

Jailhouse Rock

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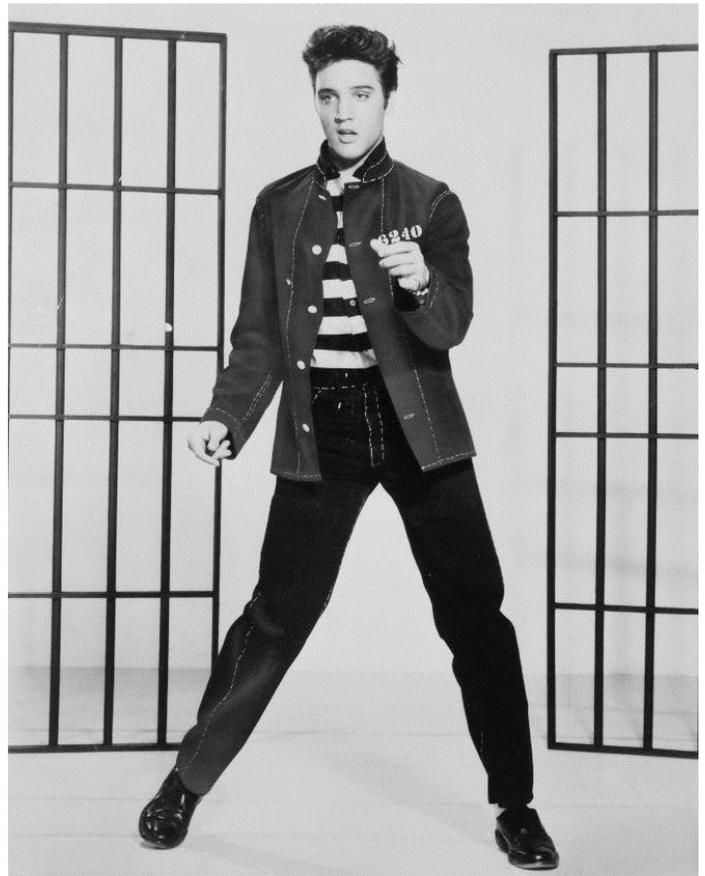
When the heavy-lidded Elvis Presley swaggered onto the screen in "Jailhouse Rock" (1957) his third picture, he shook the music and movie industries to their bedrock. Elvis quaked the landscape so profoundly that he was uplifted to their bedrock. Elvis quaked the landscape so profoundly that he was uplifted and crowned rock's King, dethroning pop royalty Frank Sinatra, who himself had dethroned Bing Crosby a decade earlier.

Understand that Elvis was not the first rock-film star. That had been another hillbilly with a beat: Bill Haley, frontman of "Rock Around the Clock" (1956) and "Don't Knock the Rock" (1957). A cheery apostle of the new sound, Haley possessed a doughy sex appeal but lacked the rebel shadings, contour, an attitude that made Elvis first a Goliath-slayer and, soon after, King of Kings.

At one matinee of "Jailhouse Rock" adults (namely, my parents) thought he resembled Michelangelo's marbled David with a jet-black pompadour, suggestive lips and gyrating hips. Teenagers (namely, my sisters) thought he resembled James Dean with a guitar. Watching "Jailhouse Rock" in 2001 I would add that he furthermore resembled a surly choirboy who couldn't suppress his orgasmic grunts. To tally the Elvis attributes is to realize how he was the fleshly embodiment of every imaginable contradiction of classicism and romanticism.

In the Elvis canon, "Jailhouse Rock" is the origin story, explaining how he might have come by his snarling, surly attitude, and proceeding to rehabilitate him and repack-age him for popular consumption. Heaven knows, "Jailhouse Rock" is not the best Elvis movie (that would probably be "Flaming Star" or "Viva Las Vegas"). And heaven knows, it's not a particularly good movie. But "Jailhouse Rock" remains the most eloquent record of two seismic events that rocked 1950s America: The Rise of the Teenager and The Elvis Phenom.

Elvis gave voice to that eternal teenage imperative, "Treat Me Nice" (as he demands musically here). His very presence made him the link in the rebel chain that connects James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause" to Warren Beatty in "Splendor in the Grass" to John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever" to Brad Pitt in "Legends of the Fall."



Elvis Presley dances in the iconic Jailhouse Rock musical number. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

When first we meet Elvis's Vince Everett, he is riding a forklift on a construction site, smiling about payday, and joking that he plans to use his salary "to buy a line of chorus girls and have 'em dance on my bed." Immediately he is established as a working-class kid (as opposed to the middle-class youth played by James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause") who believes that money buys him sex. (He's oblivious to the fact that women of all ages, and men too, are drawn to him as bees to nectar.)

In a subsequent scene, he buys drinks for the house in a downscale tavern, attracting the attention of slatternly blonde whose (protector? pimp? boyfriend?) roughs her up. In defending her honor, Vince beats up the woman-beater and kills him, landing himself a jail sentence for involuntary manslaughter.

In the slammer, Vince bunks with that slab of country ham Hunk Houghton (Mickey Shaughnessy), who's so impressed with the way the kid strums a guitar that he offers to help him on the outside – for a price. And when Vince gets sprung, he works Hunk's connections and catches the ear of music huckster Peggy van Alden (Judy Tyler), who professes to be all business but excites Vince's pleasure instincts.

At a time when Brando astride a motorcycle and Dean behind the wheel of a hot rod were the dominant images of misunderstood youth, "Jailhouse Rock" framed the misunderstanding musically. When perky Peggy introduces Vince to her parents, both academics, their intellectual friends pontificate about jazz tonalities. Vince, who hears only rock's primal rhythms, finds this beside the point.

And at a time when teens – that emerging demographic – felt put upon, "Jailhouse Rock" framed the adult/teen struggle in power terms. Adults – like the record exec who gives Vince's song to a more established artist to record – are the exploiters who take from the powerless and give to the powerful.

It's enough to justify Vince's bad attitude. And when he hits it big, he hits back manhandling women and minions the way the judges and wardens and execs have manhandled him. In perhaps the most attenuated Act Three in movie history, he realizes the error of his ways. In a confrontation where his is physically struck, Vince controls his anger and does not strike back. Hey, even a teenage caveman can evolve.

Cinematically, "Jailhouse Rock" is that curiosity, a wide-screen Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musical shot in black and white. Director Richard Thorpe, best known for costume musicals such as "The Student Prince," exploits the panoramic formal only in one sequence, the title number. It features Vince – now filming a TV variety show – before a male chorus line of adoring inmates – in prison uniform, snaking down a firepole. Even in 1957 this number was more Metro than Memphis, choreographed like the Gene Kelly spoof of "The Wild One" in "Les Girls," rather than something a rock idol might have imagined. (In hindsight, it portends Elvis's future Vegas productions.)

As a seismic event, the reverberations from "Jailhouse Rock" are still being felt. For the Elvis who emerges in this movie modeled how teenagers might style defiance. And it showed their parents that a bad boy could be rehabbed into a good citizen.

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