

The Reel Life

Elvis Presley's life story has been told countless times on film and TV, with Baz Luhrmann's take on the King due later this year. We look back at the many Elvis biopics, from the sublime to the ridiculous...

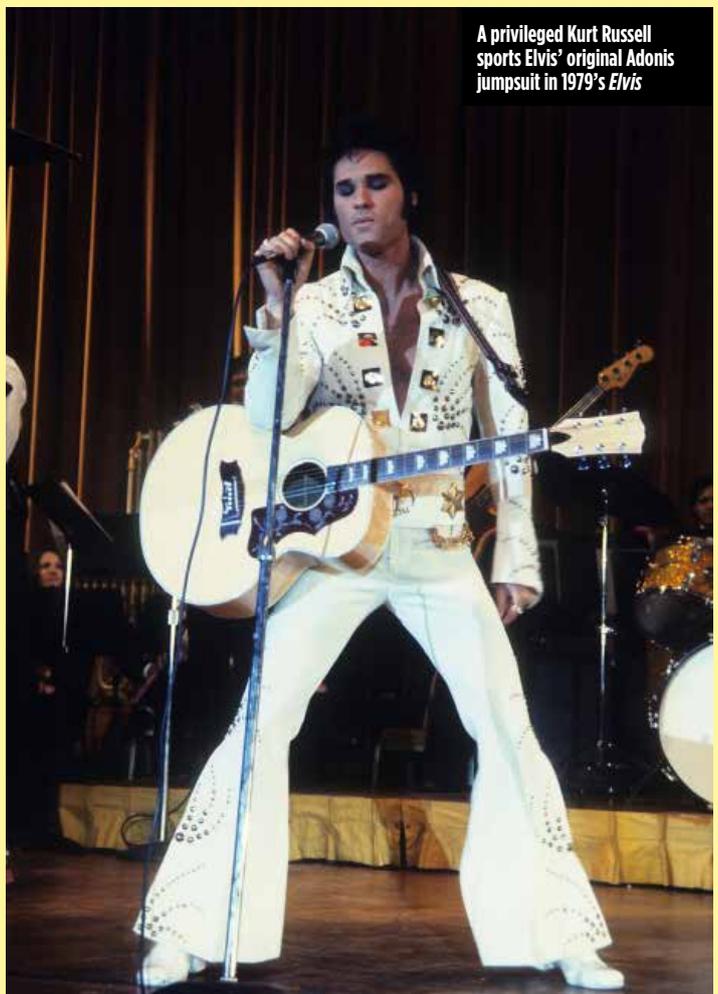
WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

ELVIS 1979

It was a decidedly off-brand John Carpenter (*Halloween*, *The Thing*, *They Live*) who was behind this fan favourite made-for-TV film that headlined one-time child actor Kurt Russell as the King. Carpenter started on the movie after finishing *Halloween*, and was keen to move into a different genre. "I wanted to work with actors," he told *Film Comment* magazine. "I wanted to do a dramatic film. I wanted to do something different. And Elvis was the first thing that came along that I had any feeling for, personally – because I did have a feeling for Elvis, I liked him very much, cared about him."

Carpenter's passion for Elvis oozes from every frame of this rags-to-riches odyssey. So much so that the director ends the film in 1970, before the King's creative and physical decline. It's very much a print-the-myth approach to the Elvis story, more hagiography than biography, as you might expect given that it arrived just two years after the King's death. At just under three hours it has the space to tell the tale of Elvis' rise to fame without it feeling rushed, while Russell – who'd actually acted alongside Presley in 1963's *It Happened At The World's Fair* – gives an electrifying lead performance, capturing the King's raw charisma without ever lapsing into caricature.

Carpenter was reportedly so obsessed with accuracy that he asked Priscilla Presley to look over the script, at a cost of \$50,000. He also managed to secure Elvis' father's support, who bequeathed one of Presley's real-life jumpsuits to the film. So the next time you watch it, know that that's Elvis' real Adonis jumpsuit, not a copy.



A privileged Kurt Russell sports Elvis' original Adonis jumpsuit in 1979's *Elvis*

ELVIS AND THE BEAUTY QUEEN

1981

Future *Miami Vice* star Don Johnson proved fatally miscast as Elvis in this justly forgotten TV movie that focuses on the King's relationship with former Miss Tennessee Linda Thompson (Stephanie Zimbalist), his girlfriend for much of the 70s. Unlike Carpenter's rose-tinted biopic, this one zeroes in on Elvis' drug problems and sometimes feels more like a dramatised *National Enquirer* story than a primetime drama.

With its risible dialogue ("Nobody says no to the king of rock'n'roll," Elvis tells Linda at one point) and a misfiring turn from a clearly in-over-his-head Johnson, *Elvis And The Beauty Queen* was savaged by the critics. In fact, the only person to come out of it with any dignity was Ronnie McDowell, a Presley nut (he'd reached No.18 on the Billboard in 1977 with his single *The King Is Gone*) who provided Johnson's singing voice for the film.



So bad it's good: Chris Columbus' late-80s comedy starred David Keith as Elvis

HEARTBREAK HOTEL

1988

Not one of the proudest efforts on the otherwise skyscraping CV of director Chris Columbus (*Home Alone*, *Gremlins*, *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone*), *Heartbreak Hotel* is a fatally oversugared comedy-drama about a 17-year-old boy who kidnaps Elvis as a gift to his mom. A box office flop, it was mauled by the critics. "*Heartbreak Hotel* is such a bad idea, nothing can rescue it, not even Georges Delerue's music or Brian Keith's impersonation of the King," wrote the *LA Times*, while the great Roger Ebert called it, "The goofiest movie of the year," adding that it was "a movie so bad in so many different and endearing ways that I'm damned if I don't feel genuine affection for it." Keith's performance was one of the few aspects of the movie that won any plaudits: "The film's Elvis is a funny fellow," wrote the *New York Times*, "played by David Keith with a flair for mimicry and a fine appreciation for patented Presley mannerisms."



Susan Walters and Dale Midkiff in the adaptation of Priscilla Presley's reveal-all memoir

ELVIS AND ME

1988

In 1985 Priscilla Presley released *Elvis And Me*, an explosive, tabloid-tickling account of her life with the King, which included then-shocking revelations about Elvis' various extramarital affairs. Three years later, it was adapted into a four-hour TV bonkbuster starring Dale Midkiff (who, two years before, had had his big break starring as the young Jock Ewing in *Dallas: The Early Years*) as Presley and Susan Walters (*The Vampire Diaries*, *Teen Wolf*) as Priscilla. Playing more as soap opera than anything else, *Elvis And Me* was a ratings sensation when it aired in 1988, even though its soft-focused love story angle meant it went down better with fairweather fans than it did the Elvis faithful. ➔

ELVIS

1990

Michael St. Gerard had already guested as Elvis in two 1989 flicks – Civil Rights drama *Heart Of Dixie* and Jerry Lee Lewis biopic *Great Balls Of Fire!* – when he was offered the chance to headline a full 13-episode series about the King. Focusing on Elvis' time before he became a star, it's refreshing in that it circumvents the familiar story beats, but sadly audiences stayed away, so much so that ABC pulled the last three episodes. The 13 parts were eventually re-edited into a four-hour mini-series titled *Elvis: The Early Years*, while St. Gerard got one final crack at playing Presley in an episode of sci-fi show *Quantum Leap* in 1993. He retired from acting shortly after and is now a pastor.



Go-to Elvis Michael St. Gerard took on the King in four different productions

The real Colonel was much more complex than the cigar-chewing huckster depicted here

ELVIS AND THE COLONEL: THE UNTOLD STORY

1993

(Pictured far right) Another exploitative, under-moneyed small screen effort, *Elvis And The Colonel: The Untold Story* starred walking mannequin Rob Youngblood as Presley and a what-the-hell-am-I-doing-in-this-shit Beau Bridges as Elvis' famously difficult manager. Watching this, you'd be amazed at thinking that Elvis had *any* success in his life, as the film only seems interested in raking over the calamitous decisions Colonel Tom made for Elvis' career. The real-life Colonel was a much more complex figure than the cigar-chewing huckster depicted here, while the film itself is littered with inaccuracies. Avoid.

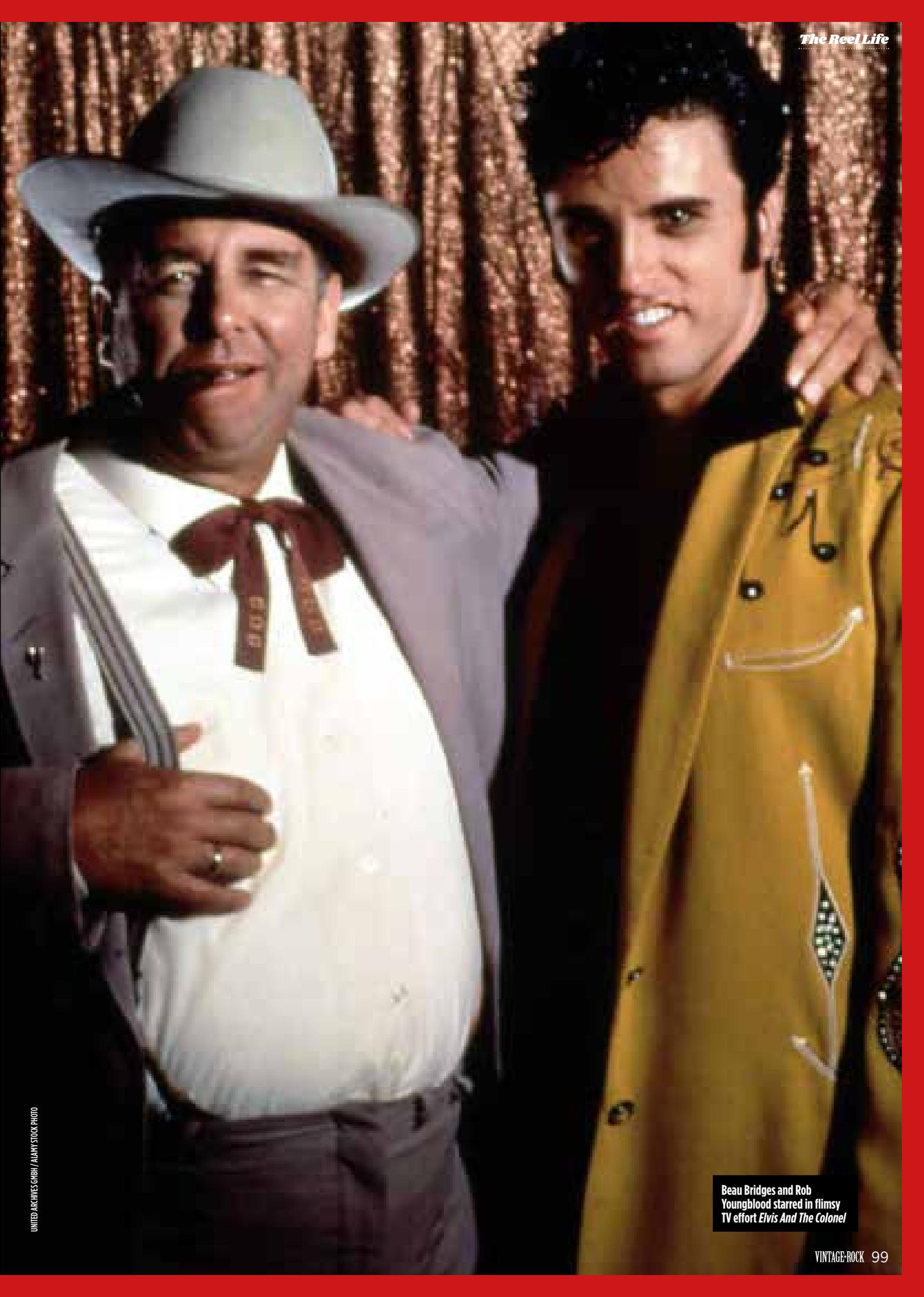


Rick Peters did a decent job as Elvis to Bob Gunton's Nixon... shame about the hairpiece

ELVIS MEETS NIXON

1997

The meeting between Elvis and the 37th President of the United States was one of the oddest episodes in the lives of both men. Travelling to the White House on 21 December 1970, Elvis offered his help to a bemused Richard M. Nixon regarding his war on drugs. Twenty-seven years later, this most bizarre of political hook-ups was dramatised in this cheap-as-chips TV movie that starred *The Shawshank Redemption*'s Bob Gunton as Tricky Dicky and Rick Peters as Presley, whose perfectly adequate performance is perpetually overshadowed by the risible wig they've made him wear. ➔



UNITED ARCHIVES/GBH/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Beau Bridges and Rob Youngblood starred in flimsy TV effort *Elvis And The Colonel*



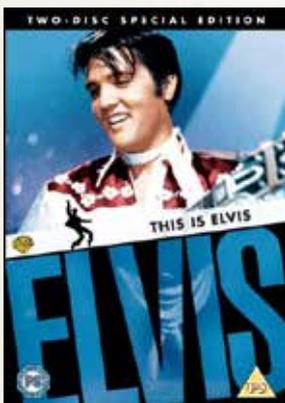
Bruce 'The Chin' Campbell gives a poignant performance as Elvis in this enjoyably daft horror

BUBBA HO-TEP 2002

Using the 'Elvis faked his own death' conspiracy theory as a kickoff, this gleefully schlocky horror-comedy sees the King (played by *Evil Dead* favourite Bruce Campbell) living out his retirement in a nursing home in east Texas, where he teams up with an old codger (played by Ossie Davis) who thinks he's JFK to battle soul-sucking Egyptian mummies. Yes, really. Despite the goofiness of its premise, Don Coscarelli's film is surprisingly poignant, and Bruce Campbell – aka 'The Chin' – brings unexpected dimensions to his portrayal of the King.

THE DOCUMENTARIES

ELVIS' LIFE STORY HAS BEEN TOLD IN A NUMBER OF DOCUMENTARIES OVER THE YEARS FROM SOULFUL AND AMBITIOUS TO UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL



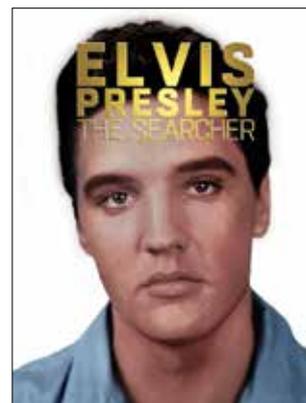
THIS IS ELVIS 1981

This Is Elvis was the first major documentary about the King to be made after his death. Written and directed by Andrew Solt and Malcolm Leo, it combines archival footage with reenactments, and a voiceover by rock'n'roll singer Ral Donner. "A real curiosity item," wrote *Variety*, "*This Is Elvis* is a fast-paced gloss on Presley's life and career packed with enough fine music and unusual footage to satisfy anyone with an interest in the late singing idol." A longer cut was issued on VHS in 1983.



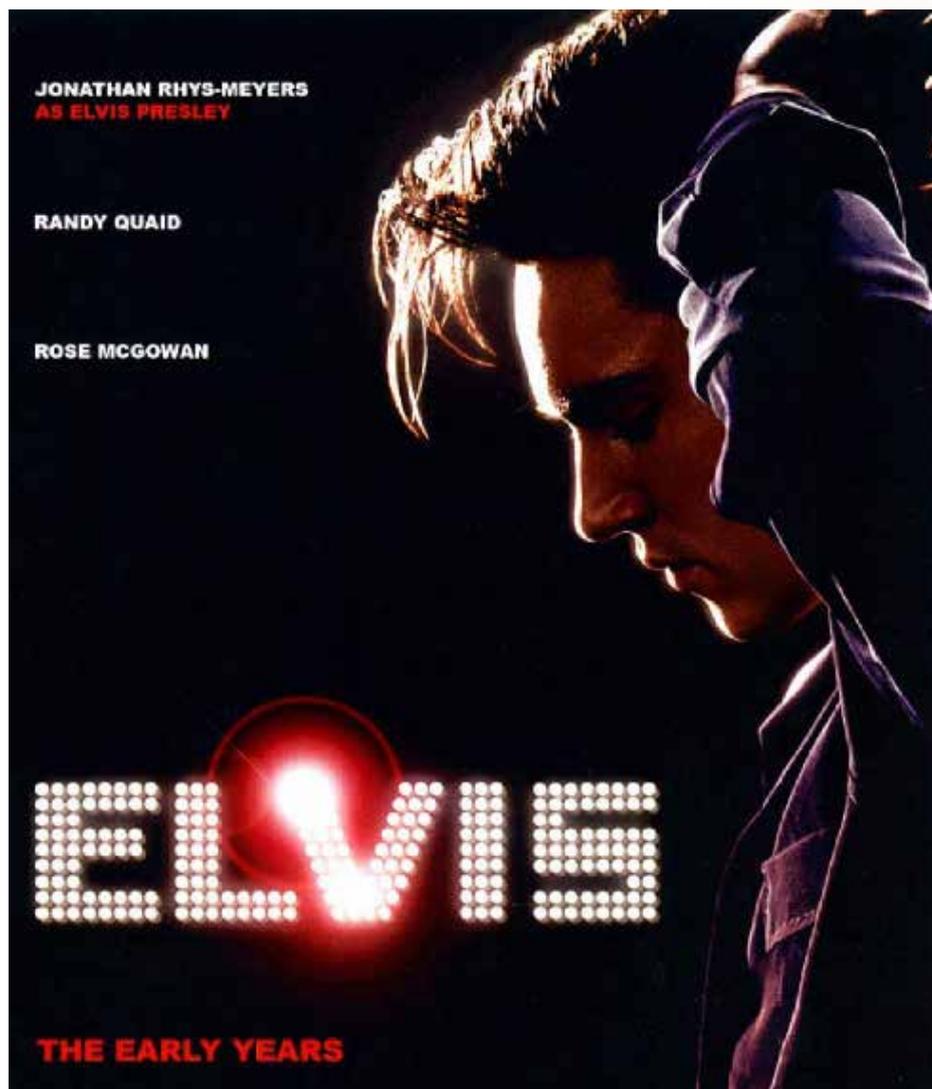
THE KING 2017

Forty years on from Elvis' death, documentary maker Eugene Jarecki embarked on a road trip across the USA in Elvis' own 1963 Rolls Royce Phantom V. From Memphis to Las Vegas, and beyond, Jarecki's politically engaged film uses the rise and fall of Elvis as a metaphor for America. It's not wholly flattering, but for Jarecki, Elvis' flaws are also America's flaws. A unique and provocative documentary that was nominated for a Grammy award for Best Music Film.



THE SEARCHER 2018

After 2017's divisive *The King*, fans were offered a more conventional account of Elvis' life in *The Searcher*. The project was birthed in 2014, when Priscilla Presley and Elvis' close friend Jerry Schilling began to plan what they hoped would be the definitive Elvis documentary. Interviewees range from those who knew him to famous fans, offering up a full-blooded account of not only Elvis the star, but Elvis the man, helped by director Thom Zimny being granted access to plenty of unseen footage.



ELVIS THE EARLY YEARS

2005

The thought of anyone but a pure-bred American playing Elvis Presley seems almost sacrilegious, but Irish actor Jonathan Rhys-Meyers would prove one of the most lauded screen Elvises, picking up an Emmy nomination and a Golden Globe for his kiss-curl'd efforts. Of course, it doesn't hurt that Rhys-Meyers looks spookily like Presley, and it's his smouldering performance that really carries this somewhat thin biopic, which climaxes with the legendary '68 Comeback Special. Made in collaboration with the Presley estate, it benefits from being able to use original Elvis recordings on the soundtrack, but that cooperation clearly came at a price, with *The Early Years* serving up a frustratingly sanitised account of the King's rise to stardom. By this point, the Elvis story had been dramatised so many times that any fresh version had to give audiences something they hadn't seen before. Sadly, *The Early Years* offered true Elvis fans little that they didn't already know.



Peter Dinklage as Elvis (left) and facing off with Matt Barr as bodyguard David Stanley

PROTECTING THE KING

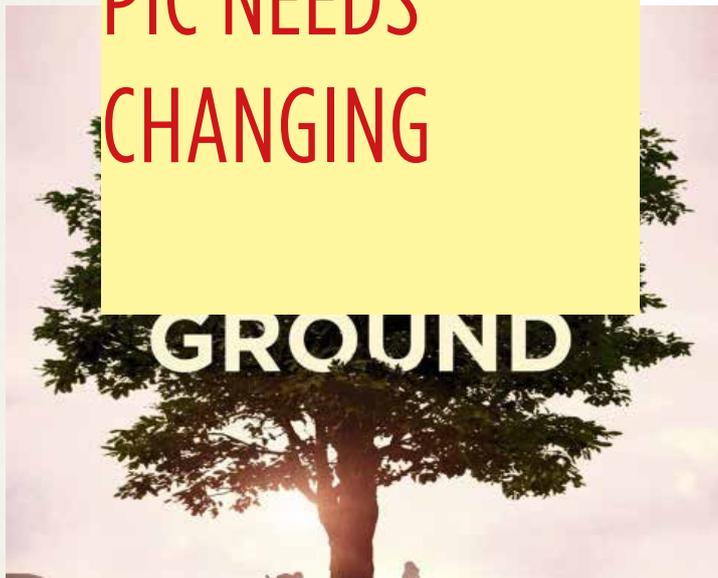
2007

Not a full from-Tupelo-to-Graceland biopic, but a true-life drama about Elvis' later years, from the perspective of the King's stepbrother and bodyguard David Stanley. It was in 1972 that Stanley, whose mother had married Vernon Presley after the death of Elvis' mom,

became the bodyguard to the King and this self-directed drama benefits from the verisimilitude of coming from a true insider. Unfortunately, the story needed a more assured hand behind the camera and its micro-budget 'direct-To-DVD' roots are all too obvious.

**PIC NEEDS
CHANGING**

GROUND



ELVIS & NIXON
2016

Liza Johnson's account of the oddest, most surreal political summit in history is certainly a more entertaining ride than Allan Arkush's mockably bad 1997 effort, taking a more comedic approach to what is essentially a pretty absurd story. Michael Shannon proves suitably eccentric casting as a darkly threatening Elvis, while Kevin Spacey channels his shadowy *House Of Cards* character Frank Underwood as the famously paranoid and disreputable Nixon. Frequently hilarious, *Elvis & Nixon* doesn't pretend that it's offering up a journalistic account of what happened that day in 1970, instead it's a comic riff on that famous Oval Office photo, and a study of two profoundly dysfunctional individuals at the very height of their powers.

Soon to be King: Austin Butler pictured with Vanessa Hudgens in Hollywood in 2019



SPECIAL MENTIONS...

SOME OTHER NOTABLE SCREEN ELVISES...



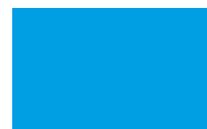
VAL KILMER
TRUE ROMANCE
1993



PETER DOBSON
FORREST GUMP
1994



TYLER HILTON
WALK THE LINE
2006



JACK WHITE
WALK HARD: THE DEWEY COX STORY
2007



SHAWN KLUSH
VINYL
2016



RON LIVINGSTON
SHANGRI-LA SUITE
2016



DRAKE MILLIGAN
SUN RECORDS
2017

ELVIS
2021

With Baz Luhrmann (*Moulin Rouge!*, *The Great Gatsby*) behind the camera and international treasure Tom Hanks starring as Colonel Tom Parker, this forthcoming biopic is likely to arrive with a deafening amount of fanfare later this year. Certainly the biggest-budgeted Presley biopic so far, *Elvis* stars 29-year-old *Carrie Diaries* actor Austin Butler (who beat such A-list names as Ansel Elgort, Miles Teller and Aaron Taylor-Johnson to the role) as the King, and the plot has been described by the film's production company, Warner Bros, as one that will "delve into the complex dynamic spanning over 20 years, from Presley's rise to fame to his unprecedented stardom, against the backdrop of the evolving cultural landscape and the loss of innocence in America."

Luhrmann is, of course, famous for his lavish, opulent visuals and love of heightened reality so it's a cert that this biopic will be somewhat less conventional than those that have come before it. At this point, the Elvis story is so well known, that it needs a fresh, bold, imaginative retelling. Something tells us that Baz Luhrmann is the man to do it. ★