

Table One: Cumulative Errors in Ten Concert Performances of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”, Compared with Elvis Presley’s Studio Recording (right column)

Version #												Total Errors per Line	
3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12				

												0	<i>[Sung:]</i>
	*											1	Are you lonesome tonight?
*												1	Do you miss me tonight?
	*											1	Are you sorry we drifted apart?
												1	Does your memory stray
												0	To a bright summer day
												0	When I kissed you and called you sweetheart?
												0	Do the chairs in your parlor seem empty and bare?
					*	*						2	Do you gaze at your doorstep and picture me there?
					*							1	Is your heart filled with pain?
					*							1	Shall I come back again?
					*	*						2	Tell me, dear, are you lonesome tonight?

												3	<i>[Spoken:]</i>
	*			*	*							3	I wonder if – you’re lonesome tonight.
*	*				*							3	You know, someone said that the world’s a stage,
*	*			*	*							4	And each must play a part.
*	*			*	*							4	Fate had me playing in love
*	*			*	*			*	*			5	With you as my sweetheart..
*	*			*	*			*	*			6	<u>Act One was where we met..</u>
*	*	*	*	*	*			*	*			8	<u>I loved you at first glance.</u>
*	*			*	*			*	*			6	<u>You read your lines so cleverly,</u>
*	*			*	*							4	And never missed a cue.
*	*			*	*				*			5	Then came Act Two.
*	*	*		*	*			*	*			7	<u>You seemed to change, you acted strange,</u>
*	*	*		*	*			*	*			7	<u>And why, I’ve never known.</u>
*	*			*	*			*	*			6	<u>Honey, you lied when you said you loved me,</u>
*	*			*	*			*				5	And I had no cause to doubt you.
*	*			*	*			*	*			6	<u>But I’d rather go on hearing your lies</u>
*	*	*		*	*							5	Than to go on living without you.
*	*			*	*							4	Now the stage is bare,
*	*	*		*	*							5	And I’m standing there,
*	*	*		*	*			*	*			7	<u>With emptiness all around,</u>
*	*			*	*							4	And if you won’t come back to me,
*	*			*	*				*			5	Then they can bring the curtain down.

												1	<i>[Sung:]</i>
					*							1	Is your heart filled with pain?
					*	*						2	Shall I come back again?
					*	*						2	Tell me, dear, are you lonesome tonight?

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Discography

The twelve performances of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” discussed here are all commercially available, mainly under the RCA/BMG corporate label. Version One is on the CD set *Elvis Today, Tomorrow & Forever*. Version Two is available on many CD collections, including *Elvis 30 #1 Hits*. Version Three is in the boxed set *Elvis Aron Presley*. Version Four is on the CD set *Memories: The Comeback Special*. Version Five is on the CD *Elvis: A Legendary Performer, Volume 1*. Version Six is on the CD set *Elvis Live in Las Vegas*. Version Seven is on the *Elvis in Person at the International Hotel* disk of the two-disk set, *From Memphis to Vegas*. Version Eight is in the *Elvis Aron Presley* boxed set and in the *Collectors Gold* CD set. Version Nine is on the CD set *That’s the Way It Is Special Edition*. Version Ten is available only on the videotape and DVD titled *Elvis: The Lost Performances*. Version Eleven is available as part of the complete concert in a two-CD set on the “Follow That Dream” label, *Elvis: New Year’s Eve*. Version Twelve is available, with varying amounts of pre- and post-song remarks by Elvis, on the *Elvis in Concert* CD, some but not all videotapes of the *This Is Elvis* film, and the out-of-print *This Is Elvis* soundtrack album.

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We have cited as inspiration for our approach the ideas of the linguistic theorist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), who proposed that related events be studied both synchronically (in the same time frame) and diachronically (across time). For those who prefer to take their inspiration for psychobiographical research from a psychological theorist, we recommend Henry A. Murray (1981, pp. 32-33). Murray proposed that personality psychologists study not only *proceedings* (single psychologically meaningful events) but also *serials*: “long enterprises” across an individual’s life, seen as intermittent temporal sequences of psychologically related events. As Murray would have argued, observing a single proceeding such as Elvis’s final performance of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” can give us some insight into Elvis’s psychological state – as, evidently, film critic Kael, biographer Goldman, and docudrama directors Leo and Solt all concluded. But as Murray would have gone on to argue, a much fuller understanding of what that single event meant to Elvis, and what it revealed about his personality, can be achieved by seeing it as the last installment in one of the many long-running serials that constituted his life, and by searching through the preceding installments in that serial to locate its common themes. The errors Elvis made, his hesitations, his confessions during the song’s final performances were not so much a revelation of his conscious confusion and failing health at that moment, as they were a confirmation of the lifelong sources of his underlying emotional pain.

Alternative Approaches

But need we resort to such psychologizing in order to explain why Elvis repeatedly and at times disastrously wrecked his delivery of that song? Perhaps there are simpler explanations. Three such possibilities immediately come to mind:

(A) Maybe he had a poor memory in general, or a poor memory at least for spoken rather than sung material. The first part of this supposition is manifestly untrue. People who worked with Elvis at various stages in his career have often remarked on his amazing memory for thousands of song lyrics and melodies. The second part of the supposition is untrue as well. The directors of his films were impressed with his memory for entire scripts, including not only his own but others’ roles in his movies, as well as long sequences of dialogue from other films that he especially liked.

(B) Perhaps he was encouraged (or reinforced) by audience laughter to repeat the same errors in the spoken bridge when he performed it again. To some degree this may be true. But he appears not to have regularly repeated the occasional errors he made in delivering other songs, even though fans laughed and then applauded at his recovery on those occasions too. Further, his particular pattern of forgetting the spoken-bridge material (as illustrated in Table One) is specific to certain issues in his personal life; it does not seem congruent with any identifiable pattern of “reinforcement” delivered by the fans’ laughter and applause.

(C) As the critics and biographers have said or implied, maybe he was so stoned and/or badly deteriorated, especially during that final filmed performance, that he couldn’t remember much of anything, let alone all those words in the spoken bridge. Again, there is something to this explanation, but it doesn’t take into account either the overall pattern of errors in the previous live performances of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” or the rest of his final filmed concert. In that concert, as shown both in the *Elvis in Concert* TV special and in the *This Is Elvis* movie, Elvis was able to perform a variety of other songs with little or no error. An interesting example is his performance, several songs later, of “My Way,” which has a long series of verses and little lyrical repetition. As in some earlier concerts where he performed that song (a fairly recent addition to his repertoire), Elvis begins to sing with a page of lyrics in hand. But after briefly glancing at the page a couple of times, he tosses it aside, performing the rest of the song without error and with evident confidence. Further, his remaining concerts on that tour – the truly final, though unfiled, concerts of his life – were by various reports effectively done, especially the very last one (which apparently did not include “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”) His physical shape was still poor, and he no doubt continued on a heavy drug regime. But as long as the songs he sang were not so directly concerned with issues of betrayal, loss, control and lack of control, he was able to deliver charismatic and, as most fans saw them, exciting performances.

I loved you at first glance states Elvis’s initial, intense attachment;
You seemed to change, you acted strange, his betrayal and rejection;
And why I’ve never known, his feelings of victimization and implicit anger;
With emptiness all around, his painful, depressive loneliness.

In addition, the remaining lines that were changed or omitted in more than half of the live performances (those underlined in Table One) touch upon a related and also sensitive issue for Elvis: lying to or being lied to by his lover. He had sung about the negative impact of such lies as early as “I Was the One” in 1956. He had felt the necessity to lie (or at least to omit potentially incriminating information) far back into his relationship with his mother, and even earlier he had seen the dangers of lying when his father was sent to prison for forgery. He had felt bitterly betrayed by Priscilla’s lying about her extramarital relationship, even though he had been lying to her about his relationships all through their courtship and marriage. He had good reason to believe that Ginger was lying to him in similar ways.

We have suggested elsewhere (Heller & Elms, 1994) that the personality of Elvis’s mother was shaped by such negative factors as her childhood experiences in a highly dysfunctional family, the unanticipated stillbirth of her first child (Elvis’s twin brother), and the felony conviction of her husband. The fearfulness and sustained depression that Gladys developed as a result surely influenced the quality of her mothering toward Elvis. Research on attachment suggests that mothers with the sorts of ambivalent family relationships she had experienced often raise insecure or emotionally disorganized children (Ainsworth et al., 1978; George & Solomon, 1999), and that unresolved depression in a maternal caregiver may increase the child’s insecurity, interfering with the normal process of separation-individuation (Main, 1988).

Elvis as a young child appears to have internalized Gladys's unfulfilled dreams and wishes as a sense of mission. As he reached adolescence, these internalizations began to affect his behavior more and more forcefully. He aspired to become *somebody*, to give Gladys the life his father Vernon was unable to provide. But as he did so, the conflict unresolved in the initial separation-individuation process reasserted itself with a vengeance. Becoming successful – individuating – at this level meant becoming a potent, adult male, with the potential for commitment to a mate of his own choosing. In order to do this, Elvis could not remain Gladys's “baby,” dependent on and loving only her the way he had done as a child. This, then, was Elvis Presley's double bind: to become a successful adult, capable of autonomous functioning and mature attachments, and to remain Gladys’s baby. If he was age-appropriately independent, he feared wounding her and being abandoned; if he remained her baby and dependent, he feared being engulfed and developmentally stuck. In response to this irresolvable conflict, Elvis developed the feelings of emptiness, depressive longing, self-recrimination, and anger often expressed in his musical performances, most vividly in his final performance of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”

were going to curse his fantasy lover: “You s” Then he catches himself and says the line appropriately, only to garble the third word in the next line, “But I’d rather go on hearing your lies.” He attempts to control the slip by intentionally rolling the garbled “r.” But his unintentional loss of control again suggests a personal emotional reaction to the content of the song: he is angry at having been lied to, perhaps by every woman he has ever trusted.

In the next section, he avoids references to the loneliness he most fears by substituting a joking reference to aging, which he had often used in concert: “Without any hair,” replacing “With emptiness all around.” Given his psychological state, appearance, and physical condition, however, this “joke” is more pathetic than humorous. Finally, avoiding the ultimate loss of control – death – he omits the last line of the bridge, “Then they can bring the curtain down.” Elvis ends by singing the remainder of the lyric beautifully, fervently. Though he has largely lost control of the spoken bridge, he is now able to regain control via the lyric fantasy that his ex-lover is indeed lonesome tonight – lonesome for him.

Why was this song so emotionally potent for Elvis? We suggest that its story line is the repetitive story line of Elvis’s life. Recapitulating his early and subsequent emotional experience, it describes the singer’s intense, ambivalent attachment to a woman who betrayed and abandoned him without his fully knowing why. Consumed with anger and yearning, unable to regain his lost love or to establish new attachments, he becomes lonely, depressed, deteriorates physically (“without any hair”), and approaches the final curtain of Act Two: death.

Our interpretation of Elvis’s errors as psychologically meaningful may seem unnecessary or even far-fetched. But such an interpretation is strengthened by the diachronic evidence that, of his nine *other* recorded or filmed concert performances of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” from 1961 to 1976, most involve similar memory “failures,” substitutions, alterations, or joking with the words of the song, usually involving similar imagery of abandonment, loss, and deterioration. Table One illustrates this pattern of errors, as shown in the lines of the spoken bridge that he most often altered or omitted. (The count of total errors per line includes Version 12, but the same pattern is present when only Versions 3 through 11 are tabulated to compare with Version 12.)

[INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Again, Elvis made very few alterations or errors in the sung lyric (when he, as the singer, is in control). He made many more during the spoken bridge (when he, as the singer, is vulnerable). In addition, the lines in boldface in Table One (those lines altered or omitted in 2/3 or more of the live performances) tell a poignant story, consistent with our interpretation:

vulnerability and the pain of abandonment that the spoken bridge insistently expresses.

When comparing omissions, alterations, and substitutions in the final performance with his original studio recording, we note that Elvis sings the lyric (where the singer is in control) perfectly, without error. But in the spoken bridge (where the singer is vulnerable, expressing his loss), Elvis makes many significant, largely unintentional, errors. He mangles the line, “Fate had me playing in love.” He omits the next three lines: “With you as my sweetheart./ Act one was where we met./ I loved you at first glance.” Then he slightly but saliently garbles the next line, “You read your lines so cleverly.” In this portion of the song as written, the singer moves from his initially stated hope that his departed lover still yearns for him, to describing his experience of her abandoning him. Elvis’s loss of control in his recitation parallels the singer’s loss of control as depicted in the song. In addition to omitting or garbling these lines, Elvis also unintentionally says “pay” for “play” and then, attempting to rescue the situation, jokingly substitutes the words “plus tax” for “in love.” This attempt at regaining control further highlights his difficulty in managing feelings of rejection. It reflects Elvis’s history of filling internal emptiness with possessions, satisfying his longing for love by buying emotional fealty through expensive gifts, and trying repeatedly to assure himself that at least a few people love him without regard to his wealth.

In the next segment of the bridge, unconscious contents appear to intrude, as Elvis jokingly/angrily blames his lover in the song for forgetting the words, when of course he is the one who has done so. He continues his angry tirade, inserting “You fool!” in the line “You seemed to change, you acted strange.” As with the previous intrusion, “You fool!” may refer not only to his lover but to Elvis as well. His voice exaggerates these self-criticisms to make them funny, but again, tears appear to flow. Then after confessing ignorance about the reason for his lover’s change, Elvis castigates himself directly, as he wonders “Or why I ever did it?” – why he ever fell in love with her in the first place, and perhaps why he ever chose his life path of performing onstage before an oblivious audience. Finally, realizing he has been verbally wandering, he attempts to regain control through reality testing; he asks, “Who am I talking to?” Unfortunately, nobody is there to respond, even though he is the center of supreme adulation by the thousands of fans who pack the arena. He is profoundly alone. Without Gladys, without Priscilla, without Linda Thompson, he has no one. He had told an early interviewer about such feelings when asked about marriage. He hoped to find the right girl soon, Elvis had said, because “I get lonesome, right in the middle of a crowd” (Farren & Marchbank, 1977, p. 65). (His current girlfriend, Ginger Alden, had proven by then to be an unreliable companion, more interested in getting special treatment for her family than in Elvis himself. He introduces her after the song, but when the audience applauds her, he says, “Sit down, Ginger – that’s enough for her.”)

Elvis then returns to the bridge, completing the line he had interrupted: “You lied when you said you loved me.” He alters the first word of the next line, as if he

concerns he expressed in his final filmed and recorded performances of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” were not unique to his immediate circumstances; he had struggled with much the same concerns through most of his life. His labile affect (at times he appeared to laugh and cry simultaneously), the intentional spoiling of the song with jokes about aging, the unintentional slips, the lapses of memory, had all been present in previous performances of this particular song – though in less sharply etched detail than in this performance.

As shown in *This Is Elvis*’s version of Version Twelve, he denigrates his own guitar playing before he begins the song: **“I’m going to actually play the guitar. I know three chords, believe it or not. But I faked ’em all for a long time.”** (He was actually not a bad guitar player, but he had expressed similar feelings before. In an interview at which his father was present, shortly before Elvis left the Army, he said, “I was never very good on the guitar, was I, Daddy?” His father responded, “Then you’ve fooled a lot of people” [Fort Worth *Star Telegram*, February 20, 1960].) Elvis then jokingly – or perhaps not so jokingly – expresses fear of being exposed as a fraud: **“They may catch me tonight.”** Some members of the audience detect a double entendre here, and squeal with delight. He follows with an open acknowledgement that **“if you think I’m nervous, you’re right.”** Having thus begun a string of emotional disclosures, he makes the most revealing one of all, by identifying his personal concerns with the concerns of the song: **“And then we did a song called ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight?’ And I am, and I was.”** Then, apparently seeking distance from the feelings of loneliness he has just expressed, he focuses on a broken nail, picks at it, says, **“Damn!”**, changes it to **“Darn!”** and finally, his mother’s son to the end, apologizes for his lapse in good taste and begins to sing.

As the song was written, the concerns in the lyric and in the spoken bridge are the same: rejection, loss of control, and the pain of abandonment. But their locus is different. The introductory lyric expresses a fantasy that the singer’s former lover is lonesome for him and, her heart filled with pain, sits at home yearning for reunion. The spoken bridge, however, presents at some length a grim reality: it is the singer who has foolishly fallen in love “at first glance,” has been lied to and then abandoned. And yet he would rather continue the relationship, even if fraudulent, than live without his ex-lover. She is so important to him that in spite of his ambivalence he cannot let her memory go – just as Elvis could never escape from his emotional enmeshment with his mother Gladys, even though she had abandoned him in death. The singer says he would rather die than live without his woman; this in fact was what ultimately happened to Elvis. The grim prospects described by the spoken bridge are then denied by a restatement of the sung lyric fantasy that the singer’s lover yearns for him and awaits his return. Through this concluding fantasy, Elvis savors the image of his ex-lover experiencing the sense of abandonment that he had repeatedly experienced in reality. By projecting his feelings onto the woman (or women), he rids himself of these feelings at least in part. By reversing the role relationships, he maintains the illusion of control, avoiding the recognition of his

the night of June 20, just before the scene shifts to his singing “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” However, though Elvis is wearing the same jumpsuit in both scenes, Ernst Jorgensen (on the basis of documentary evidence; 1998, pp. 406-407) identifies the song’s filmed performance as taking place in Rapid City the next night. Elvis sings the initial verses perfectly. But on the fourth line of the spoken bridge, he says, “Fate had me **pay** – playing in – **pl-pl-pl—bl-bl-bl-bl** – **plus tax**” (unintentional stutter, followed by intentional stutter, followed by joking substitution). He omits the next three lines, then says, “You read your lines so **li** – cleverly [laughs], And never missed a cue. Then came Act Two. **You forgot the words**, You seemed to change, **you fool**, you acted strange, And why I’ve never known. **Or why I ever did it**. Honey – **who am I talking to?** You lied when you said you loved me, **you ss**—And I had no cause to doubt you. But I’d **l-wl-wl-wl-rrrr** – Rather go on hearing your lies [laughs] Than to go on living without you. Now the stage is bare, And I’m standing there, **without any hair. Ah, no. Ah** – [laughs, omitting “With emptiness all around.”] If you won’t come back to me, **hnh** – **Aw, the heck with it!**” [omitting “Then they can bring the curtain down.”] He then sings the final sung verse perfectly.

Interpreting Elvis’s Errors

Version Twelve is, of course, the performance with which we began this chapter, the performance often cited as the ultimate evidence of Elvis’s decline and total collapse as a performer. Two of his final concerts were filmed for use in a CBS television special, arranged by the Colonel. The directors of the film *This Is Elvis*, Andrew Solt and Malcolm Leo, clearly chose this performance of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” to demonstrate Elvis’s decay. To intensify (if not exaggerate) the effect, they spliced into the filmed performance his introduction to the same song from his disastrous performance two nights earlier. Well after this spliced-together introduction and Rapid City performance of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” became the standard instance of late Elvis, drugged and nearly dead, it was deleted from further releases of the *This Is Elvis* film, and RCA stopped marketing the soundtrack album. The soundtrack of the CBS television special is currently available on CD, but no video version has been officially released, for reasons explained to fans by the Presley estate: “Because of the severity of Elvis’s health problems at the time the special was shot, Elvis was far from his best in the way he looked and the way he performed The true fans look at this through the eyes of love, respect and understanding But this is not so with much of the general public and the media. . . . They already emphasize and exaggerate the tragedy and sadness of the last years of his life too much. Right now, the emphasis for us is to remind them of all that came before” (Elvis Presley Enterprises, 2004).

By the time of these last performances, the 42-year-old Elvis was an overweight, exhausted, depressed, definitely middle-aged man, whose hair had turned gray though he still dyed it black. He was a prescription drug addict, obviously in physical decline and near death. (Indeed, he had begun to resemble his mother in the last months before her death at age 46. She had also become obese, exhausted, depressed, abused diet pills as well as alcohol [according to Hopkins, 1980; Dundy, 1985; and Nash, 2003], and dyed her gray hair black.) But the

the Hampton Roads concert, she told Elvis she was involved with her karate instructor and wanted a divorce (Guralnick & Jorgensen, 1999, pp. 304-305; Nash, 2003, p. 270). Shortly before the concert, reflecting these concerns, Elvis recorded several separation-and-regret songs, including “Separate Ways” (written at his request by one of his oldest friends, Red West), “For the Good Times,” and “Always on My Mind.” Singing a carefully low-key version of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” onstage, with a hesitation in the phrase “You lied,” fit right into his general mood.

Version Eleven: Civic Center Arena, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, December 31, 1976. This performance was taped by an audience member; a shrieking woman near the recorder often intrudes on Elvis’s singing. But Elvis’s performance overall was so good that the fan’s recording (the only one available) has been given an official release by an RCA subsidiary label aimed at Elvis collectors. On this recording, as soon as Elvis sings the song’s first line, “Are you lonesome tonight?”, the shrieking woman (who sounds more intoxicated than impassioned) shouts, “I *am* lonesome!” She screams similarly clever answers to the lyric’s questions through the entire song, often followed by laughter from other audience members. Elvis maintains his singing and his spoken recitation until the line, “Act One was where we met”; he laughs after “Act” and repeats the word as he goes on. With an occasional laugh he continues the recitation until “Act Two”: “You seemed to change, **Charlie**, you acted strange. Why – [dropping the phrase, “I’ve never known”]. Honey, you lied when you said you loved me, **you dirty ss**— [dropping “And I had no cause to doubt you.”] But I’d rather go on hearing your lies [dropping “Than to go on living without you.”] **You gonna make a bad some man’s [inaudible word]**. Now the stage is bare, And I’m standing there, [drops “With emptiness all around”], **Just me and Charlie – good luck.**” He completes the song without further alterations.

The “Charlie” of these joking remarks was Charlie Hodge, Elvis’s onstage assistant and sometime harmony singer, who provided him with guitars, water, and scarves (the latter for wiping away sweat before Elvis tossed them into the audience). The jokes also appear in part to refer to the obnoxious female fan and her interference with the song. (Of course Elvis was used to screaming female fans, but this one was so persistent and attracted so much attention from others in the audience that he sounded unusually close to overt anger. Later in the concert, as he began his introduction to another song, a different fan shouted, “Play it.” Elvis responded with a mixture of humor and threat in his voice: “Don’t tell me to play it. I will when I get ready, you understand me.”) Beyond the screaming fan, Elvis’s additions and omissions in this version of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” can again be seen as responses to recent events in his life. Linda Thompson, his most serious love interest since his divorce, had recently terminated their relationship, and his rather difficult new girlfriend, Ginger Alden, was in the audience. Whereas Version Ten took place during a period when Elvis seemed “chastened, brooding, almost perplexed” about the failure of his marriage (Guralnick, 1999, p. 459), his problems with women at the end of 1976 were immediate and on the boil.

Version Twelve: Rushmore Civic Center, Rapid City, South Dakota, June 21, 1977. The film *This Is Elvis* shows him entering an auditorium in Lincoln, Nebraska, on

354) or Millie Kirkham (Jorgensen, 1998, p. 285) to sing as accompaniment to the song during the Las Vegas run. But she had been singing that accompaniment for weeks without provoking a similar response from Elvis – as demonstrated by his near-perfect performance of the song two nights before in Versions Six and Seven. A more likely provocation for his laughter was the Colonel’s heavy-handed hint to Elvis to get his onstage comments under control. As with his mother’s insistent attempts to make him behave like a good boy, Elvis responded to the Colonel passively offstage, but (after going out of his way to please Mrs. Parker) aggressively misbehaved onstage.

Version Nine: Las Vegas International Hotel Showroom performance, midnight show, August 12, 1970. Elvis sings the first verse, then shouts, “Sing it, Armond!” (referring to Armond Morales, the bass singer for the Imperials, a gospel quartet Elvis had hired to accompany him during this concert series). Elvis continues with the next line, then repeats the joke, “Do you gaze at your **bald head and wish you had hair?**” Band members laugh at the joke, and Elvis continues with the sung verses. He interrupts the “Tell me, dear” line with a sort of quick trill in the middle, “Woo woo woo woo,” then adds a sung “Oo oo oo oo oo” to the line’s end. He laughs, the audience claps, and he says, “Thank you. Well, we got that out of the way, now we can go on with the show. [He laughs again.] What? [An audience member asks for a specific song.] Oh, yeah, yeah. There’s about 26 others I forgot, let’s see. Punt. We’ll punt, is what we’ll do.” He entirely omits the spoken bridge, and does not return to the sung verses; instead he moves on to a serious and impassioned performance of the Simon and Garfunkel hit, “Bridge Over Troubled Water.”

Elvis’s four-week August run, his second Las Vegas run in 1970, was arranged partly to give a large Hollywood production crew the opportunity to film rehearsals and stage performances for a full-length Elvis concert movie, *That’s the Way It Is*. For potential use in the film, Elvis ran through many songs, including some new to his repertoire and others dating back as far as his Sun Records days. He was, as the film shows, at the top of his nightclub-style form, lean and vigorous. “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” was clearly not intended to be one of the stage show’s major production numbers; he tossed it off almost casually, and it did not appear in the film.

Version Ten: The Coliseum, Hampton Roads, Virginia, April 9, 1972. This performance is almost perfect. As Elvis begins the spoken bridge, he makes an unclear comment, apparently to his band: “Talk to me baby” or something of the sort. After the line “Act One was where we met,” he sniffs audibly. In the line beginning “Honey, you lied,” he hesitates between “you” and “lied,” just as in Version One. At the end of the song, he simply tells the audience, “Thank you. Thank you for listening.”

This concert was part of a two-week tour of venues ranging from Buffalo, New York, to Albuquerque, New Mexico. A major reason for the tour was the making of another concert film, titled *Elvis On Tour*. Elvis may have been unusually careful with the song’s performance because of its potential use in the film, though that possibility had not led to a complete performance in Version Nine. Life events may also have had an impact: Three months earlier, Priscilla had initiated a separation; then six weeks before

it was.” He chuckles, then begins to sing. As with Version Six, the only error in his performance of the spoken bridge is his omission of the line, “I loved you at first glance.”

Versions Six and Seven were by no means Elvis’s first “live appearances” in nine years; Versions Four and Five were also “live” in the usual musical performance sense. But his four-week run at the Las Vegas International Hotel, starting with an invitation-only opening night gala on July 31 and continuing with two shows a night thereafter, marked his first public performances before large audiences since the Pearl Harbor benefit in 1961. Success with Las Vegas audiences was important to Elvis, since he (and others) regarded his previous appearances there in 1956 as a flop. As with the Comeback Special, he felt extremely nervous on the first nights of the 1969 Las Vegas engagement. But as he neared the end of the run, he was (according to Guralnick & Jorgensen, 1999, p. 262) “almost wholly at ease onstage.” He had begun to offer the audience an extra treat every evening, a jokey autobiographical commentary between songs. However, Col. Parker felt Elvis was getting too loose with this banter and wrote a note warning him to watch his language, especially at “the dinner show when there are a great many children” (quoted by Guralnick & Jorgensen, p. 262). Marie Parker was at the dinner show on the 24th, and for all Elvis knew, she might show up at the midnight show as well. As we indicated earlier, Elvis originally recorded the song because it was her favorite. So whatever he felt about the Colonel’s warning, he had good reason to be on his best behavior in performing the song.

Version Eight: Las Vegas International Hotel Showroom performance, midnight show, August 26, 1969. Elvis hums several bars from the song “Surrender” (“La da da da da,” etc.), then says, “I ain’t gonna do that song,” and moves immediately into “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” In the sung verses, he first replaces “Do you gaze at your doorstep and picture me there?” with “Do you gaze at your **bald head and wish you had hair?**” He begins to laugh in the middle of the line, “Is your heart filled with pain?” and laughs again at the end of each of the next two lines, dropping the final word in each line, then says (laughing), “Oh Lord Lord.” This unusual disruption of the sung verses does not carry promise for the spoken bridge – and indeed as soon as he says the first words of the bridge, “I wonder,” he starts laughing as he drops phrases and lines from his recitation. The phrase “if you’re lonesome tonight” disappears in laughter, then virtually all the rest of the spoken bridge. The only line he manages to speak in full is “And I had no cause to doubt you”; otherwise he is laughing heartily, with occasional side remarks: “Oh God – Oh man I tell you – Oh Lord,” and “Oh Lord – Oh sing it, baby.” At what would ordinarily be the end of the spoken bridge, still laughing, he moves back into the sung verses: “Shall I come back [laughs] again? Tell me dear, are you lonesome [laughs]?” He repeats the final sung verse in full, laughing during the last line. Then he says, “Whew! That’s it, man, fourteen years right down the drain, boy I tell you. Fourteen years just shot right there, man, I tell you.”

This performance has come to be known among Elvis fans as “Are You Laughing Tonight?” Played widely on British radio, it became a sort of novelty hit there. Several accounts of this almost total ruination of the song have suggested that Elvis felt moved to hilarity by the wordless obbligato he had asked either Cissy Houston (Guralnick, 1999, p.

to play the introduction to “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”, Elvis says, “Dead serious, boy.” He interrupts the song’s third line to say jokingly, “Lip still does that, man, you know?” When he reaches the spoken bridge, he slurs its first line, “I wonder if – you’re lonesome tonight?” After the band members laugh at this, Elvis simply returns to singing “Are you sorry we drifted apart?”, the line he had interrupted with the joke about his crooked grin. He repeats the remainder of the sung verses without ever returning to the spoken bridge.

Version Five: NBC Studios, Burbank, California, 8 p. m. show, June 27, 1968, also for use in the “Comeback Special.” This time there are audible screams from the audience as he sings the first line, “Are you lonesome tonight?” He follows the screams by singing, “Does your hair look a fright?” and laughs. In the fourth line, he omits the word “stray” from “Does your memory stray,” and instead says (apparently about a nearby audience member), “Man, she’s pretty,” followed by a whistle. When he gets to the point at which he would ordinarily recite the spoken bridge, he instead sings “Woh woh woh woh,” then “La da da da da,” with the band laughing; then he returns to “Does your memory stray” and the rest of the sung verses. He goes even beyond Version Four by eliminating the spoken bridge entirely.

Versions Four and Five were recorded under especially difficult circumstances for Elvis. He had not performed before a “live,” non-movie-set audience since the single Pearl Harbor benefit concert seven years earlier. Though Col. Parker had recruited an especially supportive audience (mostly NBC employees and fan club presidents), they were disconcertingly close to Elvis in the small television studio. Further, the performances were being filmed for a major TV special, officially named “Singer Presents Elvis” after its major sponsor, the sewing machine company. But it was indeed, as it came to be called, a Comeback Special, demonstrating that Elvis still had what it took as a performer after years of musically inferior films and a decade without a concert tour. He was extremely nervous during filming of the concert special, especially in the small-audience setting. The show’s producers encouraged him to joke with members of his old band as he performed, in order to reduce his anxiety.

Version Six: Las Vegas International Hotel Showroom performance, supper show, August 24, 1969. Elvis introduced “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” by saying, “I’d like to do this song especially for Colonel Parker’s wife. She’s in the audience tonight and she’s had an operation, and I’m glad she got a chance to come over and see the show. Miz Parker, I’m really glad you’re here tonight. I’ll do this song especially for you.” He then performed the song without error, except for the omission of the line “I loved you at first glance.”

Version Seven: Las Vegas International Hotel Showroom performance, midnight show, August 24, 1969. Elvis prefaced this performance of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” by saying, “Good evening. [Screams from audience.] Hoo boy. [More screams; he laughs.] Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is my first live appearance in nine years. [Applause] Thank you. I appeared dead before, but this is my first live one – and one of the first records I ever recorded – way back in 19 – 27, I think

“Are You Lonesome Tonight?”: Diachronic Data

Version One: RCA Studio B, Nashville, April 4, 1960, Takes 1 and 2. In Take One, Elvis gets through the first line and a half of the lyrics before he is interrupted, apparently by a producer or technician. (This take is not counted in our tabulation of Elvis’s errors.) In Take Two, Elvis sings and speaks the song’s lyrics with only one minor difficulty: In the spoken line “Honey, you lied when you said you loved me,” he hesitates between “you” and “lied,” and his voice breaks slightly on the word “lied.” In this and subsequent performances of the song, he modifies the original spoken bridge in several ways. He omits two lines completely: “Then came the day you went away,/ And left me all alone.” He also changes two phrases: “Fate had me play a lover” becomes “Fate had me playing in love,” and “In the part of a broken clown” becomes “With emptiness all around.” These are evidently intentional changes and therefore will not be counted as errors, though they may suggest some of Elvis’s personal sensitivities.

Version Two: RCA Studio B, Nashville, April 4, 1960, Take 5. According to Ernst Jorgensen (1998, p. 125), the final bar of an earlier take was spliced into this take to produce the official single release. This official release is the baseline for all subsequent citations of Elvis’s “errors” – that is, his deviations from this master recording of the song.

The session that produced Versions One and Two took place a month after Elvis’s return to America from his two-year tour of Army duty, most of it spent in Germany and all of it away from recording studios. A week prior to the session, he had appeared on nationwide television as the widely advertised guest on a Frank Sinatra musical special. Early in Elvis’s Army hitch, his mother had died unexpectedly. Fairly late in the hitch, he met 14-year-old Priscilla Beaulieu and began the serious courtship that would eventually result in their marriage.

Version Three: Bloch Arena, Honolulu, Hawaii, March 25, 1961. This concert was a fund-raiser for the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor. It was also Elvis’s first and last public performance between his Army induction in 1958 and his return to Las Vegas showrooms in 1969. Earlier in the same week, Elvis had recorded the soundtrack album for one of his most financially successful films, *Blue Hawaii*. The only available recording of the Pearl Harbor benefit concert is poorly done, with female fans’ screams often drowning out Elvis’s voice. Under the circumstances, it’s not surprising that he begins to joke a little during the spoken bridge of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” He says, “You seemed to change, **you got fat**” (instead of “you acted strange”), and “**you’ve lost your hair**” (rather than “I’m standing there”). He also drops two lines of the spoken bridge entirely.

Version Four: NBC Studios, Burbank, California, 6 p. m. show, June 27, 1968. This performance before a small invited audience, with Elvis accompanied by two members of his original band and several friends, was taped for use in what became known as the “Comeback Special,” a nationwide television broadcast. As the band begins

Escott, 2002). Elvis later joked in a stage comment (see Version 7 below) that *he* had recorded the song in 1927, so he seems to have known something of the song’s early history; but the original 1927 recordings had been long out of print by 1960. Whether he relied on Jolson’s or Blue Barron’s recording to learn the song, he made several deliberate modifications in the lyrics (as noted under “Version One” below) when he began to perform it himself.

Elvis began singing the song informally during his US Army service in Germany (Jorgensen, 1998, p. 117). According to Priscilla Presley, he sang it during her first evening with him, six months before he recorded it (Presley & Harmon, 1985, p. 29). His studio performance of the song took place during one of his first recording sessions after discharge from the Army, at around 4:30 a. m. on April 4, 1960, in RCA’s Studio B in Nashville. Earlier that night, Elvis had recorded one of his biggest hits, “It’s Now or Never,” displaying a new command of his voice with English lyrics set to the music of the quasi-operatic standard “O Sole Mio.” Over the course of the same night, efficiently and in a wide range of styles, he recorded most of the songs for one of his finest albums, *Elvis Is Back*.

Elvis insisted on special preparations for recording “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” The studio lights were turned off and he sat in the darkness, accompanied only by acoustic guitar and bass, with vocal backing from the Jordanaires. (Guralnick [1999, p. 65] says drums were also included, but no drums are audible on close listening.) He needed only five takes, using perhaps half an hour of studio time, to finish the recording that has since sold many millions of copies. Ever the perfectionist in his studio work, Elvis angrily rejected RCA’s initial remix of the song for single-record release. He insisted that it be mixed again to his specifications, because “his voice had been brought up unnecessarily at the expense of the background vocals” (Guralnick & Jorgensen, 1999, p. 157).

Those special circumstances suggest that the song had even greater significance for Elvis than most of the carefully chosen selections of the *Elvis Is Back* sessions, his triumphal return to his recording career. The further history of his performances indicates that “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” was, or became, a song of intense personal meaning for him. Of his many “live” or public performances of the song, ten are available on officially released long-playing albums, CDs, and videotapes. (Though other performances may be available on bootleg albums or via illegal Internet transmission, no effort has been made to collect them for this chapter.) The following list includes descriptions of the two complete takes officially released from the original studio recording session, plus these ten live performances. The circumstances of each recording are noted, along with some indication of salient events in Elvis’s life at the time the recording was made. (See Table One for the complete lyrics of the song in Elvis’s studio version.)

“Are You Lonesome Tonight?": The Beginning

We could easily continue this synchronic analysis of Elvis's song choices during his early career. But we want to demonstrate a *diachronic* approach as well (Saussure, 1916): looking at his performances of a single song across time, to see whether that approach tells us anything further about his personality. Perhaps the best example in this regard is his intermittent performances of the song with which we began this chapter: “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” Elvis sang the song often – not at every concert he performed, but at certain key moments throughout his professional career. His many recordings of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” show how he *chose* a song to perform, *intentionally modified* portions of the original lyrics (starting with his first performance of the song), *unintentionally or impulsively* modified other parts of the lyrics (by forgetting or spontaneously substituting words), and *framed* the song with comments that displayed his feelings about its lyrics, the quality of his performance, or his internal state and broader life circumstances at the time.

“Are You Lonesome Tonight?” was written in 1926 by Lou Handman and Roy Turk. Lyricist Turk borrowed several lines from Shakespeare and some inspiration from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. The song took a somewhat unusual form for its day, with the first three verses sung, followed by a lengthy spoken bridge, after which the third verse was repeated in song. It quickly gained popularity, with at least three singers recording it in 1927. The Carter Family did a country version in 1936 (with the sung lyrics considerably rewritten and absent the spoken bridge). Gene Austin, best known for “My Blue Heaven,” included it in his stage shows in the 1930s. Three recordings of the song appeared in 1950: by Don Cornell (again omitting the spoken bridge); by the Blue Barron Orchestra (with the band's regular vocalist Bobby Beers singing and Chicago disk jockey John McCormick reciting the spoken bridge); and by Al Jolson, in one of his final albums. (Though various sources list Jolson as first recording the song or performing it on film sometime in the 1920s, there is no actual evidence of it in his performance history prior to the 28 April 1950 recording [Kiner & Evans, 1992].)

This brief history of the song is significant for two reasons. First, the song was brought to Elvis's attention by his manager, Col. Tom Parker, who did not ordinarily intrude into Elvis's choice of material. Parker apparently suggested the song because it was a favorite of his wife, Marie (Jorgensen, 1998, p. 127). She knew it through Gene Austin's stage performances; Parker had been an advance man and quasi-manager for Austin in the late 1930s. (Elvis may have been more impressed by Marie's liking for the song than by the Colonel's recommendation. Elvis was reportedly fond of Marie, and may have later named his daughter Lisa Marie partly in her honor.) Second, as Austin never recorded the song, Elvis likely based his own performance on one of the most readily available recordings: either Al Jolson's melodramatic presentation (Spedding, 1986; Leavey, 2000) or the Blue Barron Orchestra's very similar arrangement (Worth & Tamerius, 1990, p. 351;

control. Thus for Elvis the song’s “I” may well have been not the singer but his mother Gladys. She had indeed tried to shape his behavior as closely as she could to her specifications – so closely that she left him no options except “to lie” about his sexuality and his anger, feelings that he could release only in secret or onstage in front of millions.

Elvis’s first record album for RCA was in large part leftovers from Sun and covers of current or recent hits by other singers. When he was given the opportunity to record a second album entirely from scratch, he made several idiosyncratically personal choices. In the sharpest deviation from his rock-and-roll-rebel image, he insisted on including Red Foley’s “Old Shep,” a sad country ballad about a boy and his faithful dog. Elvis had first sung the song publicly at age ten, and he apparently continued to sing it on various occasions in junior high and high school. The song describes the intense attachment between boy and dog, and then the inevitable loss when Old Sheppy grows old and ill. The singer tries to put the dog out of his misery, but cannot pull the trigger and lays down his gun. Shep nonetheless goes “where the good doggies go,” to a Dog Heaven fantasized by the singer as “a wonderful home.”

In its original form (recorded by Foley in 1940), the song had an understandable appeal to the young Elvis. Not only did it give him a long-term devoted friend, Old Shep, as he never had in real life; it also described them as freely roaming the fields together, something Elvis’s strict mother Gladys would never have allowed. (As a child, Elvis briefly had a dog named Tex; it was put to death when it developed mange [Osborne, 1999, p. 84].) But the original lyrics apparently did not fully meet Elvis’s needs. When he recorded the song at age 21, he made several significant changes in Foley’s verses. Late in the song, at a point when the singer is about to lose control of the relationship, Elvis reasserts control: as the dog is dying, he has Old Shep come to him rather than vice versa. (In the original, “I went to his side and I sat on the ground”; in Elvis’s version, “He came to my side and he looked up at me.”) But curiously, Elvis then confesses guilt for an act that is not in the original song. As the dying Shep lays his head on the singer’s knee, the original states, “I stroked the best friend that a man ever found.” Elvis substitutes, “I had struck the best friend that a man ever had,” i. e., by the act of aiming his rifle at Shep’s head, even though he failed to shoot. Finally, Elvis omits an entire verse that describes Shep’s awareness of his own imminent death; instead, without transition, the dog is imagined as already in Heaven.

These changes and omissions reflect even more pointedly than the original some of the powerful complexities of Elvis’s and Gladys’s relationship. From a psychodynamic perspective, we can see Old Shep not only as a man/boy’s canine “best friend” but as a substitute for Elvis’s mother (whom he often called “my best girlfriend.”) The fantasy of freely roaming the “hills and meadows” may then be interpreted not only as escape from maternal control but as an unresolved oedipal wish. As with his earlier Sun Records choices and consistent with Elvis’s developmental history, the song symbolically confuses (or fuses) his mother with an alternative affectionate object, and struggles with the conflict between separation and attachment (*freely* roaming the fields *together*).

by Kokomo Arnold, begins with a metaphor directly combining maternal and sexual imagery: “Now if you see my milkcow, please drive her on home, / I ain’t had no milk and butter since that cow been gone.” The song then mixes lamentations of abandonment, such as “But don’t that old moon look lonesome when your baby’s not around,” with verses of angry retribution for being abandoned, in which the singer again confounds sexual and parental roles:

“Well, I tried to treat you right, day by day,
Get out your little prayer book, get down on your knees and pray,
'Cause you’re gonna need me,
You’re gonna need your lovin’ *daddy* here some day,
Well, then you’re gonna be sorry you treated me this way.”

From one verse to the next, the singer sounds at times like an abandoned child, an adolescent resenting parental control, and a mistreated adult lover. It’s a song that Elvis says “don’t *move* me” when sung as a slow blues number. But when he transforms it into a fast “boogie,” a song of happy revenge, it appears to tap into his deepest emotions.

Some critics have asserted that Elvis’s music changed sharply, becoming commercial and emotionally vitiated, when he began to record for RCA Victor. In fact he largely continued, over the next three years, to sing and to record with much the same intensity as at Sun Records, choosing songs that displayed similar emotional concerns. His first hit for RCA, “Heartbreak Hotel” (by Mae Axton and Tommy Durden), is a bitter dirge of rejection, depression, and loneliness unto death. In its first verse, the singer introduces a powerful metaphor that he elaborates through succeeding verses: his residential address, “Heartbreak Hotel” on “Lonely Street,” which reflects an inner landscape, a state of mind, rather than a geographical locale. In the second verse, he describes other heartbroken lovers like himself, crying in the darkness and so lonely they could die. The third verse adds the bellhops and desk clerks to the roster of those abandoned by love and hope. (In his first televised rendition of the song on February 11, 1956, Elvis intensified the hotel staff’s depression by substituting the words “they pray to die” for the recorded version’s less vivid “they could die.”) In the last verse, the singer directly addresses his audience, inviting them to “take a walk down Lonely Street” if their baby leaves them too.

Elvis preferred the flip side of “Heartbreak Hotel”, a neatly structured song titled “I Was the One” (by Aaron Schroeder, Claude DeMetrius, Hal Blair, and Bill Pepper). That song is just as emotionally desolate, describing the arc of a romance in which the singer teaches his lover to kiss, to touch, to cry, until he has her “as perfect as could be./ She lived, she loved, she laughed, she cried./ And it was all for me.” In the final verse, however, someone teaches her to lie, and she thereby breaks his heart. The song remarkably anticipates the course of Elvis’s relationship with Priscilla Beaulieu beginning four years later, but as of 1956 Elvis had had little experience with having his heart broken. One might wonder why he inhabits this song so personally, even telling an interviewer it is his favorite of the songs he has recorded (Osborne, 1999, p. 10). But as with “That’s All Right, Mama,” the lyric’s central focus is on control and evasion of

Further, even though Elvis did not write the songs he recorded, he sometimes adapted existing songs to his own purposes. He deliberately changed words, phrases, and entire lines of some lyrics, as well as omitting lines or verses that didn't suit him. His choices of songs and his modifications of their lyrics can yield the sorts of personal data that make psychobiographies of creative artists possible. For instance, he spontaneously chose Arthur Crudup's jump blues “That's All Right, Mama” for an intense recorded performance at a time when his musical career was just getting started. The song's lyrics assert that the singer is willing and ready to evade his parents' (especially his mother's) attempts to control his sexuality; yet the lyrics also confuse mother and lover by calling both “Mama.” This complex of Oedipal and personal control issues in one brief song, not widely popular before he recorded it but described by Elvis as one of his personal favorites, encapsulates a pattern of motives and conflicts that remained with him until his death.

Examination of other songs Elvis recorded during the same period in his life – in what might be called a *synchronic* approach to psychobiography (following Saussure, 1916) – can broaden and deepen our understanding of his principal concerns at that time. Over a two-year period, he recorded a total of ten songs that Memphis record producer Sam Phillips judged to be worthy of commercial release on his Sun Records label. Several unreleased recordings from the same period, when Elvis was 19 years old to not quite 21, went with him when Phillips sold his contract to RCA Victor. Most of those recordings were issued under the RCA label soon afterward. That entire set of early recordings made by Elvis in the small Sun Records studio (available as a CD collection titled *Sunrise*) is now regarded by music critics and knowledgeable fans as among Elvis's best: musically powerful, emotionally expressive, pioneering rock and roll.

Among the ten Sun Records releases, two are light-hearted but rather explicit assertions of sexual prowess – songs of the older male adolescent, as Elvis was at the time. Five are songs of abandonment, in three of which the singer triumphs, either by getting his woman back, by getting another woman, or by getting revenge. The remaining three songs, including “That's All Right, Mama,” are love songs in which mother and sexual lover are symbolically or linguistically intermingled. In “Baby, Let's Play House,” for instance, the singer repeatedly asks his “baby” to come on back and play house, i. e., to play mama and papa with him – a remarkably Oedipal song for a singer whose favorite nickname for his mother was “Baby.” It would have been easy for Elvis as a three-year-old to see himself as having won a sudden victory in the Oedipal conflict, when his father went off to prison for over a year and his mother thereafter directed her attention and affection mainly toward Elvis. Of course the victory was not final: his father did return, though marked as an ex-con and as something of a failure ever after. Further, the role even of temporary victor must not have been a totally comfortable one for little Elvis. There was always the possibility that his mother would disappear as his father had, if Elvis wasn't a good boy.

Another Sun release, “Milkcow Blues Boogie,” seems particularly expressive of the resulting confusion of Elvis's emotions. The song, an old blues number first recorded

of the dope-crazed Lenny Bruce. . . . For thirty or forty seconds of mental free-fall, you are up in that padded cell atop Graceland watching Elvis blither with tightly shut eyes as he voices all the crazy ideas that come thronging into his dope-sprung mind. [1981, p. 591]

Other critics and biographers have similarly asserted or implied that Elvis’s difficulties with the song during this performance came from his heavy drug use, and perhaps more generally from his deteriorating brain as he neared death, less than two months away.

Closer study of this performance, however, suggests that Elvis’s forgetting and replacing of the song’s lyrics were not merely a matter of random drug-induced memory loss, but were in large part psychologically motivated. Set within the context of his previous performances of the same song and related songs, his final recorded performance of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” provides evidence that issues central to his earlier psychological development remained significant until the end of his life.

Elvis’s Early Songs: A Synchronic Approach

Psychobiographical studies of musicians present special problems. Psychobiography typically involves close study of words written or spoken by the subject. Musical lyricists provide plenty of well-chosen words for analysis, so studies of figures such as Bob Dylan or Stephen Sondheim may resemble studies of nonmusical literary creators. But without simultaneous consideration of the music that goes with Dylan’s or Sondheim’s lyrics, the psychobiographer omits aspects of their creativity that are central to their public success and perhaps to their private psychology. Composers of wordless or primarily wordless music present even greater problems. A few psychobiographers have written impressive studies of such composers: for example, Maynard Solomon on Mozart (1995) and Beethoven (2001, 2003), and Peter Ostwald on Schumann (1985). But their analyses of the personal origins of nonverbal and nonprogrammatic music must remain largely speculative. Difficulties of a different sort face the psychobiographer of a subject who performs music mostly composed by others. In one of the few such studies, Ostwald (1997) developed an insightful analysis of Glenn Gould’s piano artistry. But Ostwald necessarily relied on knowledge gained from a long and close personal friendship with Gould, as well as on Gould’s own published writing and interviews, to interpret the psychological foundations of his idiosyncratic performances.

Elvis Presley falls into an intermediate category. He was principally a performer of others’ musical compositions, though an unusually expressive and distinctive performer. He never wrote an entire song by himself, though he sometimes suggested song ideas to others, or encouraged them to write songs that expressed his current emotional concerns. He personally selected the songs he recorded and performed onstage (though not those he performed in films). His manager and his record producers tried when possible to limit his choices to songs for which they and he owned publishing rights. But Elvis often insisted on recording songs that he recalled from earlier listening, sometimes all the way back into childhood; and his choices were final.

[PUBLISHED IN THE HANDBOOK OF PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY,
EDITED BY WILLIAM TODD SCHULTZ, PP. 142-157.
NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2005.]

Twelve Ways to Say “Lonesome”: Assessing Error and Control in the Music of Elvis Presley

Alan C. Elms & Bruce Heller

In the current edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2002), twenty-two usage citations include the name of Elvis Presley. The two earliest citations, from 1956, show the terms **rock and roll** and **rockin’** in context. A more recent citation, from a 1981 issue of the British magazine *The Listener*, demonstrates the usage of the word **docudrama**: “In the excellent docudrama film, *This Is Elvis*, there is a painful sequence . . . where Elvis . . . attempts to sing ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight?’” (The ellipses are the OED’s.)

This Is Elvis warrants the term “docudrama” because it uses professional actors to re-enact scenes from Elvis’s childhood and pre-fame youth. But most of the film is straight documentary. The “painful sequence” cited by *The Listener* and the OED is an actual concert performance, occurring late in the film and in Elvis’s life. It remains painful to watch: Elvis, his face puffy and wet with sweat or tears or both, his elaborate jumpsuit bulging at the seams, struggles with one of his most popular songs. He repeatedly forgets words and whole lines of the lyrics, replacing them with crudely self-abnegating jokes.

That particular performance occasioned widespread comment, not only during the film’s theatrical release in 1981 but in later biographical works on Elvis. As one example of film commentary, the noted critic Pauline Kael wrote (after expressing admiration for the young Elvis’s performances):

By the end of the picture, in 1977, the heavysset, forty-two-year-old celebrity-god Elvis Presley is a gulping, slurring crooner, faltering on the lyrics of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” . . . [H]e sweats so much that his face seems to be melting away. . . . [T]he dissolving face . . . recalls De Palma’s pop-culture horror movie *Phantom of the Paradise*. [1984, p. 201]

As an example of biography, Albert Goldman concluded his scurrilous best-seller *Elvis* with a description of the same scene:

He is smiling but sweating so profusely that his face appears to be bathed in tears. Going up on a line in one of those talking bridges he always had trouble negotiating, he comes down in a kooky, free-associative monologue that summons up the image