

It was the finest music of his life. If ever there was music that bleeds, this was it.

-Greil Marcus
Remembering the 1968 TV special.
From his book, *Mystery Train*, 1975.

...if any individual of our time can be said to have changed the world, Elvis Presley is the one. In his wake more than music is different. Nothing and no one looks or sounds the same. His music was the most liberating event of our era because it taught us new possibilities of feeling and perception, new modes of action and appearance, and because it reminded us not only of his greatness, but of our own potential.

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THE LITTLE THEATER

When in June 1968 Elvis Presley made a television special to be aired in December of the same year, he accomplished two things. He saved his career, and he made the best music of his life.

"If you're looking for trouble, you came to the right place," he sang as the camera pulled in tight for his first words; then he sat in a circle with a few other people, a crowd of people around them, and left blood on the floor.

He starred in a Christmas-season show that all but ignored Christmas songs in favor of parables about a traveling guitar player. For the first time in more than seven years, he faced live audiences, real men and women who, he knew, might find him wanting – not what they expected, not what they remembered, not anything at all, because since turning the world of pop music upside down and American culture inside out in the mid-1950s, to many Elvis Presley in the 1960s had become a joke, an employee in his own movie factory.

But he had never made a television show before, and so at the end of a year of horrendous violence and upheaval, assassination and war, mass public protest and a bitterly fought presidential election, a year in which the social and political fabric of the United States seemed to be ripping apart, people of all kinds turned their televisions to NBC. The young and the old. College radicals and government officials. Northerners and southerners. White people and black people. Everyone wanted to know what Elvis would say, what he would do. In some essential way, everyone wanted to know if Elvis Presley still existed at all.

The discs collected here are a treasure chest of that moment: the special itself, as it aired on December 3, 1968; the two complete "Sit Down" shows, the rough, improvised, altogether explosive attacks on the likes of *One Night*, *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*, and *Blue Christmas*, with the audience so close Elvis could touch the people in it, and did; the two

"Arena Shows," Elvis appearing on his own, again before audiences, with a big band and chorus off stage; and three-and-a-half hours of "Bonus Material," alternate stagings of the skits and dramatized musical numbers from the show-some of them a lot hotter than anything that made it to the screen.

You can feel the shock waves the show made. Elvis looks gorgeous and he knows it; you see joy, command, and a certain slyness. In moments he reminds you of Sean Connery's James Bond. He takes that 007 you-must-be-kidding-me grin as his own, and it serves him perfectly in the whorehouse scenes, where Elvis's Guitar Man character, to the irritation of a crew of black and white painted prostitutes, is about to go off with a fresh-faced blonde when the cops raid the place. The persona adds a kind of weight to the last song of the show; when Elvis sings *If I Can Dream*, acknowledging the murders, only weeks and days before, of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, and in a way refusing their deaths, his passion seems to come from experience, not a script.

Wearing a black leather suit as if he were born in it – standing alone, or sitting with his original guitarist Scotty Moore, his original drummer D. J. Fontana (using drum sticks and a guitar case), his friend Alan Fortas (guitar case and hands), his friend Charlie Hodge (playing acoustic guitar, singing call-and-response, holding up Elvis's sit-down mike when Elvis simply can't not stand up to sing, and tambourine player Lance LeGault – Elvis sang his old songs, but they did not sound old. He invested them with so much emotion – emotions his original recordings of, say, *Blue Suede Shoes*, *Tryin' to Get to You*, *One Night*, *Blue Christmas*, or *Can't Help Falling in Love* did not contain – that each became a thing in itself. Suddenly these were less songs than events – where anything could happen, where everything did. When, in the Arena setting – with people seated both in bleachers and literally at Elvis's feet – long applause sweeps up his medley of *Heartbreak Hotel*, *Hound Dog*, and *All Shook Up*, the moment unfolds in real time, and if anything it is Elvis himself who is moved the most. You can see him all but step back from the reaction – for just a moment, it silences him, as if he expected anything but true love.

The Sit Down shows are the little theater to which people will always return. "Are we on television?" Elvis asks Charlie Hodge at one point. "No," Hodge says, "we're on a train bound for Tulsa." When Elvis relaxes into the first of five dives into Jimmy Reed's *Baby*, *What You Want Me to Do* – the deep well of the sessions, where every few minutes Elvis returns for a more open rhythm, a harder beat, a knowledge that cannot be put into words – it's as if the song itself is a train to ride, or that he is.

Early in the special, Elvis takes Scotty Moore's electric guitar for himself; he had never played the instrument in public before, but immediately he locked into the most low-down chords imaginable, into a music that any musician can tell you anyone can make and almost no one can. In an instant he moves from the quiet reading of a verse to a conflagration so powerful it doesn't seem real.

"Tell me, dear, are you lonesome-" he croons. "NO!" shouts a girl in the crowd. A woman in the audience cries as he plays "Blue Christmas" – as Hodge shouts "Play it

dirty, play it dirty!" But Elvis is already playing it dirty, reaching as if under the guitar for tones that can't be advertised. As he climbs the mountains and crosses the streams of *Tryin' to Get to You* he waves his hands in the air, he rubs the strings of the guitar on his legs, he picks it up and shakes it, his whole body fluttering like a leaf picked up by a wind and shot through the air. He dives into *Baby, What You Want Me to Do* for a fourth time and suddenly he is Casey Jones, holding down the train whistle until it is the only sound in the world. The music rises, slams down, rises again, as if a whole new language has been discovered – as if, this night, it has to be made to say everything, because it will never be spoken again. And then he went on to the next number.

Greil Marcus
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