholars and pop culture enthusiasts churn out a robust stock of theories, studies, biographies, movies, and opinions. The Elvis impersonator shows no sign of dying out as business or avocation. What history will make of all this is anybody's guess, but the signs are not altogether encouraging. As the generation that came of age during Presley's prime fades from the scene, it is inevitable that scholars of popular culture will approach his life and work from a more distant perspective, albeit one informed by a wealth of sources both primary and secondary, but still a vista looking back at a world removed and one that will likely seem more than a bit strange, one that to borrow a phrase from Greil Marcus may well look like an "old, weird America." Still, the rigors of scholarship and peer review will presumably turn out a progression of reasonable judgments adjusting to the inexorable theoretical shifts. The future of popular opinion seems more dicey. Will Presley's memory be delegated to an ever-shrinking coterie of disciples--impersonators, Las Vegas wedding parlor customers, Graceland pilgrims, the occasional offbeat filmmaker, the maverick teenage guitar picker who happens on his early Sun sides and creates yet another incarnation of rockabilly?

Will Presley and the remarkable cultural force that he was devolve utterly into caricature--and into universal perplexity about what the fuss was all about in company with allegations of racism and cultural theft? The latter view has gained some traction since Presley's death despite the consistently positive judgments voiced by contemporaries including James Brown, Jackie Wilson, and Al Green. Guralnick and Dave Marsh, two of the most reputable and accomplished of Presley's biographers, were moved to answer the denunciations of the idol by Chuck D of Public Enemy in detail and with passion.[2]

Mason gives scant attention to cultural expropriation, but her biography does cast light on why Presley mattered at the time of his emergence, why we should care about him now, and why his story is likely to retain its salience as the years go by. The answers lie in the spectacular quality of Presley's emergence as the first international superstar and avatar of youth culture, in the ingrained character of a poor boy's inferiority complex and socio-economic insecurities, and in the transcendent qualities of the music available to anyone willing to set aside preconceptions and listen.

Before rock 'n' roll, cutting edge popular music for white folks was Bing Crosby, Benny Goodman, the Andrews Sisters, and Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. For many in the older generation, Presley's music and onstage antics were either outrageous or a mystery. For many in the generations following Presley, the mystery is mostly about what the outrage could have been about, given the roads we have traveled in the four decades since his death. Born seven years prior to Presley, Mason gives us a window into the revelatory out-of-nowhere quality of his emergence--what it was like for his audience, what it meant to young people, and why it seemed at once both natural and amazing. Others have communicated the liberating nature of that moment. As Bob Dylan remarked, "When I first heard Elvis' voice I just knew that I wasn't going to work for anybody; and nobody was going to be my boss.... Hearing him for the first time was like busting out of jail." Bruce Springsteen said, "[It] was like he came

along and whispered some dream in everybody's ear, and somehow we all dreamed it."[3] Mason had the good fortune to hear Presley's music on the radio from the start. She was also blessed with parents whose catholic musical interests prepared the whole family for this phenomenon. When they first glimpsed him on ***The Ed Sullivan Show***, Mason writes,

[M]y father cried, "[B]oy, he's good!" We had been listening to rhythm-and-blues late at night on the radio for years, and we immediately recognized what Elvis was about. We had heard Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup and Little Junior Parker and Big Bill Broonzy and Wynonie Harris and Elmore James. In the daytime we listened to big bands, pop hits, country, the opera, everything we could find on the dial. On Sundays we sang in church along with the congregation, and we heard plenty of gospel music.... Elvis listened to the same regional stew, seasoned by the far-ranging reach of the radio, so when he emerged with his own startling, idiosyncratic singing style, we recognized its sources (pp. 1-2).

Of course, unlike Mason's parents, many were not ready for this twenty-one-year-old novelty from Memphis by way of East Tupelo. The sovereign of the television variety show, Ed Sullivan, resisted as long as he could. Mason notes that outside the South many found Presley "frighteningly uncouth--a redneck from a backward, bigoted region." Others heard a different message: "His music clearly had an affinity with rhythm-and-blues, from black culture. People heard raw jungle rhythms in his music--voodoo doings" (p. 1). To Mason, what clicked with the masses was Presley's simultaneous eclecticism and singularity:

Elvis swept up marginal groups of people with a promise of freedom, release, redemption; he embodied a yin and yang of yearnings; he took people close to the edge and brought them back again; with his stupendous singing talent, he blended all the strains of popular American music into one rebellious voice; like Walt Whitman, he was large--he contained multitudes; he created a style of being that was so distinctive it could be made into an icon; he violated taboos against personal expression and physicality; he opened the airwaves to risk and trembling. Rock-and-roll had been brewing for years, but its defining moment was Elvis (pp. 1-2).

The magnitude of the explosion was such that during his breakout year, 1956--his twenty-second year--"he became a millionaire, with ten songs on ***Billboard's*** top 100, more than any other artist in the past." His appearance on ***Ed Sullivan*** garnered fifty-four million viewers, an "82.6 percent share of the nation's viewing audience." As Mason describes it, "His ascendance from regional star to national star to Hollywood all occurred in an eyeblink. He was a boy wonder, both endearing and threatening, with a talent that defied category" (p. 6). Mason credits Presley with jump-starting "youth culture" and catalyzing "the breakdown of sexual inhibition ... and the end of racial segregation." Close on the heels of ***Brown v. Board of Education***, she argues, Presley, through no conscious intention of his own, inaugurated the cultural revolution that "punctured the balloon of 1950s serenity and conformity" and, as Little Richard averred, "open[ed] the door" for the cross-over of black music (pp. 6-7).

In her account of the response when Presley's first Sun Studio recording, "That's All Right, Mama," hit the airwaves in Memphis, Mason illustrates how the incendiary character of the young truck driver's emergence was, from the start, inextricable from cultural issues that persist to this day:

Elvis was an overnight phenomenon in Memphis. The record resisted classification. People didn't know if it was rhythm-and-blues, country, or what. Whatever it was, listeners clamored for it. Many people said Elvis sounded black, like the sounds of race records ["race" was the then-current industry term for blues and rhythm-and-blues]. In an era when daytime radio was domi-

nated by tepid crooning, quirky novelty, and chirpy innocence, here was a record--by a white boy--that had the flavor of juke-joint music. It had the thumping abandon, the driving energy, of the life force itself--a thrusting and writhing and wallowing and celebration (p. 28).

"Elvis," Mason declares, "had crossed a line" (p. 28). The difference between the controversy then and in more recent times is that Presley has somehow metamorphosed from a rebel who crossed racial boundaries and challenged deeply entrenched prejudices and customs to, in the minds of some, a cultural predator who (whether deliberately or as an unwitting beneficiary of institutional racism) ripped off more authentic artists who were victims of social oppression and aesthetic hegemony.

While Mason addresses the cultural theft issue only obliquely, largely content to illustrate the ways Presley was perceived by his contemporaries of different ethnicities and cultural viewpoints, she takes a more direct approach to questions that puzzle many, including those who wonder what all the fuss was about: Why did Presley allow himself to be snookered by a charlatan like Tom Parker? Why did he allow the quality of his music to deteriorate into mediocrity? Why did he waste so much of his talent on a series of forgettable movies? Why did he take up virtual residence in Las Vegas, work up a kitschy extravaganza of a stage show, take it on a seemingly endless road tour, and so on?

Mason identifies the source of the singer's career choices as a bone-deep sense of inferiority derived from generations of grinding poverty and scraping by. Her illumination of this issue is surpassed only by Elaine Dundy's descriptive narrative in her *Elvis and Gladys* of how Presley's mother's family moved numerous times from one sharecropper's cabin to another all within a few square miles, accumulating nary a dime during their odyssey.[4] Of father Vernon, Mason writes, "[He] was at the bottom of the social scale.... In [his] world, people like Vernon could work hard at whatever came along and still never get anywhere." Survival for the Presleys and their class was "tenuous. They lived in a small, impoverished world where kinfolks were both a burden and a blessing." The family sometimes depended on "the kindness of neighbors" and "the obligations of kinfolks" and sometimes resorted to government handouts, "a great source of shame." Presley's early memories, Mason notes, would have been of clinging to his mother as she worked backbreaking jobs. "When [Gladys] picked cotton, she hauled him along on the foot of her cotton sack." Another memory was the five-hour weekly bus ride the three-year-old and mother Gladys took to visit his father at the Parchman State Prison Farm, where Vernon was incarcerated for altering a four-dollar check from a hog sale in a hapless effort to squeeze out a few more dollars. "Elvis," Mason declares, "was born into the mind-set of poverty: the deference toward authority and the insolent snarl underlying it, the feeling of inferiority, the insecurity about where the next meal was coming from" (pp. 10-12). In Mason's analysis, Presley was a victim of a false consciousness, although she doesn't use that term, endemic among poor southern whites: "He was innocently authentic, but he craved the inauthentic, as country people, who are so close--uncomfortably close--to what is starkly real, often do." Poor white southerners, she avows, will "[accept] the heel of oppression when they should [be] thinking more radically" (p. 112).

Mason brings her homegrown knowledge to bear in assessing Presley's relationship with his mother. Like Guralnick and Dundy, she describes how the two communicated in baby talk and addressed each other with pet names. She notes Presley's "grief near hysteria" upon his mother's death in 1958 at age forty-six, recalling the famous dialogue between Vernon and Elvis Presley as they gazed out over the Graceland grounds:

"Elvis, look at them chickens. Mama ain't never gonna feed them chickens no more."

"No, Daddy, Mama won't never feed them chickens anymore" (p. 79).

Mason's insight and tone allow her communicate the moment without a trace of condescension, characterizing the exchange as "like a gospel call and response, [an] expression of grief that gained release through reiteration." The degree of Presley's devastation, she observes, was in proportion to the fervor with which he had dedicated his young life to "lifting his parents out of the misery of their lives." As for Presley's relationship with his mother, she declares that while "[t]hey loved each other in a way that by modern standards might seem almost pathological ... it was actually commonplace in the past" and was rooted in the family's struggle to gain a foothold in the world (p. 79).

In her accounts of Presley's relationship with his parents and the family's marginal social status, Mason covers ground gone over by Dundy and others. For example, in *Mystery Train*, Greil Marcus describes the images that survive of the family's early years, noting, "The earliest picture of Elvis shows a farmer, his wife, and their baby; the faces of the parents are vacant, they are set, as if they cannot afford an unearned smile. Somehow, their faces say, they will be made to pay even for that."[5] Marcus's description is adroit and perceptive, Dundy's study of Presley and his mother was groundbreaking and revelatory, and Guralnick's two-volume biography is exhaustive, professional, and heartfelt. But Mason's sensibility and local knowledge bring something new to the task and make available a fresh and dynamic portrait of this much-combed-over history:

"My mama loved beautiful things, but she wouldn't wear them," Elvis lamented when he gazed upon the baby-blue dress his mother was wearing in her silver casket. Of course she wouldn't wear fancy clothes around the house. Pretty things were too good to wear--why wear a nice dress to the dinner table and spill something on it? Only high-class people could afford to waste things and were indifferent to the work that went into keeping good clothes presentable (p. 80).

It is impossible to ponder the story of Elvis Presley without confronting the ease with which he fell under the sway of Parker, a Dutch immigrant lacking papers, a carnival hustler who passed himself off as a southern colonel. How did the Presleys allow their son to sign a contract that, as Mason says, "read like indentured servitude"? Why did Presley stay with Parker the rest of his life despite sporadic resentment and the knowledge that his manager was skimming the take while locking his client into contracts that debased the quality of his work? No one can answer these questions definitively, but Mason's suppositions have the ring of truth. While most would see the relationship as one of a double-dealer skinning the rubes, Mason argues that "signing up with the Colonel was actually a fairly sensible thing for [the Presleys] to do in their situation. Their social class demanded subservience to authorities--employers, people in a higher status. In order to get ahead, or to get out, you had to figure some angles" (pp. 43-44). In the unfamiliar world that wealth was preparing for them,

The Presleys knew they needed a guide, someone of their own kind who could maneuver among the bankers, lawyers, company executives--none of whom were to be trusted. The Presleys probably considered themselves lucky to find a con man who could challenge the big dudes, because they knew the big dudes would just stomp on them. That was the way life was (p. 44).

In one of many keen insights, Mason identifies Faulknerian dimensions in the Colonel and in the Presley family's sensibilities. "The South," she writes, "was full of small-time traders" who "had to figure angles," who wanted to avoid "being taken in," but "also liked to put one over on someone else." Faulkner's Flem Snopes, for example, "doesn't mind a good swindle." Like Snopes, Park-

er was a swindler, a joker who promoted Elvis "[by using] all the tricks he had learned from the carnival" (p. 44). Mason further speculates that Presley and his father knew they were signing on with someone who while he may have been a fraud would at least be their fraud and take care of them in the bargain:

Elvis and his father probably recognized the Colonel--the old carny, as he was often called--as a type of horse trader, and they knew he was good at his work because they could see how smooth he was. He knew how to make deals. Elvis and Vernon probably realized that when you hired someone like that, he would bend things around to his own advantage. They knew he would feather his own nest, but they accepted that because the Colonel would keep unimaginable amounts of money flowing their way. If Elvis made a million dollars, and if the Colonel swiped half, the remainder was still a fabulous fortune for a guy who had been earning thirty-seven dollars a week driving a truck for Crown Electric (p. 45).

The Hollywood story is more of the same, and Mason reprises the familiar story told by Guralnick, David Halberstam, and others. Elvis started out hoping to emulate his heroes, James Dean and Marlon Brando prominent among them. Moreover, credible members of filmland's A-list saw enough talent and presence to want to take a chance on the novice. "Serious directors like Nicolas Ray and George Cukor wanted Elvis, but the Colonel stood guard, "restricting his boy to middling, formulaic projects that for years provided the surest revenue stream in the business (p. 114). Presley showed up ready, worked hard, and got along well with everyone. He chafed under the yoke, depressed by the lousy scripts, resentful that "producer Hal Wallis was using his lucrative Presley movies to finance less commercial, more artistic works like ***Becket***" (p. 107). Mason attributes Parker's hold to familiar causes: The Colonel was his boss, and someone from Presley's background did what the boss said to do, especially if, as rumored, the boss had some blackmail material, or if good money was involved. "In the context of Elvis's world, when you come from poverty, you cannot turn down a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, no matter what you have to do for it" (p. 112). His adulation of Dean and Brando may have led Presley to memorize the dialogue from their films, but his insecurities would not allow him to walk the rebel walk. He might grouse to friends and family about the quality of the material forced upon him but still dutifully recited the mediocre lines and recorded the second-rate songs fed by the Parker-affiliated publishing company. The reluctance to rock the boat also accounts for Presley's discomfort with hippies and the political messages conveyed by Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and others of their generation. In Mason's words, Presley "was a representative of the marginalized who fight their way into the harbor, not the disaffected who jump ship" (p. 49).

The concomitant to a sharecropper's sense of inferiority was a hankering for the bright lights of the big city. Las Vegas offered Presley the means to take his place beside the stars he and his parents admired: "To him, it was the pinnacle of show business, the sacred territory of great performers like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin.... To succeed there would give Elvis his vindication--acceptance by the big dudes and classy dames who had once derided him" (p. 136). In 1956, at age twenty-one, his brief foray into the glitter capital fizzled before a bewildered older-generation audience. But in 1968, a "four-week engagement at the International was the most successful act in Las Vegas history" and set up a long series of annual gigs. While it is easy to dismiss the Vegas act as kitch, Mason, like Guralnick, points out that it allowed Presley to indulge and explore some fundamental passions--a youthful fascination with superhero garb (his Captain Marvel capes) and an expansive ardor for multiple genres of music. He could dress up, demonstrate his karate moves on stage, and build his personal synthesis of American music, with a taste of Italian opera in the mix.

He could also keep the cash flowing in and the wolf away from the door, and he could be "Elvis," so far removed from, so far above, the pimply kid from the sticks and the projects who was heckled and hazed by the stronger, richer, and more popular kids. Moreover, he could hire an abundance of attendants, including his senior class president and the star of the football team, to entertain and insulate him from the outer world.

Mason's biography is not all-inclusive or conclusive. Readers who want a fuller version of the story will need to read Guralnick for more details on the recording sessions, the oddity of the White House visit, the nutty spending sprees, the peculiar relationships with women, the spiritual quests, the ways that Parker sealed his client off from creative contacts like Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, the various members of the entourage of bodyguards and factotums known as the Memphis Mafia, and the speculations on the cause of death. In addition to Guralnick, Marsh, Dundy, and Marcus will prove useful complements to Mason's perspective on this remarkable American life.

But this book is for those who can appreciate--or are willing to learn--why Mason says she "felt far from home" when she learned of Presley's death, why she says "[for] me Elvis is personal ... and something of a neighbor," and what it means that "Elvis had always been there, hovering in the national psyche, his life punctuating our times" and why for Mason and so many in her generation his death "left a great hole in the American cultural landscape" (p. 1). For both her elders and people much younger than Mason, Presley's life may seem pitifully short; for Mason and her contemporaries, it was experientially parallel with their own lifespan, with the developing arc of their awareness. Reprising what broke loose in the Sun Studios when Presley, then nineteen and a half, launched his impromptu rendition of Crudup's "That's All Right, Mama," with guitarist Scotty Moore, and bassist Bill Black scrambling to join the ride, Mason, from the viewpoint of maturity, captures what her family, her peers, and she as a twelve-year-old heard when DJ Dewey Phillips first played the record over the Memphis airwaves:

> Elvis seemed to open up, and a startling new music burst through the dam of his self-consciousness. "That's All Right" wasn't black, it wasn't rhythm-and-blues, arguably it wasn't the first rock-and-roll record. But it was infectious, alive, irreverent. Besides rhythm-and-blues, Elvis threw in country strains and the rhythms of black gospel and the soul of spiritual music, the high-pitched celebrations in the church hymns. He captured the naughtiness and the sadness and the playfulness of both country and blues--two folk styles now blended forever. It was a driving, bluesy, country, rocking synthesis, a combination of many influences, deeply derivative, and totally original (p. 27).

For some readers Mason at times may rely overmuch on inference. But that is all right. Her regional and generational provenance, her understanding of a range of contexts (the Presley family history as well as the larger society and culture), are the reasons to read this book. From one perspective, you can hear her narrative and note that it is essentially the same as that of Guralnick and others who have devoted deep study to Presley's life and ouvre. From another angle, it is impossible to ignore that hers is an articulate, sensitive, and authentic eye- and ear-witness account from the scene. For that reason alone it should be--and it will be--read and contemplated for as long as Elvis Presley remains a subject of interest.

Notes

[1]. Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), xii.

[2]. Dave Marsh, *Elvis* (New York: Times Books, 1982).

[3]. Both quotes appear on the following website, http://www.elvispeople.com/share.php.

[4]. Elaine Dundy, *Elvis and Gladys* (New York: MacMillan, 1985).

[5]. Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of American in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 138.