

In 1972, Elvis Gave No Opinion — What Do I Give in 2022?



Elvis June 9, 1972 Madison Square Garden Press Conference

One day in June 1972, our family room's not-so-portable television warmed up — cathode rays tubs had to do that — and as the flickering images cleared on the Buffalo channel, the screen filled with a figure holding a press conference, mics draped with the call letters of every media outlet, national and international. The man sat in the middle of a long conference table, dressed in sky blue. His jet black coif looked bathed in hairspray, and the high collar of his coat hid the man's neck, maybe protecting his psyche, too, from prying eyes. The entertainer was well tanned and looked healthy — looks can deceive — and his eyes, topped with mascara and framed with eyeliner, belied that glowing look, for they seemed tired. Or was that sadness I saw?

I abandoned my rocking chair and sat cross-legged as close to the tiny screen as I could get, so my world filled with only him and me. Whatever he would say, I would hear, and I would remember, for with my eight years in on this planet, I knew what was really important, versus my middle-aged parents, who sat blithely by, putting up with me and my attraction to this TV fluff, wondering why their little girl cared so much for what this gyrating singer had to say.

It was Friday, June 9, 1972, Madison Square Garden, and the way my young brain saw it, it was time to watch the news. Elvis Presley was about to talk to me.

The reporters pounded the singer with all and sundry questions, the usual queries one would expect of a famous entertainer, preparing to give his first concert at the Garden. Until one female reporter asked these questions.

Q: Mr. Presley, as you've mentioned your time in the service, what is your opinion of war protesters, and would you today refuse to be drafted?

Elvis: Honey, I'd just sooner keep my own personal views about that to myself 'cause I'm just an entertainer, and I'd rather not say.

Q: Do you think other entertainers should refuse to be drafted?

Elvis: No, I can't even say that.

Elvis's answer set me back.

After all, this was the early 70s. The Vietnam War raged on. Protesting was a North American pastime, replete with anti-establishment influencers of all stripes who filled our nightly news screens with their vitriolic opinions on everything from the ERA Rights fight to stopping a war that America looked doomed to lose. Opinion was what we ate as a nightly dish, and yet Elvis took the plate away.

Why? I thought. The one man who I would listen to above all, a man who spoke to me in my time, in my generation. Did I not need his advice? Weren't his words, his opinions, be what would guide me going forward?

Yet, if you set your time travel ship to the mid-20th century, you'd find despite all the protesting noise, civil society wasn't a comment free-for-all public square. Three topics, taboo in every social environment: marriage, religion, and politics, and Elvis, a southern gentleman and a lover of his fans, not wanting to end that love affair with even just one, chose to keep his societal views close to his tanned chest. Maybe that huge silver belt buckle he sported that day protected better his heart than his gut.

The press conference was short and sweet, as was the case with every Elvis sighting, his appearance leaving you wanting more. So, from that day forward, a half century now, Elvis's choice to stay mum on society's ills has lingered, leaving me wanting to know more, forcing me as an artist, a writer, to question my place in this world, and my right to publicly say what I think, and risk losing what reader fans I may have.

That debate Elvis wrestled with sits front and center in my mind today, as close as I sat in front of that television screen so long ago.

Did Elvis know something back then that I'm fighting to know today? Could he foresee current times, and know that with one misspoken word, your image, your brand, and your very career, could blow to smithereens?

I am left with only the essence of the man who bodily left us all so long ago, leaving me to answer that question for myself, in every book that I write, in every social commentary article I pen, and every word that I speak in today's public square. I must fight to stay aloft on society's balance beam, being true to myself and my values while not triggering my readers in this oh, so ultrasensitive world I now call home, without that man in sky-blue.

Were that conference held today, would reporters attack Elvis for calling that female reporter, "Honey?" Would they lambaste him for not wholeheartedly supporting female equality? Would they throw him as so much detritus on society's garbage heap of the Me Too Movement, as just another black-balled influencer in a world bent on homogenizing everything and everyone?

And would any of that treatment be fair to a man who only wanted to love and serve his fans, determined not to lose a one to his own private thoughts and feelings?

And will the risk of being treated the same homogenize *my* words, abandon *my* beliefs?

It's been fifty years this month since that press conference took place, and the little girl in me has grown up and lived a life filled with heart-bursting joys and gut-wrenching sorrows. My skin is tougher now, and so is my psyche. Fealty to this world and its good people mean more to me now than simply playing nice. I live to hold up a literary mirror to my generation, to celebrate the good times and learn lessons from the bad. I want not to blur the lines of past realities with today's rose-colored glasses, in the name of stilling turbulent waters. If writers, artists, of all ilk, are not the ones who point to the disturbing elephants in rooms, who then will?

Would I, could I, ask this question of Elvis today? And how would he respond?

Deep down, I fear Elvis would frown on the woman, the writer, I've become. He would have preferred I remain the happy-go-luck, always smiling little girl, rapturously glued to those flickering TV images all those many moons ago. The girl who sat kissing close to the screen, listening to every word, watching every facial nuance, of the man she so admired, and thought she wanted to emulate.

I imagine, if Elvis were here today, I'd have to say to that image, "Sorry, E, for letting you down. But you'll be glad to know that even today I'm not offended if you call me, honey." I'd probably laugh, and to that intimate reference quip some joke like, "Geez, E, and we haven't even gone on our first date yet."

For, you see, my skin is thick, my psyche whole. I can put a man in his times and his words not in the least offend. Elvis, the artist, spoke his truth to me then, as I'm speaking mine to you now, and will either of us truly be wrong, however our words might shock the future world?

I'll have to be content not knowing Elvis's inner thoughts. He went his way as an artist, and I'm going mine. He was loved the world over and publicly didn't offend a fly; whereas I've probably had more hate mail over the years than love for my no-holds-barred literary spouts.

Maybe Elvis would whisper, "See, I warned you that day on your TV, Barbara. The world doesn't want their artists to be offensive. They want them to be perfect, enjoyable, performing with not one disturbing quirk or flaw, for we exist to lessen their troubles, not create more."

What could I do with those words but smile...

Earlier in the press conference, a reporter said,

Q: Are you satisfied with the image you've satisfied?

Elvis: Well, the image is one thing and the human being is another, you know, so...

Q: How close does it come? How close does the image come to the man?

Elvis: It's very hard to live up to an image, I'll put it that way.

It took me many years before I fully appreciated the gravity of this comment — the image is one thing, the man another. Maybe Elvis's no comments held hidden answers after all. Maybe he knew what his fans wanted, needed, and in the end, he knew he had to stay true to that image to survive himself. Those tired, sorrowful eyes showed the war the man had been waging against his brand. So many battles fought, and with only five years of life left to live, so many battles that would never be won.

After such a short life lived, would I now read between Elvis's spoken lines, "Be true to yourself, but be even truer to your fans. Truth, at all costs, over No Comment, will be what saves your soul."

Maybe if Elvis had shown more of the fallible man to his fans and less of the brand, his fears of being disliked would have disintegrated like dying embers unto ash, and he would have realized we were ready to love the man all that much more.

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In my mind's eye, Elvis rises from the conference table as photographer bulbs explode. He flashes us that warm smile. His hand waves a quick goodbye, and in the blink of an eye, he is gone. Mom gets up from her easy chair, and without a thought, switches the knob to CBS and Walter Cronkite. It's six o'clock, after all. Time to hush up and pay attention to news that's really important.

Yet 50 years on, it's not Cronkite's words that day which echo in my mind and make me strive to be a better, more truth-seeking artist, knowing that any brand I may hold will never match the need for the woman in me, who must stand in front of her own mirror, and ask,



“Why not the truth, above all?”