



Jussi and Elvis

by David Lewis

Jussi Björling and Elvis Presley. Elvis and Jussi. The Swedish Caruso and the King of Rock 'n' Roll. An absurd pairing Or is it?

First, while Jussi likely was hardly conscious of the King, Elvis was well aware of Björling. After all, he loved singing. In 1970, Presley hired Kathy Westmoreland, a new "high soprano" to sing backup in his Las Vegas show. According to Peter Guralnick's definitive biography, "Careless Love," Elvis "was curious about her musical background, (and) he asked her opinion about some of the great tenors in history, like Caruso and Bjoerling."

Yet we know from years of lurking around the Jussi Björling chat group that a significant proportion of Björling lovers despise Elvis Presley. And why wouldn't they? After all, while Björling liked to sing numbers like "Amor ti vieta" and "Traum durch

die Dämmerung," the King preferred the likes of "Bossa Nova Baby" and "All Shook Up." And yet ... And yet ...

It can't be denied that Elvis had a rare musical talent and a pretty terrific voice.

Musical talent? Really? Oh, yes. Let's take the case of "Don't Be Cruel."

True, this ditty will never be confused with "Demanten på marssnön," and Otis Blackwell will seldom be mentioned together with Jean Sibelius. But Blackwell wasn't half-bad. In 1956, for instance, he wrote "Fever," later a hit for Peggy Lee, and "Don't Be Cruel," which Presley turned into a No. 1 hit in a matter of moments.

This occurred when Presley's producer began playing a demo copy of Blackwell's tune. "It took just a few bars to convince Presley that it was a perfect song for him, and he decided to cut it right away," wrote RCA's Anne Fulchino. "Presley learned the song within minutes — he had an inherent musical sense — and in short order a great master was put on tape." ("Short order" was 28 takes, by the way.)

Such examples proliferate. (Another great case is Blackwell's "All Shook Up." Listen to the agonizing original version by David Hill, then hear what Presley made of it.)

What else? There are the painful similarities: both singers lost their mothers too soon; both had merciless addictions; both enjoyed Mario Lanza records. But there are musical similarities, too. Björling recorded "O sole mio." Presley called it "It's Now or Never" and sold 20 million copies. Björling sang "Torna a Surriento." Presley transformed it into "Surrender" and made it into a No. 1 hit. Presley probably wasn't a tenor, but he caps "Surrender" with a high B-flat. Björling could do that, too. ■

Jussi Björling Museum Update, Voxna and Strömsbruk

Largely due to the ongoing Covid pandemic and the usual Swedish summer-vacation period, there is nothing new to report about the fate of the Museum, as well as no news about when Borlänge Kommun plans to empty the current Museum building. As of this writing, the municipal government is still planning to relocate the Jussi Björling Museum to space in the Borlänge library. Although the Museum remains officially closed, it is possible to visit by appointment. Efforts continue to find appropriate space in Stockholm as well as to work with Borlänge Kommun to insure the best possible arrangement for this priceless resource.

Stefan Olmås writes: Unfortunately, the annual Jussifest in Voxna will be postponed until July 11-12 of 2022 due to Covid pandemic. The Strömsbruk events have also been postponed until September 3-4, 2022 due to Covid restrictions. Clearly it is not practical to hold concerts when only fewer than 50 people may attend. ■