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Elvis Review: Austin Butler Will Leave You Shaken

Austin Butler dazzles as the King reincarnated, even as Baz Luhrmann’s decadent Elvis struggles with its Las Vegas-sized excess.



By [David Crow](#) | June 23, 2022 |

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Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

The long shadow cast by *Walk Hard* remains an impressive thing. Despite debuting to mostly inattentive critical notices and abysmal box office, Jake Kasdan's vicious send up of music biopics continues to loom over this lucrative, and often ludicrous, subgenre. Thanks to later dramatizations of the life and times of Freddie Mercury or Aretha Franklin, John C. Reilly's turn as Dewey Cox is still relevant for predicting the flattening effect Hollywood can have on wildly different creative journeys.

Which makes Baz Luhrmann's gaudy and happily glossy *Elvis* a fascinating surrender to indulgence. Never a filmmaker to be accused of subtlety, Luhrmann's

maximalist instincts carve out a power ballad to the King of Rock ‘n Roll that doesn’t just revisit the **Dewey Cox** formula; **Elvis** supersedes it with a sense of starry-eyed mythology. After the first sequence where Elvis thrusts his pelvis, and girls scream tears of unbridled desire in slow motion shots that each span their own epoch, you’d be forgiven for thinking the singer had invented sex itself.

In this way, Luhrmann has turned a fairly tragic and curtailed life of use and abuse into something as operatic as the filmmaker’s previous Red Curtain Trilogy spectacles (particularly 2001’s **Moulin Rouge!**). The director also appears determined to avoid the traps of your **Rays** or **Bohemian Rhapsody**s—movies ultimately about nothing but tribute acts—and instead centers his Elvis Presley passion play on the King’s vampiric manager, “Colonel” Tom Parker (a broad and misjudged Tom Hanks in a fat suit), who had a Svengali like sway over his meal ticket.

It's an odd choice, and it's a bit like if *Moulin Rouge!* was viewed through the prism of Richard Roxburgh's garish Duke. But garishness has always gone with Elvis like peanut butter and bananas, and the bizarre framing gives this messy fantasia of excess a narrative through-line that mostly works. It doesn't play as an all-time classic, but at least it's got a juicy fat hook that, like the Colonel, can get other types of hooks into you too.

This is clear from the outset, for it's there we begin *not* with Elvis looking back on his entire life before he plays, but rather a decrepit Tom Parker who on his deathbed is still making excuses for draining that Presley kid dry. Parker's life has been a long, blurred night at the roulette table ever since Elvis' death at the age of 42, and Luhrmann is only too happy to visualize

this spoiled irony as the camera literally spins around Hanks on a frame that's been bisected by red and black lines. This character, and this film, are going to take us for a ride.

We then whirl back to the mid-1950s to find a slightly younger Parker in his element as a carnival barker, and in need of a new act for his sideshow. When he hears about a white kid who “sounds Black,” it's a wonder dollar signs do not appear in his eyes. Voiceover dialogue and inserted comic book panels later assert that Parker recognized Elvis (a sensational Austin Butler) was something of a superhero, but what's more telling is one of the early shots where Parker spies on the young heartthrob. The camera captures Elvis' silhouette beside a “Geek Show” sign in the classic *Nightmare Alley* sense, suggesting Luhrmann is going for something darker than all the surface level opulence suggests. And, remarkably, this storm cloud lingers over all the bombast and Graceland pyrotechnics which follow, tracking Elvis from early rock star and perceived sexual deviant (particularly to Southern segregationists) to hammy movie star, and then finally finding him as a washed up self-parody buried in his own Vegas-sized Xanadu.

One almost wonders whether the title “Caught in a Trap” was bandied around Warner Brothers? No matter the case, Luhrmann and company's ability to shroud this melancholy in such grandiosity, and with such

disarming sincerity, makes the viewing experience inexplicably come off as a kind of victory.

That win is in large part due to Butler's truly transcendent performance. Devoid of caricature or casino impersonator cheese, Butler incredulously becomes "the King." Sure, he still does the lip curl, and he shakes those hips magnificently, but in spite of lacking little of Presley's physical appearance, what makes this muscular creation so effective is a sweaty, relentless desperation. In the moments on stage when his gaze tightens, and his rock god persona taps into primal divinity, the movie elevates itself above just nostalgia. Butler, and Luhrmann's penchant for distinctly manic editing, is what causes this most ancient of ancient boomer music to suddenly feel dangerous again.

More's the pity then that the director cannot also resist his equally distinct taste for anachronisms. As with *Moulin Rouge!* and *The Great Gatsby* (2013) before it, modern pop music (and in the case of *Elvis*, a handful of covers of the Memphis standards) are sampled and woven into the period piece. *Elvis* is more sparing about such flourishes, but they should never have been used at all. Whereas the anachronism was the point of those earlier movies, *Elvis* has enough going for (and against) itself already. There's no need to reveal a lack of confidence about the relevancy of its titular star with younger audiences.

This is doubly true since the movie struggles plenty in other areas. The most talked about of which has been Hanks' bellicose turn as a Dutch huckster. And sure enough, the *Forrest Gump* star sounds as if Burgess Meredith's Penguin was doing a Van Helsing impression, except here the professor is the bloodsucker. It's ill-advised, but in a movie that wallows in showbiz artifice it's hardly any more distracting than whirling, superimposed title cards that frame the honeymoon years of Elvis' marriage to his child bride Priscilla (Olivia DeJonge) like they were one of the King's goofy surfing movies.

Which is to say it's a nifty distraction, especially since the middle of the movie is where *Elvis* finally loses its fight against falling into *Dewey Cox* boilerplate. Indeed, large swaths of *Elvis*' heavy-handed screenplay, by Luhrmann, Sam Bromell, Craig Pearce, and Jeremy Donner, is still as conventional as *Walk the Line*. There are the montages of Elvis climbing the charts, the thin simplification of his mommy and daddy issues in a handful of maudlin scenes, and the inevitable third act deterioration of his soul—although this time there's no hint of redemption in the denouement.

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As with most movies in this genre, *Elvis* tries to cover too many years in too little time, even with a near 10-year time jump in the midst of its 159-minute length. Major aspects of Presely's life, including what Elvis and Priscilla's home life actually was like, are subsequently underdeveloped. Also, while the film admirably confronts head-on Presley's appropriation of Black culture and music (unlike pretty much every previous *Elvis* TV movie), the approach ultimately comes across as overstated and a little defensive, particularly when Elvis' choice to derail a tacky TV special (months) after the MLK assassination is treated as a covert triumph for civil rights.

Elvis is a troubled and chaotic film. It is also a gorgeous and gauzy monument to an idol who never sought to approach anything by halves. If this cinematic tempest could be distilled into a sparkly gemstone and then dipped in gold, it's easy to imagine the real King would wear it around his neck. Through it all, there's a genuine soul buried in there, a dark one that's as poisoned as Presley and Parker's one-sided relationship.

Like a Vegas revue, it's big, it's loud, and it might be something you will roll your eyes about later. But in its moment, this three-ringed circus will dazzle. And isn't

that the secret of men like the King and Colonel? They know how to keep you smiling while inside the tent.

Elvis is in theaters on Friday, June 24.

Rating:



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