



HOUND DOG

ERIC WEISBARD





HOUND DOG

► A SERIES EDITED BY JOSHUA CLOVER AND EMILY J. LORDI

SINGLES



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*This book is dedicated to Frank N. Furter
Nietzsche Weisbard, aka Frankie*

You ain't nothin' but a Maltipoo

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II Intro

IT MIGHT SEEM OUTLANDISH for me to brazenly declare that 1950s rock and roll never happened, but music bizzers had reason to suspect a mass hallucination. The phrase circulated because DJ Alan Freed needed a replacement name for his New York radio show in 1954, and *rocking and rolling* stood for sex in the Black-identified R&B songs he played to white teens. That usage got reinforcement when Bill Haley and His Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" featured to start the film *Blackboard Jungle* the next year. Rock and roll, the story goes, was dead at the end of the 1950s: Elvis Presley was in the army, Little Richard a Christian, Chuck Berry in jail, Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens dead in a plane crash, Jerry Lee Lewis ostracized, Freed charged with payola, the whole sick crew replaced by clean-cut kids like Fabian on television's *American Bandstand*. Really, though, the issue was that, unlike rhythm and blues and country and western at the time, or rock starting only in the late 1960s, rock and roll had no infrastructure. Even radio stations that played it were called Top 40, not what the punk Ramones later fantasized: rock and roll radio.

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Still, baby boomers could continue to believe that rock and roll would stand, to sanctify it, because one thing made its alchemy complete: the single. The great schism that divorced seven-inch 45 RPM vinyl singles from twelve-inch 33.3 RPM LPs in the post-World War II era, where everything had once been ten-inch 78 RPM shellac, made the smaller format a bastion of youth music and working-class genres like the electric blues of R&B and the electric country of honkytonk. In the familiar histories of rock and roll, told by *Rolling Stone* and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, that created a revolution—youth, Black, and southern styles colliding with a thunderclap.

More adroit interpreters have noted how that thunderclap, caterwauling guitar solos and soaring, doubled-up *whoos*, made it onto singles in the first place: a new technology, magnetic recording, allowed multiple takes, multitracking, edits, tricks to fashion records into minimovies. They were now a world unto themselves, alternative realities. Schizophonia, cutting sounds from sources, had always been an aspect of recording. But where the previous innovation, electrical recording, worked against that, welcoming the intimacy of a crooned breath, a cool sax, instead of still earlier acoustic recording's windy bellow, magnetic recordings were theatrical and alienating again: electrified, blaring, amateuristic—unidentifiable freaky objects.

Sixty-plus years later, rock and roll has spawned not only a hall for canonization but a connected Cleveland archive for research. YouTube, Spotify, Bear Family box sets, and the like offer perfor-

mance repositories. In other ways, we're just beginning to reckon with what took place in the moment of "Maybellene" and "Tutti Frutti," able to consider race, sexuality, and other elements rarely dissected in their day beyond the outcries of conservatives and jazz fans. Back then, a lot couldn't be candidly addressed, and the most fervent listeners were too young to articulate their passions. Anyway, the rock and roll records that became all but supernatural to those listeners clearly, blazingly, worked their magic just fine whatever the hell they were.

"Hound Dog" waits for us at this intersection of revisionism and identity politics. Most listeners first heard Elvis Presley's version, recorded in 1956 and topping the pop, R&B, and country charts. But R&B fans knew it was a cover: Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton's 1953 single had been a giant hit in that fledgling format, with no attempt made at crossover. A white guy's lift of a Black woman's anthem: What could better represent the outright appropriation that cultural studies scholar Eric Lott has called "love and theft"?¹ To reply, defensively, that the song's writers were white, along with some of the musicians playing on it, only defers the issue—these were all Black music admirers/appropriators, too.

Boomers cherished the Elvis "Hound Dog" as a kind of Frosted Flake: it tasted great and revved them up, but eventually their diet became more adult. Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Keith Richards, and the other new guys kept the King outside their group chat, revering him from a distance as he got fat in Graceland, then died at forty-two in 1977. By this point, rock and roll itself was getting

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its first debunking: “No Elvis, Beatles, or the Rolling Stones in 1977,” the Clash sang in their punk manifesto “1977.” For *London Calling*, their cover image sarcastically reworked a Presley cover—instead of the 1950s rocker letting loose as his guitar, voice, and body erupted, you saw Paul Simonon in hunchbacked posture, getting set to smash his bass. That became canon, too—rituals of what Kurt Cobain, in 1991’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” called, over and over, “a denial.”

Only punk hadn’t gone far enough. In 2021 *Rolling Stone* released its first list in a generation of “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” A document of critical consensus, it gives this book a useful hook. In one of the greatest shifts, Presley’s “Hound Dog,” number 19 in the 2004 version (his highest ranking), disappeared altogether in 2021, replaced by Thornton’s “Hound Dog” in the bottom half, at 318.² Canon upending is a given in our moment. Much important music writing does what this new list does: change the players, retell the history from their perspective, center what was once left to the margins.

But I’m thinking about what happens to marginalize something that was once central. For a time, my formative lifetime, marginalizing the center was just a wordy way of being a punk rocker. You can see the evidence in that 2004 *Rolling Stone* list, where the only “newer” songs sharing space in the top 20 with Elvis, Beatles, Dylan, Stones, Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, and Marvin Gaye were the punk denial anthems: the Clash’s “London Calling” and Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit.”

The expurgation of Elvis is something else, denial in far more sweeping terms. It recasts who gets to rock. And it changes what we value in noise and rebellion. Rock and roll's foundational narrative canonized something aggressive and life-altering shooting out of those 1950s singles, whose impact took decades to absorb and whose spirit resisted appropriation. Many loved "Hound Dog" in part as a song that helped drive Patti Page's tame, mainstream "(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window," and all that went with it, off their planet. That take is now fading: the question is how much will shift in the process. At this point, "Hound Dog" stands in for every question that has ever been raised about musical thievery and reconstituted whiteness.

For the first rock and rollers, it courts charges of cliché to note, "Hound Dog" served as evidence, the proof of concept that a young John Lennon in Liverpool could clutch to heart and begin life anew as a Beatle. Rock criticism proved no less reverent, from Nik Cohn's UK defense of Presley's pop appeal against rock seriousness to the "Presliad" finale of Greil Marcus's foundational US account, *Mystery Train*, which embraced the King, from all-out rock to squalid schlock, as a story worthy of America's contradictions. Presley's cover of Thornton couldn't be racist, Marcus argued, because the song's origins were so mongrel to begin with. Anyhow, he thought Presley's version was better; it demanded more. "We will never agree on anything as we agreed on Elvis," Lester Bangs wrote in Presley's *Village Voice* obituary.³

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But he was writing in the past tense, about the spirit of 1956. Black listeners had rejected Presley not long after he triumphed, pushed away in part by a made-up story that he'd said they should shine his shoes and buy his records, but ultimately by the obvious contrast between his integrated repertoire and segregated legacy. Alice Walker's 1981 short story "Nineteen Fifty-Five" was a sharp note of Black dissent, with a protagonist modeled on Presley begging a protagonist modeled on Thornton to explain what his big hit song was about. Tyina Steptoe's 2018 article "Big Mama Thornton, Little Richard, and the Queer Roots of Rock 'n' Roll" enfolded several layers of revisionism: a Black scholar putting Black artists at the core of rock and roll history—and queer Black performance at that. (A photo of Steptoe's grandfather with Thornton ran with the piece: Why should white boomers be the only protagonists in the arena of cultural memory?) Thornton was "a three-hundred-pound, twenty-six-year-old black woman who dressed in suits and ties," and her look and sound, like Richard's, displayed a "commitment to gender nonconformity and a rejection of heteronormativity." Her spirit, abstracted for 1950s standards in ways not required of earlier classic blues singer Ma Rainey, was rock and roll's spirit. The appropriation by Elvis, Steptoe made clear via Jack Halberstam (author of *Female Masculinity*), was from queer to straight as much as Black to white.⁴

Maureen Mahon's prizewinning *Black Diamond Queens* centered on Black women rockers from Thornton to Tina Turner.

Did Thornton author “Hound Dog”? At least, Presley “picked up on her refusals.” Her command. “He makes a million and all this jive because his face is different from mine,” Mahon noted that Thornton had said. And if you thought about it, Mahon wrote, contrasted with Thornton’s spirited rebuke of a scoundrel man, “Presley’s version of the song didn’t make sense”: Who was the dog? In Mahon’s more expansive accounting, “if we listen, we can hear a line of descent from Thornton to Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin on through to Robert Plant, Axl Rose, Kurt Cobain, Jack White, and Brittany Howard.” Fittingly, Mahon ends with Howard, like Thornton a child of Alabama but able—in our era, where the Willie Mae Rock Camp named for Thornton teaches girls to play, sing, and write—to be unabashedly a rock star. By the way, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller said in their joint memoir that they preferred Thornton’s version to Presley’s. When I teach the two recordings in classes, I get the sense my students do, too.⁵

Can a book, in the 2020s, accept this history, accept the backlash to this history, then ask what remains of the original rock and roll allure that pulled so many into records, singles especially, in the first place? “Hound Dog” remains well suited for the mission: seemingly every iteration of music writing since 1956 has confronted its arc. And the Presley version has hardly disappeared: it reached over 180 million plays on Spotify circa the much-touted summer 2022 biopic, *Elvis*, directed by Baz Luhrmann. As with that streaming service, we now have tools for investigating “Hound Dog” that would have been hard for earlier

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listeners and writers to replicate. We can repeatedly watch the television performances by Presley that flew past and were gone, even as they made his hips a national controversy and preceded the recording of the song.

For all this increased ease of access, a belabored hesitancy has settled in over how to view the white man rocking. The rough music that Marcus heard as overturning restraints—the limits a country singer from a working-class background like Hank Williams epitomized but former truck driver Presley threw off—resounds now like Tea Party, Trump, and SEC football populism. Our pop histories don't start with rock and roll these days or imagine rural blues streaming into some great river of sound. They confront blackface minstrelsy, northern whites in the 1830s moment of white male Jacksonian democracy putting on a crude "southern" "Blackness" to scream at the new bourgeoisie. Lott's *Love and Theft* embedded these questions of racial appropriation in the full arc of US history, noting, "Its modern resonance is articulated in white guitarist Scotty Moore's remark to Elvis Presley at one of the recording sessions in which Elvis first found his voice: 'Damn, n****r!'"⁶

After the session that produced the recording of "Hound Dog" in thirty-one takes, Presley requested an acetate, so he could better study the sound that had come out of him. He wasn't playing "Hound Dog" for laughs anymore, nor, as Thornton had, grooving on it. What had he locked onto instead? It's not clear from the twenty-one years that followed, half his life, that Presley ever

fully knew. My own sense is that musicologist Robert Fink was onto something in comparing the result to “white punk rage—the Ramones, Iggy Pop, the Sex Pistols.”⁷ Inside the recording tape of that record, where it remained real because it had been preserved but unreal in most other ways (as something that could be spoken about, marketed, straightforwardly codified), the biggest singles artist of the decade, if not all time, had left a premonition of punk on his biggest single. It takes every ounce of Generation X sardonicism I possess not to reach for a Greil Marcus tagline.

Instead, what I’ll do in this book is roam around in the singles bin, letting versions and antiversions of “Hound Dog” play out their creation and circulation, with some other dog ditties thrown in for good measure. There’s a specific history to dig at here: the birth of a pop singles circuit revved by currents of editable electricity. How that functioned as cultural distortion and feedback, how it was understood in its moment, and how we understand it now can take us through most of the story. We can jump back to minstrelsy and blues, forward to contemplate George Clinton’s “Atomic Dog” and DMX’s “Get at Me Dog.” Patti Page’s “Doggie in the Window,” scapegoat of every rock and roll history ever, will be explored as one of the genre’s key early influences, too popular to be wrong evidence of how studio trickery might stage gaudy unreality. “In other words, I am three,” jazz immortal Charles Mingus began his putative memoir, *Beneath the Underdog*, refusing unity in a spirit Black music

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theorist Fred Moten called, in his trilogy of books, “consent not to be a single being.” I cannot treat the Elvis “Hound Dog” single as a single being. Big Mama Thornton beckons. And so does “Doggie.”

If this is mainly a story about a dogfight among three categories of music and human being—white woman’s pop, Black woman’s rhythm and blues, and, finally, white man’s rock and roll—at the end we’ll revisit that premonition of punk. I never heard an Elvis record as Year Zero. I did feel that way, as a college DJ who became a rock critic, about the Stooges’ “I Wanna Be Your Dog.” It represented a punk rebellion, sonic as much as social, emerging on singles primarily because they were cheaper to make, an indie label-friendly format, but also because LPs were a rock form and this was as much an antihippie rock and roll restoration as a political act of revolution. The punk single insisted that if a group could make clamor transcendent, who knows what else they—and we—could do. It was a singularity, a scream. And for many of us, listening to an Iggy Pop bellow, or versions like Glenn Danzig in the Misfits and Mark Arm in Mudhoney, then Kurt Cobain in the pop stratosphere, Bikini Kill and Sleater-Kinney subsequently, that yowl was an essence. Where do we put it in our current pop soundscape?

The chapters to come take on “Hound Dog” by exploring why Patti Page was more than whole-fat milk. Why pop through history could be both blackface travesty and sentimental parlor shame. Why Willie Mae Thornton was a groove auteur and not the quintessential Big Black Blues Queen. Why Elvis, extending

on Milton Berle's show his bump-and-grind version of a Vegas version of "Hound Dog," ended up in a media cycle that produced a supercharged recording—Screaming White Man—with none of that shimmy. A massive hit single he had to study to learn, scorned in performance, and may even have regretted. How the Berle TV broadcast version was all but lost for rewatching, but the single remained, shaping rock and punk. It's been a long time since we rock and rolled. New acts of restoration, conscious of race and sexuality, are everywhere. But if I am to testify to my own baptism in sound, I need to reflect on the whiteness of the wail.

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NOTES

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1. Lott, *Love and Theft*.
2. For the two lists, see <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-151127/> and <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-songs-of-all-time-1224767/> (accessed October 27, 2022).
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4. Steptoe, "Big Mama Thornton," 55–56. Steptoe cites Halberstam's "Queer Voices and Musical Genders."

5. Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*, 29–51 (quotes: 29–30, 38, 39, 47–48); and Leiber and Stoller, *Hound Dog*, 93–96.
6. Lott, *Love and Theft*, 56.
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Chapter 1. "Doggie in the Window" and the 1950s Pop Single

1. Dylan, in *No Direction Home* (Paramount Pictures, 2005); *Theme Time Radio Hour*, season 1, episode 16, "Dogs," aired August 16, 2006, on XM Satellite Radio; and Patterson Hood, interview by author, July 16, 2021.
2. Page, "There Are Two Sides to a Song."
3. "Country Music Is Big Business and Nashville Is Its Detroit," *Newsweek*, August 11, 1952; and Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly*, 61.
4. Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*.
5. Gillett, *Sound of the City*; and Peterson, "Why 1955?"

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