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This resources provides relevant background information that students, actors, and audiences may find beneficial as they delve into the play [When Elvis Met Ali: If I Can Dream](#) by [Tom Schreck](#), part of the Gitelman & Good Publishers catalog.

Exploring Fame, Race, and Cultural Appropriation in *When Elvis Met Ali: If I Can Dream*

By Tom Schreck

Growing Up

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Elvis Presley grew up in a transient, unskilled family that knew only poverty. They lived in an integrated neighborhood in Tupelo, Mississippi, in housing set aside for the poorest white citizens. His father was sentenced to three years in prison for altering a check for \$40.

Muhammad Ali, on the other hand, was raised in a middle-class Black neighborhood in segregated Louisville. His father, a frustrated artist, made a living painting signs for local Black businesses.

In the play *When Elvis Met Ali: If I Can Dream*, Presley reaches out to Ali, believing he is the only person who can understand the pressures of his level of fame. He travels to meet Ali for an

important conversation about what he should do with his career. Instead, they spend much of the time discussing their personal histories and how race shaped their early formative years.

Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is the act of adopting elements of one culture by members of another culture, particularly when the adoption is done by members of a dominant culture from a marginalized or minority culture. This can include using symbols, dress, music, language, art, or other cultural expressions.

Cultural appropriation often involves a power dynamic where the dominant culture benefits from or exploits the cultural elements without understanding, respect, or acknowledgment of their original significance or context. It can be seen as disrespectful or harmful, especially when it reinforces stereotypes, contributes to the erasure of the original culture, or ignores the historical and social contexts of the cultural elements being appropriated.

In *When Elvis Met Ali: If I Can Dream*, Ali questions Presley about "stealing" the song "Hound Dog," which was made famous by the influential African-American rhythm-and-blues singer and songwriter Big Mama Thornton. Ali's sentiment was echoed by critics and historians even today. Elvis points out that the song was written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who, as Elvis puts it, were "two white Jewish boys from New York."

Still, to what extent was it Thornton's song? Without her interpretation, it is hard to believe the song would have gained its popularity. Presley's later version is similar but not identical to hers. Is that considered thievery...or tribute?

BB King, the iconic American blues singer, guitarist, and songwriter, once told Presley, "Music is owned by the whole universe. It isn't exclusive to the black man or the white man or any other color. It is shared in and by our souls." How do King's words relate to the idea of cultural appropriation and music?

It's difficult to imagine Black artists of the time not feeling resentful of a white man singing the songs they originated in the same style while being hailed as an innovator. However, Presley acknowledged from the beginning that he was performing music he heard from the Black community. In his mind, he was paying tribute, not stealing.

Even with BB King's endorsement, many still disagree. What do you think?

Civil Rights

Ali asks Presley why he didn't march in the Civil Rights era; Presley responds by asking if that was something he was obliged to do. Although Ali stops short of demanding his involvement, he challenges Presley, suggesting that the movement would have greatly benefited from his involvement.

In response to Ali's criticism, Presley points to his actions: socializing with the Black community in the Jim Crow South, attending Black-only gospel events, and—perhaps most importantly—creating a sound that brought Black and white Americans together at a time when it was unheard of.

Can a statement be made through actions without words? Are words without action as effective?

It's a complex topic.

The play, by design, raises more questions than it answers. Race relations in America can't be reduced to a simple collection of facts and interpretations. Instead, the topic requires ongoing examination and discussion between people willing to listen and attempt to see through each other's eyes.