

Review: Reinventing Elvis: The '68 Comeback – Movies for the Rest of Us with Bill Newcott

Reinventing Elvis captures a moment when a legend was rediscovering his own genius and sharing it with a world that had nearly forgotten him.

Bill Newcott



Steve Binder Archives

Reinventing Elvis: The '68 Comeback



Run Time: 1 hour 36 minutes

Stars: Elvis Presley, Steve Binder

Writer/Director: John Scheinfeld

Streaming on Paramount+

I guess we all suspected that director Baz Luhrmann's account of Elvis Presley's 1968 comeback TV special in last year's blockbuster musical drama *Elvis* was at least a tad gussied up. I mean, did the producers *really* build an entire Christmas village set just to fool Colonel Parker into thinking they were making a traditional Holiday extravaganza?

No, they did not. Nor was the show's signature protest song, "If I Can Dream," written, arranged, and taped within a span of 24 hours.

Still, as this tuneful time capsule of a film demonstrates, *Elvis* got the essential truth correct: After nearly a decade drowning in mediocre movies and recording second-rate songs, Elvis Presley, for one shining moment, seized control of his career and detonated one of the great musical hours in TV history, reclaiming his title as the rightful King of Rock and Roll.

I speak here as one uniquely qualified to write about Elvis's comeback special, known at the time as *Singer Presents...Elvis*. (And can't you just imagine all those '60s women looking up from their sewing machines to sigh at the sight of Elvis in his skin-tight leather suit?) Not long after the show aired, my next-door neighbor Jon, a lifetime Elvis fan, somehow acquired a 16mm film transfer of the hour. Over the next few years, we watched that thing countless times. A half-century later, I still know every song, every transition, every curled lip by heart.

What I did not have at the time, and what makes *Reinventing Elvis* so essential to even a casual Elvis fan, is the presence here of the show's producer/director, Steve Binder. A natural storyteller, Binder regales the filmmakers with tales of trying to balance Elvis's artistic and social aspirations with the baser instincts of his manager, the now-reviled Colonel Tom Parker.

But mostly, *Reinventing Elvis* is a chance to experience the raw power of Presley as a performer. It had been nearly a decade since the singer last set foot on a stage in front of a live audience; that had not happened since he went into the Army. In the film, Binder recalls having to virtually drag the singer onstage when he refused to come out of his dressing room, terrified that he would forget the lyrics to his classic songs (perhaps with good reason: In one outtake, Elvis uses a cheat sheet to introduce his band members, some of whom he'd known for decades).

For the most part, the special's production numbers are giddy, over-the-top 1960s kitsch: Flocks of dancers gyrating à la Peter Gennaro and swelling choruses reminiscent of *The Red Skelton Show's* Alan Copeland Singers. Here's Elvis singing gospel in a Black church, Elvis kung fu fighting, Elvis slinging his guitar in a stylized Memphis nightclub, almost lost in tides of extras. Even in 1968, it all appeared just a tad dated and forced; today it seems one step short of Bill Murray's tasteless Christmas special in *Scrooged*.

The fact is, at the time, those segments actually seemed to reinforce Elvis's 1960s B-movie image, the very thing the comeback special was supposed to bury forever.

And so, wisely, this documentary focuses on the special's golden moments, the sequences where it's just Elvis alone onstage, or Elvis sitting in with his longtime buddies, singing. Just singing.

Also, playing guitar. Those of us who know Presley primarily from his records may be surprised to see he was a pretty fair rhythm guitar player, more than holding his own with the accomplished studio musicians who surrounded him.

Reigning from a raised, boxing ring-like stage, Presley — sweaty and resplendent in that black leather outfit — plows through a catalog of songs that, although barely a decade old, must have seemed like artifacts from a dim and distant past: "Lawdy, Miss Clawdy," "One Night with You," "Blue Christmas" (his one concession to Colonel Parker's desire for a Christmas special). Never did so many oldies sound so new and vital.

Then comes the finale: Elvis, the Angel Gabriel in a white three-piece suit, performs "If I Can Dream," inspired by his anguish over the recent assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (just a few miles from Elvis's Memphis home). Eyes closed, arms swinging with abandon, sometimes folding into a fighter's crouch, Presley gives perhaps the most heartfelt and spine-tingling performance of his career — with the operator of lone, bulky NBC color camera valiantly keeping up with every improvised move. Remarkably, in the ensuing nine years until his death, Presley never again performed this song, which should otherwise have become his signature number.

Wisely, after having intercut interviews and contemporary clips with most of the film's other songs, for "If I Can Dream," writer/director John Scheinfeld lets the entire one-shot number play in full, cutting to black at the final note. My only complaint here is that he does not let the tape roll 10 more seconds for Elvis's breathless "Thank you...Good night."

Scheinfeld comes to this film well-established among our most accomplished showbiz documentary makers. Besides a long history of films spotlighting celebs from Jimmy Durante to Jonathan Winters to Harry Nilsson, he created the recent theatrical doc *What the Hell Happened to Blood, Sweat & Tears?* — a truly fascinating study of the year rock music was co-opted by the U.S. State Department.

Here, given the luxury to focus on a single month in a singer's life, Scheinfeld is in complete control of his material, deftly matching Binder's recollections with corresponding clips and outtakes. Most delightfully, he tracks down a woman who, in 1968, was chosen from the live audience to sit next to Elvis as he crooned "Memory." Speaking about the experience today, her eyes light up with the same starstruck wonder of that young woman on the vintage videotape.

That's not unlike the experience any seasoned Elvis Presley admirer will get from the brisk 126 minutes of *Reinventing Elvis*; a warm musical wormhole, capturing a moment when a legend was rediscovering his own genius and sharing it with a world that had nearly forgotten him.