

entertainment

Elvis: fine music under the vinyl mountain

By Paul Stuart

1977 may be remembered as a twilight of the idols, the last year in the lives of four of the century's greatest entertainers.

Elvis Presley, Groucho Marx, Bing Crosby and Charlie Chaplin all met their ends. The death of Presley, youngest and most alive in the public mind, made the greatest impact. Many, especially his devoted fans in the southern states and Britain, couldn't believe that the world would go on without him. An understandable reaction when you think of the Presley of the '50's.

It was they say, a simpler, more innocent time. Nobody thought Elvis was into sado-masochism when, in *Teddy Bear*, he sang:

*Put a chain around my neck
And lead me anywhere*

In his 1968 TV special he cracked-up when he got to the following line in one of his earliest tunes, *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*:

*You like to ball
in the morning
Don't come home
'til late at night*

Twenty years ago the line was understood to mean nothing more licentious than ballroom dancing. That Elvis' hips were too hot for the Eisenhower era is well known; but what member of the blank generation can comprehend the salaciousness Presley could inject into a lyric like:

*I love to hear you sighin'
Even though I know you're lyin'*

To this day his 1960 hit, *Stuck On You*, is the most spectacular display of simmering sex in popular music. *Shake it, shake it sugar*, indeed.

Most of us who were too young to have really seen the Elvis years, don't realize the extent of his dominance of rock's first decade. From 1956 to '64 he had 40 gold records and recorded six other albums of mostly first-rate material.

Presley's greatest work is unfamiliar to much of today's audience

Due to his 33 ridiculously successful movies, which grossed about \$200 million, Elvis may be the most over-exposed performer in history. But much of his work is unfamiliar to today's audience. When people think of Presley they have an image of a flashy fellow who had about a half-a-dozen big hits in the '50's, went on to disgrace himself in the movies and then parodied himself as that depressing, white-suited phenomenon, '70's Elvis.

This picture is woefully incomplete. He recorded dozens of great songs; among them *That's All Right, I'm So Glad You're Mine* and *You're So Square*, which would

amaze most rock fans if they ever heard them. It is clear from old film clips that Elvis was the most exciting of all white rock performers; only Jimi Hendrix has ever matched him in energy and magnetism.

The only rock singer with the range of the early Bing Crosby, Elvis was aided by his first guitarist Scotty Moore, and his long-time back-up singers the Jordanaires, all fine performers in their own right. The summit of their achievement, *Hound Dog, All Shook Up* and *Jail House Rock*, has never been equaled. If you don't believe it, try listening to him for a couple of hours and then play any Beatles record; the singing will sound incredibly weak.

There is no doubt that many have quite justifiably been put off by the appalling glut of terrible Presley movies. While the corruption of Hollywood is partially to blame, the question of why such an important performer would allow himself to coast for so long remains. I believe the answer is that things just came too easily for him. Like most of us, when he wasn't faced with a challenge he stagnated.

Take his recently re-tecast 1968 TV special. By then Presley had been left behind by two new waves: the British invasion of '64 and the Frisco Sound of '67. Thanks to the likes of Canned Heat and Janis Joplin, adulterated blues records were in the top ten for the first time in years and the Stones had gone



back to the delta with the *Beggars Banquet* album. Musical honesty was all-important.

After years of forgettable movies, Elvis had to show he had retained his musical integrity if he wanted to return to live performances. He rose to the occasion splendidly, singing his heart out for 90 minutes. He sang the rockers in a lower key, but his voice had all the old tone, employed with more intelligence.

But what followed was perhaps too easy. Welcomed back with open arms by the public, he faced no serious challenges and his performances gradually lost their authenticity. He had a good number one single in 1972 [*Burnin' Love*] and a bad number one album [*Aloha*

From Hawaii] in 1973. And then he died.

If you're interested in hearing more of the ultimate rock star but are leery of all the cheap-shot records he did, here is some friendly advice: avoid all the movie soundtracks, with the notable exception of *King Creole*. For the early rockabilly Elvis get *For LP Fans Only*. If you want rock 'n' roll there are the gold records and three other albums of different material; *Elvis, A Date With Elvis* and *Elvis Presley* (the one where he shows his tonsils on the cover).

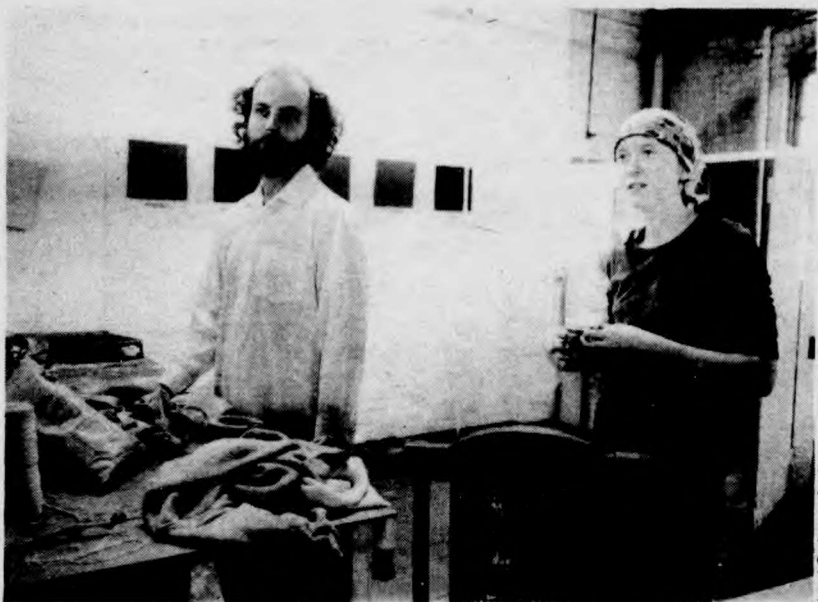
His more polished, bluesy rock sound, is on *Elvis is Back* (from the army).

In the last four years of his life he barely changed his gaudy stage show and turned into a bloated caricature of himself. His CBS special, taped last May, showed a dying man, voice worn thin, all the agility gone, making a brave final effort.

Of all things, it reminded me of newsreels of a dying President Roosevelt at the Yalta conference; death was carving out its kingdom around his eyes. Those marvellous eyes, which once sparkled with a nearly superhuman exhilaration, peered out from deep caverns as if they were already on the other side of the void.

The man is dead, the music lives. The best of it is comparable in both quality and quantity to that of the Beatles or Bob Dylan or anyone else you care to name. Adios King.

York artists build a new kind of campus



Lori Spring photos

By Don Ballanger

The Lansdowne Artist Collective: a crucible of opinion. In May of last year, a group of students and artists affiliated with Calumet College began to discuss the alternatives to the conventional learning situation at York.

Writers, sculptors, poets, printers, painters, politicians and bureaucrats began to discuss with much enthusiasm the idea of a studio space where they could exchange their thoughts on the freedoms and limitations of their respective disciplines.

A proposal was made before the Calumet general meeting in May for the allocation of a seed fund to get the ball rolling. In June, a satisfactory place was located and rented: an old warehouse close to the Bloor subway line at the Lansdowne station.

From the outset, there was the problem of how ideals generated in discussion can be actualized. One factor prevailed and that was the economic reality of the space. It must be as inexpensive as any other studio space in the city.

For the majority of those directly involved, Lansdowne became more of a workplace than an abstract social ideal. Yet the collective hasn't eliminated the idea of performance from the space.

Robbie Rox, a performing rock,

band with a highly conceptual concert direction, has become the concretization of that ideal. The leader of the band, Robbie Theodore, feels that a line should be drawn between social and work interests. He wants people at the collective to be involved with the sounds he makes during his rehearsals, but not necessarily entertained by them.

He doesn't like people coming to meetings just to "scrape it off the top." Nor does it seem right to him that a collective party should be broken up so that the co-ordinators can give everybody "a reality sandwich."

Robbie and his band practise every night at the 58 Wade studio. In the beginning, they suffered both internal and external problems. They were conditional members for almost two months and were visited by a representative of Toronto's answer to the Noise Abatement Society of the World. Now they have solidified their membership on a permanent basis and have begun to insulate their studio.

Iain McLean, a graduate from York Fine Arts with an interest in sculpture, is the unofficial bookkeeper at the collective. He is very deliberate about pointing out the cooperative nature of the collective. In September, after a rocky start financially, a coor-

inating committee of five or six people was established.

Mitch Soble, whose interests are painting and sculpture, is the unofficial chairperson of the co-ordinating committee. He says, "One thing I learned: decisions have to be made." He attributes some part of this decisiveness as a response to his upbringing. He is the son of a Detroit millionaire. "I asked my father where he got all his money and he wouldn't tell me so I decided to become an artist... He didn't like that."

It is a matter of some collective pride that Lansdowne is now financially viable and will pay Calumet back half of the original \$1,000 loan. (\$400 was also granted to the venture by the college.) Members meet a monthly \$1,000 plus rent commitment and are opening a new wing of the warehouse as well.

Chris Orr points out that most of the people involved are not fulltime students. "... We are not a school situation.... Most people here aren't students anymore... I'm not interested in astrological signs, Elvis Presley records or women in black silk stockings."

Kim Adams is a West Coast artist educated at the University of Victoria. He has a very transient background ranging from Australia to Alberta. "I adapt to the facilities wherever I go. The studio is a physical space where I can do what I want."

Beverly Biram is a graduate in painting and is also from the University of Victoria. Her response to Joyce Weiland's view that the art of men and women is distinct is pretty clear. "To draw a line between men and women's art is ludicrous.... men are different from men."

Bev's work might be considered intuitive: textured surfaces and colour in a variety of formats — in book forms, as hanging pieces or on the floor. "My art oozes out of categories."

John Tucker has a varied background and he is also from the West Coast. Although a fine arts major, he has also studied math, biology, biochemistry, "and threw a lot of rocks" Kim adds. His musical

interests include punk rock concerts. He feels that part of the problem with the "amplified human condition" is that "too many people work too hard at trying to sound smart."

Writers Judith Doyle and Fred Geysse have many feelings about the arts and the mass media. Says Fred of artists and the media, "We want to get our grubby little hands on it." Judith feels that "most media people are frustrated artists."

Judith and Fred were particularly interested in setting up a co-operative publishing venture at Lansdowne but did not find enough support there. Presently though, they are associate members who are continuing their efforts towards this end outside of Lansdowne. Says Judith of the difference between the mass media and multimedia art forms, "I don't think the artist wants the reader to just suck."

Dave Porter is one of the co-ordinators and a former student of drawing at the Ontario College of Art. He found the environment at OCA lacking in terms of intellectual discussion and experiment and so he transferred to York. Dave feels the collective is an environment where one can share ideas and obliterate the arbitrary line, so carefully drawn

by institutions, between performance and the visual arts. "I am a socialist kinda."

Mark Adair is a fourth year student in sculpture and another one of the co-ordinators. He illustrates the validity of the co-op as an experimental performance space. He points to the Glass Orchestra performance at Lansdowne. The performance was well publicized and the Royal Ontario Museum subsequently booked the group to coincide with its "A Gather of Glass" show.

Mark has a pragmatic view of the space and doesn't believe that it is necessary for artists to produce more than a few good works a year for the studio to be a creative success.

Constantly aware of the legalities (he and Barry Prophet located the space originally), he was not shocked by the responsibilities involved. "I'm not just another dizzy artist"

There were many other people involved in the creation of the Lansdowne studio space: Barry Prophet, Calumet visionary; John Mays, creative bureaucrat and student liaison officer. Only a few of those individuals involved have been presented.

