Free Expression and Censorship: Elvis Gets America "All Shook Up"

Elvis Presley became a world-famous rock star in the 1950s. He became famous for the rock 'n' roll music he sang and played on his guitar and for his crazy dance moves. He swung his hips around and wobbled his knees while he grabbed the microphone and shrugged his shoulders. Elvis's fans loved the way he danced, but some people thought it was too wild. They didn't think young people should see Elvis's dance moves because they believed that watching Elvis might make the young people act wild and crazy, too.

In October 1956, Elvis made his first appearance on a popular TV program called "The Ed Sullivan Show." It was a variety show that featured performances by all kinds of singers, dancers, comedians and other entertainers. The producers of "The Ed Sullivan Show" knew that some people found Elvis's style of dancing shocking. When they filmed Elvis for his final appearance on the show in January 1957, they only showed him from his waist up, so people could not see his legs move. The people who didn't like the way Elvis danced thought this was a good thing to do, but Elvis's fans were disappointed that they didn't get to see the star's whole performance.

In the United States, we have a law called the First Amendment. This law is part of our Constitution, and it protects our freedom to share our opinions and ideas. This is called freedom of expression. When someone attempts to block or suppress the opinions or ideas that another person is trying to express, it is called censorship.
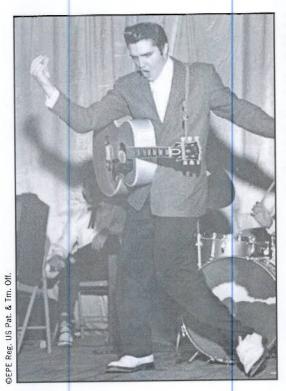
For Elvis — and for all of us — dancing was an outlet for freedom of expression, a way to express thoughts and emotions through movement. "The Ed Sullivan Show" censored Elvis's dancing by only showing him from the waist up. After Elvis's appearance on the show, people all across America discussed whether censoring Elvis was the right thing to do. Today we continue to debate how much freedom of expression we should protect and if it's ever right to censor a person or message.

Think about this:

- Why did some people dislike the way Elvis danced?

- What is freedom of expression? Do you use your freedom of expression? How?

- What is censorship? Can you think of any examples you've seen of something or someone being censored?

- Do you think "The Ed Sullivan Show" did the right thing when they censored Elvis's dancing?

Meet "The King"

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Have you ever heard of Elvis Presley? Elvis was a musician and singer who first became famous more than 50 years ago, in the 1950s. He sang a new kind of music that most people hadn't heard before called "rock 'n' roll." Some of his songs were loud and fast. Others were slow. They sounded like a mix of blues music and country music, but with a stronger beat. When Elvis sang, it wasn't always easy to understand what he was saying, because sometimes his words slurred into each other. Some people thought that this new kind of music was noisy and unpolished, but other people thought it was exciting. It made them want to dance and shout. They wanted to hear more!

Elvis's music became very popular very fast. He released his first song in 1954. By 1956, he was famous all around the world. Over the next 20 years, he had 18 No. 1 hit songs on Billboard magazine's "Top 40" lists. He also starred in 31 feature films. *Rolling Stone* magazine called him the first rock 'n' roll star.

Few performers have become as popular as Elvis. In 1973, Elvis performed a televised concert in Hawaii that was beamed live via satellite to 40 countries — a show business first. The concert special was called "Aloha from Hawaii." More than 1 billion people watched it live or taped. That's more people than tuned in to watch man first walk on the moon in 1969.

Although Elvis died in 1977, his music remains popular. He has sold more than 1 billion albums worldwide.

Think about this:

- What type of music did Elvis perform? What made it different?

- Why did Elvis receive the nickname "The King of Rock 'n' Roll?"

- How many people watched Elvis's "Aloha from Hawaii" TV special? Who would you tune in to watch if they performed a special TV concert?

"That's All Right" on Memphis Radio, July, 1954

Source: Historic-Memphis.com

Dewey Phillips was a long-time disc jockey at WHBQ radio in Memphis, Tennessee. Phillips was known for playing music recorded by both white and African-American artists. Shortly after Elvis Presley made his first recording, of the rhythm and blues song "That's All Right," Phillips became the first disc jockey in the country to play the song on the radio in July, 1954.

The account below is taken from the book *The Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, by Peter Guralnick.

> The response was instantaneous… He played the record seven times in a row, eleven times, seven times over the course of the rest of the program. In retrospect it doesn't really matter; it seemed as if all of Memphis was listening as Dewey kept up his nonstop patter, egging his radio audience on, encouraging them to join him in the discovery of a new voice…

> For Gladys [Presley, Elvis' mother] the biggest shock was "hearing them say his name over the radio just before they put on that record…" She didn't have time to think about it for long anyway, because almost immediately the phone rang. It was Dewey for Elvis… He said, "Mrs. Presley, you just get that cotton-picking son of yours down here to the station. I played that record of his, and them birdbrain phones haven't stopped ringing since."

> …Within minutes, Elvis was at the station. "I was scared to death," Elvis said. "I was shaking all over, I just couldn't believe it…"

> "Sit down, I'm gone interview you" were his first words to the frightened nineteen-year-old, Dewey told writer Stanley Booth in 1967. "…I had a couple of records cued up, and while they played we talked. I asked him where he went to high school, and he said, 'Humes.' I wanted to get that out, because a lot of people listening had thought he was colored."