Waiting for Elvis

Agony, adoration, love, desperation—all in one photo. It was Sunday, May 13, 1956, and Elvis Presley had come to town.

He played two concerts on the same day, at the St. Paul Auditorium at 3 pm, followed by an 8 pm show at the Minneapolis Auditorium. Tickets went for $1.50, $2.00, and $2.50. An ad for the concerts promised not only Elvis, but singers, dancers, and comedians. A popular local rock n’ roll group fronted by Augie Garcia opened for Elvis but was pulled off the stage after two songs, Garcia later said, because they were upstaging Elvis. No subsequent coverage mentioned any singer other than Elvis. The dancers and comedians were similarly slighted.

The Minneapolis Star described the new bobby-sox idol as follows: “Elvis Presley, a 21-year-old former Memphis, Tenn., truck driver who plays a savage guitar and works himself into a frenzy with his blues songs...” Throughout the country, his performances were described with words like riots, bedlam, and pandemonium.

The day before his Twin Cities performances, the Minneapolis Tribune ran a piece headlined “Why is Elvis Presley the teen-agers’ idol?” Some of the teens’ responses:

“He is the best-looking singer I know. His singing should get anyone shook up, that is, anyone who loves good music.”

“When I hear him sing, I get shivers up and down my spine. His looks remind me of my dream boy.”

“He’s got real down to earth humility and that’s something most high school boys don’t have.”

Naturally, adults had different reactions. They noted Elvis’s tight jeans, his long hair, his wiggles and shakes, and his general “torso behavior.” One reviewer compared the sound of screaming fans at his concert to “two or three state basketball tournaments going on at the same time.” A columnist was asked by the mother of two teenage daughters to “please have him behave like a gentleman.”

There were other music options for that Sunday in May 1956. Jules Herman and his orchestra were playing at the Prom Ballroom in St. Paul, and Count Basie and his orchestra were playing at the Minneapolis Armory. But it was Elvis that the young women wanted to see. One of them explained: “Great grandma had Rudolph Valentino, grandma has Rudy Vallee, mother has Clark Gable and I’ve got Elvis Presley.”

—Linda James
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