

WEEKEND

Rachael Davis chats to the star and director of new biopic *Elvis* about the Rock and Roll icon's fame, legacy and tragedy

A tragic American opera

Cinema

BAZ Luhrmann's *Elvis* is, by the director's own admission, not a traditional biopic.

Rather than simply telling a story, the *Romeo + Juliet*, *Moulin Rouge!* and *The Great Gatsby* director says he wanted to emulate Shakespeare's histories by taking a historical figure and asking: What can we learn about today?

Luhrmann's film tells the tale of the King of Rock and Roll's life from humble beginnings in Mississippi to launching his music career in Memphis in the 1950s, all the way through his electric years of fame to his untimely and tragic death in 1977.

It explores the good, the bad and the ugly parts of Elvis's life, diving into the African-American origins of the musical genre he brought to the mainstream, the complicated relationship with his manager and the toll his fame took on his family, culminating in a heartbreakingly visceral depiction of his final years – all told in Luhrmann's trademark exuberant cinematic style to parallel the rollercoaster ride that was the life of Elvis Presley.

Elvis is played by 30-year-old Austin Butler, known for starring on the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon in his youth and more recently in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*.

Legendary cultural icon Tom Hanks, 65, stars as Elvis' manager Colonel Tom Parker. "First and foremost, it was a huge honour for me. Just the privilege of my lifetime," Butler says of being cast to play the King. "But that being said, it was also a responsibility and a weight that I've never felt before."

"Any time you play somebody who's actually lived there's that responsibility, but with him there's so many people around the world



"Getting down to who he was as a man, the core of his humanity, that was what fascinated me," says Austin Butler about playing the role of Elvis

who love him so much that I want to do justice to.

"There are so many misconceptions about Elvis, so many ideas of him: the icon, the god-like figure, the Messianic Elvis, but then there's also the Halloween costume and the guy who marries you in Las Vegas."

"Stripping all that away and getting down to who he was as a man, the core of his humanity, that was what fascinated me about it. That's what really drove me every day."

Butler says he dedicated every day to Presley's music, live concerts and interviews so he could not only perfect his voice, mannerisms and body language, but to truly understand Elvis Aaron Presley, the man behind the glitz, glamour and performances.

"I knew his work, especially the songs of the 50s, and I'd seen some of his films and some live performances, but not nearly had I scratched the surface of all the information and recordings that are out there," he says.

"It was such an amazing thing to get to dedicate every day to listening to every one of his songs, and watching every interview he ever gave and listening to every interview that he ever gave, and watching every concert and every film."

"Through that process I was

constantly like this detective trying to find keys into his humanity, keys into the truth of this man.

"Every time I found one it was the most exhilarating feeling. I would go: 'Oh, that's why he does that!' It was so inspiring."

In *Elvis*, the story is told from the perspective of Colonel Tom Parker, an illegal immigrant Dutch carnival worker turned musical entrepreneur who, the film shows, held Elvis Presley firmly under his thumb for more than two decades.

For Tom Hanks, who Luhrmann describes as "a superstar" and "one of the great actors of all time", the role of the Colonel presented a unique opportunity to play someone inherently unlikeable and morally disreputable.

"I told him the story and Tom instantly related to the idea of this sort of carnival huckster manager," Luhrmann says.

"He stopped me in the middle of ten minutes of talking and went: 'Hmm. Well, if you want me, I'm your guy'. And that was it."

"Actors like to play new notes on their instruments. Tom's played a lot of things, but he's never played a particularly unsavoury human being."

Luhrmann says he decided to tell the tale of *Elvis* from the Colonel's point of view because: "any storytelling, even a

documentary, is just somebody telling somebody's truth".

"He's a pretty unreliable storyteller," he says of the character. "But then again, who isn't? If you told me the story of something that happened last night, and I told you the story, we'd tell it differently."

"He's not really telling the story, actually, what he's really doing is he's arguing in the court of public opinion that he's not responsible for all the bad stuff."

The 'bad stuff' Luhrmann speaks of are the low points of the rollercoaster ride that was Elvis' life and career.

The star saw incredible highs and unimaginable lows over his 20 years of fame, and the director believes that we, today, have lessons to learn about the impact of fame from Elvis' story.

"What we can learn about today is that there's definitely a very big issue called instant fame. Anyone can be famous overnight," he says.

The character of Colonel Tom Parker, Luhrmann adds, is born of a world which nurtures "the ability to sort of go: 'Hey, I'm kind of lying to you and making up stuff, making you believe in stuff, and even though you know you've been worked over, you kind of like it'."

"You put those two things in

Colonel Tom Parker – never a Colonel, never a Tom, never a Parker, spoiler alert – with this incredibly sensitive soul who finds himself, like Eminem, in one of the few white houses in a black community, growing up around this music, and this movement, absorbing it – and boom, there's an explosion," he says.

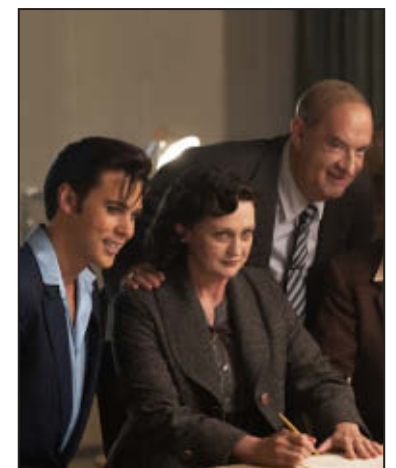
"You have Elvis the punk, Elvis the radical, Elvis the Hollywood stuck in a bubble. Then he finds himself again and he's caught in a trap in Vegas."

"It's like an opera. It's a tragic, American opera."

■ **Elvis is in UK cinemas now.**



The look of love: Elvis (Austin Butler) and Priscilla Presley (Olivia DeJonge)



Elvis (Austin Butler) with his mother Gladys (Helen Thomson) and manager Colonel Tom Parker (Tom Hanks)

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