



*A Head
Full of
Music*

Cliff
Richard

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The soundtrack to my life

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CLIFF RICHARD

with Ian Gittins



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*I was not the only one affected by the tsunami of
rock and roll that came from the USA to Britain. It not only changed
our lives but also shaped our futures.*

*So, I dedicate this book to Norman Mitham, Terry Smart,
Ian Samwell . . . my first band.*

*To Hank B Marvin, who influenced countless, now world-famous
guitarists. To Bruce Welch and Brian Bennett. To my competitors
Marty Wilde and Billy Fury and, of course, The Beatles, a formidable
force . . . with admiration and love . . . Cliff.*

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FOREWORD BY BOB STANLEY

What do you think was the best year for music? I'd plump for 1981. I was sixteen, after all, and the world was a peach. There was the summer breeze of Britfunk from Freeez, Level 42 and Linx; the proto-indie 12-string reveries of Orange Juice; the chart takeover of synthpop, with unlikely oddballs Soft Cell and the Human League going all the way to Number 1 and the exciting new technology of the Walkman, which meant you could listen to all of these records on the bus without bothering the other passengers. In 1981, the Walkman even inspired a Number 4 hit called 'Wired For Sound'. Records you hear as a teenager are so affecting, and aged sixteen you're open to everything – any guitar, or any bass drum as Paul Weller put it. Your ears are tuned in to anything new.

In January 1957, Cliff Richard was sixteen. The year before, his head had been turned by a song he had caught wafting out of a car window in Waltham Cross. It was a mesmeric sound, all

echo and mood, which seemed to have come from another planet – ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ by Elvis Presley. Cliff has said many times how that moment literally changed his life. He sought out pictures of Elvis, bought every Elvis record he could find from his local record shop, grew his hair and slicked it into a pompadour, practised his Presley moves in the mirror. Elvis’s look, his attitude, his sound transmitted a message so powerful it caused a youthquake in Britain – he didn’t even need to set foot in this country to transform it. There was no bigger fan than teenager Harry Webb from Hertfordshire. He wanted to be Elvis – not to be *like* him, but to get inside his skin and actually *be* him.

Elvis, it turned out, was just the beginning. January 1957 saw ‘Hound Dog’ in the Top 10 nuzzled up alongside Tommy Steele’s wobbly ‘Singing The Blues’ (Cliff was apparently not impressed) and Malcolm Vaughan’s keening ‘St Therese of the Roses’ (Cliff’s thoughts on this record have never been recorded). February was the month when Little Richard’s ‘Long Tall Sally’ entered the UK chart. Imagine hearing Richard’s ear-splitting Venusian wail for the first time on the radio, straight after some pre-rock ballad like David Whitfield’s ‘The Adoration Waltz’! Well, you probably wouldn’t have, not on the BBC’s Light Programme anyway. Happily, 16-year-old Cliff had discovered the American Forces Network – or AFN – which would also have introduced him to another record that was in the charts in February 1957 – Fats Domino’s rolling, relaxed New Orleans beauty ‘Blueberry Hill’. Every month, it seemed like there was a fresh, new, ever more outlandish rock and roll.⁴⁵ In June it was the turn of The Diamonds’ falsetto doo-wop ‘Little Darlin’; then along came Chuck

Berry, seeming to duet with his own guitar on ‘School Day’; and in July The Everly Brothers appeared on the British hit parade for the very first time with ‘Bye Bye Love’ their harmonies going on to inspire The Beatles, Cliff’s favourites The Bee Gees, and his future bandmates Brian Rankin and Bruce Welch, back then just a pair of spotty skiffers in Newcastle upon Tyne.

What an unimaginable thrill it must have been to be sixteen in 1957. Elvis’s ‘All Shook Up’ was Number 1 right through the summer holidays. By the end of the year, Jerry Lee Lewis had stormed the chart with ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On’. And when Cliff turned seventeen, Buddy Holly’s band, The Crickets, were Number 1 with their breakthrough hit, ‘That’ll Be the Day’. *Imagine being there!* The wonderful thing about this book is that you can. Cliff’s enthusiasm for this music is completely undimmed. Sometimes he can hardly get the words out, the love for the music is so great. You’re there with him in Cheshunt, kicking your heels through school, waiting for the latest piece of teenage news (‘Have you heard? Bill Haley is playing in Edmonton! *Let’s go!*’). You’re there with him outside the record shop in Waltham Cross, hearing ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ for the first time. You’re there at the Kilburn State, with a handful of die-hard Jerry Lee Lewis fans, as the sweat-drenched Killer gives the performance of his life.

I can guarantee you won’t be able to get through this book without pausing to dig out your Eddie Cochran 45s – or your *Best Of* album, or at least without tapping his name into Spotify. Cliff is and was, first and foremost, a music fan. Just a year after all these seismic singles were released, he had one of his own – ‘Move It!’ – and there he was, translating his fandom, his

CLIFF RICHARD

love of rock and roll, into something tangible, a record on the green Columbia label – just like Frankie Lymon & The Teenagers! – that you could buy from Marsden's in Waltham Cross alongside those Jerry Lee and Elvis 45s, or those Sammy Davis Jr and Frank Sinatra albums. Talk about making your dreams come true.

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this book may ring a bell for you. In fact, you know what? I hope it does! It's taken from the chorus of one of my biggest hits, 1981's 'Wired for Sound'. That's the song where I sing about 'Walking around with a head full of music . . .' – and, in so many ways, that is what I've been doing for my entire life.

It's a simple fact. When you're a musician, an artist, music *consumes* you. The love of music is what makes you want to be a performer; then, when you get started, it's what fills your head every waking day. You hear music everywhere you go, and it constantly sets questions pinballing around your mind:

Wow! That's a great song – I wonder what it is?

I love that singer's voice – who is he?

That's a brilliant melody – what could I do with it?

Oh, I know that song! It's fantastic – what is it, again?

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The part of your brain that responds to music never switches off, and nor would you want it to. Songs are the soundtrack to our lives: the music that moves us and lifts us; the music that we fall in love to, and break up to. Music was my first love, and it will be my last . . . oh, hang on, isn't that a song, too?!

Artists live in, and *for*, music. I'm no exception. I have been a singer for sixty-five years now, and done Lord knows how many thousands of interviews, yet for some reason, journalists always prefer to ask me about my private life, or nonsense like that. Why? Who knows! Because, frankly, I'd *much* rather talk about music.

Well, this book is my chance. I've had a head full of music for most of my life and here, laid out, are the contents. This book is, roughly speaking, thirty songs that I have played regularly since the first day that I heard them. They sound as fresh and exciting to me as they did on first listen, even if that was many decades ago.

You will soon notice that there are two main themes that unite the majority of the songs in this book. And I make no excuses for either of them! The first is that much of the music dates from the first wave of rock and roll, right back in the late fifties. And the second is that most of the songs came out of America.

America will always be the fatherland of rock and roll. I have always said that the day my life changed was the Saturday morning in May 1956 when I was mooching down Waltham Cross High Street, aged fifteen, with two mates. We heard some music blaring out of a parked car . . . and it simply stopped us in our tracks.

The song was 'Heartbreak Hotel' by Elvis Presley and it sounded like nothing I had ever heard before. In that instant, I

fell in love with rock and roll, and it gave me the thrill, the purpose and the mission that has shaped my life ever since. As I've always said, if there had been no Elvis Presley, there'd have been no Cliff Richard.

Before rock and roll, it felt like there was nothing much happening in music. We were all listening to Frank Sinatra and Alma Cogan and Max Bygraves, and then suddenly . . . *boom!* Along came Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard and Buddy Holly! I'm not exaggerating: it felt like the world had changed overnight.

It was a truly extraordinary time and, luckily, I was just the right age to appreciate it and lap it all up. Being alive, being *young* at that time, meant you knew that you were in at the start of something truly special. The advent of rock and roll changed so many British lives. It certainly altered mine beyond all recognition.

How do I mean? Well, I came to England from India in 1948, a wide-eyed, seven-year-old boy named Harry Webb. Just ten years later, I was a teenage rock star called Cliff Richard who was fronting a band called The Drifters, riding high in the hit parade, and on tour playing live to thousands of screaming fans every night.

How did *that* happen? Well, it happened because I heard the amazing music being made by the people in this book, and I wanted to make my own. And it happened because I was lucky enough to catch a few breaks, make the first ever British rock and roll record, and work like crazy to make my dream come true.

I hope this book serves another purpose. So many people believe that British pop music began in the early sixties with The Beatles. *Well, no, it didn't, thank you very much!* We had

homegrown rockers making terrific tunes much earlier than that: not just me, but Billy Fury, Marty Wilde, Adam Faith . . .

In any case, The Beatles only really took off five years after I did, but they were listening to exactly the same artists that I was taking inspiration from: that first generation of American rock and rollers. The first time that I ever bumped into the Liverpool lads, we compared notes:

‘What do you think of Chuck Berry?’

‘Hey, man, we *love* Chuck Berry!’

‘What about John Lee Hooker?’

‘Wow, yeah – he’s fantastic!’

We had the same musical education, the same schooling, as each other. And I think that The Beatles would be as happy as I am that this book is celebrating that great music.

This book is meaningful to me on a number of levels. It’s not just that I love the songs, although obviously I *do*. I was also fortunate enough to meet, and even get to know, some of the legendary artists who created them, and I’ll share those stories and memories with you in these pages as well.

The songs in *A Head Full of Music* are arranged in rough chronological order – but not strictly. It’s the sequence in which the songs impacted on me. I didn’t hear a few of them until a while after they came out. I also get diverted here and there, but that’s OK: rock and roll rarely proceeds in a straight line from A to Z!

I’m eighty-three this year. I’ve been alive for a very long time, which means that not all of the music filling my head dates from that first era of rock and roll. I also want to take this chance to pay

homage to other artists whose songs have deeply moved me over the years.

It's a broad category, and it includes great soul stars such as Aretha Franklin, long-time colleagues like Elton John, dear friends who have passed away, such as Cilla Black and Olivia Newton-John, and, of course, my all-time favourite band, The Bee Gees . . . and some of the great gospel music that is so close to my heart.

It's a lot to fit in – well, of course it is! I have lived my entire life in music! So, let's get started, and delve in to my *Head Full of Music*. I hope you enjoy it and I hope, by the end, that the music is playing inside your head, too.

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ONE

'IN A PERSIAN MARKET' – SAMMY DAVIS JR

A tune from before I'd even heard of rock and roll

Before Elvis shoved rock and roll to the very centre of my life, music was really just background noise for me: pleasant, diverting and inconsequential. An occasional tune might catch my fancy, but nothing about the ditties that I was hearing on the radio sounded remotely important or life-changing.

As I explained in my life story, *The Dreamer*, my first musical memory as a boy, growing up in India, was being put in my church school's choir. I can't remember which hymns we sang, just how mortified I felt at having to wear a cassock, which to me felt like putting on a girl's dress!

We had some music at home. My dad worked for a catering company but he was also a hobby musician, playing banjo in his firm's jazz band. In our apartment we had a gramophone, which had what looked like a huge old hearing aid sticking out of it: an ancient wooden contraption that played my parents' records.

My mum and dad would listen to singers such as Frank

Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald on there, as well as big bands like Stan Kenton & His Orchestra. And, when I was only four years old, I had my own little party piece.

Whenever my parents had friends over for dinner, Dad would tell me, ‘Harry, go and get “Chewing a Piece of Straw”!’ This was a 10” single by Jack Payne & His Orchestra. I would scurry over to Mum and Dad’s record collection, stacked neatly by the gramophone, fish it out, and proudly run back and hand it to them.

I couldn’t read yet, of course, but I could recognise the shape of the writing on the label on the middle of the record. Nearly eighty years on, I can still picture it – and still remember the guests all saying ‘Look at that!’ as they praised me for being so clever. I liked that!

That gramophone got sold and left behind when my family moved to England in 1948, after partition had divided British India into India and Pakistan. We lived in relatives’ spare rooms for two years and were very poor. We didn’t even have enough money for a radio, let alone a record player!

My dad was nothing if not ingenious, and brilliant with his hands, and when my parents, my three sisters and I were all living in one room at my Auntie Dorothy’s house in Waltham Cross in 1950, he built us a crystal radio set. This was a basic radio receiver, with valves, and a big pair of headphones attached to it.

We took it with us when we got given our own council house, down the road in Cheshunt, at the end of that year. I would sometimes sit in the front room and listen to it after school

or at the weekends but, if I am honest, I wasn't all that excited about the music I was hearing on the BBC Light Programme.*

When you're a kid, I guess you're attracted to novelty tunes. I liked a fun 1951 single by Dean Martin and Helen O'Connell called 'How D'ya Like Your Eggs in the Morning' ('I like mine with a kiss!' sang Dino). I can remember Patti Page's '(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?', which basically sounded like a nursery rhyme set to music.

The first British weekly singles chart came out in 1952, with Al Martino at Number 1 with 'Here in My Heart'. Every week, it was full of what, nowadays, we would call 'easy-listening' music. I remember Frankie Laine's trembly voiced 'I Believe', and Guy Mitchell's clip-clopping cowboy song, 'A Dime and a Dollar'.

There was Doris Day's 'Secret Love', which I liked because I'd been to the flicks to see her sing it in *Calamity Jane*. I didn't mind big 1955 Number 1 'Dreamboat' by Alma Cogan† ('The girl with the giggle in her voice') or Jimmy Young singing 'The Man from Laramie' or 'Unchained Melody'. But they didn't mean much to me.

There were a lot of crooners. Frank Sinatra was being chased around America by the bobby-soxers, and Perry Como and Matt Monro were always on the radio. I was pretty indifferent to them. Only years later, as a singer myself, did I listen to them more closely and think, *Wow, they really know what they're doing!*

* Before I got into music, my favourite show on the BBC Light Programme was *The Goons*. My friends and I would all listen to it at home, then go to school and impersonate Neddie Seagoon, Eccles and Bluebottle.

† I was to meet Alma many years later. She was a lovely lady who, sadly, died of cancer when she was only thirty-four.

Like a lot of kids, as I got into my mid-teens I started to grow more interested in music. I began tuning that crystal radio into Radio Luxembourg, when I could hear it through the crackle and static. It launched a lot of DJs who were later to become famous on the BBC, such as Pete Murray, David Jacob and, sadly, Jimmy Savile.

Far better than Luxembourg, because I could actually hear it clearly, was the American Forces Network, or AFN, which broadcast out of Germany. And when I was about fourteen, I began to hear music on that station which drew me in a little more.

I liked the stuff that the DJs called 'doo-wop' that was coming out of New York. Even as a gawky teenager who knew nothing about music, I loved the easy grace and smooth harmonies of groups like The Moonglows and The Cadillacs. As you'll soon learn from *A Head Full of Music*, I'm a sucker for a great harmony!

I liked The Moonglows' 'Sincerely', The Cadillacs' 'Gloria', 'A Thousand Miles Away' by The Heartbeats and The Flamingos' 'I Only Have Eyes for You'. Some of it was almost like barbershop-quartet music, but it had an extra edge and a little bit of attitude about it, which appealed to me.

The other music scene that was going on at the time, and which I used to hear on the BBC Light Programme, was home-grown skiffle music. Skiffle was a bit of a weird one. It was originally a kind of American folk-blues music, which had been popular in the US early in the century then got revived in Britain in the fifties.

I didn't *mind* skiffle but I didn't love it either. Its big selling point was that it used very cheap, homemade instruments. People would bang on washboards or make a tea-chest bass: a tea chest

with a broom handle tied to one corner with a piece of string, which the player would vigorously twang away on.

The first big UK skiffle hit was ‘Rock Island Line’ by Lonnie Donegan, which went into the chart in 1956 and stayed there for months and months. It was OK but it sounded lightweight to me. It was a cover of an old US folk song previously sung by bluesman Lead Belly. I only heard his version recently, and I much prefer it.

Lonnie Donegan had a pretty good voice, I suppose, but I had no interest in buying skiffle records. I only got a thruppenny bit* pocket money each week and, in any case, there would have been no point. We were still too poor as a family to own a record player – or even a television, come to that!

In the very unlikely event that I wanted to hear a record, I’d cycle to my auntie’s house, in Waltham Abbey, to play it on their radiogram. If I wanted to watch TV, I’d get on my bike and pedal in the opposite direction to my Auntie Dorothy’s, in Waltham Cross. At least it all kept me fit!

Sometimes, my cousins from Waltham Abbey – Gerald, Derek, Keith and Gordon – joined me at Auntie Dorothy’s to watch telly. She only had a small set, but she put a magnifying-glass-like contraption on the front of it to make the picture bigger. It meant that we didn’t have to squint as we gawped at *The Quatermass Experiment*.

On the rare occasions when I *did* buy singles at fifteen, I got them from a shop called Marsden’s in Waltham Cross, next to the Embassy cinema. Marsden’s was a local institution: a family-run

* A thruppenny bit was a pre-decimal twelve-sided coin worth the mighty sum of three old pence (just over 1p).

business that sold TVs and electrical goods, and also stocked all of the latest hits and records by almost any artist you could think of.

The cool thing about Marsden's, in common with most record shops in those days, was that you could listen to songs and decide whether you wanted to buy them or not. It had three little booths at the back of the store, and you'd go to the counter and tell the assistant what you wanted to hear:

'Excuse me, can I listen to "Sixteen Tons" by Tennessee Ernie Ford, please?'

They would nod, put the record on the turntable on the counter, and you would go to a booth and sit and listen to it through headphones, or via a speaker. If the shop was quiet, they might play you two songs. But, after that, they'd be knocking on the door of the booth to kick you out!

I wasn't buying many singles when I was fifteen, but one that I *did* get, after I heard it on our crystal radio, was 'In a Persian Market' by Sammy Davis Jr.* It was a jaunty little number, and I suppose a bit of a novelty tune, with its bursts of trumpet and saxophone across what sounded like exotic, snake-charming music.

What really got me, though, was the *rhythm* that ran beneath it all. The song had a swing to it, yet also quite a hard-edged beat that was almost rock and roll, in its own way. It chugged along a lot like Fats Domino's 'The Fat Man' had done a few years earlier, which I thought was tremendous.

Sammy Davis Jr was one of the Hollywood Rat Pack, of

* I heard it on AFN in 1955, when it was a US single A-side for Sammy with 'The Man with the Golden Arm'.

course, with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. He was a true global superstar. Six years later, in 1961, after my career had taken off, he came over to play more than fifty nights at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London. My then manager, Tito Burns, took me to see him.

Sammy was *unbelievable*. He had the crowd in the palm of his hand as soon as he walked on and said, in his gravelly voice: ‘Look at me – I’m the only broken-nosed, black Jew in the world!’ He was an amazing showman who could do everything. He could act, sing, tap-dance, tell jokes, and he was terrific at all of them.

That was the big thing with the generation of entertainers before mine: they had all been to stage school, so they were complete all-round showbiz entertainers. Sammy was terrific to watch, but I remember turning to Tito and saying, ‘I think I might as well give up and retire now!’ Because I felt that I just couldn’t compete.

So, back in 1955, I bought ‘In a Persian Market’ and went off, on my bike, to my aunt’s house to listen to it. It was sweet, but it certainly wasn’t a song to blow my head off my shoulders and turn my entire world upside-down. *That* came along on that fateful afternoon on Waltham Cross High Street . . .

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TWO

'HEARTBREAK HOTEL' — ELVIS PRESLEY

I heard it through a car window . . . and my life changed

It used to take us about twenty-five minutes to walk from Cheshunt to Waltham Cross. We did it a lot of Saturdays. There wasn't a lot for a teenager to do in Cheshunt, so a few school-friends and I would meet up and mosey on down to Waltham Cross, where there was . . . well, not a lot, but *slightly* more to do.

That Saturday in May 1956, Norman Mitham, Terry Smart and I did the walk. We were planning to do the usual: hang out in the park, look in a couple of shops, have a cup of tea in a café, maybe call in at Marsden's to listen to a new single or two. And then, outside the newsagents, Aspland's, we saw the parked car.

I must have told this story a thousand times, but I never tire of telling it. It was a French car, a green Citroën, with a funky curved back. You didn't see many of *those* in rural Hertfordshire, so we headed over to it for a gawp. And then, wafting through the open front window, we heard the song playing on the car radio.

'We-e-e-ll, since my baby left me . . .'

Hub? What. Is. That? Norman, Terry and I stared at each other, open-mouthed. And as we did, a guy ran out of Aspland's, jumped into the car, threw his fags and newspaper onto the front passenger seat, started the motor, and drove off. The alien-sounding music vanished down the road with the Citroën.

Wow! I had never heard anything like it in my life! Norman, Terry and I spent the whole afternoon gabbling about how great it had sounded, and how we had to find out what it was. As soon as I got home and had had my tea that evening, I glued myself to the crystal radio to try to track it down.

I had no luck, but Norman was more successful. When I saw him at school that Monday morning, he was grinning in triumph. 'I heard that song again, on AFN!' he proclaimed. 'It's called "Heartbreak Hotel", and it's by some guy called Elvis Presley!'

Well, we all had a good hoot about what a daft name that was – *Elvis? Who gets called Elvis?* – but, more to the point, I knew I had to get the song. I would never have dared ask my parents for money for a record, so I saved up my thruppenny bits for a couple of weeks to get the shilling that I needed to buy it.

I marched back to Waltham Cross, and didn't even bother asking the assistant in Marsden's if I could hear 'Heartbreak Hotel' first – there was no way that I wasn't going to get it! And one very cool thing was that, by now, I didn't have to climb on my bike and head off to my auntie's house to listen to it.

We were still quite impoverished as a family, and my dad was always very careful with the purse strings, but we had recently invested in a record player. It was the basic, classic Dansette, a

turntable in a sturdy square box with a hinged lid, and it now took pride of place on the sideboard in our front room.

The turntable had a spindle and you could stack five records on it that would drop down and play, one at a time. Next to the turntable, in the bottom-left corner of the open box, was a knob that you had to set to control the speed the records played at: 16rpm (revolutions per minute), 33, 45 or 78.

Why was this? Because records were changing. Singles had always been pressed on what was called shellac, and rotated at 78rpm. But technology had moved on – and there'd apparently been a shellac shortage, since the war – so now they were being increasingly pressed on vinyl, which played at 45rpm.*

The 33 – or, strictly speaking, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ – setting was for albums, which in those days were called long-players, or LPs. I gather that 16rpm was intended for playing spoken-word records, such as talking books, but never really took off. I certainly don't recall us ever using it!

My copy of 'Heartbreak Hotel' was a 10" single in the old-fashioned shellac format and played at 78rpm. It didn't come in a picture sleeve: they hardly existed yet! It had a plain cardboard cover and a blue label with Elvis's name, the song title, and the famous His Master's Voice logo of the dog sitting by a gramophone.

I couldn't wait to get the record out of its cover and onto the player. And, when I did, the music that came out of the Dansette

* Shellac was largely dying out by the late fifties but someone recently wrote to me to tell me they'd found a genuine version of my 1962 single 'The Young Ones' in an American antique shop. *An antique shop!* Oh, dear . . .

transfixed me just as much as it had blaring through the window of the green Citroën.

I'd heard American rock and roll before. Like everybody, I'd enjoyed Bill Haley & His Comets' 'Rock Around the Clock' – '*One, two, three o'clock, four o'clock, rock!*' – when it had been a big hit a year earlier, and I'll talk about that song, and about Bill, later in this book. But *this . . . Elvis . . .* was something else again.

It's always hard to explain exactly why you love a piece of music. It's like trying to describe why you fall in love with somebody – you just do! But what I can say, for sure, was that Elvis Presley sounded like nobody we had ever heard before.

This was new. It was fresh. It was unique. It was nothing like Frank Sinatra or Bing Crosby or Dean Martin, or any of the male singers that I was familiar with. Those guys, with their smooth voices and their gentle melodies, sounded like they were singing for my mum and dad. Elvis sounded like he was singing for me. *To me.*

Nobody my age, no teenager, would ever have been inspired by Sinatra or Bing, or wanted to be like them. Elvis was different. He sounded so young, so cool and so *now*, and his voice cut through everything else. He sounded passionate, and powerful. He sounded like he had . . . secrets that you needed to learn.

Oddly, I wasn't that bothered about the lyrics of 'Heartbreak Hotel'. It was exactly what it said on the tin: a heartbreak song, as so many great rock and roll tunes are. But what excited me about it was the rhythms of the music, the beats, the feel, the *attitude*. The sense of something being born

Here, right before my ears, Elvis was giving rock and roll a

new shape. Yes, he sounded like nothing I had heard before, but suddenly I wanted to hear nothing *but* him. And, a whole lifetime on, I still remember exactly how thrilling, how life-changing, hearing Elvis Presley for the first time was.

Immediately, he obsessed me. I started trying to find out everything about Elvis that I could. When I first saw a photograph of him, I couldn't believe how cool he looked – that quiff! That curled lip! And when I realised that he had an album out already, I absolutely *had* to have it.

LPs cost four-and-six (22.5p) in those days, an absolute fortune for a schoolboy who got a thruppenny bit pocket money a week. But I started frantically saving up. I got a holiday job picking potatoes on a local farm. There I was, all day long, bent double and yanking spuds out of the dirt for a shilling an hour.

The boredom and backache were all worth it when I had saved up the cash and was back down Marsden's to buy *Elvis Presley*. 'Heartbreak Hotel' wasn't on the record, but I didn't mind: there were so, so many new songs to love.

I loved the opener, 'Blue Suede Shoes', with its urgent vocal and frantic rhythms. I adored 'I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone', where Elvis's trembling voice told tales of desertion. I worshipped 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy', with its honky-tonk piano, crazy twang and aching vocal. Heck, I loved every single note on the record!*

Listening back to that debut album now, I still think there is a distinct Black-music influence on it, especially on one track,

* I even loved the distinctive font that Elvis's name was in on the album sleeve, in pink and green. I was using it for my own records in years to come.

'Mystery Train'. I used to imagine Elvis sitting on his stoop, at home in Memphis, with a Black guy hanging out with him. If you close your eyes, I think you can easily imagine Elvis was a Black guy singing.

Not everybody agrees with me. I used to have friendly arguments about this with Pearly Gates, the great Black American singer who sometimes guested on my TV show in the seventies. 'Elvis Presley could be a Black singer,' I'd tell her.

'No, he couldn't,' Pearly would say. 'He sounds white.'

'Well, his influences were Black music, and he sounds Black to me!' I'd reply. We had to agree to disagree. But I thought of trying to track dear old Pearly down to call her when I saw the Baz Luhrmann movie, *Elvis*, in 2022.

The film has a scene where the young Elvis, played by Austin Butler, goes into a Black church. He is blown away and transported by the passion and spirituality of the gospel music he hears, and goes wild, singing and clapping along. *A-ha!* I thought, when I saw it. *Yes! That's the Elvis that I know and love!*

Back in the summer of 1956, I played that *Elvis Presley* album to death. Because the Dansette was in our front room, my parents and sisters got very used to me running home from school and dropping the needle on the start of the record. Mum would laughingly say, 'Oh, please, Harry! Don't play it *again!*'

My parents didn't really mind, though. Back in the day, they had loved Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, so they indulged my passion. Their only negative comment was, now and then, to shake their heads and say 'Hmph! I can't tell a word that he is singing!' Well, that was fine, because every line was crystal clear to me.

I wasn't the only family member hooked on Elvis. My eldest sister, Donna, who was thirteen then, adored him. At the end of 1956, I took her to the pictures to see him star in *Love Me Tender*. She *sobbed*. 'Harry, can I borrow your handkerchief?' When she gave it back, it wasn't just wet through. It was *torn*!

Whenever I could afford them, I bought magazines like *Melody Maker* and the *New Musical Express* and scoured them for articles about Elvis and, best of all, photographs of him. He was such big news seemingly overnight that they, and even the daily newspapers, were suddenly full of stories about him.

They talked about how Elvis looked like a Greek god, and ran photos of him next to pictures of statues. They started calling him 'Elvis the Pelvis', and said that his gyrations on stage were so sexual that American television would only show him from the waist up. *Wow!* Obviously, this only made me marvel at him even more!

Elvis Presley quickly became the poster boy of rock and roll. From not knowing what he looked like only a few weeks earlier, suddenly I was seeing his picture everywhere. And I set off on a determined one-man mission to make myself look as identical to him as was humanly possible.

The quiff came first, of course. I began spending hours in front of the bathroom mirror, sweeping my hair to the back of my head and trying to fix it in place with Brylcreem. I wasn't the only lad in Cheshunt doing that. A couple of other boys also turned up at school sporting would-be Elvis quiffs.

You need thick hair to make a quiff (I could do it in those days; I'd certainly have no chance now!). I was quite pleased with

my Brylcreem skills, but it never looked as good as when Elvis had just a few strands that broke loose from his quiff and hung over his forehead. I never managed to reproduce that.

I wanted to dress like Elvis as well. I appeared in a school production of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* as Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim's father, and my costume included a pair of tight, tapered Edwardian-style trousers. They looked like the drainpipe trousers that the Teddy Boys, who were into Elvis, wore, so I got a pair of those.

I'd have loved a leather jacket, but there was no chance that would happen, both because of the cost, and because my parents might have looked askance at me dressing like that. Instead, my mum got me a duffle coat. All the other kids at school had black or blue ones, so I chose brown.*

My love for Elvis even influenced my diet! When I read in *Girlfriend* magazine that he liked putting peanut butter *and* jam (or 'jelly', as the Americans call it) on his toast, I started eating mine like that too. It was an . . . acquired taste, but I managed to acquire it. *This is how Elvis eats it!* I told myself. *It MUST taste great!*

I was so infatuated with Elvis Presley that, really, it was hero worship. There is no other term for it. Seriously, some nights I used to dream that I *was* Elvis: singing on stage in front of thousands of screaming fans, or signing autographs. I would be *so* disappointed when I woke up in the morning!

It was all great, but combing my hair like Elvis, dressing like him, and even eating like him weren't enough. As I said in my

* I've been like that for my entire life. When I'm on stage or off, I don't like just wearing what everybody else is wearing.