

# *Elvis Presley*

A Southern Life

JOEL WILLIAMSON    FOREWORD BY TED OWNBY

ELVIS PRESLEY



ELVIS  
PRESLEY

A SOUTHERN LIFE

JOEL WILLIAMSON

WITH DONALD L. SHAW

FOREWORD BY TED OWNBY

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*For Anna, Alethea, William, and Joelle*



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# FOREWORD

TED OWNBY

People respond to Elvis Presley with some pretty powerful emotions. People love him for some things, laugh at him for others, feel almost desperately sad about his decline and wasted potential, and sometimes get angry at him or people close to him.

In the 1950s the main emotions seem to have been lust and also fear. From 1954 to 1958, Elvis Presley's music in sound, look, and movement so appealed to young women that by his early twenties he became the subject of extraordinary female sexual fascination. They (not Sam Phillips or Tom Parker or even Presley himself) made Elvis Presley a powerful cultural figure, and for four years his appearances in person and on television and, less importantly, his recordings made him the subject of unprecedented public lust as a figure of sexual desire for people who, by the standards of their day, were not supposed to express or even possess such sexual desires.

Elvis Presley responded to these fascinations by performing onstage for only four years, and then by taking advantage of numerous opportunities to make money through the movies and to pursue sexual experiences with lots of young women. He did virtually nothing creative from 1958 to 1968, the year of his comeback television special, and only rarely and perhaps accidentally made music of much consequence. His fans stayed with him, though he feared he was not gaining many new fans, and in the last decade of his life he performed to loving but aging crowds in Las Vegas and in second-tier settings in smaller cities. He and his managers, bodyguards, and other supporters made choices that kept him in an unappealing, aesthetically unimaginative state in which he made uninspiring movies and (with a few exceptions) uninspiring music that relied on the

fact that he was already a sex symbol. He lived an unhappy adulthood, fearful of bad publicity, overweight, oversexed, and overprotected, and took far more pills than human beings should take. The pills killed him.

That is a quick and far from complete summary of Joel Williamson's biography of Elvis Presley. Any book on a well-studied individual is bound to say things most readers already know or address topics that will be familiar. Most books on Presley have at least mentioned his rising from Southern poverty and obscurity, confounding categories about musical genre, race, and class, disturbing television censors and the parents of young women with his music and movement, and displaying unique musical creativity and maybe losing it. Scholars have analyzed Presley and his relationships with music<sup>1</sup> and race<sup>2</sup> and religion<sup>3</sup> and celebrity<sup>4</sup> and cultural rebellion.<sup>5</sup> Williamson's book draws from all of those approaches, but above all it is a book about Presley and sexual desire—the desire young women had for Presley, his desires for them, how both affected his life as an artist, and how all of those became intertwined with efforts to keep desire alive into Presley's middle age and beyond his death. The book seriously studies things that now seem clichés or easy jokes—squealing young women chasing performers into their dressing rooms, the phrase “Elvis has left the building,” wardrobe changes and handing out scarves, passing encounters with actresses, pageant winners, and other fans, and entourage members who attracted women by asking if they'd like to meet Elvis. The important female

1. Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994); Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1999).

2. Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

3. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

4. Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

5. Vernon Chadwick, ed., *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); E. Warren Perry, Jr., ed., *Echoes of Elvis: The Cultural Legacy of Elvis Presley* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2011); Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

figures in Presley's life, Gladys Presley, Priscilla Beaulieu Presley, Linda Thompson, Ginger Alden, and Lisa Marie Presley, all are crucial to the story. As Williamson argues, Presley loved being loved, and that craving did not always lead in creative or happy directions.

Historians of Elvis Presley see the mid-1950s as a time of impressive and creative musical experimentation as the young man and his friends made new music out of a fascinating mixture of other available, mostly Southern, forms of music. Williamson emphasizes that this period of Presley's life was dominated by young women who responded to his music. The music was in fact sometimes creative, but soon it hardly mattered, since in public appearances no one could hear it. What the author of *Crucible of Race* and *William Faulkner* and other important works brings to the topic is a lifetime of provocative scholarship on the relationships between race and sexuality in southern history.<sup>6</sup> He helps us understand the young Presley in the settings where he heard and started to make music—fair, church, honky-tonk, public park, the *Louisiana Hayride*, the New York television shows—in part to show the dynamics of who was there, what was expected, and what his rebellion rebelled against. The young women screaming at Presley get their own history here, and Williamson discusses them through the combined histories of Southern white women who had been valued above all for purity and self-control and plain-folk evangelicals whose religion encouraged plenty of expressive music but discouraged open display of sexual desire.<sup>7</sup>

6. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

7. On young women in the mid-twentieth-century South, see Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). On Elvis Presley's female fans, see Mary Elizabeth Lasseter, "'That's Alright, Mama, Any Way You Do': Elvis, Sexuality, and Changing Southern Womanhood" (MA thesis, University of Mississippi, 2002). On Elvis Presley and female partners, see Alanna Nash, *Baby, Let's Play House: Elvis and the Women Who Loved Him* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).



In response both to the frenzy of young women fans and to his own performance style onstage, Presley, even more than most other popular musicians, had to defend himself against charges that he posed a threat to good morals. He found those charges amazing and troubling, but he took advantage of female sexual desire for him from 1954 to his death, had physical relationships with countless young women, and lived in fear that the nature of his lifestyle would undermine his public support. Presley wanted to walk a line between being the object of desire and being a decent, religious, and patriotic American, but he frequently failed. Williamson makes a great deal of Presley's fears that a book by some of the bodyguards he had fired would reveal him as lecherous and indulgent.

Williamson argues that the contours of Presley's life were set by 1958, when he was twenty-three years old. Presley got stuck as the star in a grand drama about desire, and he enjoyed its benefits too much to break away from its limitations. One turning point came in 1968, when Presley surprised many people with a television special that was far more creative in music, dance, and look than most expected from a standard Christmas musical television special. Making what many saw as a comeback, Presley tried some things that were new, accepted some clothing choices that led to the style that defined him in his final decade, and, as Williamson emphasizes, played some older music surrounded by female fans who were no longer girls but grown women. The show was a high point because it once again pointed to Presley as a creative figure and object of desire. After that, Presley played primarily to older, loving fans in live performances, and his final years were generally sad and painful for the performer, his family and friends, and his fans. In retrospect, most of Presley's shows in the 1970s represented a long swan song.

I came to this book as a reader for Oxford University Press, and I found that it made an impression on me for the ways it mixes good scholarship with extraordinary empathy for a troubled and often frustrating individual. As I first read the manuscript, I found myself hoping, no matter how irrationally, that Presley could turn things around, and Williamson ponders some of the possibilities he considered. And I found myself wanting to hear and see performances I had never encountered. I watched the Comeback Special and the Aloha Special and listened to

the early recordings. The book left me in a bit of a daze, and in truth, although it is a long book, I wanted it, like a really good concert, to keep going. With its focus on a unique, sometimes bizarre story, and with some details it is still hard to fathom, Williamson's book is not a case study of the problems of capitalism or mass culture or patriarchy. Nor, certainly, is it a celebrity biography. It is, instead, a thoughtful story of a fascinating individual life, and it is less about drawing conclusions and more about telling stories, often stories full of complications and context and extraordinary details. By emphasizing the relationships between Elvis Presley and the people who seemed to have mattered to him most—his female fans—the book helps us connect Presley's music more broadly to the social changes of Presley's time and more specifically to the uniqueness of his own personal circumstances. The book may not help us love its subject more or cause us to love him less, but it helps us understand him a lot better by seeing him in relation to the people who wanted so much from him.

So, what's new about Williamson's book? Is it just another story of the accomplishments, failings, and demise of a creative and influential individual? Many of the works on Elvis Presley deal with his Southern roots, his rebelliousness, his fans, certainly his music, and his extraordinary rise and personal and artistic decline. This volume will no doubt affect different readers in different ways, but I suspect its most unique, most powerful feature is its suggestion that the roots of Presley's failures lay in the roots of his rise to popularity. The mixture of youth, sex, race, and religion that made Elvis Presley's body and music so exciting and transgressive to his female fans and left Presley stuck in an identity created in his early twenties also let loose the mixture of easy sex, self-importance, and desire to cling to youth that were central to his failings and demise. Elvis Presley, as Joel Williamson shows, was not just another hero with big flaws. More important, the reasons for Presley's success were what ultimately led to his decline.

University of Mississippi

June 2014



## P R E F A C E

Mississippi and Memphis are fascinating places. I suppose I always knew this, but it came home to me forcefully in 1984, when I taught at Millsaps College in Jackson as Eudora Welty Visiting Professor and at Rhodes College in Memphis. My hidden agenda in coming out from North Carolina was to pursue research for a book on William Faulkner. As the year progressed, however, I became increasingly interested in Elvis Presley in a scholarly way. In February of that year I visited Graceland. It was not crowded, not rushed at all, and the experience of the visitor much less structured than it is today.

On July 28, 1954, ten weeks after the initial Supreme Court Brown decision integrating public schools, Elvis sang “That’s All Right” in the Overton Shell in Memphis. It was a black man’s song, and white women went wild at the sight of Elvis’s body—this beautiful young white male body—in motion as he sang. During the months that followed, “Elvis mania” swelled while the white South floated in dread, waiting for the Court’s promised next move. How would integration be enforced? By federal soldiers with fixed bayonets as in Reconstruction after the Civil War? By Yankee policemen, such as federal marshals or the FBI? What would our girls do?

I began to ponder the question: “Why Elvis?” Why this amazing phenomenon springing up so suddenly, so powerfully from the soil of Southern culture and influencing people all around the globe?

Teenage girls in America created “Elvis.” Why were these girls there in the Elvis venue in 1954, 1955, 1956, and 1957? Why did they express themselves sexually in such a revolutionary way?

These young women belonged to a very special generation in American history. They were teenagers, born as the Great Depression ended and World War II began. During the war, their early childhoods were often marked by absent fathers and, essentially, “single mothers.” Some sixteen million men were away in the armed services and more than 400,000 of these were killed in combat. Millions more men were engaged in war work, often at a distance from home. A girl who turned sixteen in 1955 would have been born in 1939. She would have been two years old when America entered the war and six when it was over. Until late 1945 and early 1946, many of these girls lived with and among married but “single mothers” who, of necessity, did the work of two parents. It was a familial experience, unmatched in magnitude and duration in America since the Civil War.

During the war, all the girls in Elvis’s audiences had lived in a world of man-made death and destruction. After the war, they lived in families that were virtually obsessive in their desire to produce children and acquire houses, cars, and clothes—to create all the good things of life.

The veterans who came home after World War II did not want to re-live the war in memory. They did not often talk about the slaughter they had witnessed overseas. Good men in that age were not supposed to flinch or cry, but rather absorb their physical and emotional hits and go resolutely on. And so they did, these men who were children during the heady prosperity of the 1920s, survived the Great Depression of the 1930s, and fought a desperate, obviously necessary and clearly moral war to the bitter end and won. They dedicated the remainder of their lives to fathering children and working diligently to ensure the perpetual comfort of their families. Ideally, their wives would stay home and care for these children.

After World War II, as very young girls, the females in Elvis’s audiences had seen their mothers’ bellies swell huge with pregnancy as often as nature allowed—once, twice, three times and more—while an increasing number of their younger brothers and sisters clutched at her sagging skirts. They helped their mothers mind their younger siblings, and they also helped neighboring mothers mind their children, all the tots and toddlers of the boomer generation. Babysitting—surrogate

motherhood—became a new word to fit a novel and pervasive American institution as teenage girls were enlisted to help care for the sudden and massive flood of infants, toddlers, and tiny children that filled to overflowing the homes of the nation. In the lives of their own mothers and other mothers all around them, they saw their own future rise inexorably before them. They were slated to marry hard-working young men, bear child after child, and stay at home. Why did Elvis attract them?

The two key words, I realized, are “Southern culture.” Elvis is the creature of that little postage stamp of earth in northeastern Mississippi that also gave birth to William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams. William Faulkner was born in New Albany, less than thirty miles northwest of the tiny shotgun house in which Elvis was born; Tennessee Williams was born in the Episcopal rectory in Columbus, about sixty miles south of Tupelo. Why did America’s greatest writer in the twentieth century, America’s greatest playwright in the twentieth century, and America’s greatest entertainer in the twentieth century emerge from this same place? The answer, I think, lies in the history of the South and the particular history of the region.

A hundred years before Elvis was born, this land was populated and controlled by Native Americans, the Chickasaws. By the 1830s nearly all of the Indians were moved west to Oklahoma, and the land was quickly filled with African Americans and European Americans, with slaves and slaveholders, and with the plain folk of the Old South. Slavery dictated relations between men and women, and further it promoted a class structure that was hierarchical. Elvis was highly conscious of his place in that social hierarchy. Everyone born and reared in these Southern communities is conscious of his or her place. It is not so much a matter of simple class divisions as it is a matter of “who your people are.” What does your family name mean, and how do you yourself fit into your family and clan and community? Elvis was well down in the hierarchy, and he never attempted to climb higher on the social ladder, regardless of his considerable wealth and global fame.

Perhaps Elvis knew enough to know that elite Memphis would not have accepted him anyway. Money can help one make it in Memphis,

but not within a generation. Even so, poor boys and girls who do make it often do aspire to the columned mansion with surrounding grounds that they associate with gentility. Elvis bought that symbol when he acquired Graceland.

Graceland was created as a show piece, verily a signal to the world of wealth, social eminence, and elite culture. Elvis's sense of aesthetics alone was a gulf separating Elvis and his people from the elite of Memphis whose wealth was comparable to his own. When he moved in, one of the first things he did to change the landscape was to add a mobile home. When Elvis died, there were three mobile homes, two of them conspicuously large. In the later years a nurse who would monitor Elvis's drug addiction would work out of one of those trailers. Elvis was not at all a social rebel, no leveler of classes. But race and gender were other matters.

Looking at Elvis in 1984 and considering the matter of race, I very soon picked up on the Sam Phillips story—this Memphis white man who was recording black musicians and who allegedly said something to the effect that if he could just find a white singer with the Negro sound—the Negro feel—he could get rich. Phillips is a highly significant figure in the evolution of Southern culture. Had he been in politics or journalism, scholars would have called him a “Southern white liberal” and put him in the camp with such movers and shakers as Frank Porter Graham, president of the progressive University of North Carolina and Ralph McGill of the Atlanta *Constitution*. Phillips did not wait for the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* to begin deliberately undermining the racial establishment in the South. He was a “cross-over” person, a person of one race who relates closely to the other race. Among whites in the early to mid-twentieth century these persons were rare but not unique. Often they were church people, professional or lay. They were also writers, and very often musicians. Given the compelling character of African American religion and music, this is not surprising. In Elvis, Sam Phillips found his white man with the Negro feel. Soon white women did too, and then the rest of us.

Let's consider Elvis's first great audience—that is, his early audience in the flesh. Those Memphis audiences in 1954, 1955, and into

1956 were vastly white, female, and young. The very first audience was Southern, even “Deep South Southern.” In photographs the girls appear to be fourteen years old or in that neighborhood. The person who was female, white, Southern, and fourteen in 1954 was born about 1940 as the country was plunging deeper into World War II. Perhaps her father was away, among the millions of men in the American military. The need for soldiers was so great that men who had been in Parchman Prison with Elvis’s father, Vernon, were released to join the service. Her father might not have been in the military but he might have taken a job in war work away from home, as did Vernon. In any event, all Americans suffered some of the physical and psychological pain of wartime. Priscilla Presley, for example, lost her father, a Navy pilot, in a crash that occurred just as the war came to a close.

Soon after that war ended, the Cold War with the Communists began, bringing with it omnipresent fears of the atomic bomb. At school, say, in the fourth grade, this girl might have participated in an air raid drill, crawling under her desk when the alarm sounded. Another killing war broke out in Korea when she was ten and wound down to an uneasy ceasefire when she was thirteen. This girl’s family doggedly pursued the good life under the real danger of nuclear war and amidst fears of Communist subversion.

A threat of a very different order arose in May 1954, when the Supreme Court decided that her junior high school would be desegregated. Desegregation was a vital and potentially violent issue in the South and especially so in the Deep South, the black belt South, the Bible-belt South, the South where Elvis would find his first great live audiences. That is where Elvis found this girl who, with her friends, responded to him so enthusiastically he did not know what was happening. For the girls, it was escape from cultural restraint, however temporarily it might turn out to be for some. It was more than the music.

In the Southern white mind, race and sex are inextricably mixed, and it is not difficult to accept the idea that the primary purpose of segregation was to keep black males away from white females. Ideally, white women were expected to be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive,



while the men provide and protect. Purity, of course, meant purity of body, but it also meant purity of mind and thought. No lusting by women allowed; no sex outside of marriage; no overt admiration and appetite for the male body; no overt expression of awareness of themselves as sexual creatures.

Then Elvis—with his mix of black and white rhythms, with his seeming indifference to race, with his exciting moving body—came along. During the months that followed his performance at Overton Shell in Memphis, “Elvis mania” swelled. In the audiences, the girls shrieked, danced, and stomped in expressions of their sexuality. Not every teenage girl in the lower Mississippi Valley became an Elvis girl, but enough did, and the movement spread through the black belt South, first in places where the numbers of black people relative to white people ran highest and where the tension over integration was greatest—from east Arkansas and Texas across to north Florida and up into eastern Virginia. Wherever Elvis played, the girls responded in the same demonstrative style as his first audiences.

“His audience was his true love,” Priscilla Presley wrote in her book, *Elvis and Me*, her 1985 remembrance of her ex-husband. The engine that drove Elvis Presley for the rest of his life has never been stated more clearly. These teenage girls, not Elvis’s managers, created “The First Elvis,” without whom the Elvis that the world came to know and often celebrate during his life and after his death would not have existed. From 1954 to 1957, when Elvis performed live on stage, it was as if he and the teenage girls in his audience existed in a huge and protective bubble, alone, ecstatic, and away from the stultifying world.

Elvis became—and remains—a worldwide phenomenon. Graceland is one of the most visited homes in America, a quintessential piece of Southern culture where the spirit of a shy young man still seems to wander the house and its grounds. Elvis’s dream included a son who would look like him and be with him in Graceland. But no daughter could look more like her father than his daughter, Lisa Marie. The feminine in the masculine and the masculine in the feminine are living contradictions, phenomena like no other in Western Civilization where dualism is virtually a religion. No duality may be more sacred than sexual duality.

No other phenomenon asserts more beautifully, more perfectly the oneness of us all. Elvis had a treasured masculine side...and a sensitive feminine side too. Perhaps we all do.

The gender world in which Margaret Mitchell of *Gone with the Wind* came to maturity was precisely the world into which the Elvis girls were born. The culture in which she suffered as a woman and finally flourished as a writer in the late 1930s was the culture that poured into the bodies of the Elvis girls virtually as they first stirred to life. In *Gone with the Wind*, it was Scarlett, not Melanie, who took charge of her life. Just two decades after publication of the novel, it seemed like the audiences for Elvis were filled with women who reflected Scarlett, cautiously bold, tentatively independent and, for a few hours at least, openly sexual. In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett raised a pistol and fired a bullet through the head of an intruding bummer who invaded her plantation home at Tara. As she did so, she glanced up at Melanie dragging a sword for their defense to the top of the stairs. Why, Scarlett exclaimed, she's just like me! As it turned out, it was not just Southern women who responded to Elvis's unique blend of musical cultures. It was American women, and in time women everywhere, and men, too.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Donald Shaw, Kenan professor emeritus of journalism at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Professor Shaw met with me biweekly for the last several years and recruited special assistants to follow the manuscript through many changes, rewrites, and revisions. There have been many helpers. I mention in particular Melanie Hudak, Dr. Tom Terry, and my friend, Chapel Hill writer Joanna Catherine Scott. I appreciate my long association with the late Frank Ryan of the University Department of History. Of course I am grateful to Oxford editor Susan Ferber. Thank you also to my seminar students with whom I shared my research and insights, and who, in the back and forth discussion, inspired me with new ideas. Without all these brilliant and generous people, twenty-five years of labor would never have come to fruition in the publication of this book. Of course I owe a special debt of gratitude to my wife, Anna, and my children, Alethea, William, and Joelle. I feel I have been supported tenderly.

Joel Williamson  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina  
December 2013



Elvis Presley's birth home in Tupelo, Mississippi. Photograph in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



Elvis with his parents, Gladys and Vernon Presley, c. 1938. Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.



Elvis with his  
parents, 1950.  
Joseph A. Tunzi/  
JAT Publishing.



Elvis on stage  
with the Blue  
Moon Boys,  
1954. Joseph A.  
Tunzi/ JAT  
Publishing.





Publicity photo of the Blue Moon Boys: Scotty Moore, Elvis Presley, and Bill Black, c. 1955. Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.

**ARENA BUILDING**  
**Cape Girardeau, Mo.**  
**WEDNESDAY - JULY 20th**  
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Presenting... **★ ELVIS PRESLEY** ★  
 with... ★ "Blue Moon" ★ "Good Rockin'!"  
**SCOTTY AND BILL**  
**WANDA JACKSON**  
**BUD DECKELMAN**  
**JOHNNY DAUME**  
**AND HIS OZARK RIDGE RUNNERS**

Elvis Presley with Scotty and Bill poster, Cape Girardeau, Mo., July 1955. Taken at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee. Thomas Hawk, photographer, Flickr.



Elvis on his way to fame at the *Louisiana Hayride*, 1954. Louisiana State University-Shreveport Archives and Special Collections.



An impromptu session with Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley, and Johnny Cash at the Sun Record Studios in Memphis, Tennessee, on December 4, 1956. Originally published in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. Courtesy of the Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



Mae Axton and Elvis Presley hold *Heartbreak Hotel* in 1956, just after the record sold a million copies. The photograph is from Ms. Axton's private collection.



## **‘Heartbreak’ duo helped take Elvis off a lonely street**

Headline and 1956 photo from article on Elvis and Mae Axton, who wrote “Heartbreak Hotel,” just after the record sold 1 million copies, 1956. Published in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Courtesy of the Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



Portrait of a young Elvis. Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



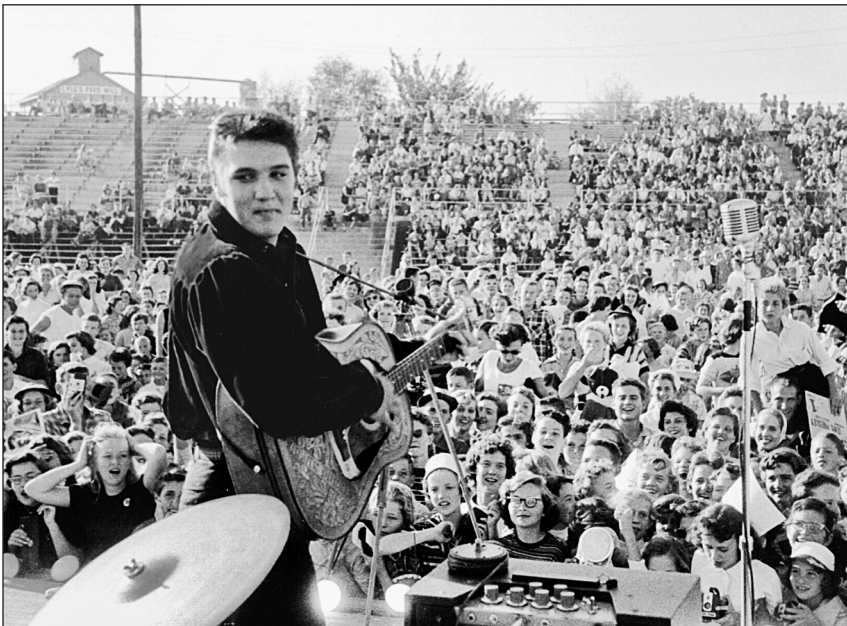
Elvis rehearsing with band, swiveling hips, on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, September 9, 1956. Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.



Elvis with crowd  
in Florida, 1956.  
Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT  
Publishing Publishing.



Teenage girls add graffiti to the bottom of an Elvis movie poster, 1956. World Telegram & Sun photo by Phil Stanziola. Library of Congress LC-USZ62-114912.



Elvis in a matinee performance at the Alabama Fair and Dairy Show, Tupelo, Mississippi, September 26, 1956. Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.



“Jailhouse Rock”  
(1957). Joseph A.  
Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.



Last photo of Elvis  
with his parents,  
March 24, 1958.  
Memphis and  
Shelby County  
Room, Memphis  
Public Library  
& Information  
Center.





Elvis Presley was stationed in Grafenwoehr, Germany, in 1958. Courtesy of U.S. Army Garrison Grafenwoehr.



Colonel Tom Parker (far left) with Elvis on his return from Germany, 1960. Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



The façade of Graceland in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

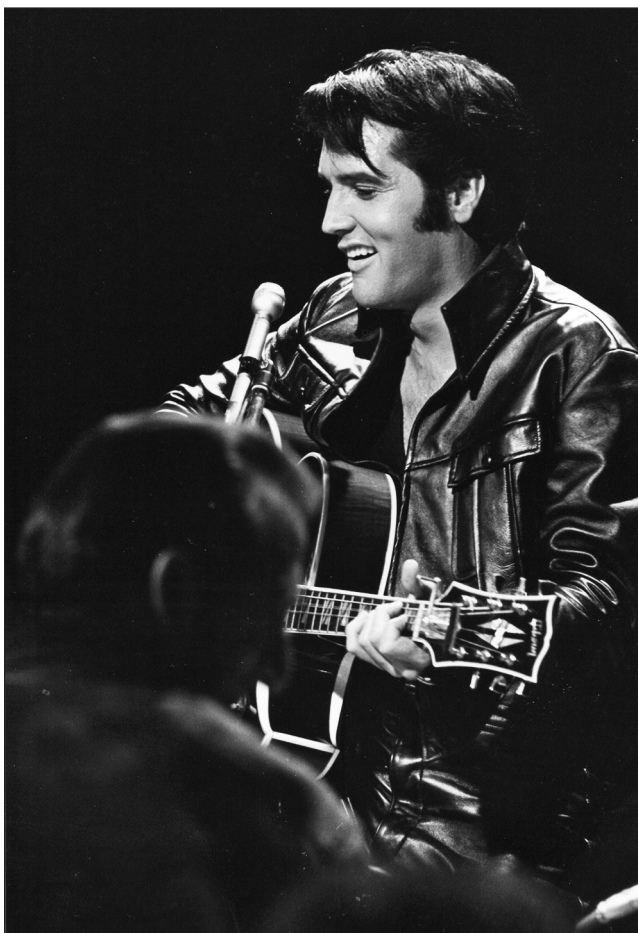


Elvis posing with a car in front of Graceland. Photographed by Charles A. Nicholas for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.





Elvis and Priscilla's wedding at the Aladdin Hotel, Las Vegas, May 1, 1967.

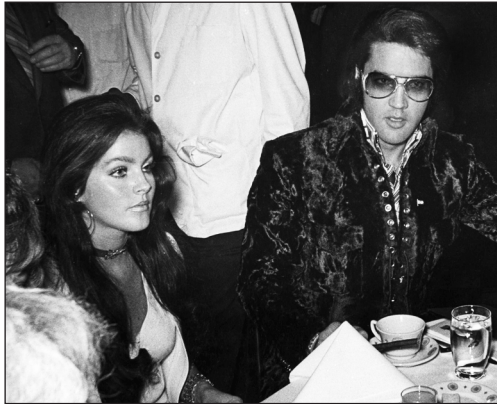


Elvis during his '68 Come-back Special on NBC. Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.

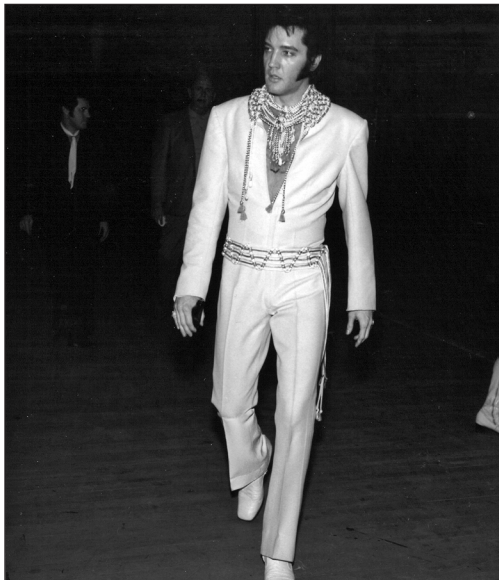
Elvis, Priscilla, and  
Lisa Marie, December  
1970. Joseph A. Tunzi/  
JAT Publishing.



Priscilla and Elvis at a  
Jaycees event honoring  
him as one of Ten  
Outstanding Young Men  
of the Nation, January  
1971. Memphis and  
Shelby County Room,  
Memphis Public Library  
& Information Center.



Elvis after a performance  
in Las Vegas, January or  
February 1970. Joseph A.  
Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.



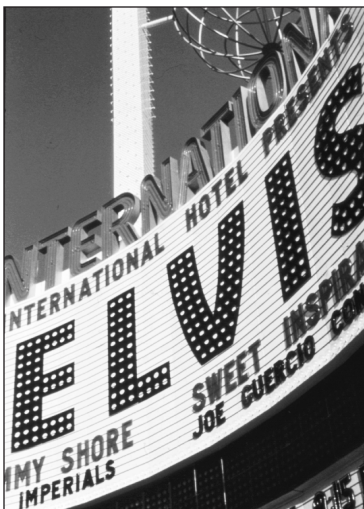




Elvis rehearsing in Las Vegas for his 1970 documentary, "Elvis: That's the Way It Is." Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.



Elvis Presley meets President Richard Nixon on December 21, 1970. White House Chief Photographer Oliver F. Atkins. General Services Administration. National Archives and Records Service. Office of Presidential Libraries. Office of Presidential Papers. Collection RN-WHPO: White House Photo Office Collection (Nixon Administration), 01/20/1969-08/09/1974.



Marquee of the International Hotel, Las Vegas, 1971. Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.

Elvis at  
Madison  
Square Garden,  
1972. Joseph  
A. Tunzi/ JAT  
Publishing.



“Elvis’ Personal Brand of Fireworks Lights the Night for Homecoming.”  
Article and photo covering the Elvis Concert at the Coliseum, Memphis,  
Tennessee, over the Bicentennial weekend, July 6, 1976. Staff photo by  
Ken Ross. Published in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. Memphis and Shelby  
County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



Elvis and Ginger Alden on vacation in Hawaii, March 1977. Joseph A. Tunzi/ JAT Publishing.



Mourners gather at the gates at Graceland on the day Elvis died, August 16, 1977. Photographed by Saul Brown. Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



Crying for the King. One woman consoles another in the crowd at Graceland on the day Elvis died. Photographed by Saul Brown. Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



# Death Captures Crown Of Rock And Roll —Elvis Dies Apparently After Heart Attack

By LAWRENCE BUSER  
 Elvis Presley died Tuesday, apparently after a heart attack, at Graceland Mansion. The 42-year-old 'king of rock and roll' was found unconscious in his night clothes at 2:30 p.m.  
 Presley was found by his road manager, Jim Esposito, and was taken by ambulance to Baptist Hospital's emergency room where he was pronounced dead at 3:30 p.m., police said. Hospital officials announced the death at 4 p.m.  
 Esposito told authorities he could find no sign that Presley was breathing and could not detect a heartbeat. He began emergency resuscitation efforts and called Memphis Fire Department ambulance.

Shelby County Medical Examiner Jerry Francisco, who performed an autopsy, said the death was due to "an erratic heart beat" but added that the exact cause of death may never be determined.  
 "There was severe cardiovascular disease present," Dr. Francisco told newsmen Tuesday night after the autopsy was performed. "He had a history of mild hypertension and some coronary artery disease. These two diseases may be responsible for cardiac arrhythmia, but the precise cause was not determined. Basically it was a natural death. The precise cause of death may never be discovered."  
 Initial police reports yesterday said homicide officers were investigating the

possibility of death from a heart attack or from an accidental overdose of drugs.  
 Francisco said, however, there was "no indication of any drug abuse of any kind." He said the only evidence of drugs involved those Presley was taking for his physical condition — mild hypertension and a colon problem.  
 Francisco said there would have been evidence of needle tracks in his arms or other parts of his body if illegal drugs were involved. He said there would have been evidence in or on his nose if cocaine had been involved.  
 He said death occurred between 9 a.m.

and 2 p.m. "There's no way to be more precise than that," Francisco said.  
 Dr. George Nichopoulos, Presley's personal physician, said last night he was not aware of "anything he did unusual yesterday (Monday)" and said "his father — Ginger Alden" was the last person to see Presley before his body was found about 2:15 p.m. or 2:30 p.m.  
 As news of Presley's death spread, telegrams and phone calls began pouring into Memphis from mourners and newsmen throughout the world wishing to either express condolences to Presley's survivors or to arrange lodging to attend the funeral, or both. Radio stations began playing Elvis music and record stores in Memphis and

other parts of the country reported a run on Elvis records.  
 Memphis Mayor Wyatt Chandler said flags on all city buildings would be flown at half staff until the funeral.  
 Police said they were told Presley had played racquetball at his home early Tuesday and quit about 6 a.m. when he told friends he was going to read.  
 Esposito found Presley in his night clothes in his second-floor bathroom. He said he could find no sign of breathing or heartbeat and immediately summoned an ambulance.  
 Nichopoulos was performing cardio-pulmonary resuscitation when the ambulance

arrived shortly after 2:30 p.m.  
 A Memphis Fire Department ambulance from Engine House 29 at 2:47 Elvis Presley Boulevard responded to the call at 2:53 p.m. and by 2:56 p.m. had taken Presley to the emergency room at Baptist Hospital in Midtown from his Whitehaven home seven miles away.  
 Martin Davis of Chattanooga, a construction projects engineer with K-Mart Discount Stores, said he was driving south on Elvis Presley Boulevard when an ambulance almost hit him as it turned into the driveway at Graceland.  
 "The ambulance damn near ran over me," he said. "It hit the gate as it was."  
 (Continued on Page 12)



## Elvis Went From Rags To Riches

By WILLIAM THOMAS  
 He was born in a two-room house in Tupelo, Miss., on Jan. 8, 1935, a nobody with a somebody destiny.  
 He was the twin who lived — the son of Vernon and Gladys Presley, who had been married two years earlier in Verona, Miss., amidst the Great Depression.  
 "We matched their names," his mother recalled later, "Jesse Garon and Elvis Aaron. Jesse died at birth. Maybe that is why Elvis is so dear to us."  
 For the next 12 years, the Presleys struggled for survival in Mississippi. Vernon Presley farmed while his wife toiled in shirt and dress factories. They moved to Memphis in 1948, but things didn't get better — at least not right away.  
 Mrs. Presley worked as a nurses' aide at St. Joseph Hospital. Elvis enrolled in L.O. Hughes High School and worked as an usher in a movie theater.  
 Briefly, he went out for the football team but had to quit in order to go to work. Although the family was so poor that they had to accept a charity Christmas hamper during the holidays, Presley, man-



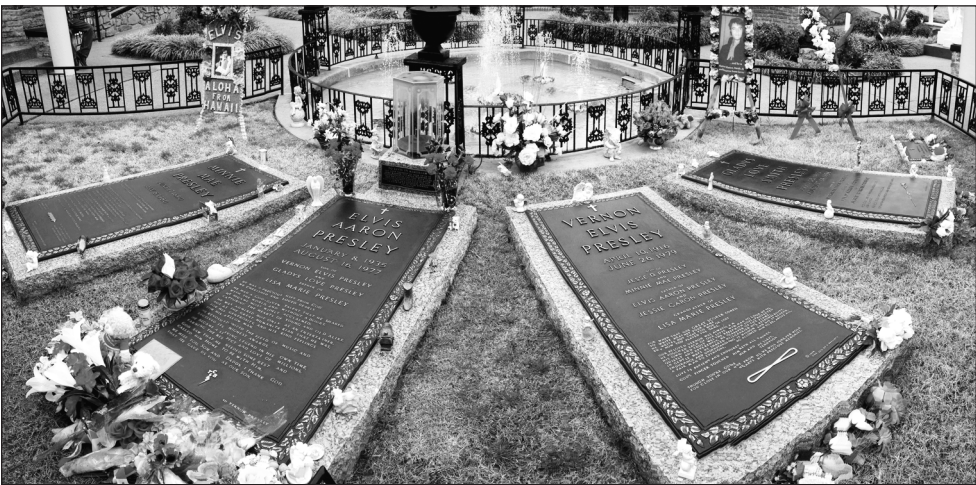
Hearse Takes Body Of Elvis Presley From Baptist Hospital

By Fred Griffith

## 'Are You Sure There's No Mistake?' —The Desired Answer Never Came

By TERRY KETTER announcement that earlier reports had tied other emergency cases into the hospital

The front page of the *Commercial Appeal* announcing Elvis's death, August 17, 1977. Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center.



Graceland Meditation Garden. Gravestones (from the left) of Elvis's grandmother, Minnie Mae Presley; Elvis Aaron Presley; Vernon Elvis Presley; and Gladys Love Smith Presley. A. Lee Bennett Jr/ Flickr <https://flic.kr/p/e51p3F>

