

So, you want to sound like “The King”?

Well, take heart from two little-known facts:



- Elvis was an impersonator
- you have a big advantage over him

You heard me right – Elvis was an impersonator. The person he impersonated was himself. Like every famous entertainer, Elvis had to go up on a stage and do the song the way the audience remembered it. Twenty years older, 100 pounds heavier, stoned, good mood or bad, sore throat or smooth ..., he had to deliver the Elvis sound. Indeed, from the beginning it was his clowning impersonation of Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup’s *That’s Alright, Mama* that became his trademark rockabilly sound. The point is, there is no such thing as natural sound. Elvis had to concentrate to create his sound just as you do.

What’s your advantage? You can do an “Elvis version” of songs that he never recorded. He’s not around to challenge your version, so you have the Neo-Elvis and Post-Elvis markets all to yourself. Just as importantly, Elvis has done his best, whereas you can keep on improving. So, step up to the mic, Good Buddy. Hey I’ tell yah. I’ll show ya’ how I fooled ‘em all those years. Three chords, man, three chords



The Elvis vocal style

Many Elvis impersonators sound like “the King” on one or two songs. They have mimicked a sound but have not captured the man. Elvis did a whole range of song styles and, over 20 years, he sang as a young man and a middle-aged man. His first recording, for his mum, was a ballad, *My Happiness*. He loved Gospel music. So those who think that merely banging out some rockabilly is to do him justice have not really listened to him.

We’re searching for the unchanging aspects that give an Elvis “feel” to each song by adopting an Elvis mind-set that can be applied to any song. The true test of your skill would be to do an Elvis-style rendition of a song that Elvis didn’t actually sing – then you know you have mastered his style. His vocal style and distinctive Southern accent both influenced his popularity. I’ve tried to break it down into components:

Range

Elvis has a baritone-bass range and would sound more natural on the low notes.

High notes, on the other hand, were always creative. He handled high notes in two ways:

- **Loud** - Emphasis is shouted with an open throat (as in the final “...marchin’ on”... note in *American Trilogy*), as would a conventional operatic or Broadway baritone. Remember to hold the mike away to shout at it to give that huge, distant, cavern sound.
- **Quiet** - seductive high notes (as in “...please, surrender to me...” in *Surrender* or the finale of *Are You Lonesome Tonight* “..Tell me, dear, ...”) are falsetto. Remember to hold the mike close to half-whisper these notes & let the mike provide the volume. The quiet high-pitched Elvis sound is a bit like a clarinet – restrained and reedy.

Low notes require resonance. This is the sort of sound made when Santa booms out “Ho, ho, ho. Me-r-r-ry Christ-mas.” Because it uses an open throat, it requires a lot of air. The Elvis bass sound is a bit like a Tuba or Bassoon – booming and full.

Breathy Sound

Despite his basically low range, Elvis, like many rockabilly singers, cultivated a nasal twang which made a “hrumpf” sort of sound, particularly noticeable on *Love Me Tender* and in his rockabilly numbers like *Jailhouse Rock*. It’s a very subtle variant on the Buddy Holly style of “Puheggy-Sue ..muheye Peggih-Soo-oo”. If you practice snorting an “H” along with each consonant, so that “Love

me tender” becomes “lihov hme tihender” you’ll get an idea. The sound is sort of “L-H-ove hme t-H-ender, l-H-ove hme tr-H-ue”. This should be done very subtly but is necessary to be really authentic 50s rockabilly. If done well, it adds the “breathy” sound that made his ballads seductive.

Southern Accent

Elvis came from a much-parodied ethnic group. For example, Walt Disney's character, Goofy, uses many pronunciations common to Elvis, particularly a “uh” sound (as in Yuk Yuk) in place of “a” or “e” as in “thuh” for “the” or uh” for “a”, as in “...thuh hwole wurld is uh staige..”

A secondary accent was his pronunciation of the “ee” sound as “ih”, so “lonely” becomes “lonelih”. My favourite Elvisism was his pronunciation of “Cherrih’s Jub’lee” in the movies. Too much fake southern accent is insulting to Southerners, but, because uh”and “ih” sounds require uh lowerin’ of pitch, uh little touch of thuh Suthu’n akscent prob’ly hailps give more body to thuh lower notes.

Diction

Possibly because of his awareness of ethnic stereotype and portrayal as a hillbilly, Elvis was very careful to exaggerate his diction, like an old fashioned thespian. This was very pronounced on songs like *Wooden Heart* and *Are You Lonesome Tonight*: “I’d-a rather a-go on a-hearing your-uh-lies...”. So there is no harm in hamming this up as it is his authentic approach.

Blues

Eric Clapton once described Elvis as “The greatest blues singer who ever lived”. This is a mixed blessing. The distinguishing feature of the Blues, aside from tempo, is the “Blue note”. Essentially, it means singing flat. A blue note is just flat of where the conventional listener expects the note to go. Edith Piaf, Billy Holiday, and Gershwin, in *Rhapsody in Blue*, were masters at slowly taking the note toward that point. Elvis, on the other hand, sometimes just sang slightly flat, as in the recorded *Love Me Tender*. Singing deliberately flat is definitely an advanced art and not recommended for beginners. What Elvis gets away with will not be excused in others.

Rockabilly Staccato

Real rockabilly numbers such as *That’s Alright*, *Mama* and *Lawdy Miss Clawdy* were what put Elvis in the charts in the first place, before anyone got to see his pelvis, so a snarling *Jailhouse Rock* needs the punch that comes from delivering those “uh” sounds in machine-gun bursts, as in “well it’s uh-whun fo’ thuh monih, two fo’ thuh show...”. This takes a lot of air and is harsh on the throat, so it would be easy to get a sore throat belting out too many of these tunes in a row.

Teenage Snarl & Pout

Elvis also used to snarl –ie- curl up his lip and nose when doing some of his raunchier numbers. He was a very early teen rebel and even as a grown man, still exuded that high-school-class-bad-boy attitude. This was how he answered interviewers' questions. He also clowned it up in every performance. Indeed, it was he, Scotty Moore, and Bill Black clowning around in the studio that invented their rockabilly sound. So the facial postures, which change over the course of even one line in a song, actually influence the music and are necessary to give that unique repertoire that we associate with Elvis.

Ballads

What catapulted Elvis from mere rockabilly to megastar were his ballads. The sweet falsetto contrasts with the booming rockabilly sound. To a 50s audience, he almost seemed like two different artists. His backing tracks were very spartan. *Love Me Tender* was a 100 year old Civil War tune. It was up to Elvis to make these ancient dirges sexy. Ballads require a very low vocal pressure, with mike up close, with audible lip movements, like whispering in someone's ear. This is then contrasted by standing back and shouting to the world on the booming parts. So pretend you're whispering to Ann Margaret (or whoever) on the quiet parts. Treat the mike as you would your lover's ear: "I love you, Ann". When you want to shout, back off, turn your head away and scream "Hello world, I love Ann Margret!".

Vibrato

Elvis and Frank Sinatra are poles apart in terms of vibrato. It's quite natural to warble and waver on notes, but Frank Sinatra cultivated a flat, non-vibrating sound. Elvis, like most of the rest of us, changed both the pitch (vibrato) and volume (tremolo) of his notes. For example, on a sustained phrase like "Wise men say...", he would get in perhaps 6 subtle wavers per syllable –ie- "W-i-i-i-i-i-se m-e-e-e-e-en s-a-a-a-a-a-ay..". This gives a musical sound to a sustained note. A good Elvis ballad sound such as *You Were Always On My Mind* definitely requires a vibrating resonance on each sustained note. However, too much vibrato sounds contrived and pretentious so it needs practise.

Yodel

Country singers employ yodelling, which is defined as "changing register", in other words, abruptly closing the throat into falsetto to drive the note up an octave and back down. Many country artists such as Shania Twain employ this successfully. Elvis did not yodel continuously like Frank Ifield or Buddy Holly and his main use of yodels was much more like his contemporary Jerry Lee Lewis: to give a rockabilly emphasis on the end of notes such as in the uplifted end of the word "North" in Johnny Horton's "*No-earth to Alaska*". Elvis often applied falsetto to only certain notes in a phrase such as "..down the e-end of lonely street..". It is not a total flip into falsetto but rather a use of it to emphasize certain syllables as in Jerry Lee Lewis' "..feels g-ooo-d. Hold me

bab-ee...” in *Great Balls of Fire*. You have to practice the ability to yodel then apply it sparingly. Too much yodel sounds country-cornball-hick rather than country-stud.

Echo

Without the addition of proper echo, even the real Elvis would not sound like the Elvis we know from recordings. Sam Phillips at Sun Records used a tape echo to get the “slapback” delay we now associate with rockabilly and rock in general. A typical “reverb” echo (like a guitar amp spring reverb) does not give the exact same sound and will not provide the punch that a “delay” type echo gives – quite the opposite – a big reverb carries complex multiple echoes as in a canyon and each note does not have an abrupt ending. A tape slapback, by contrast, gives the same sharp ending to the delay as is in the original note as it is a mere lagged copy of that note. Don’t expect to rock like Elvis without a delay type echo, either digital or analog (tape).

Summary of the Elvis style:

Emphasis - classic baritone with open throat, holding the mike away

Quiet, seductive high notes - use falsetto

Ballads - a very low vocal pressure, with mike up close

Low notes - resonance use an open throat and a lot of air like a Tuba

Diction – clearly pronounce-a-words-a-with a vowel-a-between-a-consonants

Blues – start blues notes slightly flat & swing up to the correct pitch

Breathy/Rockabilly Twang - singing an “H” halong hwith heach consonant

Southern Accent - particularly a “uh” sound in place of “a” or “e”

Rockabilly Staccato - “uh” sounds in machine-gun bursts

Vibrato- change pitch (vibrato) and volume (tremolo) on sustained notes

Yodel and falsetto - sparingly applied to emphasize certain syllables

Delay-type echo - “slapback”, either digital or analog (tape).