

TUNE INTO ENGLISH

Elvis Presley's Jailhouse Rock

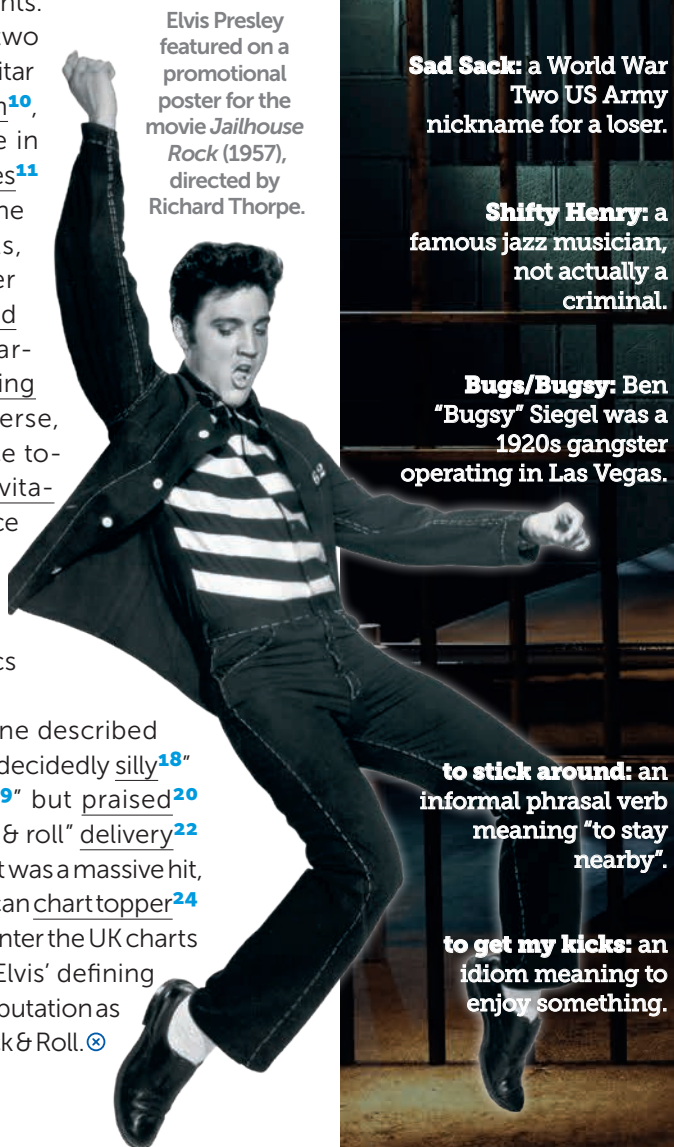


La canzone che ha segnato il salto del re del rock nel cinema è un compendio di ciò che lo ha reso una superstar.

The year 1957 was **pivotal**¹ in Elvis Presley's career, marking his movement from live performance to cinema. In his third movie *Jailhouse Rock* he played a young prisoner who became a rock star. This storyline allowed Presley to **showcase**² his **signature**³ **quiff**⁴, his **brazen**⁵ **sneer**⁶ and, of course, the manic **leg-and-hip-shaking**⁷ "Elvis the Pelvis" dance idolised by teenagers, but **loathed**⁸ by their parents.

The song, opened by two instantly-recognisable guitar **chords**⁹ and a **snare drum**¹⁰, was inspired by a scene in the film where the **inmates**¹¹ **put on a show**¹². Using the names of real criminals, songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller **summed up**¹³ a **boisterous**¹⁴ party in five verses of **rhyiming couplets**¹⁵. The third verse, in which two men dance together, **came under inevitable scrutiny**¹⁶, yet has since been **embraced**¹⁷ by the LGBTQ+ community who believe it to be a reference to "homoerotics behind bars"!

Rolling Stone magazine described the lyrics of the track as "decidedly **silly**¹⁸" and "**tongue-in-cheek**¹⁹" but **praised**²⁰ Presley's "straight²¹ rock & roll" **delivery**²² "overlooking²³ the jokes." It was a massive hit, becoming his sixth American **chart topper**²⁴ and the first ever song to enter the UK charts at number one. One of Elvis' defining songs, it established his reputation as the undisputed King of Rock & Roll. ☺



Elvis Presley featured on a promotional poster for the movie *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), directed by Richard Thorpe.

to throw a party: this means 'to have a party' and is an American colloquialism.

Join: American slang for a place where people meet.

knocked out: this adjective refers to prisoners' position in society.

I ever did see: the auxiliary is often used for emphasis in affirmative phrases.

Sad Sack: a World War Two US Army nickname for a loser.

Shifty Henry: a famous jazz musician, not actually a criminal.

Bugs/Bugsy: Ben "Bugsy" Siegel was a 1920s gangster operating in Las Vegas.

to stick around: an informal phrasal verb meaning "to stay nearby".

to get my kicks: an idiom meaning to enjoy something.

The warden²⁵ **threw a party** in the county jail
The prison band was there and they began to **wail**²⁶
The band was jumpin' and the **joint** began **to swing**
You should've heard those **knocked out jailbirds** sing

Chorus
Let's rock
Everybody, let's rock
Everybody in the whole cell block
Was dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock

Spider Murphy played the tenor saxophone
Little Joe was **blowin'**²⁸ on the **slide trombone**²⁹
The drummer boy from Illinois **went crash, boom, bang**
The whole rhythm section was the **Purple Gang**

Let's rock
Everybody, let's rock
Everybody in the whole cell block
Was dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock

Number 47 said to number three
"You're the cutest jailbird **I ever did see**

I sure would be delighted with your company
Come on and do the Jailhouse Rock with me"

Chorus
Sad Sack was sittin' on a block of stone
Way over in the corner **weepin'**³⁰ all alone
The warden said, "Hey, **buddy**³¹, **don't you be no square**
If you can't find a partner, use a wooden chair"

Chorus
Shifty Henry said to **Bugs**, "**For Heaven's sake**
No one's lookin', now's the chance to make a break"
Bugsy turned to Shifty and he said, "**Nix nix**
I wanna **stick around** a while and **get my kicks**"

Chorus
Dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock, dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock
Dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock, dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock
Dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock

to swing: slang for to dance.

jailbirds: this term for prisoners is based on the image of **caged birds**²⁷.

went crash, boom, bang: to make a lot of noise.

Purple Gang: a criminal gang operating in Detroit in the 1920s.

Fergal Kavanagh runs the website www.tuneintoenglish.com, the web's largest free resource for learning English through pop music.



don't you be no square: the double negative is often incorrectly used in songs. A 'square' is slang for a conventional, boring person.

for Heaven's sake: an idiomatic phrase expressing frustration or irritation.

make a break: a 'jailbreak' is an escape from prison.

Nix nix: meaning 'no, no', the songwriters needed a rhyme with 'kicks'.

SCAN & WATCH



Scan this QR code with your smartphone or tablet and listen to the official song on YouTube while reading the lyrics.



SCAN, READ & LISTEN
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UPPER INTERMEDIATE B2

GLOSSARY

- 1 **pivotal:** cruciale
- 2 **to showcase:** mostrare
- 3 **signature:** caratteristico
- 4 **quiff:** ciuffo
- 5 **brazen:** sfacciato
- 6 **sneer:** sogghigno
- 7 **leg-and-hip-shaking:** oscillazione di gambe e finachi
- 8 **to loath:** odiare
- 9 **chords:** accordi
- 10 **snare drum:** rullante
- 11 **inmates:** detenuti
- 12 **to put on a show:** mettere in scena uno spettacolo
- 13 **to sum up:** riassumere
- 14 **boisterous:** rumoroso
- 15 **rhyiming couplets:** rima baciata
- 16 **to come under scrutiny:** essere sottoposto a esame
- 17 **to embrace:** abbracciare
- 18 **silly:** sciocco
- 19 **tongue-in-cheek:** ironico
- 20 **to praise:** lodare
- 21 **straight:** diretto
- 22 **delivery:** esecuzione
- 23 **to overlook:** ignorare
- 24 **chart topper:** numero uno in classifica
- 25 **warden:** guardiano
- 26 **to wail:** piangere
- 27 **caged birds:** uccelli in gabbia
- 28 **to blow:** soffiare
- 29 **slide trombone:** trombone a scivolo
- 30 **to weep:** piangere
- 31 **buddy:** amico