

Elvis Presley: From Rock-a-Billy to the King

The year was 1955. The youth of America flocked to the theaters to see a movie called *The Blackboard Jungle*. What they heard when the movie opened changed the world of popular music forever. The movie opened with Bill Haley and His Comets singing "Rock Around the Clock." From that time on, *rock-and-roll* became almost a battle cry for the youth of America. In this song and the many that would follow, the younger generation found lyrics, rhythms, and harmonies that they believed best expressed how they felt.

Though it may appear that rock-and-roll was a phenomenon that came out of nowhere, it had been developing for many years. Its origins can be seen in the music of black musicians such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard and in the American folk tradition of singers such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. Rhythm and blues, the style of music played by Little Richard and Chuck Berry, contributed hard-driving rhythm, electric guitar, and plain lyrics that would be popular in the new hybrid style of rock-and-roll. The main contribution from country western music was its representation of white America, thereby combining the music of two cultures into one style that appealed to both.

Following the success of "Rock Around the Clock," the early rock-and-roll stars used rhythm and blues tunes, modifying them by using guitars and drums and changing the lyrics so they would appeal to white audiences. Without a doubt, the most influential and important of these early figures was Elvis Presley, a young, handsome, energetic performer who captured the hearts and imaginations of America's youth with his rhythmic and innovative stage antics. Elvis also had a lyric quality in his voice that suited his ballads and slower love songs. He was a virtual unknown who had been doing some performing in local clubs in Tennessee. The style of music that he performed was called rock-a-billy because of its combination of blues and hillbilly music. Elvis was quite popular in his native area. With his clean-cut image in his early years, Elvis Presley also appealed to many adults and, indeed, became a household name by 1960. Because of Presley's tremendous influence in the world of popular music, many other rock musicians were able to capitalize on his success and also become famous.

Some of the other early rock-and-roll legends were Jerry Lee Lewis with "Great Balls of Fire" and Buddy Holly with "That'll Be the Day." Many black performers, such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino, also gained popularity with the predominantly white audience.

Elvis Presley was able to maintain a high level of popularity through the 50s, 60s, and 70s and was dubbed the "King of Rock-and-Roll" before his untimely death. Because of his tremendous influence, rock-and-roll was here to stay.

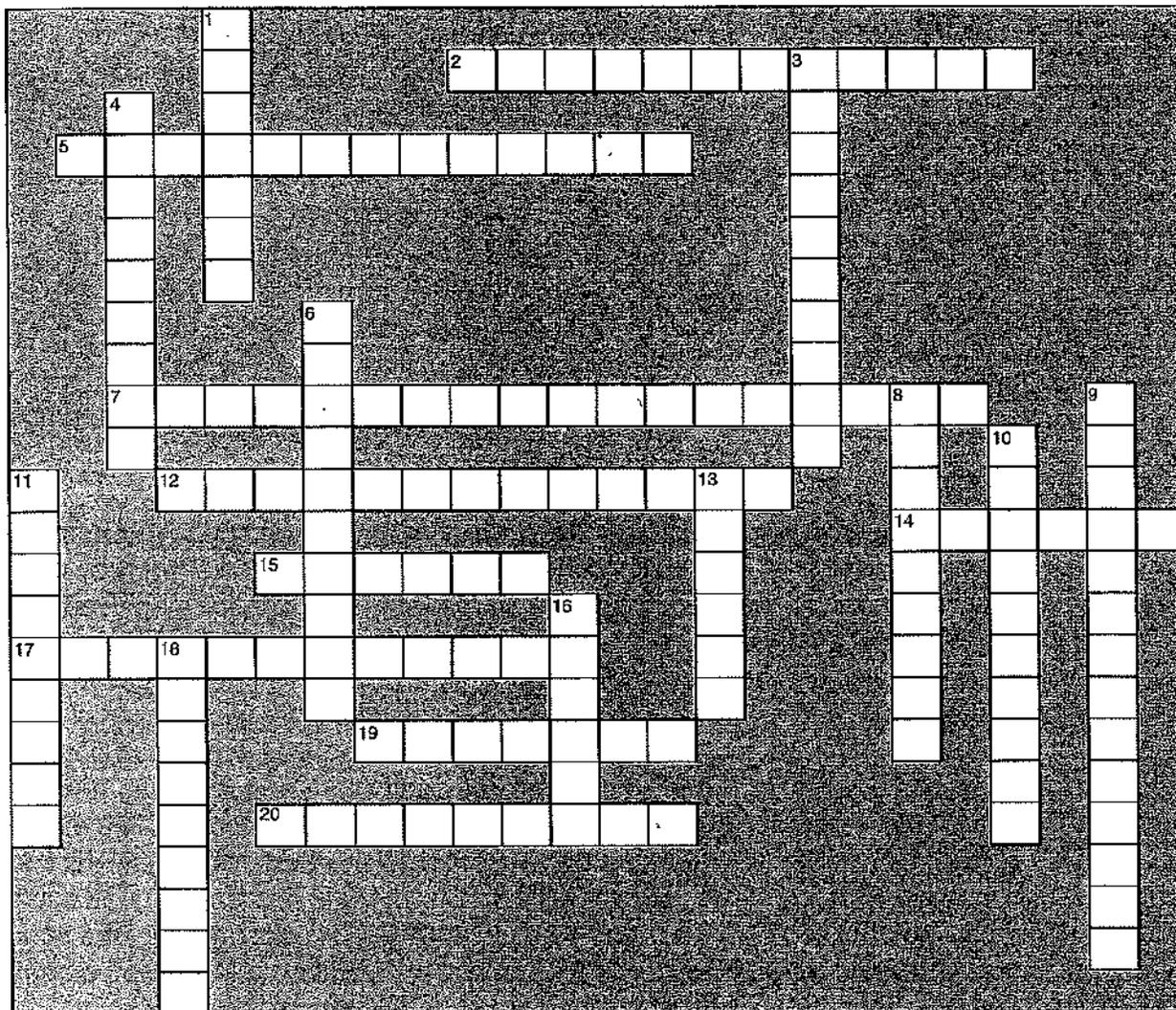


Elvis Presley

Name: _____ Date: _____

Those Puzzling Facts

Use the clues below to complete the crossword puzzle. The answers can be found in the narrative about Elvis Presley.



ACROSS

- 2. Combination of blues and hillbilly music performed by Elvis Presley (hyphenated word).
- 5. Sang "Great Balls of Fire" (three words)
- 7. Bill Haley's hit song (four words)
- 12. This became a battle cry for youth (hyphenated word).
- 14. Elvis appealed to both young people and _____.
- 15. These sang with Bill Haley.
- 17. Young, energetic performer
- 19. Elvis's nickname (two words)
- 20. Where Elvis began performing in clubs

DOWN

- 1. The youth of _____ flocked to the theaters in 1955.
- 3. He wrote "That'll Be the Day" (two words).
- 4. One of the country western singers who contributed folk tradition to rock-and-roll (two words)
- 6. *The _____ Jungle*
- 8. Elvis's image was this (hyphenated word)
- 9. The style of music played by Little Richard (three words).
- 10. Black performer who contributed to the hybrid style of rock-and-roll (two words).
- 11. Elvis became this type of name.
- 13. Jerry Lee Lewis was an early rock-and-roll _____.
- 16. The younger generation believed the rock _____, rhythms, and harmonies expressed their feelings.
- 18. Elvis had a tremendous _____ in the world of popular music.

