

ELVIS PRESLEY

BY PETER GURALNICK

ave you heard the news? . . . There's good rockin' tonight."

—Elvis Presley, the Hillbilly Cat, in his recording of the Roy Brown song, 1954

"The pure products of America go crazy."

—William Carlos Williams,
"Spring and All," 1923

The world was not prepared for Elvis Presley. The violence of its reaction to him ("unspeakably untalented," a "voodoo of frustration and defiance") more than testified to this. Other rock & rollers had a clearer focus to their music. An egocentric genius like Jerry Lee Lewis may even have had a greater talent. Certainly Chuck Berry or Carl Perkins had a keener wit. But Elvis had the moment. He hit like a Pan American flash, and the reverberations still linger from the shock of his arrival.

In some ways the reaction may seem to have been out of proportion, for Elvis Presley was in retrospect merely one more link in a chain of historical inevitability. His ducktail was already familiar from Tony Curtis, the movie star whose pictures Elvis haunted at the Suzore No. 2 in Memphis; the hurt, truculent expression we had seen before in Marlon Brando's

motorcycle epic, *The Wild One*. His vulnerability was mirrored by James Dean, whose first movie, *East of Eden*, was released in April 1955, just as Elvis's own career was getting under way. ("He knew I was a friend of Jimmy's," said Nicholas Ray, director of Dean's second film, *Rebel Without a Cause*, "so he got down on his knees before me and began to recite whole pages from the script. Elvis must have seen *Rebel* a dozen times by then and remembered every one of Jimmy's lines.") His eponymous sneer and the whole attitude that it exemplified—not derision exactly but a kind of scornful pity, indifference, a pained acceptance of all the dreary details of square reality—was foreshadowed by Brando, John Garfield, the famous picture of Robert Mitchum after his 1948 pot bust. Even his music had its historical parallels, not just in the honky-tonk clatter of Bill Haley



Elvis warming up backstage in his heyday, before he was quarantined in Hollywood.

and His Comets but in the genuine popular success that singers like Frankie Laine and Johnnie Ray—and Al Jolson, Mildred Bailey, even Bing Crosby in an earlier era—had enjoyed in bringing black vocal stylings to the white marketplace.

None of it seemed to matter somehow. To anyone who was alive at the time, Presley was, and remains, a truly revolutionary force. Country singer Bob Luman, a near-contemporary, described in Paul Hemphill's *Nashville Sound* what might almost be considered a typical first reaction. "This cat came out in red pants and a green coat and a pink shirt and socks, and he had this sneer on his face and he stood behind the mike for five minutes, I'll bet, before he made a move. Then he hit his guitar a lick, and he broke two strings. I'd been playing ten years, and I hadn't broken a *total* of two strings. So there he was, these two strings dangling, and he hadn't done anything yet, and these high school girls were screaming and fainting and running up to the stage, and then he started to move his hips real slow like he had

The solid-gold rocker.

a thing for his guitar. That was Elvis Presley when he was about nineteen, playing Kilgore, Texas. He made chills run up my back, man, like when your hair starts grabbing at your collar. For the next nine days he played one-nighters around Kilgore, and after school every day me and my girl would get in the car and go wherever he was playing that night. That's the last time I tried to sing like Webb Pierce and Lefty Frizzell."

It was the same for countless fans and for other performers, too. To Waylon Jennings he was "like an explosion, really." To Buddy Holly, "Without Elvis none of us could have made it." As for Elvis Presley, the center of the storm, it was something over which he professed to have no control. Over and over again in the course of his life, he refused to speculate on the reasons for his success, putting it down to luck, blind instinct, anything but conscious design. "I don't know what it is," he said to C. Robert Jennings of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1956. "I just fell into it, really. My daddy and I were laughing about it the other day. He looked at me and said, 'What happened, El? The last thing I can remember is I was working in a can factory, and you

were driving a truck.' We all feel the same way about it still. It just . . . caught us up."

There it all is: the modesty, the deferential charm, the soft-spoken assumption of commonsense virtues (in this version even the tireless twitching and suggestive pelvic action are seen as involuntary reflex) that became the official Elvis. In many ways I am sure that this picture is accurate, and it undoubtedly conforms to the image that Elvis Presley had of himself. It tends to leave something out, however. What it leaves out is the drive and consuming ambition of the nineteen-year-old Elvis Presley, who possessed a sweeping musical intelligence, energies that could barely be contained, and a ferocious determination to escape the mold that had seemingly been set for him at birth. Even more, it ignores the extent to which his rebellion, his surly refusal of responsibility, his reaction to the stifling conformity of the time, could stand for an entire generation, taking in a social base of which he could scarcely have been aware, much less directly known. Most of all, though, this explanation, or lack of it, overlooks the music itself, a music that expressed a kind of pure joyousness, a sense of soaring release that in such self-conscious times as ours seems unlikely ever to be recaptured.

An early photo taken just before the first sessions for Sun.



He was born Elvis Aron Presley on January 8th, 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi, a child of hard times but an only child, adored and pampered by a mother who would walk him to school until he was in his teens. His twin, Jesse Garon, died at birth, and he was always to be reminded of this absence ("They say when one twin dies, the other grows up with all the quality of the other, too. . . . If I did, I'm lucky."), as if he were somehow incomplete, even down to his matching name. His first picture shows a little boy in overalls, sober in an oversize soft-brimmed hat similar to his

father's. He is flanked by parents who regard the camera with touching blank-faced looks that reflect neither expectation nor disappointment. His mother's hand rests on his father's shoulder; she is still young and pretty. And the child looks lost, waiflike, with that strange, familiar hurt look in his eyes, that unmistakable, unfathomable curl to his lips.

He grew up, schooled in all the classic virtues of small-town America: diffident, polite, siring and ma'aming his elders, hungry with an unfocused yearning that would have been impossible for him—or anyone of his background and generation—either to explicitly admit or implicitly deny. "My daddy was a common laborer," he said. "He didn't have any trade, just like I didn't have. He mostly drove trucks, and when he used to bring the truck home from the wholesale grocery, I used to sit in it by the hour." The car radio was his first exposure not to music necessarily but to the world outside.



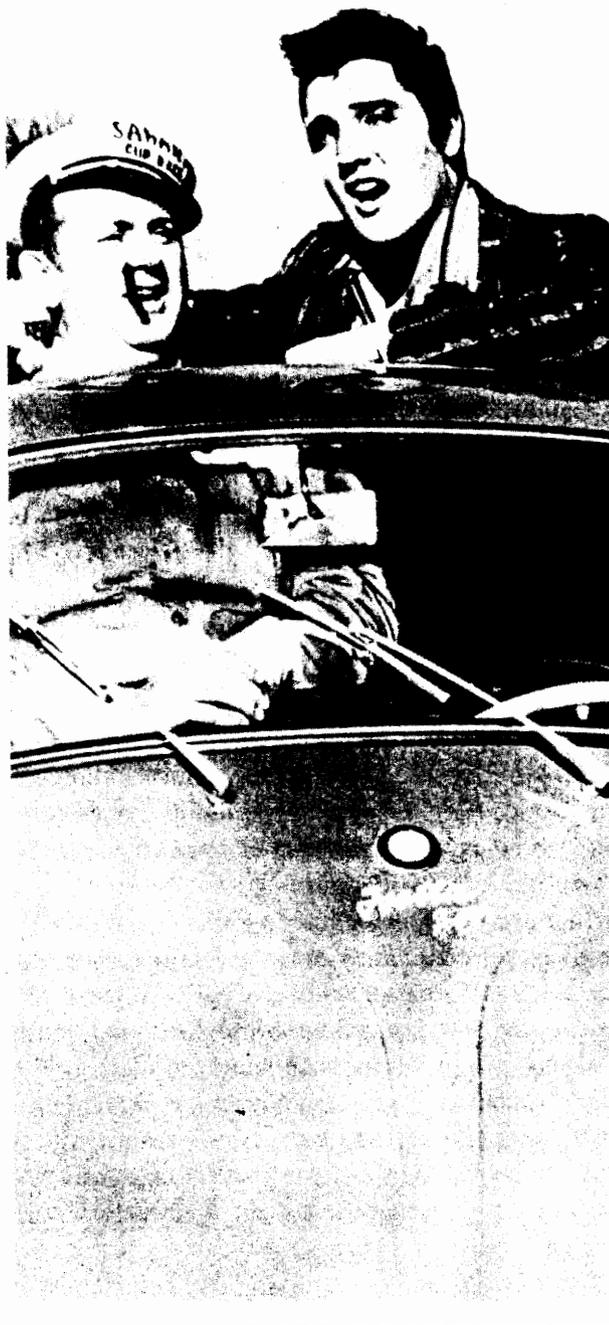
Sam Phillips, entrepreneur of vision, founder of Sun Records, first to record Elvis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison. Without him, there would have been no rock & roll.

Music, to begin with, came from the Pentecostal First Assembly of God church. "We were a religious family, going around together to sing at camp meetings and revivals. Since I was two years old all I knew was gospel music; that was music to me. We borrowed the style of our psalm singing from the early Negroes. We used to go to these religious singings all the time. The preachers cut up all over the place, jumping on the piano, moving every which way. The audience liked them. I guess I learned from them. I loved the music. It became such a part of my life it was as natural as dancing, a way to escape from the problems and my way of release."

There is another picture of Elvis and his parents, taken in 1956 after the phenomenal early success. In this picture Elvis is playing the piano; the mouths of all three are open, their eyes half-shut. They hold themselves stiffly and are evidently singing with fervent emotion. Both parents have put on weight; Vernon is still handsome in a beefy sort of way, but Gladys has taken on the bloated, starch-fed appearance of so many poor Southerners. She is forty-four but will die in only two years' time, her son's eternal and heartfelt sorrow. "I think of her nearly every single day," he said nearly five years later. "If I never do anything really wrong, it's all because of her. She wouldn't let me do anything wrong."

I can remember to my embarrassment the reaction that my friends and I had when we first saw the picture. We thought it was a joke. We thought that Elvis was putting us on; it seemed so clearly at odds with Elvis's rebel image and the mythology that, unable to construct from our own lives, we had erected around a pop idol. Today it is easier to recognize that out of this seeming contradiction (newness vs. tradition, rebellion vs. authority, sacred vs. profane) arose the tension that was rock & roll. Such thinking was at the time beyond the scope of our experience—and probably Elvis's as well.

He won a singing prize at ten, when his grammar school principal sponsored his appearance at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show. The song he sang, "Old Shep," was a bathetic C&W ballad about a boy and his dog that Red Foley had popularized and Elvis would record for RCA some ten years later. It is not difficult to imagine the tow-headed little boy standing on a chair so that he could be seen, and singing, unaccompanied, with that same throbbing emotion for which he would one day become famous. "I wore glasses, no music, and



Elvis with his "copilot," Colonel Tom Parker.

I won, I think it was fifth place. I got a whipping the same day, my mother whipped me for something. I thought she didn't love me."

When he was eleven, his parents got him a guitar ("I wanted a bicycle"). Teachers and relatives remember him carrying the guitar around with him everywhere he went. Elvis later compared his guitar playing to "someone beating on a bucket lid." He listened to the *Grand Ole Opry*, Roy Acuff, Eddy Arnold, Jimmie Rodgers's early records, and Bob Wills. He idolized the Blackwood Brothers and the

Statesmen Quartet, two prominent white gospel groups. Billy Eckstine, Bill Kenny and the Ink Spots were his favorite rhythm & blues performers. And he absorbed the blues from the radio and the pervasive contact that a poor white family like the Presleys, always living on the edge of town and respectability, would necessarily have with blacks. "I dug the real low-down Mississippi singers, mostly Big Bill Broonzy and 'Big Boy' Crudup. Although they would scold me at home for listening to them." When he was thirteen his family moved to Memphis. "We were broke, man, broke, and we left Tupelo overnight. Dad packed all our belongings in boxes and put them on top and in the trunk of a 1939 Plymouth. We just headed for Memphis. Things had to be better."

Memphis in the late Forties and early Fifties was a seedbed of musical activity. Never really much of a center for commercial country music, it had a raw hillbilly style and a distinguished blues tradition that went back to the Twenties. In 1950 Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson were broadcasting on station KWEM from West Memphis; WDIA, the "mother station of the Negroes" and the first black-operated radio outlet in the South, featured B. B. King and Rufus Thomas spinning records and performing daily. On Beale Street and in W. C. Handy Park you could hear all manner of blues singers and entertainers. And at 706 Union Avenue an ex-radio engineer and announcer from Florence, Alabama, named Sam Phillips had opened the Memphis Recording Service for "Negro artists in the South who wanted to make a record [but] just had no place to go."

Elvis in a pensive moment ponders the fate of the less fortunate: *He was not born to die in a plane crash.*



It sounds a little disarming, but Phillips in fact recorded Howlin' Wolf, Walter Horton, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Little Junior Parker and B. B. King, all

at the beginning of their careers. To begin with he leased his sides to the Biharis' West Coast RPM label and to the Chess brothers in Chicago. It was not until 1952 that he started his own Sun label. In the meantime, though, a quiet revolution was taking place. Many of the small independent promoters were becoming aware of it, and in Memphis, where there had long been a relaxed social, as well as musical, interchange, it was particularly noticeable. White kids were picking up on black styles—of music, dance, speech and dress. "Cat clothes" were coming in; bebop speech was all the rage; and Elvis Presley, along with Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Charlie Rich and all the other Southern children of the Depression who would one day develop the rockabilly style, was seeking his models in unlikely places.

In other ways Memphis was an oppressively impersonal urban dream for an only child, shy and strangely insecure, living in a city project, working jobs after school, going off by himself to play the guitar. High school was a fog. He went out for football and ROTC but failed to distinguish himself in this or any other way. He majored in shop, grew his hair long, carefully slicked it down and tried to grow sideburns from the time he started shaving, because, he said, he wanted to look like a truck driver. Which may or may not have gotten him kicked off the football team. Dressed anomalously in pink and black, he called attention only to his personal colorlessness and lived out typical adolescent fantasies of rebellion in teenage anonymity. "Nobody knew I sang, I wasn't popular in school, I wasn't dating anybody. In [my senior year] they entered me in another talent show. I came out and did my two songs and heard people kinda rumbling and whispering. It was amazing how popular I was in school after that."

Whether he was in fact popular even then is doubtful. Memories of rejection were inevitably clouded in the aftermath of success. Indeed it is as if in later years he set out deliberately to erase the loneliness of that time by gathering around him all the popular figures—football heroes, high school politicians, well-established Memphians—who would barely even speak to him then. For some twenty years of his life, as the so-called Memphis Mafia, they made up his personal retinue, subject to his every whim, devoted only to their chief. When he graduated from Humes High School in 1953, he was perceived by one schoolmate as an individual with "character, but he had no personality, if you

Elvis considers the proper tempo during one of his first sessions for RCA.



know what I mean. Just acted kind of goofy, sitting in the back of the class, playing his guitar. No one knew that he was ever going to be *anything*." When he got a job working on an assembly line at the Precision Tool Company, it seemed as if his life pattern was set.

One year later he had a record out, and everything was changed.

One of Sam Phillips's sidelights was a custom recording service where anyone could go in and make a record for two dollars a side. Sometime in the summer after graduation Elvis went in and cut two sides, "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin," stylized ballads that had been popular for Jan and Sandra Steele and the Ink Spots. He came back several times over the next few months to see if Sam Phillips might be interested in recording him professionally for the Sun Records label. Phillips put him off, though Elvis evidently made enough impression for Phillips to hold on to his address and phone number. Elvis was not singing professionally, but he had his mind on music at the time. He was always going to the all-night gospel sings at the Memphis Auditorium and that spring almost joined the Songfellows, a junior division of the renowned Blackwood Brothers Quartet.

In late spring, by Sam Phillips's calculation, he called Elvis to try out a demo on "Without You," still another ballad that met with minimal success. Phillips was more or less undeterred. He put Elvis together with Scotty Moore, a twenty-two-year-old guitar player who had been hanging around the studio and had recently persuaded Phillips to record his own group, Doug Poindexter's Starlite Wranglers, in one of the earliest gropings toward a rockabilly style. Elvis showed up at Scotty's apartment, wearing, says Scotty, "a pink suit, white shoes and the duck-tail. I thought my wife was going to go out the back door." Bill Black, the bass player for the Starlite Wranglers, wandered in and out without being overly impressed. Over the next few weeks, as Phil-



Otis Blackwell, one of the greatest R&B songwriters of all time, author of "Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up" for Elvis; "Great Balls of Fire" for Jerry Lee Lewis.

lips recalls (everyone's version of this crucial moment in history is a little bit different), they ran down song after song—country, ballads, blues. What they were looking for no one seemed quite sure of. What they got everybody knows.

"Over and over," said Marion Keisker, Sam Phillips's secretary, "I remember Sam saying, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.'" With Elvis, Phillips apparently found the key.

"That's All Right," a traditional blues by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, was the first number that actually jelled in July of 1954. According to legend it was worked out during a break between ballads. According to Scotty Moore the initial recording date took place only days after Scotty first met Elvis. "It wasn't intended to be a session at all. That was the reason only Bill and I were in the studio. Sam just wanted to see what he sounded like on tape. Then we were taking a break, I don't know, we were having Cokes and coffee, and all of a sudden Elvis started singing a song, jumping around and just acting the fool, and then Bill picked up his bass and he started acting the fool, too, and, you know, I started

playing with 'em. Sam, I think, had the door to the control room open—I don't know, he was either editing some tape or doing something—and he stuck his head out and said, 'What are you doing?' and we said, 'We don't know.' 'Well, back up,' he said, 'try to find a place to start and do it again.' "

Whatever the evolution of the session, it marked a turning point in the history of American popular music.

Elvis arrives late for a game show, registers shock that it could have begun without him.



"That's All Right" was at first glance an unlikely song to create such a transformation. A conventional blues put out by a very pedestrian blues singer (if any bluesman deserves the charge of monotony, it is Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, who rarely escaped from one key and possessed a singular ineptitude on guitar), it consists of a string of traditional verses set to a familiar, slightly shopworn blues melody. The copy in this instance bore little resemblance to the original. For if the record was not worked out during a break, but was in fact the product of months of hard work, trial and error, and direct calculation, that isn't the way that it comes across at all.

It sounds easy, unforced, joyous, spontaneous. It sounds as if the singer has broken free for the first time in his life. The voice soars with a purity and innocence. There is a crisp authority to Scotty Moore's lead guitar, Elvis's rhythm is ringing and clear, the bass gallops along in slap-heavy fashion. The record sparkles with a freshness of conception, a sharpness of design, a total lack of pretentiousness, an irrepressible enthusiasm. Like each of the ten sides eventually released on Sun—evenly divided between blues and country—"That's All Right" has a timeless quality that was just as striking and just as far removed from the trends of the day as it is from contemporary fashion. The sound is clean, without affectation or clutter. And there remains in the conventional lyrics, easing their way into a scat verse that was in Crudup's original leaden and pedestrian, a sense of transformation, both diz-

zying and breathtaking, an emotional transcendence, which, if only because of the burden of knowledge, could never happen again.

And yet this is not quite literally true either. It is perhaps another self-sustaining myth, with the reality at once more straightforward and more paradoxical. The B side of "That's All Right" was Bill Monroe's classic bluegrass tune "Blue Moon of Kentucky," recorded at the same session and taken at something like breakneck tempo in the released version. An alternate take exists, however. It indicates that "Blue Moon of Kentucky" at any rate started out its rockabilly life in a slower, bluesier version, more direct emotionally and more ornate vocally, much in the manner of "She's Gone," an alternate interpretation from a later session of the innocuous enough "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone." Both contain surprising intimations of what is to come, with hints of the familiar vibrato, the smoky drop to a bass register, the lazy crooning style, all hallmarks, I would have thought, of a later decadent period. In fact it is a style with which Elvis is distinctly more at home than the more frantic rockabilly mold, giving vent to all the smoldering passion that was to be so conspicuously absent from his later efforts. "Fine, fine, man," Sam Phillips declares, as the bluegrass number disintegrates into nervous laughter and edgy chatter. "Hell, that's different. That's a pop song now, nearly about. That's good!"

"That's All Right" was cut on the night of July 5th, 1954. A dub was delivered within days to Dewey Phillips, host of the popular *Red Hot and Blue* show, which was a kind of Memphis Moondog Matinee: rhythm & blues and hipster talk for a mixed black and white audience. Phillips, who enjoyed a close, almost fraternal relationship with his nonrelative Sam, played the record half a dozen times in a row on the first night.

By the time the record came out there was a back order of 5000 copies, and Elvis and Sun Records were well on their way.

Largely on the strength of this success (the record went on to sell 20,000 copies and even made Number One briefly on the Memphis C&W charts) Elvis was named eighth most promising new hillbilly artist in *Billboard's* annual poll at the end of the year. Almost immediately he began to appear around Memphis, sitting in with the Starlite Wranglers at the Bon Air, playing with Scotty and Bill (very briefly billed as the Blue Moon Boys) at the Eagle's



The King with kissin' cousins.

Nest, debuting at a big country show at the Overton Park Shell, even opening a shopping center. In October he appeared on the *Grand Ole Opry* for a one-shot appearance. He met with more success on the *Louisiana Hayride*, where he signed on as a regular after his second appearance, and where he picked up a drummer, D. J. Fontana. And he began touring, through Texas and Mississippi, performing at schoolhouses and dance halls, traveling in a succession of second-hand Lincolns and Cadillacs that were sometimes driven until they gave out.

Everywhere the reaction was the same—a mixture of shock and wild acclaim. No one knew what to make of him. "I recall one jockey telling me that Elvis Presley was so country he shouldn't be played after 5 A.M.," said Sam Phillips. "And others said he was too black for them."

Nonetheless the records continued to sell ("Good Rockin' Tonight," the second release, cut in September 1954, made Number Three on the Memphis C&W charts); teenagers turned out in droves to hear the so-called Hillbilly Cat, the King of Western Bop (his titles alone betray the cultural schizophrenia with which he was greeted); and they came away with the same dazed reaction as Bob Luman in Kilgore, Texas. He did splits, kneedrops, and crawled to

the edge of the stage, only to leap back from clutching hands. "He threw everything into it," says Bob Neal, his first manager, "trying to break that audience down, trying to get it with him. He'd always react to audience reaction, and in the rare instances where he'd be placed on the show early, I always felt he kind of outdid himself, making it tough for the next guy to follow."

The records followed, one after another, although according to Marion Keisker, "Every session came hard." Each came out sounding like some kind of inspired accident: the unexpected falsetto with which Little Junior Parker's "Mystery Train" trails off, the bubbly hiccuping beginning to "Baby, Let's Play House," the wailing lead-in to "Good Rockin' Tonight," the too-perfect beautiful slow intro to blues singer Kokomo Arnold's "Milkcow Blues Boogie," which Elvis interrupts to declare portentously, "Hold it, fellas. That don't *move* me. Let's get real, real gone for a change."

Well, he got gone. The records picked up in sales, though never on a scale larger than a relatively tiny independent company like Sun could expect. The bookings increased. The cars and the clothes got fancier; the money did, too. A year after his Sun debut, in July of 1955, "Baby, Let's Play House" made the national C&W charts. By the end of the year Elvis Presley was named most promising new C&W artist. But by then, of course, he was a proven commercial commodity, for he had signed with RCA Records.

"He was greatly anxious for success," said Bob Neal, with whom he signed in January 1955, and with whom he went to New York for the first time for an unsuccessful audition with Arthur Godfrey's *Talent Scouts*. "He talked not in terms of being a moderate success. No—his ambition and desire was to be big in movies and so forth. From the very first he had ambition to be nothing in the ordinary but to go all the way. He was impatient. He would say, 'We got to figure out how to do this, we got to get ahead.'"

Sometime early in 1955 Colonel Tom Parker, who claimed to be a scion of the Great Parker Pony Circus though he was really a Dutch immigrant, onetime manager of Eddy Arnold and current manager of Hank Snow, entered the picture. Through Snow,



Elvis at ease in the army.

then one of the nation's top country stars, Parker had developed Hank Snow Jamboree Attractions into one of the major booking agencies in the South, and working through Neal at first, the Colonel began booking Elvis. In November 1955 Bob Neal was eased into a secondary position. On November 22nd Colonel Tom Parker produced a document that entitled him to represent Elvis Presley exclusively and signed a contract with RCA. Sun Records received \$35,000 plus \$5000 in back royalties for Elvis. It was an unheard-of sum for the time.

There were many cogent reasons for such a move. For Sun Records the deal provided much-needed capital, and Sam Phillips has always staunchly defended his decision, citing the subsequent success of Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee Lewis on his label as proof. For Elvis Presley the benefits became obvious immediately. On January 10th, 1956, he entered RCA's Nashville studio and recorded "Heartbreak Hotel." The rest, I think, is history. As for the Colonel, he soon divested himself of all other interests and devoted himself to advancing his boy, a devotion that took such forms as the decline of all presidential and nonremunerative invitations, the hawking and retrieving of souvenir programs at concerts, the personal dispensation of Elvis calendars at the fabled Las Vegas debut in 1970—in short a steadfast refusal to cheapen his product. "When I first knew Elvis," the Colonel once remarked, "he had a million dollars' worth of talent. Now he has a million dollars."

I don't know what there is to say about the success. There are, of course, the hits: "Heartbreak Hotel," with its bluesy country feel, metallic guitar and dour bass; "Hound Dog," with its reversed sexual imagery, savage musical ride and spewed-out lyric ("Well, they said you was high class, well that was just a lie"); "Jailhouse Rock," with its frenetic pace and furiously repeated drum roll; "Love Me Tender," "Love Me," "Loving You"; the scornful ease of "Don't Be Cruel," the mnemonic pop of "All

Shook Up." There was the impact of hit after hit after hit, fourteen consecutive million-sellers, RCA claimed, simultaneously topping pop, country and R&B charts; the phenomenal explosion of both the mode and the music over a period of twenty-seven months until his March 1958 induction into the army; the elevation to socio-mytho-psychosexual status, as Elvis Presley unwittingly became a test of the nation's moral fiber.



Elvis in the mid-Sixties—
his debonair look.

The peculiar thing is that in retrospect it is all irrelevant. Not just in the wake of Presley's success but as the inevitable consequence of the almost total acceptance that rock & roll has come to enjoy. When Elvis Presley was first recorded by Sam Phillips, he was an unmarketable commodity, an underground hero on the fringes of society and artistic respectability. Today, like every trend and tidal wave that comes along in our consumer-oriented society, with its voracious appetite for novelty and its pitiless need to reduce what it does not understand, his achievement has been subsumed, his art has been converted to product, and rock & roll itself has become part of the fabric of corporate America. And the music—what of the music?

For some reason Elvis Presley never again recaptured the spirit or the verve of those first Sun sessions. When I say "never," I don't mean to imply that all of the output for his last twenty years was worthless, nor do I mean to set up some arbitrary, pure-minded standard by which to measure, and dismiss, his popular achievement. Many of the



Elvis in the late Sixties, young
and beautiful again.

songs he recorded, from "Hound Dog" to such extravagant items as "Don't," "Wear My Ring Around Your Neck," "A Fool Such as I," were still classic performances, despite their musical excesses and pronounced air of self-parody (the clear, hard tenor had yielded to tremulous vibrato, dramatic swoops from high to low, and lighthearted groans). They were also fundamentally silly records, a charge that could never be leveled at the Sun sides, which, whatever else they might appear to be, were seriously, passionately, joyously in earnest. You are left with the inescapable feeling that if he had never recorded again, if Elvis Presley had simply disappeared after leaving the little Sun studio for the last time, his status would be something like that of a latter-day Robert Johnson: lost, vulnerable, eternally youthful, forever on the edge, pure and timeless.

Not that RCA would not have liked to duplicate the Sun sound. At the beginning there is little question that they tried. Still, even RCA was aware of the difference. It was "a new sound," according to Steve Sholes, Elvis's RCA discoverer, because Elvis had evolved so rapidly in the months following his RCA signing. The fact is, I think, that Elvis was too well suited to success. He was intelligent, adaptable, ambitious and sure of his goals. He wanted to break loose, and music was only his vehicle for doing so.

He soon settled in fact on a fairly comfortable and formulaic approach that took advantage of his wide-ranging musical background, facility in a number of styles, real talent as a quick study and almost total lack of taste. With the addition of the Jordanaires, a popular vocal quartet present from the first RCA sessions, the sound quickly took on the trappings of the gospel and pop groups that Elvis had always admired. With the almost inexhaustible demand for material brought on by the unprecedented dimensions of the Presley success, professional songwriters were called in and invited to submit their compositions for approval (and publication, under the Gladys or Elvis Presley Music imprint). Whereas



Elvis, with dad, Vernon, in Las Vegas, 1969.

a song like "Hound Dog," although already part of the stage act, required as many as thirty takes, after a while vocals were merely patterned on the demos that were submitted, and while no session could be complete without the warmups and inevitable gospel sings that always remained a feature of Elvis Presley's musical life, the loose feel of the Sun studio was gone.

Events moved too rapidly even to try to comprehend. Million-sellers, national tours, the triumph over Ed Sullivan's stuffy personal pronouncements (Presley will never appear on my show, said Sullivan, just weeks before he signed Elvis for a \$50,000 series of appearances), instant celebrity, the promise of immortality, the rush of success. Record making in fact became something of a subsidiary interest once Elvis went to Hollywood in the summer of 1956. By the time he entered the army in 1958 he was what Sam Phillips had said he would become: a genuine pop singer. A pop singer of real talent, catholic interests, negligent ease and magnificent aplomb, but a pop singer nonetheless.



Elvis with then-wife, Priscilla, at his opening at the International Hotel, Las Vegas, 1969.

I can remember the suspense my friends and I felt when Elvis came out of the army in 1960. By this time we were growing sideburns of our own, and in some ways his fate, like that of any other icon, seemed inextricably linked with ours. What would he be like? Would he declare himself once again? Would he keep the faith? We hadn't long to wait for the answers.

His first release, "Stuck on You," followed the familiar formula of "All Shook Up," "Too Much," "Let Me Be Your Teddy Bear," innocuous enough rock & roll fare but still rock & roll. The second release was the monumental best-seller "It's Now or Never," reputedly Elvis's favorite song and loosely based on the "O Sole Mio" of Mario Lanza, one of Elvis's favorite operatic tenors. The first, and last,

paid public appearance was a Frank Sinatra TV special, in tails. Frank Sinatra! After that he retreated from the world for nearly a decade to make movies.

We forgave him his apostasy, just as we forgave him all his lapses and excesses; his self-parodying mannerisms, his negligible gift for, or interest in, acting; his corporeal puffiness; his indifference to the material he recorded; his apparent contempt for his own talent; his continuing commercial success in the face of all these fallings-away. The spectacle itself of the bad boy made good.

Because that is what I think gratified us most of all. Elvis's success, flying as it did not only in the face of reason but of good taste as well, seemed in a way a final judgment on the world that had scorned him and, by the sheer magnitude of his talent, he had transformed. We took it as a cosmic joke. We speculated endlessly on the life that Elvis must be leading, and the laughs he must be having, behind the locked gates of Graceland, his Memphis mansion. Every fact that is presented in this essay was a mystery then, the subject for painstaking detective work, an intricately assembled collage that has since been exploded by knowledge. Most of all we labored happily in the wilderness, self-mocking but earnest, possessors of a secret knowledge shared by only fellow fans: Elvis Presley was to be taken seriously.

There were only two footnotes to this long and continuing saga of perfect decline.

The first was the TV special that ended Presley's eight-year slumber in Hollywood. This came about quite simply because by 1968 Elvis had exhausted his audience, as well as himself, with movies that were no longer drawing, records that, devoid of even a semblance of commitment, were no longer selling. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Dylan had eclipsed their onetime mentor. Elvis was beginning to look dated. And so the Colonel, who had always avowed that it was his patriotic duty to keep Elvis in the 90-percent tax bracket, decided that it was time for his boy to step out. Seizing the moment with customary astuteness, he wangled a remarkable financial deal for a special to be shown at Christmas-time. What could be more appropriate, the Colonel argued, than the star's appearance in a kind of formal Christmas pageant, singing a medley of Christmas carols and hymns. For the first time in his career Elvis seems to have put his foot down. Or perhaps that is merely what the Colonel would like us to believe. In association with the show's young

producer-director, Steve Binder, he determined to appear in live performance, doing his old songs in taped segments in front of a handpicked but real, live breathing audience. A good chunk of the special was still choreographed, it's true, and some big production numbers remained, but the core of the show was just Elvis, alone on the stage with his guitar and such old musical friends as Scotty Moore and D. J. Fontana.

I'll never forget the anticipation with which we greeted the announcement and then the show itself, having the opportunity to see our idol outside his celluloid wrappings for the very first time, knowing that we were bound to be disappointed. The credits flashed, the camera focused on Elvis, and to our utter disbelief there he was, attired in black leather, his skin glistening, his hair long and greasy, his look forever young and callow. "If you're looking for trouble," he announced, "you've come to the right place."

I don't know if I can convey how transcendent, how thrilling a moment it was. Here were all our fantasies confirmed—the look, the sound, the stance, the remarkable appositeness of the selection. The voice took off, it soared, it strained, and then to our vast surprise Elvis is sweating. He is unsure of himself, he is ill at ease, he is uncertain of our reaction, and it seems clear for the first time that Elvis is trying, and trying very hard, to please us. He needs to have our attention, and it comes as something of a shock after all this time to discover that a hero whom we had set up to feel only existential scorn, a hero who was characterized by a frozen sneer and a look of sullen discontent, should need us in the end.

I say that this is a footnote, but maybe it was more than that. Because to my mind at least it gave rise to the second brief flourishing of the art of Elvis Presley, a flourishing that could not have taken place without all that went before but which can stand on its own nonetheless as a real and significant artistic achievement. On the strength of the success of the



Elvis in 1971 after receiving the rarely granted Bing Crosby Award of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. Does he look impressed?

TV show, and the subsequent sales of "If I Can Dream," the inspirational single that concluded it, he went back to Memphis to record for the first time in nearly fourteen years. The singles ("Suspicious Minds," "Kentucky Rain," "Don't Cry Daddy") and initial album, *From Elvis in Memphis*, that came out of these sessions are true reflections of the passion and soul which Elvis invested in that rare moment of unease in an otherwise uninterrupted career. There continues to be that same sense of tension, the atmosphere remains nervous and almost self-effacing, there is that strange anxiety to please and constriction in the voice that seems a million years away from the perfect self-assurance of the nineteen-year-old "natural" who first recorded for Sun so very long ago.

What happened after that everybody knows. Amid much hoopla Elvis returned to live performing, first in Las Vegas, where a flock of critics were flown out to the historic opening, to come back with tales of vitality undimmed, robust roots and disarming charm. We are all fans. When it became obvious from the relative unsuccess of *Elvis: That's the Way It Is*, a documentary of the Vegas act, that movies were no longer a viable commercial formula, the Colonel hustled his product back out on the road, where he appeared in coliseums, hockey rinks, the Astrodome and Madison Square Garden. There was a great deal of money made very quickly, and very soon the burst of involvement that had so briefly galvanized Elvis dissipated, the act was reduced to total self-parody and Elvis to practicing his karate kicks onstage. When I finally saw him in person at the Boston Garden in 1971, it was like going to a gathering of the faithful, grown middle-aged, perhaps, in pantsuits and double-knits, but faithful nonetheless. I sat as far away from the stage as you can sit in a big arena, but even from there you could see that he was the perfect artifact, preserved like the great woolly mammoth in a block of ice, suspended, Greil Marcus has suggested, in a perpetual state of grace, all his illusions and mine intact.

After that, sadly, the ice melted. Elvis's final years were a grotesque parade of tabloid headlines (ELVIS AT 40—PAUNCHY, DEPRESSED AND LIVING IN FEAR; IT'S ELVIS THE NIGHTSTALKER) and disturbing personal revelations (*Elvis: What Happened?* written by renegade members of the Memphis Mafia and on the newsstands just days before his death, told a dark tale of drugs, spiritualism and paranoia). His death, in Au-



The 1968 TV special. Elvis could still do it all.

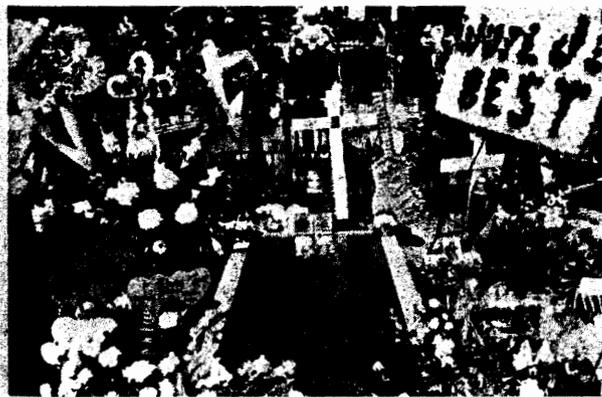
gust 1977, only represented the final violation of a jealously guarded privacy, as we learned of last words, last acts, past sins, both real and imagined. Even in death the waxy image was maintained, with pious tributes and a blurred open-coffin picture, showing Elvis at peace, on the front page of the *National Enquirer*. And life after death? That, too, has come in a triumph of pure plasticity, the enshrinement of the hero as all-purpose product—book, record, liqueur, pewter statuette, dashboard icon, portrait suitable for framing. As the Colonel is reputed to have said, nothing has changed. It's just like when his boy went into the army.

It doesn't matter, none of it matters. For Elvis was merely a prisoner of the same fantasies as we. What he wanted he got. What he didn't he deliberately threw away. There is a moment in *Elvis on Tour*, his final film and yet another documentary, in which Elvis yields the stage to J. D. Sumner and the Stamps, the gospel group in his entourage. He has just finished singing "You Gave Me a Mountain," a Marty Robbins song that tells in a series of dramatic crescendos a tale of separation from an only child. It could just as easily be "My Boy" or "Separate Ways" or even "Mama Liked the Roses," all dramas of broken marriage and separation from loved ones (Elvis's daughter, whom he was said to adore, was



A concert in 1977. By then he was struggling with ill health, drug dependencies and personal problems. In August of that year he died.

born nine months to the day after his 1967 marriage, which subsequently ended when his wife took up with her karate instructor). These are the only secular songs that he seems able to sing with any real conviction, painful substitutes for self-expression, artful surrogates for real life. In the film he introduces the gospel group, enlists the audience's attention ("I don't sing in this. Just listen to them, please. It's a beautiful song.") and for the first time



Worldly tokens of eternal life, at his grave in Memphis.

is at rest, expression pensive, eyes uplifted, mouthing the words and shaking his head with a smile, carried outside of himself. It is as if it is intended in expiation, and it probably is. Then the music starts up, the show begins again, he launches into "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" without so much as a blink, and Elvis Presley is once again encapsulated in the gauzlike world from which he will never emerge.

It's all right, you want to say to him impertinently. It's all right. You did okay, even if your greatest talent did turn out to be for making money.

Earlier in the same film there are moving images from *The Ed Sullivan Show* of 1956, where youth is forever captured, forever joyous, with a swivel of the hip, a sneer of the lip, and the full confidence and expectation that nothing will ever go wrong. "My daddy knew a lot of guitar players," recalls Elvis in one of the film's interview segments, "and most of them didn't work, so he said, 'You should make your mind up to either be a guitar player or an electrician, but I never saw a guitar player that was worth a damn!'" Elvis smiles. Elvis laughs. His face fills the screen. "When I was a boy," you can hear Elvis Presley saying, "I was the hero in comic books and movies. I grew up believing in that dream. Now I've lived it out. That's all a man can ask for."

Jerry Hopkins's biography, Elvis, has been an invaluable source of information. Several unattributed quotes have been taken from the book.

DISCOGRAPHY

SINGLES

"That's All Right" b/w "Blue Moon of Kentucky" (Sun; 1954). "Good Rockin' Tonight" b/w "I Don't Care If the Sun Don't Shine" (Sun; 1954). "Milkcow Blues Boogie" b/w "You're a Heartbreaker" (Sun; 1955). "Baby, Let's Play House" b/w "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone" (Sun; c★10, 1955). "Mystery Train" b/w "I Forgot to Remember to Forget" (Sun; c★1, 1955). "Heartbreak Hotel" b/w "I Was the One" (RCA Victor; r★5, c★1, ★1, 1956). "Blue Suede Shoes" (RCA Victor; ★24, 1956). "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" b/w "My Baby Left Me" (RCA Victor; r★10, c★1, ★3, 1956). "Don't Be Cruel" b/w "Hound Dog" (RCA Victor; r★1, c★1, ★1, 1956). "Love Me Tender" b/w "Anyway You Want Me (That's How I Will Be)" (RCA Victor; r★4, c★3, ★1, 1956). "Love Me" b/w "When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again" (RCA Victor; ★6, 1956). "Poor Boy" (RCA Victor; ★35, 1956). "Old Shep" (RCA Victor; ★47, 1956). "Too Much" b/w "Playing for Keeps" (RCA Victor; r★7, c★5, ★2, 1957). "All Shook Up" b/w "That's When Your Heartaches Begin" (RCA Victor; r★1, c★3, ★1, 1957). "(There'll Be) Peace in the Valley" (RCA Victor; ★39, 1957). "Let Me Be Your Teddy Bear" b/w "Loving You" (RCA Victor; r★1, c★1, ★1, 1957). "Jailhouse Rock" b/w "Treat Me Nice" (RCA Victor; r★1, c★1, ★1, 1957). "Don't" b/w "I Beg of You" (RCA Victor; r★4, c★2, ★1, 1958). "Wear My Ring Around Your