

## The King of Rock and Roll and Texas

by Scott Sosebee

*The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.*

*Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at [sosebeem@sfasu.edu](mailto:sosebeem@sfasu.edu).*

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(Jul 17, 2022) My wife and I went to see the new Elvis movie the other day and I must say that it is quite good and if you get the chance you should most assuredly go see it. The film also made me think about Elvis Presley and his relationship with Texas. What answer would you give if I asked you what state Elvis performed in the most times? Well, the correct answer would be Nevada as the “King of Rock and Roll” had an extended gig at the International Hotel (later the Las Vegas Hilton and now the Westgate), but would it shock you that Texas was the second-most frequent place that Elvis performed, having played in the Lone Star State almost one hundred and fifty-times between 1954 and 1977? I know it did me. He even told a reporter for a Dallas newspaper once that “I kind of got my start here” since he played a number of fairs, carnivals, and small venues just across the line in Texas while he was appearing on the Louisiana Hayride radio program in Shreveport.

Elvis Presley was relatively unknown when he was scheduled to appear on the Louisiana Hayride radio program beginning in 1954. “The Hayride” was a country music radio show (later a television program) broadcast from Shreveport’s Municipal Memorial Auditorium beginning in 1948 (it lasted until 1960). Elvis debuted on the Hayride on October 16, 1954, when he did his rendition of “That’s All Right” at the midway point in the show. The reaction was mixed as the older members of the audience did not know how to react to Elvis’ “rockabilly” sound. The younger members—and many in the radio audience—had a much different reaction as they begged for more of the young star from Mississippi. The Hayride thus signed Presley to a one-year contract for as many as thirty appearances on the Show. Ironically, Elvis’ fame became responsible for ending the popularity of the Louisiana Hayride as he created a demand for what would become known as “rock-and-roll” and other than Elvis the Shreveport program was strictly a country music presentation.

The demand that Elvis be in Shreveport at least once almost every week led his manager and promoter, Colonel Tom Parker, to schedule many of his appearances in Texas. Elvis, in 1955 alone, played 73 shows in the state, most of those in small towns in East Texas. Elvis performed in Longview, Nacogdoches, Tyler, and Marshall on more than one occasion, and played the Big D Jamboree in Dallas almost as often as he did the Hayride. He and his touring band often performed more than one show a day, which meant that in 1955 he rolled up for over three hundred shows.

Elvis was a superstar throughout the nation by 1956 and rock-and-roll had also become a national phenomenon. Parker moved quickly to capitalize on Elvis' fame—as well as exploit, financially and physically—the young superstar. He organized a year-long tour in which Presley played throughout the nation for an amazing 315 dates. A number of the shows in that year came in Texas. He gave a notable concert in Lubbock where in the audience sat a twenty-year-old Buddy Holly and nineteen-year-old Waylon Jennings; both men later related that seeing Elvis perform that night inspired them to their music careers. He also played shows that year in Waco, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, Abilene, and Amarillo. He returned to play ten shows in Texas in 1957.

Elvis' performing career had to take a hiatus in 1958 when he was inducted into the United States Army for a two-year stint. Texas would even play a role in that part of Elvis' life. After processing at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, Elvis arrived at Fort Hood for basic training and then advanced tank training. His presence at Fort Hood created a media and fan firestorm as reporters and admirers lined up daily at the facility's gate to support and perhaps hope to get a glimpse of who Walter Winchell called "the most famous man in America." The Army's press relations officer at Fort Hood's daily requests grew so heavy that the Pentagon sent two soldiers to his office to do nothing but handle interview and other requests for Elvis Presley. Elvis left Fort Hood for Germany, where he served until he was mustered out of the Army in 1960.

When Presley returned from the Army, he was eager to resume his performing career, but his manager had other ideas. Parker convinced Elvis that his next move should be to become a full-time movie star (Presley had made three films before he went into the service). The young star had always had a dream of being a serious actor, but the movies Parker arranged for him were anything but. Most actors usually made one, maybe two films a year, but between 1960 and 1969 Elvis Presley starred in an astonishing twenty-eight films. They were anything but serious as they were mostly formulaic, light-hearted scripts that featured almost as much singing for Presley as dialogue. Elvis grew tired of the productions, and he also saw his singing career decline. Music had changed while he was "away," with the Beatles and more message-filled rock music filling the void.

Elvis Presley embarked on a different career path in the 1970s. He signed a contract to appear at the International Hotel for extended dates, and while he was not performing in Las Vegas he began to tour with his new “big” sound, a band and company that featured string and horn orchestra pieces, multiple back-up singers, and more “pop” arrangements than he had done before. Texas would figure prominently in this version as well. He performed six shows at Houston’s Livestock Show and Rodeo in 1970. He would return to the Astrodome four more times before his death. Dallas became a regular stop on tours in the 1970s, as did San Antonio. Elvis’ lifestyle, however, had begun to take its toll as he became more addicted to pain killers and other opioids during this time. Elvis’ last appearances in Texas came in Abilene and Austin in March 1977. The King of Rock and Roll was dead by August of that year at just forty-two years old. He remains today the biggest-selling artist in music history and Texas played a large role in his career.

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