

# ELVIS ★ IS IN THE ★ BUILDING

With his 2022 biopic *Elvis*, director Baz Luhrmann brought the King's story to millions. Now with his latest big-screen documentary, he's reminding us just what a force Elvis Presley was live...

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

**T**here are few artists who have had their life and career autopsied with as much thoroughness as Elvis Presley. The number of biographies written over the years stretch into the hundreds, with nearly as many documentaries and tribute magazines, while on the big screen, no musician in history has been the focus of as many biopics as the King. So it's long been assumed that we've read everything there is to read, seen everything

there is to see, and that documentary-makers had pretty much rinsed that celluloid archive. After all, this was the most adored and chronicled artist of his day – surely there couldn't be anything else left to learn or see or hear?

Except, it seems, there was. When director Baz Luhrmann was prepping his 2022 Elvis biopic, he went hunting for any hitherto unseen footage of the singer, orbiting around the 70s concert films *Elvis: That's The Way It Is* and *Elvis On Tour*.

What he found was dynamite. In '72, the makers of *Elvis On Tour*, Pierre Adidge and Robert Abel, wanted to include an interview with the King and although Presley wasn't keen on doing it on camera, they did secure a 40-minute audio chat, most of which never made it into the finished film.

That discovery, Luhrmann told *The Guardian*, was "our lightbulb moment," saying that "because Elvis was off camera when it was taped, I think he was really unguarded and really open-hearted. ➤"

Baz Luhrmann's concert film  
EPIC captures Elvis in his heyday



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Enjoy the unguarded magnetism of Elvis in concert



➤ We thought, 'What if we use this in the film so that Elvis tells his story himself?'

Why this priceless interview was never included in the 1972 film was due to the King's notoriously censorious manager, Colonel Tom Parker, who kept a tight leash on what fans could and couldn't know about their favourite artist.

Quite what the Colonel would have made of Luhrmann's 2022 flick we can only guess at. He would have surely loved the director's hagiographic touches and the stirring penury-to-palace story arc, but would have likely redlined the depictions of Elvis' drug use and womanising. For the rest of us, it was simply the most exhilarating and all-encompassing film about the King since John Carpenter's 1979 bio, receiving eight Academy Award nods

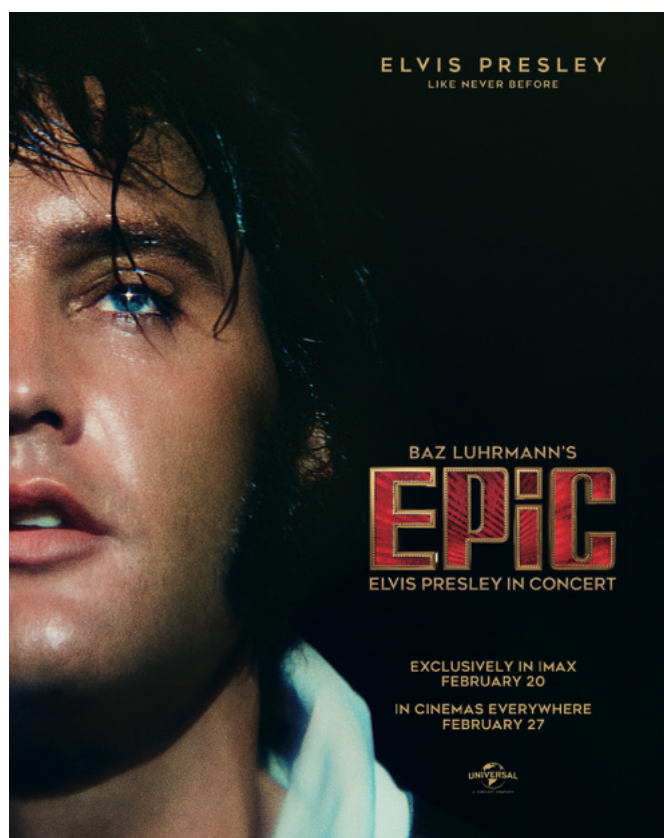


Director Baz Luhrmann made *Elvis* in 2022, and has now released a "real-life" Elvis film

(including Best Picture and Best Actor for Austin Butler) and grossing \$288.7 million against a \$85 million budget. It was, quite simply, a sensation.

With a haul that huge, it's no surprise that Luhrmann wanted to return to the Elvis well. He'd heard talk of unused footage from *That's The Way It Is* and *Elvis On Tour*, and so sent researchers to Warner Bros' vaults in Kansas to see what was there. What they found exceeded all expectations – 59 precious minutes, housed in 69 boxes, of mostly never-before-seen negatives, that the director then passed to Peter Jackson's Park Road Post Production company for a digital spruce-up. But that wasn't all – he also acquired rare Super 8 footage from the Graceland archives and even more from private collectors, a situation that the director joked was like "going to see gangsters in car parks at midnight". Whereas previous Elvis documentaries had been hamstrung by having to rely on familiar, oft-repeated clips, Luhrmann's film is that rarest of beasts – a genuinely fresh look at The Memphis Flash.

"Baz is obviously an Elvis fan and he has Elvis' best interests at heart," Candy Rose, co-president of the Official Elvis Presley Fan Club UK, tells *Vintage Rock*. "His 2022 film was a great watch for the casual fan. He hopefully



*EPIC: Elvis Presley In Concert* has been created from never-before-seen footage from Graceland, private collectors and the Warner Bros archives in Kansas

changed peoples' perspective of the caricature that Elvis had become in some circles, contributing to a positive shift in the way people perceive him. But with this new film, it's Elvis telling his story in his own words, something that's never happened before – the words that are spoken are factually correct, not like some myths and legends, and no creative licence has been taken."

Titled *EPiC: Elvis Presley In Concert*, Luhrmann's latest

feature is so much more than what it says on the tin. "It has 'concert' in its title, but *EPiC* isn't your typical concert film," explained *Empire* magazine in its four-star review on release. "Then again, director Baz Luhrmann's filmmaking is rarely typical... Luhrmann's fascination with the King of Rock'n'Roll continues with this dazzling mix of documentary and concert, his first non-fiction film."

## HAVING FUN WITH ELVIS ON STAGE

While Baz Luhrmann's film shows Elvis having genuine fun on stage, there wasn't much joy to be had with this 1974 vinyl release...

There are some albums that are endurance tests even for the most broad-minded listener – Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*, Naked City's *Grand Guignol*, Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*... The list goes on. Yet it seems unimaginable that the King of Rock'n'Roll could have produced a record that's able to stand shoulder to shoulder with those avant-garde torture listens. But so it was with 1974's loyalty-testing *Having Fun With Elvis On Stage* LP. The difference, however, was that those other albums offered up music, however ill-defined and impenetrable. Elvis' record, in contrast, boasted no songs at all, and was instead a compilation of the King's banter between numbers.

RCA owned the rights to Elvis' singing voice and the songs, Colonel Tom Parker reasoned,

but not Elvis' speaking voice. It was Elvis' manager's belief that whether Presley was singing *All Shook Up*, or simply saying hello to a fan in the front row, it would sell. He inked a deal with RCA in which the label would manufacture the records for Parker, and would in turn receive a small portion of the income from the album. But you can't help thinking that if RCA had masterminded a record like this, then greater care would have been taken in picking which snippets of on-stage chat would be included. As it is, the choices are just bizarre, lacking in context, and often incoherent.

"This one is really for hardcore fans, but there are plenty out there," *Billboard* magazine stated diplomatically. Other reviews were less polite: writing in the *Rolling Stone Record Guide*, Dave Marsh



described the LP as "the worst by far... bad jokes and about 10,000 requests for a glass of water."

In the years since its release, *Having Fun With Elvis On Stage* has been labelled one of the worst LPs ever. RCA has never reissued the original album on either vinyl or CD. It's clearly the label's way of attempting to erase one of the more cynically-produced records in the King's catalogue. Approach with caution.

It may be the director's maiden documentary, but it's unmistakably a Baz Luhrmann production. As a filmmaker, the 63-year-old has a distinct, uncopyable voice, a flamboyant, kinetic, maximalist style that's there in everything from 1992's exuberant *Strictly Ballroom* to 2001's *Moulin Rouge!* (the film earns its exclamation mark) and 2013's razzle-dazzle take on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The movie, then, has the flair and force of a real-life Elvis concert. That is one thing the two artists have in common, an unquenchable taste for the theatrical, and Luhrmann edits the film with the volcanic energy of a vintage Presley performance. Look at any of those Vegas turns and it's not a singer on the wane, shorn of his youthful vitality, but a performer that's still thrillingly fiery. Every time

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CANDY ROSE

he's on-stage, you can feel his temperature risin', burning a hole where he lays.

And that's the great gift of *EPiC*, obliterating the lie that Elvis was somehow redundant and diminished by the 1970s – Luhrmann's film shows an Elvis still as heart-stoppingly beautiful, still as flaming and still as twinkly as in his Sun days. In fact, it depicts him as an even more fluid performer, having expanded his on-stage repertoire beyond those

quivering legs and girl-taunting pelvic thrusts.

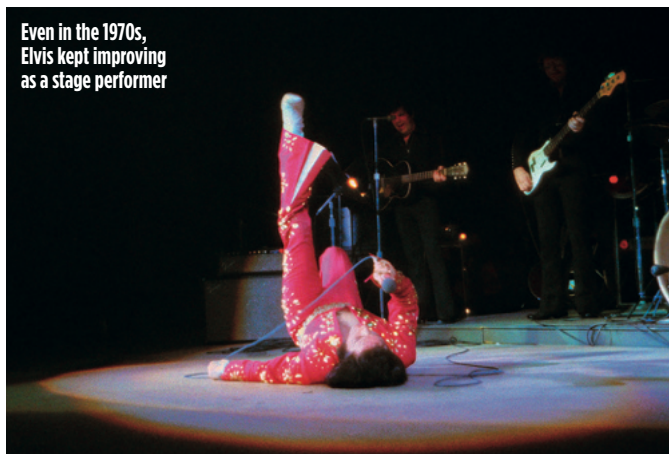
*EPiC*, then, works as a perfect side-dish to Luhrmann's 2022 biopic. As majestic as *Elvis* was, it missed one vital ingredient – the real Elvis Presley. Austin Butler was exemplary in the part, but even he could only hint at the atomic-powered charisma of the real King and *EPiC* reminds us quite why Elvis was the greatest performer of this or

any other century. And that the majority of the footage here is new – outside of a few scruffy bootleg recordings anyway – to Elvis-heads is the film's main USP and something Luhrmann is clearly proud of.

"There's an amazing bit I love where Elvis was just sitting with the guitar and he is doing *Little Sister*, and he segues into [The Beatles'] *Get Back*," the director told *Variety*. "Now, there's pirated black-and-white stuff" ➔



*EPiC* contains beautifully restored footage of Elvis joking around with other performers



Even in the 1970s, Elvis kept improving as a stage performer

Official Elvis Presley Fan Club UK's Adrian Tedeschi. "The sound and image quality is stunning," he says. "For the casual fan it provides a great insight to the man behind the legend, demonstrating his humour, humility and talent that could change people's perspective and opinion of him, and for the more serious Elvis fan or collector it's still a marvellous watch, with a lot of the footage that was 'unseen'

All the footage here, from the newly-unearthed film to the reused clips from *That's The Way It Is* and *Elvis On Tour*, have been assiduously remastered by Park Road Post. It was Peter Jackson's New Zealand-based company that tickled up those 16mm negatives for The Beatles' *Get Back* project, but the scale of the job on *EPiC* was even greater, making this half-century-old footage detailed enough to be projected onto giant IMAX screens.

"We thought the man with the big voice deserved to be on the big screen," film editor Jonathan Redmond told fans at a screening of the film at Graceland's Guest House on what would have been Elvis's 91st birthday. "We wanted to make a film for the cinema. It's been 50 years since he's been on a cinema screen."

But giving new life to that footage wasn't easy. Firstly, the 35mm anamorphic film found in the Warner vaults didn't have an attached soundtrack, as the sound

## "FOR THE CASUAL FAN IT PROVIDES A GREAT INSIGHT TO THE MAN BEHIND THE LEGEND, DEMONSTRATING HIS HUMOUR, HUMILITY AND TALENT"

ADRIAN TEDESCHI

out there, but through Park Road we were able to print it and bring it back into a colourscape. Or, when he sings *How Great Thou Art* in the gospel section, 16mm, that's just never been released. Some of it you would've seen in very scratchy bootleg versions. But even if you've seen some of it in *That's The Way It Is*, you've never seen it like this... In our movie you see Sammy Davis Jr and Cary Grant backstage, and we've been able to dig back the sound. You've seen that footage occasionally, pirated, but we

found the sound of what they actually say."

It's a film that has gone down well with both regular cinemagoers and hardcore aficionados, according to the

having been around for years on the bootleg scene but without the level of quality. The clips that were totally 'unseen' are refreshing to finally be able to view."



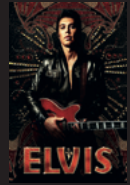
The new film shows that later Elvis was not the figure of fun some think

# THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING

With so much Elvis media out there, finding the best is hard work. So we've done it for you...

## Best biopic

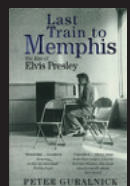
*Elvis* (2022)



There aren't many performers who have been essayed on screen as many times as Elvis. It's the trickiest of jobs – not only do you have to look like one of the most lusted-after men of the 20th century, but you have to at least hint at the magnetism he showed on stage. Thankfully, director Baz Luhrmann struck gold with Austin Butler, who comes the closest to nailing the King's innate star quality. But it's not just Butler – Luhrmann too proves the perfect director to tell the Elvis story. No other filmmaker could replicate the high-voltage thrill of the King's music, and it's a typically bombastic, fast-moving feature from the famously idiosyncratic director. The American Film Institute named *Elvis* one of the Top 10 films of 2022, and we have to say we agree.

## Best biography

*Last Train To Memphis: The Rise Of Elvis Presley* (1994) and *Careless Love: The Unmaking Of Elvis Presley* by Peter Guralnick (1999)

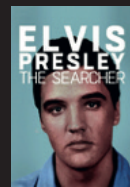


There are, it hardly needs to be said, so many books on Elvis Presley, that even the most completist of fans can't say with confidence they own every one. But the one they will have, and that every fan needs on their shelf, is writer Peter Guralnick's two-volume biography, consisting of *Last Train To Memphis: The Rise Of Elvis Presley* from 1994 and *Careless Love: The Unmaking Of Elvis Presley* from 1999. Widely acclaimed as the definitive account of the King's

life, it's been reprinted many times since it was first published and was described by *The Washington Post* as "assiduously researched, meticulously assembled and beautifully written, equal parts Shakespearean tragedy and sociological treatise."

## Best documentary

*Elvis Presley: The Searcher* (2018)



While Baz Luhrmann's latest movie has biographical elements, it is, to all intents and purposes, a concert film. For the full Presley story, you need to check out *Elvis: The Searcher*, a 215-minute HBO documentary released in 2018. Initiated by Priscilla Presley and Elvis' close friend Jerry Schilling, it works well for both newcomers and dedicated Presley-heads (Graceland opened its archives for the project, giving director Thom Zimny much more footage than was available to previous documentary makers). It was well-reviewed at the time, too, with *Rolling Stone* writing: "While *The Searcher* covers well-known highlights of Presley's life and career, it takes a more measured and thoughtful approach in its treatment of Presley, the artist... If you're looking for a more balanced look at Presley's life that zeroes in on his music and impact, the film absolutely delivers."

## Best coffee table book

*The Elvis Encyclopedia: A Visual Compendium Of The King Of Rock And Roll* (2008)



So you have Peter Guralnick's two books, but what they don't do is remind you of the sheer head-turning beauty of Elvis Aaron Presley.

Let's face it, even if his voice had been the same, if Elvis had looked like Wee Willie Harris he wouldn't have become the star he was. This coffee table book then is a feast for the eyes, telling the full story of Elvis through gorgeous photography. "As a visual compendium of Elvis and his times the work is outstanding," wrote Bel Mooney in *The Times*, "and students of rock'n'roll history have a valuable resource of quotes, pictures and facts – for every detail of every single record is here, as well as the names of musicians he worked with, those singers he influenced and the credits for all his movies."

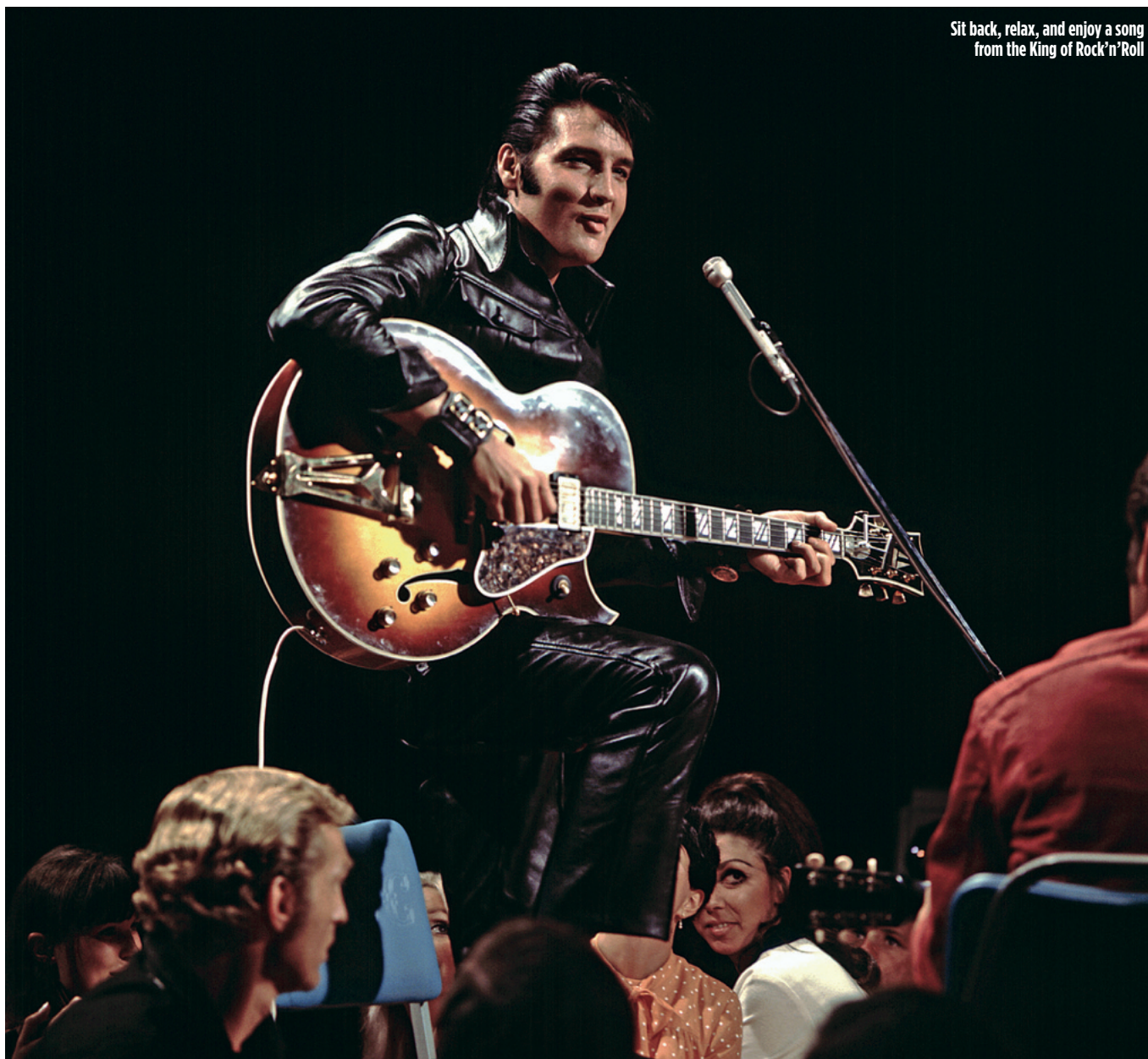
## Best podcast

*TCBCast: An Unofficial Elvis Presley Fan Podcast*



With endless Elvis content across books, films and docs, the podcast world offers deep dives, fan discussions, album breakdowns and more for every level of Presley enthusiast. The standout recommendation is *TCBCast*, an unofficial fan podcast hosted by Justin Gausman and Gurdip Ladhar (often with guests). It's widely regarded as the go-to Elvis podcast, praised for its knowledgeable hosts, thoughtful analysis and thorough exploration of the King's career, music, movies and legacy. Fans on platforms like Reddit and Apple Podcasts rave about *TCBCast*: "Justin and Gurdip are so knowledgeable... they've made me revisit an Elvis song and hear it in a new way," said one fan, with another adding, "If you want to know everything about Elvis, you've come to the right place!" It is well-researched, fun and perfect for both newcomers wanting context and die-hards seeking fresh perspectives.

Sit back, relax, and enjoy a song from the King of Rock'n'Roll



➤ was recorded separately, so the challenge was to match the footage with audio recordings from other sources.

But the whole endeavour, a Herculean labour of love for all concerned, has proved well worth it. Budgeted at just \$11 million, it's already raked in over \$23 million at the box office at the time of going to press, which is amazing considering this is a non-fiction film about a celebrity who died nearly 50 years ago. But maybe it's not so surprising. What *EPiC* does is underline quite how ahead of his time Elvis was as an artist. Whether he's out

**“FOR ELVIS, THE IMAGE AND THE MAN BECAME ONE ONSTAGE... EPiC IS SO VIVID IT MAKES ELVIS SEEM LIKE A FIGURE WHO LIVES IN THE PERPETUAL RIGHT NOW.”**

SHEILA O'MALLEY

there singing *Hound Dog*, *Burning Love*, *Polk Salad Annie*, *How Great Thou Art* or *You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'*, this film shows a performer that could consign into the shadows any of today's stadium-filling megastars. Baz Luhrmann

has said he wanted to make this film [like] the world tour Elvis dreamed of but never had,” and it's fair to say that he's succeeded.

“For Elvis,” Sheila O'Malley writes on the rogerebert.com website, “the image and the

man became one onstage. It would leave him depleted and wrecked... *EPiC* is so vivid it makes Elvis seem not like an entertainer from the past, but a figure who lives in the perpetual Right Now.” Amen to that. ★