

King Creole

by Emily Soares | June 19, 2009

Considered by fans and the King alike to be Elvis Presley's best film, **King Creole** (1958) gives audiences a taste of what Presley's movie career might have been had he not been confined by the lightweight script choices of Colonel Tom Parker. It's a movie that doesn't really fit into the accepted Elvis pantheon, because it's not a typically "Elvis" movie. **King Creole** has the breadth and depth of a stand alone achievement, packed with talent, a compelling storyline and other unexpected surprises.

Based on the Harold Robbins novel *A Stone for Danny Fisher*, **King Creole** tells the story of a rebellious and complicated youth named Danny who is pulled in many directions. He struggles between loyalty for his often-disappointed father, his desire to sing rather than go to school and the need to survive in the rough and tumble corner of his New Orleans' world. Fisher also has a complicated love life and is pulled in two directions; on one side is his virtuous soda fountain crush, Nellie (Dolores Hart), and on the other is Ronnie (Carolyn Jones), a hard-drinking gangster moll. It's a dark, complex story and one that showcased Presley's emerging skill as a serious actor, much to the surprise of critics. Paul Dehn, film critic for the *News Chronicle*, a British daily, was initially a harsh critic of Elvis but said of **King Creole**: "Mr. Presley has a new admirer ☺ me!....(He) has suddenly learned to act very well indeed....which he does with new skill, a new restraint and a new charm....His very singing has actually improved with his other attainments."

In addition, the film's musical numbers stand on their own and make sense in the context of the story rather than appearing as poorly integrated musical interludes in the later Elvis vehicles. When Danny Fisher performs at the King Creole, it's easy to see why the crowds are coming to see him. Backed by his real-life band, with Scotty Moore on guitar and the Jordanaires providing backing vocals, Elvis performs with more abandon and seeming spontaneity then in many of his other films. As noted by Dehn, his voice during this period is especially impressive.

Many Elvis biographers divide his career into pre- and post-Army phases, with some of the entertainer's happiest personal days and best films coming before his time as an enlisted man. **King Creole** represents the closing chapter of the pre-Army period. Elvis' call to duty, however, nearly derailed the production schedule, but Paramount intervened. When Elvis was told that he needed to report for induction on January 20, 1958, the studio, which wanted to begin shooting that day, knew it would be out \$350,000 if their star left the picture before March. Frank Freeman, studio production chief, sent a letter to the Memphis draft board asking for an eight-week extension of his report date. The draft board said they'd consider it if Elvis wrote them himself, which he did, and the extension was granted.

Unlike so many of the post-Army Elvis vehicles, **King Creole** allows Elvis to play a believable character - one with human flaws, strengths and natural talent. He treats the good girl like a tramp and the bad girl like high society. He tries to graduate twice and fails; tries to help his father and nearly has him killed. Nearly everything and everyone that Danny Fisher touches in this film disintegrates, at least temporarily. He's the sort of working class character it would be hard to imagine Presley playing in his later movies.

King Creole brought together a pool of impressive talent, including director Michael Curtiz (born Mihaly Kertesz in then-Austria-Hungary), who helmed such titles as *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), *Casablanca* (1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Although **King Creole** was shot just a few years before his death at the age of 74, much of the style that marked Curtiz's apex is still intact, including the heavy noir aspect of **King Creole**, both in its telling and its look.

Carolyn Jones (Ronnie) went on to receive great fame on television in her role as Morticia in *The Addams Family* (1964). She gives a tragic performance as the kept woman of mobster Maxie Fields, played by Walter Matthau, who delivers a notably sinister performance that is far removed from his usual comic persona. Dolores Hart, the chaste but willing-to-learn Nellie, gave up her career in the mid-sixties to become a nun.

King Creole was in good company with the other youth films of the era - *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) - with a main character caught between an uncertain future and the day-to-day struggle to survive. **King Creole** also brought together two individuals who had worked together in *Blackboard Jungle*: Vic Morrow (Shark), who made his debut in that film, and cinematographer Russell Harlan (*Run Silent, Run Deep* (1958), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962).

Producer: Hal B. Wallis
Director: Michael Curtiz
Screenplay: Herbert Baker, Michael Vincent Gazzo; Harold Robbins (novel "A Stone for Danny Fisher")
Cinematography: Russell Harlan
Art Direction: Joseph MacMillan Johnson, Hal Pereira
Music: Walter Scharf
Cast: Elvis Presley (Danny Fisher), Carolyn Jones (Ronnie), Walter Matthau (Maxie Fields), Dolores Hart (Nellie), Dean Jagger (Mr. Fisher), Liliane Montevecchi (Forty Nina), Vic Morrow (Shark), Paul Stewart (Charlie LeGrand), Jan Shepard (Mimi Fisher), Brian Hutton (Sal), Jack Grinnage (Dummy), Dick Winslow (Eddie Burton), Raymond Bailey (Mr. Evans), Gavin Gordon (Mr. Primont, Druggist).
BW-116m. Letterboxed. Closed Captioning.

by Emily Soares

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTERS

Our monthly newsletter delivered on the 1st of each month that features your printable programming calendar, articles and exciting TCM news and updates.

SIGN UP NOW

CONNECT WITH TCM

