

Elvis Review : Baz Luhrmann Shows It Wasn't Easy to be the King
Hayley Croke

If there's one thing about Baz Luhrmann, it's that he makes films for movie theater audiences to enjoy. He leans into the campy, over-the-top cinematic experiences he's become famous for. He brings maximalist, experimental filmmaking into the mainstream market. As to be expected, *Elvis* is no different.

Elvis follows the life of the rock and roll legend, Elvis Presley (Austin Butler), from his rise in the 1950's to his death as told through the unreliable narration of Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker (Tom Hanks). The film opens up with the Colonel in poor health, he seems to be telling this story in an attempt to exonerate himself of any guilt surrounding his shady management of Presley.

Luhrmann leans heavily into the background of these two men in a Shakespearean attempt of saying the key to their success is also the ticket to their downfall. The Colonel is introduced as the greatest "snowman" of the carnival circuit. While he is known for lining his own pockets first, he has a keen eye for acts that will draw in huge crowds, and more importantly, huge profits. He's a smooth talker, often making empty promises to get people to work with him.

Elvis is introduced as a naive kid who has a talent that he cannot contain (Elvis "The Pelvis"). When first meeting the Colonel, Elvis mentions Captain Marvel Jr. being his favorite superhero, and says he one day wants to fly to the Rock of Eternity like him. The Colonel promises him a career where he will reach the Rock of Eternity, a rock that's equal parts heaven and hell. Those who go to the Rock of Eternity, however, become bound to it and are only

allowed to leave on rare occasions. This cycle of being bound to a place that's both heaven and hell is explored through the way Elvis deals with the peaks and valleys of his career created by the Colonel. The most impressive aspect of this film, however, is how expertly Butler is able to depict the double sided nature of Elvis' fame.

I grew up knowing Austin Butler as the charming guest star in my favorite preteen shows like *iCarly* (2007-2012), *Zoey 101* (2005-2008) and *The Carrie Diaries* (2013-2014). When the casting was announced for who would be stepping into the role of the King himself, I was equal parts as skeptical as I was hopeful. His turn as Tex Watson in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019) showed he had potential for acting in the big leagues, but I still couldn't actualize his ability to hold the reins as the titular character of this blockbuster Luhrmann production.

As it turns out, he was much more capable than expected. It doesn't take a lot of time, nor effort, to lose the image of Butler that you came into the theater with. He portrays the rise of Elvis with a gleeful naivety that he translates into debilitating optimism as the film unfolds. Oftentimes throughout the film he plays Elvis with such authenticity, it makes the veteran actor Hanks' performance seem cartoonishly ingenuine.

Butler is able to strip back the icon's facade and reveal the man behind it all with ease. By the end of the film, the cuts between Butler and the actual Elvis Presley had me second guessing if I could tell the difference between the two men. A doubt that plays right into what the world of Baz Luhrmann is all about.

Luhrmann's commitment to his auteurism is truly poetic. His unwavering dedication to the cinematic universe he's created since *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) shows his philosophy on filmmaking: use spectacle to draw an audience in, and then use the attention they've given you to

teach them something about what it's like to be human. *Elvis* does just that- draws you in with the extravagance associated with the titular icon, but shows you the struggles the man behind the curtains grappled with.

Film Credits:

Elvis (2022)

159 minutes

Cast:

Austin Butler as *Elvis Presley*

Tom Hanks as *Colonel Tom Parker*

Olivia DeJonge as *Priscilla Presley*

Kelvin Harrison Jr. as *B.B. King*

Written by:

Baz Luhrmann

Sam Bromell

Craig Pearce

Jeremy Doner

Directed by:

Baz Luhrmann

Produced by:

Baz Luhrmann

Gail Berman

Catherine Martin

Patrick McCormick

Schuyler Weiss