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Three Kings and the Bright Star of Fame

Emalyn J. Bullis

Cedarville University, emalynbullis@cedarville.edu

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Abstract

Many phenomena in music history as well as in American history have helped develop and shape the types of music listened to today, but none have been so fresh as looking back to twentieth-century popular music and the several key individuals that “ruled” in this area. These “rulers” were hailed as “kings” firstly as a media ploy, but the American public did nothing but encourage the titles. This is somewhat confusing considering American’s pride in their democratic political system but history shows that in several key American cultural changes the “Kings” crowned in the music sphere are representative of these changes.

While not difficult to determine who these individuals are, as most of them were hailed and recognized as “Kings” to their respective audiences. Benny Goodman, the King of Swing, in the 1920’s and 30’s helped usher in and popularize the Swing movement. Elvis Presley, the King of Rock and Roll, capitalized (intentionally or not) on the move towards combining African-American sounds such as blues and jazz with folk, gospel, and soul, thus creating a whole new and extremely popular sound. Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, was practically born into fame with his involvement with the ‘Jackson 5,’ but that did not stop him from rising up the ladder of fame in his solo career to change the face of pop music forever. There were also many artists that surrounded these “kings,” a court, if you will, that allowed their new styles to proliferate throughout American culture, and sometimes even surpassed them musically. However, as icons, these men stand on their own for their achievements in music and their ability to change and adapt to the culture around them. By looking at the three Kings of American pop culture’s past, it is possible to see the direction of America’s culture in general from the 1920’s on and perhaps see the trajectory of music of the USA today

Keywords

Popular music, United States

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Three Kings and the Bright Star of Fame

Emalyn Bullis
Cedarville University

Many individuals in music history as well as in American history have helped develop and shape the types of music listened to today. In many ways these individuals not only shaped music but also “ruled” in this area, determining what was popular, when it was popular, and how it would be heard or seen in the public eye. These “rulers” were hailed as kings firstly as a media ploy, but the American public did nothing but encourage the titles by following their kings in every possible way. While there were many individuals throughout history that meet these criteria, three specifically stand out in the changing tides of American history.

It is not difficult to determine who these individuals are, as most of them were hailed and recognized as kings to their respective audiences. Benny Goodman, the King of Swing, in the 1920s and 1930s helped usher in and popularize the Swing movement. Elvis Presley, the King of Rock and Roll, capitalized (intentionally or not) on the move towards combining African-American sounds such as blues and jazz with folk, gospel, and soul, thus creating an entirely new and popular sound. Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, was practically born into fame with his involvement with the Jackson 5, but that did not stop him from rising up the ladder of fame in his solo career to change the face of pop music forever. As icons, these men stand on their own for their achievements in music and their ability to change and adapt to the culture around them. By looking at three kings of American pop culture’s past, it is possible to see the direction of America’s culture in general from the 1920s on and perhaps see the trajectory of music of the USA today. Benny Goodman, Elvis Presley, and Michael Jackson were three very different kings who separately changed the trajectory of popular music but have all had a lasting impact on American culture and will forever be labeled as some of the few kings in America.

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The 1920s and 1930s were important years for popular entertainment. For those individuals that lived in rural small towns, seeing professional musical groups was fairly limited. Besides traveling minstrel shows and the occasional circus, most performing groups performed in the big cities, leaving the rural towns to their own devices, such as reading, playing the piano together, ice skating and so on.¹ With the invention and popularization of the phonograph as well as the invention of the home radio in the 1920s music began to leave the concert hall and come into the home. This allowed for a more widespread and prolific idea of popular music.

It was during this time that jazz was also being carried from the southern states of America towards the north in Chicago. In 1922 Benny Goodman began his career, and as one of twelve children, life was not easy for the Goodmans. Benny's father, David Goodman, felt that regardless of wealth and hardship his sons should be educated in music and went to his local synagogue for resources.² Benny got involved in the Kehelah Jacob Synagogue's boys band and then later in the Hull House Band where he played and studied the clarinet, an instrument that he picked up very easily and naturally.³ Through several lucky breaks by working with talented teachers, and getting several paid gigs with his brothers in local parades, Goodman realized the potential of the paid jobs he could get as a musician. As a working musician, Goodman began his career at thirteen by playing in the Austin High Gang where he displayed his talent and his affinity for the clarinet and, of course, jazz.⁴

America at this time was experiencing the Roaring Twenties, a time of experimentation, racial segregation, and economic disintegration. Goodman, at the beginning of his career, found jobs and openings as a "hot soloist" fairly easily, and because of his impoverished childhood he was able to connect with the jazz culture and create a career surrounding it.⁵ However, despite the promising starts and momentum gained as a musician, the Great Depression brought even Goodman's

¹ James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁵ Lewis A. Ernberg, *Swinging the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 72.

career to a halt, and he hit an emotional low point in 1932. He found it increasingly difficult to see a career in jazz and it wasn't until 1933 with the help of John Hammond, a "political radical and jazz impresario" who helped connect Goodman back into the jazz scene, specifically with the black community and African-American musicians of his youth.⁶ While Goodman relied heavily on the black community's sound, the credit went only to him and not to his partners in the field, though some of them might have been more worthy. Louis Armstrong was definitely a front-runner in jazz along with Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and many others who were influential in big band sounds and the swing style. Regardless, it was Goodman who held the limelight, due much to the fact of white preference, segregation, and media involvement.

Jazz and swing were now officially taking off, as the youth embraced and became serious about dancing. After growing up in the depression era, young people looked to music and dance to become a needed pastime to interact with each other and embrace the future optimistically.⁷ Goodman was just the man America sought.

White, talented, and obsessed with perfection in his bands, he was sometimes known as 'Benny Badman' due to his ornery behavior and being a stickler for perfection, almost to a fault.⁸ But even though he had a clashing personality, Goodman didn't hold to the standards of racial segregation in his bands. He freely mixed whites and blacks in his group, wanting first and foremost for good musicians to come and play regardless of color.⁹ His high standards of musicality, appearance, and polish paid off despite some of his more controversial band members. After creating his own big band in 1934, the Goodman band auditioned and was accepted to perform regularly on the radio as a part of NBC's network show entitled *Let's Dance*, which became the turning point in Goodman's career, this time for the better and for good.¹⁰

His band was now heard around the country, in living rooms for young people to dance with each other and for families to enjoy. They played

⁶ Ernberg, *Swinging the Dream*, 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ Michael DiCuirci, Personal Interview, Cedarville University, April 11, 2013.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 129.

popular numbers of the day, jazz, swing, and other tunes that would add variety as well as popularity. This didn't just offer publicity but hefty salaries considering the depression that was raging on, and Goodman and his band were doing well despite the economic setbacks of the time.¹¹ The band in another year went on a cross-country tour, stopping in various cities to perform with mixed results and successes and losses until they finally got a break in 1936 on their last gig, August 21 in Los Angeles, California.¹² The turnout to the performance was so good and the music so well received that this performance has been hailed as the beginning of the Swing Era, a dancing, and big band sensation that would last for about a decade. The Goodman Band went on to perform in various places after that, reaching pinnacle after pinnacle in their popularity. When the band was just over two years old they reached fame status after several gigs in the Paramount Theatre in Times Square, March 3, 1937. The audience, mostly youths, were so involved and excited about the performances of the band that they danced in the aisles and even, when they ran out of room, on the bandstand. Benny Goodman, at twenty-eight years old, was famous, and his career had hardly begun.¹³

Goodman went on to become one of the best known and well respected jazz musicians of his time, and he was instrumental in popularizing several rising musical techniques. He relied heavily on a strong rhythmic section within his band, allowing the drums to drive the music, which was extremely conducive to dancing.¹⁴ Because the rhythm section drove the band forward and held everything together, the rest of the instruments were free to improvise and be more open with their sound. Soloists were free to deviate from the melody and the written music, and the improvisation that resulted was a driving yet effortless sound that remains popular even today.¹⁵ His humble beginnings provided him with a background to understand jazz, feel the rhythm of swing, and always keep working towards perfection.

Scholars do not agree on the exact date that Goodman was “crowned” the King of Swing, but it is known that he was not self-proclaimed as

¹¹ Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 130.

¹² Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), 653.

¹³ Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 187.

¹⁴ Ernberg, *Swinging the Dream*, 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

such and that it happened soon after his big break in Los Angeles. The media, perhaps prematurely, labeled him the King for the sake of money and sales, a gimmick that had been tried before to some moderate success. Paul Whiteman several years before Benny Goodman had self-proclaimed himself as the “King of Swing” to further his big-band career but had no lasting success. However, with the momentum of Goodman’s band, as well as the talent he provided, combined with the authenticity of his sound, success was right around the corner and the Swing Era was set ablaze by his popularity. Benny Goodman remained popular and successful throughout all his life and can be credited for taking dance music into the concert hall, specifically Carnegie Hall, giving swing music a new venue in which to mature.¹⁶ Even after the big band era faded away in the 1940s and 1950s, Goodman still performed and perfected his clarinet in the jazz and classical styles to large audiences. He died in 1986, after having seen the world change around him, change that he had been instrumental in forming. He truly was and remains to this day, the King of Swing.

The combining of African-American rhythms and blues into popular music before World War II set the stage for the music that would come after it. Young adults had been influential in the rise of the swing era and they would also be influential in the rise of the next great music genre, rock and roll. After World War II musicians began to develop many different styles, all of which could be heard on the radio, now a staple in every home. Popular music had never been so separated from classical and new genres were forming, such as rhythm and blues, soul, country, and gospel.

In the midst of these changes a young man, Elvis Presley, came on the music scene almost by sheer accident. He was born in Mississippi on January 8, 1935, right around the time that Benny Goodman’s career was about to take off and the country was still in deep depression, near the beginning of World War II. He and his mother and father moved to Memphis, Tennessee. They were a poor family but not without some means of providing Elvis with toys and other gifts. Probably the most important one was a guitar for his tenth birthday.¹⁷ Growing up, Elvis listened to and liked all types of music, including, but not limited to, all the ones listed above. He was deeply spiritual, and thus enjoyed gospel music, but also loved the sounds of rhythm and blues. In 1953 Elvis

¹⁶ DiCuirici, interview.

¹⁷ Sigrid Arnott et al., *Rockability* (New York: Voyageur Press, 2011), 17.

went to Sam Phillips's Memphis Recording Services to record several tracks for his mother's birthday. Phillips heard Elvis, and while unimpressed, seemed to remember him for some reason and invited Elvis to come back and record a few more tracks in June 1954. While this didn't come to fruition either, Phillips decided to try one more recording session in July 1954 with a few other musicians. It was during a break, after the audition seemed to be a flop, that Elvis and the other musicians started fooling around and played "That's All Right Mama" by Arthur Crudup. This recording is what made Phillips pay attention. He got the song on the radio and Elvis started getting a few country gigs.¹⁸

It is no wonder that Elvis intrigued Phillips. Elvis at the time was still in high school, yet had an extremely mature and distinct sound. Because of Elvis's previous musical interests, he had begun to form a sound that was a mixture of soul, gospel, and rhythm and blues. In fact, many of his earlier listeners were surprised to find that Elvis was white, which only helped his career in a still racially segregated world. But as Elvis began performing, it wasn't just his musical ability that endeared him to audiences but his sexually provocative dancing. It was during the first few gigs that Elvis performed that he developed a nervous tick due to stage fright. While at first Elvis didn't realize he was doing it, the audience loved it, especially the younger generation and so he began to do it more, eliciting screams of approval from audiences wherever he went.

Elvis's popularity continued to grow and "before long, girls were swarming around him by the hundreds."¹⁹ With World War II now finished, the younger generation was taking on a different role in society. With money to spare and not as many responsibilities, the next generation received the label of "teenagers" and advertising began to create ploys around this. Seeing monetary gain, the media catered specifically to the teenage culture, selling and advertising specifically to the younger generation. The independent and sexual image of Elvis Presley is also seen in James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* and in Marlon Brando's *The Wild One*. While this became wildly popular with youth, adults feared for their children and began to censor most of the movies and music artists that showed the growing sexualized image.

¹⁸ Arnott et al., *Rockability*, 17-18

¹⁹ Glen Jeansonne, David Lührssen, and Dan Sokolovic, *Elvis Presley, Reluctant Rebel* (Santa Barbara: Praeger 2011).

Not only was Elvis looked on with disdain because of his image but also his background. “Presley was ‘Southern white trash’...and rather than this making his achievements all the more remarkable...it was taken to mean that everything he did was irredeemably trashy.”²⁰

This, however, in no way deterred Elvis’s career, which was now on an astounding trajectory of fame. On April 17, 1956, Bea Ramirez wrote an article about an interview with Elvis in the *Waco Tribune* entitled “Elvis Gives Out with Crazy Cool Interview.” This is the first record that scholars have of Elvis being called a “King.” “Shortly before he was to go on stage at the Heart O’Texas Coliseum, Elvis Presley, the 21 year old king of the nation’s rock ’n’ roll set, sat in a darkened Cadillac Limousine for an interview...”²¹ Just twenty-one and already Elvis was so famous that he had to hide in his car to keep the fans at bay. His kingship stuck and his fame escalated further with the introduction and use of the television in people’s homes. Musical shows dedicated to showcasing famous artists were a favorite on television and Elvis was able to make several appearances on various shows. One of Elvis’s greatest accomplishments was making it on the Ed Sullivan show, though Sullivan would only let Elvis be filmed from the waist up, lest his gyrating hips corrupt his watchers.²²

While the fame and fortune was certainly exhilarating, they would soon take a toll on Elvis’s life. He was no longer able to go anywhere without being bombarded by teenage girls trying to get at him. Crowds were so crushingly immense that he had to hire body guards to ensure his safety. Elvis had risen to become more than just a person, he became a phenomenon as seen in unprecedented sales and fan devotion.²³ While he was able to uphold his strong moral standards in the beginning, as the phenomenon slowly faded and gave way to other musical groups in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Beatles, Elvis’s life changed its trajectory. After growing up as a young man with thousands and thousands of fans, seeing his fame dwindle with his age

²⁰ Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, *Pop and Rock*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76-77.

²¹ Bea Ramirez, “Elvis Gives Out for a Crazy Cool Interview”, *Waco Tribune*, 17 April 1956, <http://newspaperarchive.com/waco-tribune-herald/1956-04-19/page-3>.

²² Kathleen Tracy, *Elvis Presley* (Westport: Greenwood Biographies, 2007), 94-95.

²³ Frith, *Pop and Rock*, 75.

was difficult for him to handle. This, coupled with several failed marriages and an unsuccessful Hollywood career, led him to begin abusing prescription drugs. This habit became evident in his performances, which were becoming more and more grotesque due to his distraction and failing health.²⁴ He now more blatantly entertained the vices of drugs and women, utilizing his wealth to fill his desires. Despite all this, Elvis was still the King, and his fans remained devoted to him to the very end.

When Elvis died in 1977, America as well as the rest of the world grieved. This was seen in the massive sales of flowers in Memphis to put at the gates of Graceland, as well as the mass chaos that surrounded his funeral.²⁵ He was a pioneer for all of rock and roll and his life, the good and the bad, has been emulated time and again by performers that would follow him. His continued fame lies in infamy more than in his musical skill due mostly to the sad way his career faltered at the end. America still refers to him as “The King” regardless of his untimely death.

Elvis’s time had seen the change from swing music in the depression, to the birth of rhythm and blues and rock and roll with himself at the forefront. Wars had come and gone, and in the 1960s and 1970s America faced important identity crises regarding segregation and race. Music had become a dumping ground for all races and identities at this time, creating a more diverse music work environment.

1977 was not only a turning point with the death of Elvis, but also for the next rising star, Michael Jackson. Jackson was, at this time, a well established member of the Jackson 5, having been born into a family of musicians with ambition to rise to stardom. Joseph Jackson ruled his family with an iron fist and was physically abusive throughout the Jackson’s childhood, but because of his strict attention to his boys as well as the passion and future he envisioned for them, Joseph was able to lead his boys on towards stardom. The group began with talent shows in Indiana, and eventually got their first record deal in 1968.²⁶ Michael Jackson, the eighth child of ten, was singled out early on in their career as the lead singer and his influence helped lead the group

²⁴ Jeansonne, *Elvis Presley: Reluctant Rebel*, 192.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁶ J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 2009), 45.

towards popularity and the added momentum needed to move towards stardom. In the 1970s they were able to appear regularly on television and despite some residual racial segregation they were well respected and popular around the country.²⁷ Jackson in 1977 was beginning to pursue a solo career separate from his family, and in 1979 when he turned twenty-one he made agreements with a lawyer to become independent from his family and make money solely for himself, a move that was both controversial and heartbreaking for his father.²⁸ It was that year that his first solo album came out with reasonable success and Jackson's career began to take off.²⁹

Jackson had ambitions to reach the highest pinnacle of stardom and began to collaborate with key musicians and businessmen to further his career. In 1982 Jackson reached the most important year for his career. He received a Grammy for his song entitled "Someone in the Dark," the song featured in the award winning movie *E.T.* He also released his best-selling album *Thriller*.³⁰ In tandem with Jackson's rising stardom was the growth of Music Television, otherwise known as MTV. Now one of the most watched channels on television, MTV was groundbreaking in its use of visual media, releasing cutting edge music videos that shaped the generation that watched it to become more visual than any generation in the past.³¹ Gone were the days of the Ed Sullivan show, as MTV brought forth music videos that pushed the limits of sex appeal, grunge, and dancing. Jackson's videos, featuring his songs "Beat It," "Thriller," and "Billie Jean" were groundbreaking, in that they were popular among African-American and middle-class white America, a fact that made him marketable to the visual generation. Michael Jackson's videos were so well done, so groundbreaking, and became so iconic and popular that MTV renamed their Video Vanguard Award to The Michael Jackson Vanguard Award in 1989.³² Music videos through MTV allowed music artists to become well known very quickly and in a relatively easy way, especially

²⁷ Thomas Harrison, *Music of the 1980s* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 2.

²⁸ Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson*, 191.

²⁹ Harrison, *Music of the 1980s*, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2

³¹ Clayton Rosati, "MTV: 360° of the Industrial Production of Culture," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32, no.4 (2007), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4626271>.

³² Graham Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 129.

internationally. On the global scale, *Thriller* is the best selling album of all time, a testament to its popularity and the use of MTV and similar television stations world-wide dedicated to marketing music.³³

Other technological advances also allowed Michael Jackson's work to flourish, especially the arrival of cassette tapes in the 1970s, which provided portable music wherever you wanted to go, a luxury that had never before been readily available.³⁴ In 1979 the Sony Walkman boosted music sales, causing record companies to replace vinyl records with cassette tapes and then of course in 1984 with the compact disc, or CD, which took a little longer to catch on due to the expense of the new hardware.³⁵

In many ways, it was as if the world had been waiting for Michael Jackson to arrive. His dancing was deliberate and fresh, a welcome change to musical artists before him who had taken to standing still and playing their instruments. His music beat was akin to disco and funk of the past with added modern synthesizers to appeal to a younger generation.³⁶ The reception of his performances were comparable to those of Elvis Presley and the Beatles, with devoted fans becoming obsessed with his music and image.

But there were consequences for participating in and pushing a visual generation, as well as growing up in a world of fame. Jackson had grown up performing and had not had an average and healthy childhood. In this way he became reliant on his image just as audiences grew accustomed to seeing him. Pressures of looking a certain way and his own self-consciousness led to many plastic surgeries. By 1986 Jackson had already had four rhinoplasties to make his nose slimmer and was pursuing a cleft in his chin. His friends and girlfriend at the time commented that he had said, "I *do* want to be perfect. I look in the mirror, and I just want to change, and be better," and "I can afford [plastic surgery]. I want it, so I'm going to have it."³⁷ Along with the plastic surgery, he had begun using a skin bleaching cream to lighten his skin, all of which drastically changed his appearance.³⁸ Jackson

³³ Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s*, 129.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁶ Harrison, *Music in the 1980s*, 5.

³⁷ Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson*, 347.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 351.

noted the publicity he was getting for his physical appearance and decided that he wanted his career “to be the greatest show on earth,” deciding that any publicity was good publicity. This led to strange rumors of his lifestyle, some which were even encouraged and given to newspapers by him personally. He also would wear strange things to attract attention to himself and gain even more publicity. Charles Montgomery, a writer for *The Enquirer*, said it best, “I realized then that Michael Jackson liked to see himself portrayed in an absurd, bizarre way... Michael is one of the smartest entertainers in the business. He knows how to get his name out there.”³⁹

Jackson continued with strange behavior that at first was seen by the public as harmless, mainly as an asexual man who had already given everything to his career. Obsessed with his fame, he compared himself often to Elvis, wondering why people referred to Elvis as “The King” but wouldn’t give him that right. There is some evidence that he then proclaimed himself the “King of Pop” but the media seems to have been on board with this proclamation. Unfortunately, just as Elvis is known both for his excellent achievements in music as well as the way he faded in the end, the second half of Jackson’s career was littered with sketchy dealings and scandal. Numerous allegations were brought about child molestations at his grand estate, which he denied exuberantly. The public however was not on his side, as his appearance and image did not necessarily support his innocence. The media jumped on the scandal, fanning the flames of the trials and cases. It also became apparent that Jackson was involved in prescription drugs and continued getting plastic surgery, his skin getting ever whiter. In 2009, the King of Pop died at his home due to a drug overdose.

Jackson *was* The King of Pop if only because his life displayed the changes occurring in the entertainment culture to the maximum. He was not just a man who was a performer; he literally performed for the public in every way, as if his life was a reality television show. The publicity stunts, dancing, strange costumes, implied sexual themes, and his own lifestyle catered not only to his desires of being a wealthy performer but to what the audiences that he served wanted as well. He probably did not anticipate the media’s desire for scandal, nor did he realize the effect his actions would have on his future. It is also possible that the fame that he experienced since childhood robbed him of a

³⁹Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson*, 360.

healthy life with healthy goals and mindsets. He certainly felt this way, and enjoyed spending time with children for this reason. His albums, his life, his music, and his videos have become as iconic as Elvis's, if not surpassing them, and that, more than anything else it seems, would have been his sole desire.

Each of these kings exemplified the changing American times. Benny Goodman was the workingman, dedicated to his music to the point of perfection, and he never relied solely on image and fame to get jobs. Because of this, he always worked hard at his craft to ensure employment. Elvis Presley embodied the emerging teenage culture, adding sex appeal and individuality to performances, creating a phenomenon that would become larger than life. Michael Jackson would see Elvis's life and success and emulated that, recognizing what Elvis had not, that image was everything, and Jackson chose that pathway to get the money and fame that he desired. All three started at a young age, and grew up with the desire to perform and interestingly, all three dealt with themes of combining white and black cultures within their music. America, though divided, obviously was not as divided in their music. Many rhythms and beats that were typically African-American greatly appealed to the white population, though at the time it was not mentioned, as evidenced by the fact that Goodman and Elvis both were white men selling music from black culture. All of them also experienced the phenomena of American obsession, of youth cultures rallying around music that they love, almost to a harmful point, and reaping the benefits and the consequences. They all also utilized the new technological advances available to them and were able to completely capitalize monetarily on them.

Goodman, Elvis, and Jackson were not the only royalty in the music culture, though they are probably the most iconic. Goodman shared the stage with Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong, all of whom were amazing jazz musicians who took jazz to new heights, sounds, and technicality. The Beatles, who in their own way ruled the music world, quickly followed Elvis. Jackson had his "colleagues" Madonna and Prince, who both pushed the limits of decency and image in different ways, but followed Jackson's example of being a performer first, and a person second. There's also John Phillip Sousa, the March King and the self-proclaimed Queen Latifah as well as many others. It is the ones that are still known today, like Goodman, Elvis, and Jackson, which are a tell-tell sign of the changes in culture and the impact that they had on music in general.

America remains obsessed with royalty whether official or perceived. Tabloids and magazines discuss almost nothing else beyond celebrities and the English royalty. While politically America remains staunchly democratic, there is something that appeals to the public and the media about people that are elevated. Perhaps it is a need for role models or more likely, as most Americans would admit to desiring “The American Dream,” the media and audiences uphold what they want so much: money beauty, and fame. Goodman’s swing band freed the young adults to interact with each other and “let loose.” Elvis pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be young and what sounds of music could be combined together to create something new. Jackson desired fame and fortune to the point of obsession and gave his life for his own dreams, something that the American public encouraged and then sought after themselves.

Today, performers such as Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, 50 Cent, Miley Cyrus, and even Justin Bieber supplement their performances in outlandish and shocking ways, very much similar to Michael Jackson, following in his footsteps in that respect, though hopefully avoiding his scandal. However, they would not be considered the new American kings or queens, no matter how large a phenomenon they create, for the sole fact that they do not represent any new changes in American culture beyond what Jackson had already done.

The tides in American culture truly have been changing and in 2006, *Time Magazine* recognized the new king. “You.”⁴⁰ For the YouTube, social media generation, who grew up watching shows such as *American Idol*, *America’s Got Talent*, *The ‘X’ Factor*, and more recently, *The Voice*, the person who represents the changing culture, who exemplifies what America stands for today is “You” and in many ways, it has always been “You;” after all, a king is nothing without the subjects on which he sits. The kings that have been chosen for America have been selected and elected by the American people in an almost perfect democratic way, based on how they spend their money and how they support their favorite musicians. Perhaps royalty is so loved by Americans because they chose it in the first place. America worships the ground on which celebrities walk, but those chosen few would not

⁴⁰ Lev Grossman “You—Yes, You—Are TIME’s Person of the Year,” *Time*, December 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html>.

be where they are now without the support of the American people. Benny Goodman, Elvis Presley, and Michael Jackson became who they became, and rose up the ladder of success due to being in the right place at the right time, due to their own dedication to their craft, due to their ability to mesh and use the culture in which they lived, and most assuredly, due to the support of the American public, the real true king. "You."

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