ELVIS PRESLEY

and the American Dream

Have 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

ENOUGH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about Elvis Presley to fuel an industry. Indeed a study could be made of the literature devoted to Elvis, from fanzines and promotional flack to critical and sociological surveys, which would undoubtedly tell us a great deal about ourselves and our iconographic needs. Sadly enough it is the weight of the literature itself, the very volume of information, no matter how well intended, which inevitably obscures the one quality unique to Elvis in all the pantheon of rock 'n' roll heroes: what jazz critic Whitney Balliett calls the sound of surprise. Other rock 'n' 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 and 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.

The world was not prepared for Elvis Presley. The violence of its reaction to him ('unspeakably untalented,' a 'voodoo of frustration and defiance') testifies to this, although in one sense he was merely another link in a chain of historical inevitability. His ducktail was already familiar from Tony Curtis, the movie star whose pictures he haunted at the Suzore No. 2 Theater in Memphis; the hurt, truculent stance 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 just as Elvis was getting launched on his career in March of 1955 ('He knew I was a friend of Jimmy's,' said Nicholas Ray, director of Dean's second film, landmark for a generation, *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 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 and his Comets, but in the genuine popular success that singers like Frankie Laine and Johnny Ray (and Al Jolson, Mildred Bailey, even Bing Crosby) had enjoyed in bringing black vocal stylings to the white marketplace of earlier eras.

None of it seemed to matter somehow. To anyone who was alive at the time, he was, and remains, a truly revolutionary force. The recollection of country singer Bob Luman, just younger than Presley, 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,' he told writer Paul Hemphill, '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 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 Presley none of us could have made it.' And to 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 plan. 'I don't know what it is,' he said to C. Robert Jennings of *The Saturday Evening Post*. '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

Page 116: Elvis with Charlie Walker, Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Day, Meridian, Mississippi. Courtesy of John and Shelby Singleton.

assumption of common-sense 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 the 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, this explanation, or lack of it, overlooks the music itself, a music which 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.

HE WAS BORN Elvis Aron Presley on January 8, 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 middle name. An early photo shows a little boy in overalls, sober in an oversized 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. It is the picture that adorns the cover of his 1971 *Elvis Country* album, which bears the otherwise inscrutable (and totally uncharacteristic) epigram 'I was born about ten thousand years ago.'

He grew up, schooled to all the classic virtues of small-town America: diffident, polite, sirring and ma'aming his elders, hungry with an unfocused yearning which it 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.

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

Elvis with his parents.

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 photograph 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 southern whites and blacks. She is forty-four but will die in only two years time, to 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 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 which, in our own state of self-deracination, we had erected around a pop idol.' Today it is easier to recognize that out of this seeming contradiction (newness versus tradition, rebellion versus authority, sacred versus profane) arose the tension that was rock 'n' roll. Then such thinking was beyond the scope of our experience, and probably Elvis's, too.

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, which Red Foley (later to become Pat Boone's father-in-law) had popularized and Elvis would record for RCA some ten years later. It is not difficult to imagine the towheaded little boy standing on a chair so 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 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.'

At eleven his parents got him a guitar ('I wanted a bicycle'). Teachers and relatives remember him carrying the guitar around with him everywhere

Vernon, Gladys, and Elvis at the piano.

he went. Elvis remembered that 'it sounded like 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 and Bill Kenny and the Ink Spots were his favorite rhythm 'n' blues performers. And he absorbed the blues off the radio and from 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 KWM 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 you were likely to run into such prominent figures as one-man-band Joe Hill Louis, veteran bluesman Frank Stokes, the famous Beale Streeters. In W.C. Handy Park you might hear a free concert by the legendary white blues singer and medicine show entertainer, Harmonica Frank Floyd. And at 706 Union Avenue, 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,' an enterprise which would evolve in 1952 into the Sun Record label. In the meantime, though, a quiet revolution had begun to take place. Many of the small independent record producers were becoming aware of it, and in Memphis, where there had long been a relaxed social, as well as musical, interchange between black and white, it was particularly noticeable. White kids were picking up on black styles—of music, dance, speech, and dress.

'They didn't let whites into the clubs,' veteran producer Ralph Bass told rock critic Michael Lydon, 'when I used to go out on the road with the black acts I was handling in the forties. Then they got "white spectator tickets" for the worst corner of the joint, no chairs and no dancing, and the tickets cost more, too. But they had to keep enlarging it anyway, cause they just couldn't keep the white kids out, and by the early fifties they'd have white nights sometimes, or they'd put a rope across the middle of the floor. The blacks

on one side, whites on the other, digging how the blacks were dancing, and copying them. Then, hell, the rope would come down and they'd all be dancing together.'

'Cat clothes' were coming in; bebop speech was all the rage. Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Charlie Rich, each has memories of sneaking off to hear the blues singers play; all came under the direct influence of black musicians in their development of a new style.

Elvis, too, sought his models in unlikely places. 'I knew Elvis before he was popular,' blues singer B.B. King has said. 'He used to come around and be around us a lot. There was a place we used to go and hang out at on Beale Street. People had like pawnshops there, and a lot of us used to hang out in certain of these places, and this was where I met him.'

In other ways Memphis was an oppressively impersonal urban dream for an only child, shy and strangely insecure. Living in a city project. Working a monotonous succession of 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 the eleventh grade in school 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 not 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 and devoted 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 know what I mean. Just acted kind of goofy, sitting in the back of class, playing his guitar. No one knew that he was ever going to be *anything*.' When he got a job as a driver for Crown Electric, 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 more lucrative sidelines was a custom recording service, where anyone could go in and cut a record for two dollars. Some

time 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 recent hits for the Ink Spots. He came back in January of 1954 to cut another two sides, once again two sentimental ballads, and to see if Sam Phillips might be interested in recording him professionally for the Sun Record label. Phillips put him off but held on to his address and a neighbor's phone where he could be reached. 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, whom he had admired for years.

Then around April, by Phillips's calculation, Sam Phillips called him to try out a demo on 'Without You,' still another ballad, which met with minimal success. Phillips was more or less undeterred. 'Mr. Phillips said he'd coach me if I'd come over to the studio as often as I could.' He put Elvis together with Scotty Moore and Bill Black, the guitar and bass players in Doug Poindexter's Starlight Wranglers. Together, as Phillips recalls (everyone's version of this crucial moment in history is a little bit different), they ran down song after song – country, ballads, blues, in the late spring of 1954. 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, and indeed following Elvis's success he practically force-fed his formula to the succession of rockabillies – Perkins, Lewis, Roy Orbison, even Johnny Cash – who followed. That was after Elvis, though. At the time, judging by all the unsuccessful attempts (premature might be the better word) that were made to turn Elvis into a Dean Martin crooner, even Sam Phillips must have had his doubts.

'That's All Right,' a traditional blues by Crudup himself, was the first number that actually jelled, in July of 1954. According to popular legend it was worked out during a break between ballads. According to Elvis, in a British interview, '"You want to make some blues?" he [Phillips] suggested over the phone, knowing I'd always been a sucker for that kind of jive. He mentioned Big Boy Crudup's name and maybe others, too. All I know is, I hung up and run fifteen blocks to Mr. Phillips's office before he'd gotten off the line – or so he tells me. We talked about the Crudup numbers I knew – "Cool Disposition," "Rock Me Mama," "Hey, Mama," 'Everything's All Right," and others, but settled for "That's All Right," one of my top favorites.'

Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup. Courtesy of *Blues Unlimited.*

Scotty Moore, of course, remembered the session differently. In Scotty's recollection 'That's All Right' was virtually an accident that happened in the studio, something that no one could have planned, for the simple reason that no one knew Elvis had it in him. From what Scotty says, he and Bill Black had only met Elvis a few days before, and Sam Phillips scarcely remembered Presley's name, let alone his musical proclivities. So when Elvis put down his Coke, picked up his guitar, and started singing 'That's All Right' during a break ('Just jumping around the studio, just acting the fool'), no one could have been more surprised than Scotty Moore, Sam Phillips, and maybe even Elvis Presley.

However the song was recorded, it marked a turning point in the history of American popular music.

'That's All Right' was at first glance an unlikely song to create such a transformation. A conventional blues, originally 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, however, bore little resemblance to the original. For even 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 instead 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 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 deliberate – a sense of transformation, both dizzying 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,' taken at something like breakneck tempo in the released version. An unreleased alternate take exists, however, available on *Good Rockin' Tonight*, a Dutch bootleg LP of Sun masters. It indicates that 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' 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 take of the innocuous enough 'I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone,' which resulted from a later session. Both unreleased versions 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 said, 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, little guy. That's good!'

'That's All Right' and 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' were cut on July 5 and 6,

1954. A dub was delivered on almost the same day to Dewey Phillips, host of the popular 'Red Hot and Blue Show,' which was a kind of Memphis Moondog Matinee, rhythm 'n' blues and hipster talk for a young white audience. Phillips, who enjoyed a long and presumably profitable relationship with his nonrelative Sam, played the record thirty times one night. 'When the phone calls and telegrams started to come in,' he told journalist Stanley Booth, 'I got hold of Elvis's daddy, Vernon. He said Elvis was at a movie, down at Suzore's No. 2 Theater. "Get him over here," I said, and before long Elvis came running in. "Sit down, I'm gone interview you," I said. He said, "Mr. Phillips, I don't know nothing about being interviewed." "Just don't say nothing dirty," I told him.

'He sat down, and I said I'd let him know when we were ready to start. I had a couple of records cued up, and while they played we talked. I asked him where he went to high school, and he said "Humes." I wanted to get that out, because a lot of people had thought he was colored. Finally I said, "All right, Elvis, thank you very much." "Aren't you gone interview me?" he asked. "I already have," I said. "The mike's been open the whole time." He broke out in a cold sweat.'

By the time the record came out, there was a back order of 5,000 copies, and Elvis and Sun Records were well on their way.

Largely on the strength of this success (the record went on to sell 30,000 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 started appearing around Memphis, sitting in with the Starlight Wranglers at the Bel Air and the Airport Inn, playing with Scotty and Bill (very briefly the Blue Moon Boys) at the Eagle's Nest, debuting at a big country show at the Overton Park shell, even opening a shopping center. In September he appeared at the Grand Ole Opry, where he was advised to go back to truck driving. According to Gordon Stoker of the Jordanaires, he cried all the way home. 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 and Arkansas, performing at schoolhouses and dance halls and crossroads, traveling in a succession of second-hand Lincolns and Cadillacs, which were sometimes driven until they gave out and then abandoned by the side of the road.

Everywhere the reaction was the same – a mixture of shock and wild acclaim. 'He's the new rage,' said a Louisiana radio executive in a 1955 European interview. 'Sings hillbilly in r&b time. Can you figure that out? He wears pink pants and a black coat and owns a Cadillac painted pink with a black top. He's going terrific, and if he doesn't suffer too much popularity, he'll be all right.'

According to Marion Keisker, 'On that first record of Elvis's we sent a thousand copies to disc jockeys, and I bet nine hundred went into the trash can, because if a rhythm 'n' blues man got it and heard "Blue Moon of Kentucky," he tossed it away . . . same thing if the country man heard "That's All Right."'

'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 sold ('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, 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 Bob Luman experienced in Kilgore, Texas. He stood limpid, straddle-legged at the mike, lips curled in a sneer, guitar strung negligently around his neck. One leg twitched, sending a ripple down the seam of his loosely draped pants; the other jackknifes out at the hip. Girls scream spontaneously, and he fixes them with a glance of almost scornful ease. The left leg keeps up its tireless jiggling. As the music heats up, he swivels his hips, leans forward with the mike, points his guitar like a phallic tommygun, drops to his knees, crawls to the edge of the stage, leaps back from clutching hands – will do anything, in fact, like Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis after him, to engage an audience's attention. 'He threw everything into it,' said 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 guy to follow.'

The records followed, one after another, and 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 of 1955 and 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."'

Some time in the summer of 1955, Colonel Tom Parker, scion of the Great Parker Pony Circus, manager at one time of Eddy Arnold and at that time of Hank Snow, veteran of a lifetime of carnivals, medicine shows, and various enterprises of greater or lesser dubiety, entered the picture. Through Snow, then the nation's number one country star, 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. On November 20, 1955, Bob Neal bowed out of the management business. On November 22 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 the artist. 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 of its correctness. For Elvis Presley the benefits became obvious immediately. On January 10, 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 frequently 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 negligent ease of 'Don't Be Cruel,' the mnemonic pop of 'All Shook Up.' The impact of hit after hit, fourteen consecutive million sellers, RCA claimed, simultaneously topping pop, country, and r&b charts. The phenomenal explosion

Elvis and the Colonel, right, with the Duke of Paducah.
Courtesy of John and Shelby Singleton

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/psycho-sexual status, as Elvis Presley unwittingly became a test of the nation's moral fiber.

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 which rock 'n' 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,

With the Jordanaires. Courtesy of Douglas B. Green.

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 'n' roll itself has become part of the fabric of corporate America. And the music—what of the music?

For some reason Elvis Presley never recaptured the spirit or the verve of those first Sun sessions. When I say never, I don't mean to imply that all of his output for the 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 songs that 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 light-hearted

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. The echo, the slapping bass, Scotty Moore's fluid lead guitar, the Arthur Crudup blues and sentimental country numbers that appeared on the first two albums—these were the very elements that had made the Sun sides so bright and distinctive. Carl Perkins's 'Blue Suede Shoes,' Ray Charles's 'I Got a Woman,' Little Richard's 'Tutti Frutti,' all fit in admirably, and rockingly, with the five previously unreleased Sun cuts that turned up on his debut LP. 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. Others feel that it was a combination of technology (choruses, added instrumentation, the RCA studios could never be as funky as Sun's makeshift quarters), commercial calculation, and spiritual malaise. 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.

Exchanging autographs with Carl Perkins.
Courtesy of Wayne Russell and John Morris.

'The way we made records,' Sam Phillips has said of the Sun days, 'kind of coincided with the studio. There was something about the looseness that rubbed off on the recordings. I had to be a psychologist and know how to handle each artist and how to enable him to be at his best. I went with the idea that an artist should have something not just good, but totally unique. When I found someone like that, I did everything in my power to bring it out.'

'Elvis never had *anything* ready,' said Marion Keisker. 'Elvis was different from the other Sun artists. He did not write his own songs. And he'd never rehearse. First thing he'd always want to cover some records he'd heard on the jukebox. And Sam would have to persuade him he couldn't do that. It was always a case of the same thing—sitting down and letting him go through everything he knew or he would like to do, and we'd pick things to concentrate on.'

With RCA, it seems clear, there was too little time and too much money riding on each session to allow for so haphazard an artistic process. It was too painful for the artist as well, and Elvis soon settled on a more comfortable and formulaic approach which 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 quartet present from the first RCA session, 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 Elvis Presley Music imprint). Whereas a song like 'Hound Dog,' although already part of the stage act, required as many as thirty takes, after a while vocals were simply patterned on the demos that were submitted. ('He fell in love with certain demos,' says songwriter Jerry Leiber, 'and in some cases just recorded in the same key the demo was in, even when that was maybe not the most comfortable for him.') And while no session could be complete without the warm-ups 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 that he entered the army in 1958 he was what Sam Phillips had foretold 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 Nudie, costumer to the stars.

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,' 'Teddy Bear,' innocuous rock 'n' roll fare, but still rock 'n' roll. The second release was the monumental best seller, 'It's Now or Never,' reputedly Elvis's favorite song and loosely based on the '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 (*GI Blues* was his most successful picture; the soundtrack from *Blue Hawaii* sold an incredible $5 million worth of records). The spectacle itself of the bad boy made good.

Because that is what I think it was that gratified us most of all. Elvis's success, flying as it did in the face not only of reason but of good taste as well, seemed in a way a final judgment on the world that had scorned him and which 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 of 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 only by fellow fans: Elvis Presley was to be taken seriously.

And, of course, we always looked for signs, which appeared occasionally, if at irregular intervals, that our faith was justified. Mostly these took the form of musical throwbacks (blues, country, rockabilly), some of which had been recorded years before their actual release date, further evidence of the secret conspiracy in which Elvis had enlisted us. The first of these found objects was *Elvis' Christmas Album*, released as early as November 1957, and dismissed at the time as sure proof of his sellout to the commercial forces that be. It turned out, like his two early gospel albums, to contain some of his most heartfelt singing as well as showcasing one of the dirtiest, nastiest (that's *bad*) blues he would ever put on record, 'Santa Claus is Back in Town.' *Hang up your pretty stockings*, we quoted the Leiber-Stoller lyrics at each other, once we had made the discovery, *Turn out de–light / Santa Claus is coming / Down your chimney tonight.*

Then there was the album Elvis put out on his return from the army, called, appropriately, *Elvis Is Back*. Basically a rhythm 'n' blues session cut with top Nashville sidemen, it charted new directions that were never followed up and featured Elvis in the uncharacteristically adventurous role of taste-maker. It, too, is crowned by a convincing blues interpretation, this time of Lowell Fulson's 'Reconsider, Baby,' which is highlighted by Elvis's gruff, 'Play those blues boy, play the blues!' long before such asides became popular with young blues acolytes.

Elvis for Everybody, a generally dismal collection, hid away not only a chiaroscuro 'Your Cheatin' Heart', and a dramatic reading of Chuck Berry's 'Memphis, Tennessee' but another r&b number that harked back to the Sun days, a really raunchy version of Sun stablemate Billy 'The Kid' Emerson's 'When It Rains It Really Pours.' The rumor that Elvis had played guitar on a Billy Emerson side (it turned out, on closer examination, that Billy was saying, Play it, *Calvin*, not Play it, Elvis) only added to the piquancy of the association.

And so it went. Right up to the end. Finding evidence of life amidst marble entombment. Finding evidence of engagement, wakefulness even, in the midst of sloth and torpor. Finding treasure in the midst of dross, and faith amid an artistic inconsequentiality that is almost staggering.

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

The first was the TV special that ended his eight-year retreat from the world and punctuated his long 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 without even a semblance of commitment—they were simply lifted from innumerable, and ineffable, movie soundtracks—were no longer selling. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan had eclipsed their one-time mentor. Elvis was begin-

Fort Worth, Texas. Courtesy of Gregg Geller.

ning 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 that the star should appear in a kind of Christmas pageant, dressed soberly in tuxedo and tie and singing a medley of Christmas carols and religioso numbers? 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 youngish producer-director, Steve Binder, Elvis determined to appear in live performance, doing his old songs in taped segments, in front of a somewhat handpicked but real, live, breathing audience. A good chunk of the special was choreographed, it is true, and there remained some big production numbers, 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 of his celluloid wrappings for the 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. . . .'

If you're looking for trouble
Just look in my face
I was born standing up
And talking back
My daddy was a green-eyed
Mou-ow-ntain jack.
Because I'm evil
My middle name is Miser–eeee . . .

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 choice. 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. It is his *involvement* after all that comes as the great surprise,

and I don't think anyone who watched the TV show at the time will ever forget the sheer tension of the moment, the brief instant in which Elvis's and our passions, our fears, our illusions, were nakedly exposed.

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 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 fifteen years. The singles ('Suspicious Minds,' 'Kentucky Rain,' 'Don't Cry, Daddy') and the 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 which 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, flown out to the historic opening, came back with tales of vitality undimmed, robust roots, and disarming charm. We are all fans. When it became obvious from the relative unsuccess of *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 and 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 on stage. 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 doubleknits, 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.

And then, sadly, the ice melted. When Elvis turned forty, the media had a field day. He was fat, and depressed about it, and didn't get out of bed all day. It seemed to be a continuing battle against creeping mortality, and Elvis was not winning. His hair was dyed, his teeth were capped, his middle was girdled, his voice was a husk, and his eyes filmed over with glassy impersonality. He was no longer, it seemed, used to the air and, because he could not endure the scorn of strangers, refused to go out if his hair wasn't

right, if his weight—which fluctuated wildly—was not down. He had tantrums on stage and, like some aging whore or politician, was reduced to the ranks of the grotesque. It no longer seemed difficult to imagine where it all would end.

Don't feel sorry for him. 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 'Lord, 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 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 which 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 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 gauzelike 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' biography, Elvis *(Simon and Schuster, 1971), has been an invaluable source of information. Several unattributed quotes have been taken from the book.*

FADED LOVE

It's like someone just came up and told me there aren't going to be any more cheeseburgers in the world.

FELTON JARVIS, Elvis's producer, commenting on Elvis's death

I USED TO IMAGINE that Elvis would call me up some time in the middle of the night. I would stumble to the phone, pick up the receiver, listen blearily to the silence at the other end, and then hear that familiar voice say, 'I been reading some of the stuff you been writing about me, and it's all right, man. It's good.' Of course it never happened, but whenever I wrote something about Elvis – and this dates back more than ten years now – I would always send a copy to 3764 Elvis Presley Boulevard, in those days merely Highway 51 South. Once I got a Christmas card, a record company handout like the yearly calendar, with printed season's greetings 'From Elvis and the Colonel.'

More than anyone else Elvis made us all into fans. Maybe it was the barriers that the Colonel erected around him. Maybe it was the legend to which his own improbable removal from roots gave rise. When I first started writing about him, it was not fashionable to admit that you were an Elvis fan. 'For a long time,' I wrote in the middle of a Beatles era that seems curiously more distant in time and point of view, 'to suggest that you liked Elvis Presley only invited ridicule.' Elvis himself seemed to share in this sentiment, at least from the evidence of his records and movies which by this time were so perfunctory an echo of the feeling that had animated his early work as to make the King of Western Bop seem like just another corporate success. And yet when he emerged from his Hollywood exile in 1968 for the TV special, the Memphis sessions, and one final burst of glory, there we all were, still his loyal fans, eager to welcome him home, no questions asked.

It was almost too easy for him. After that first spectacular surge he didn't have to *do* anything. He just had to be – himself, Elvis, no last name necessary. In a way it was the classic American success story. Elvis, a desperately lonely, desperately ambitious child of the Depression, rising from that two-room Tupelo shack to a marble-pillared mansion on the hill. There was irony, there was pathos, there was fierce determination, more than anything else there was passion. There was as well a kind of unself-conscious innocence

that could never enter his music again – and for good reason. Elvis Presley was a year out of high school, and on the Sun sides he would throw in everything that had made up his life to date – all the yearning, all the unfocused resentment, all that sense of being, as he would later sing, 'a stranger in my own hometown.' And on top of it all he was imposing not so much a surly sneer as an almost contemptuous certainty that what he was doing was right, that all the rest were wrong, that it was his cat clothes and be-bop language that would eventually prevail.

Well, he was right. Elvis was, everyone has finally conceded, no overnight sensation. He was in fact one of the most phenomenal successes of our time. And he maintained the sneer; in some ways he maintained the music (to the end there were flashes of the old spirit). Most of all, though, he retained that callow adolescence of the spirit, that sense of impatient expectation that could only be staved off, never satisfied, with cheeseburgers and ice cream and peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches. It was adolescence with a gloss on – no more pimples, no more grease, the teeth are capped, imperfect reality is replaced by the perfect dream. Because, of course, Elvis never grew up. Elvis never could grow up. For Elvis everything stopped when he was nineteen years old and knocking them dead in Kilgore, Texas, or Bethel Springs, Tennessee. After that nothing changed. He never knew anything else. And though the arenas and the money got bigger and bigger, it was inevitable that Elvis should become less important than the product he was selling. Which was – not music certainly, not even personality – perhaps it was merely economic growth and the GNP.

Everywhere you go you can see Elvis Presley as he might have been. At the ballpark eating a hot dog. Sitting at the bar with a flowered shirt hanging over his belt. Cruising along the interstate hauling a load of frozen vegetables. A heavy-set, worn-looking man with a graying ducktail and wide mutton-chop sideburns. These are commonplaces, they don't mean anything one way or another, except that the commonplace is the one thing that escaped Elvis Presley in his numbingly long stay at the top. For Elvis there was no escape in art; his original triumph was his very artlessness. He didn't write songs, nor did he aspire to anything more than success. Even his films were no more than a magnification of his image, a further reinforcement of the impossible perfection that we demand of all our public figures, and that Elvis alone fulfilled – a perfection that transformed him from a living presence into an all-purpose, economy-rate icon. Elvis, it could be said until just a year or two before his death, never made a foolish move. But then Elvis, once the Colonel got a hold of him, never made a public move at all. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke, the only time that passion ever entered his voice towards the end was in praise of the Lord. He was truly transformed from rebel into the idealized boy next door. And that was what he was doomed forever to be, trapped forever in a web of packaging in which he himself

came to believe. And that was why neither he nor his followers (and I include myself) could bear to hear the faint laughter and the jeers, could come to terms with the inevitable attrition of time.

I saw him just that once, in Boston in 1971. At the end of the concert he sang 'Funny How Time Slips Away,' and when he reached the line 'Gotta go now,' a universal groan went up, mollified only in part when he followed with, 'Don't know when, but I'll be back in your town.' I don't know if it was a great performance for anything more than the ease with which he tossed it off. In many ways it was self-parody certainly, with its karate poses and vocal posturing, but it was for me and for everyone else who was there, I think, an event that would be forever memorable, and a memory which I at any rate never sought to violate by repetition.

In recent years whenever I've been in Memphis I've driven by the mansion, just one of the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims looking for a substantiation of their experience. I never saw Elvis, but Memphis friends of mine would tell of seeing him out on the highway late at night, just driving up and down the strip in a sleek new car, still impatient, still restless, still lonely. In the last few years of his life the tabloids abounded with stories to flesh out this image. Elvis the Nightstalker. Elvis hearing his mother's voice in the corridors of Graceland. Elvis, troubled and overweight, giving gifts, seeking love. They were unnecessary reminders of what we already knew.

His death 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*. It doesn't matter, none of it matters. All that we are left with is a shared memory and a musical passion that could still catch fire at the most improbable moments. The last time I heard it was on 'Shake a Hand,' like so many of Elvis's best recent songs one with which he was comfortable from the past and one with strong religious overtones. As he sings, 'Shake a hand, shake a hand, shake a hand if you can,' there is nothing but the pure familiar melody and the impassioned engagement of the voice. It was this engagement that Elvis missed at the end, but when it came – in the music anyway – it seemed to overtake him all in a rush, his voice would soar, just as it always had, and he would seize on a lyric, chew on it, in the manner of the great gospel singers worry it to death, and not let go until he had wrung every last ounce of emotion from it. That was Elvis's mark; it was his only expiation. It was what rock 'n' roll first came from, and it was what doomed rock 'n' roll in the end. Because you can't manufacture that feeling any more than you can manufacture the religious belief from which it originally stemmed. As Little Richard, another evangelical soul turned once again to the ministry, summed it up, 'He was a rocker. I was a rocker. I'm not rockin' any more and he's not rockin' any more.'

SNAPSHOTS OF CHARLIE RICH

WHEN I FIRST met Charlie Rich in the spring of 1969, he was playing out at the Vapors by the Memphis airport. After nearly fifteen years, his career seemed to be going nowhere, and he and his wife, Margaret Ann, spoke openly about his alcoholism and their bitter disappointment and frustration with the music business. Originally signed by Sun as a kind of successor to Elvis Presley, on record he showed a musical versatility that always stood in the way of success, and he himself continued to incline towards jazz in live performance.

I've never liked anyone better upon first acquaintance, and I wrote up that meeting as a chapter in my book, *Feel Like Going Home*. I've continued to see Charlie and Margaret Ann over the years – both as a friend and as a journalist – and I've continued to write about him. These two stories show him at two points in his sudden rise to stardom, first on the verge of success – just as 'Behind Closed Doors' was about to cross over from the country charts, to become an altogether unexpected, worldwide pop hit – and then at what would seem to have been his peak of popular recognition. Neither occasion saw him any more complacent in outlook or attitude than at our original meeting. With the initial success of 'Behind Closed Doors,' in fact, Charlie fell apart completely and drank himself virtually comatose at the taping of a Burt Reynolds special at the Tennessee governor's mansion. After hospitalization and hypnosis treatment, he stopped drinking altogether, but then in the fall of 1975 he brought further scandal upon himself on the nationally televised Country Music Association Awards show. Slated to present the award for Entertainer of the Year (which he had himself won the previous year), he appeared visibly unsteady and his speech was slurred. When John Denver turned out to be the winner, Charlie took out his lighter and burned the slip of paper. Shortly afterwards he and Margaret Ann announced their separation and plans for divorce. Though they got back together again, Charlie still wasn't speaking to the press when I saw them several months later.