

ELVIS

THE LEGEND

INTRODUCTION

In American folklore, 19-year-old Elvis Presley strode into Sun Records, recorded *That's All Right, Mama* – as a present for his mother - and exploded into the stratosphere of stardom.

That's not what happened.

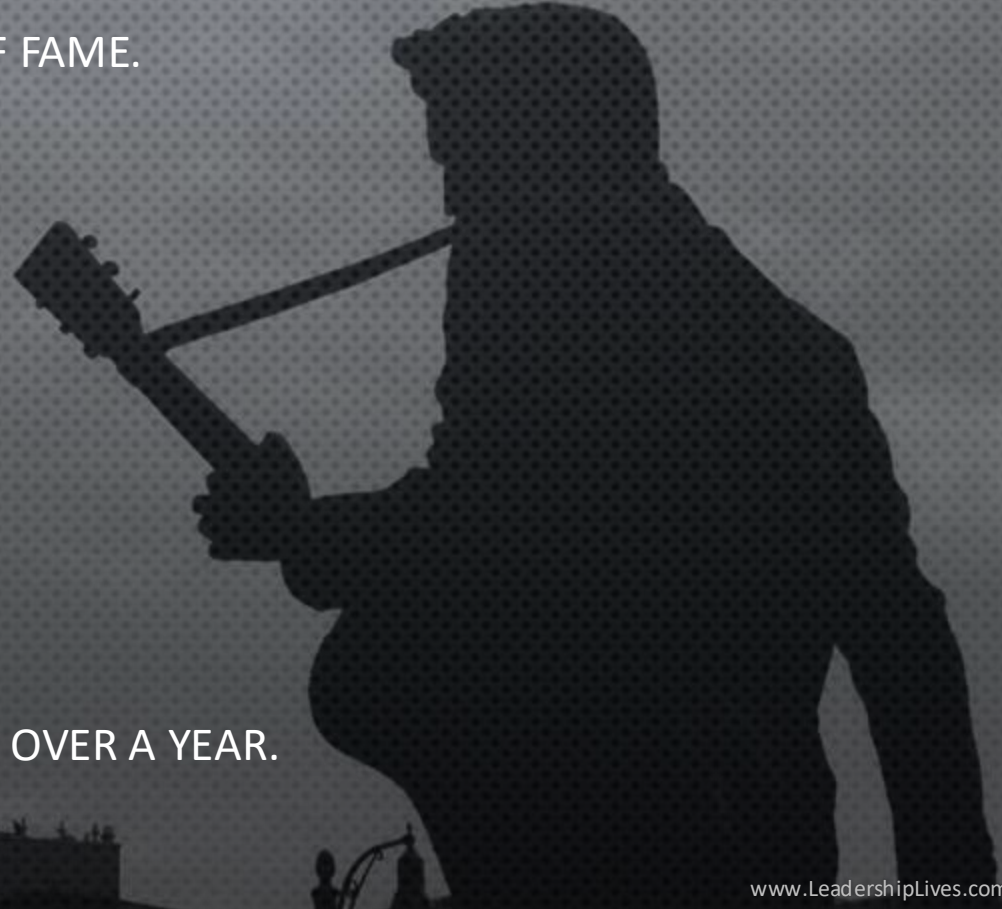
Elvis struggled for years to develop his talent, failed auditions, and was even told he couldn't sing!





Unfazed by naysayers, critics, and daunting challenges, he pursued his dream, blasted rock 'n roll into America's bloodstream and transformed the world.

- ☆ BEST-SELLING SOLO ARTIST OF ALL TIME.
- ☆ HAS SOLD OVER 1.5 BILLION RECORDINGS.
MICHAEL JACKSON HAS SOLD 1 BILLION; MADONNA HAS SOLD 300 MILLION.
- ☆ INDUCTED INTO MULTIPLE HALLS OF FAME.
- ☆ STARRED IN 33 FEATURE FILMS.
- ☆ 38 TOP TEN SINGLES.
- ☆ 18 #1 HITS.
- ☆ 90+ GOLD SINGLE RECORDS.
- ☆ 50+ GOLD ALBUMS.
- ☆ 4 ALBUMS ON RECORD CHARTS FOR OVER A YEAR.



EARLY YEARS

Elvis was born in a two-room house in the rural community of East Tupelo, Miss. on the early morning of January 8, 1935, 30 minutes after his twin brother Jesse was stillborn.

His parents, 19-year-old Vernon Presley and 22-year-old Gladys Smith Presley, cherished their only child.

When Elvis was three, his father forged a check from his sometime employer and mortgage holder, Orville Bean. Vernon was sentenced to three years in prison and served eight months. Gladys and Elvis lost their home, moved in with family, and got by on welfare.

From the time Vernon Presley went to jail in 1938 until Elvis bought Graceland at the age of 22 in 1957, the Presleys moved at least fifteen times.

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When Elvis was two, he wriggled off Gladys' lap to join the choir at East Tupelo's Assembly of God church.

Filled with family, friends and neighbors, the church gave Elvis a safe place to sing and dance in front of an audience.

"His greatest joy was being on stage," Priscilla Presley recalled.

Elvis won three Grammys - all for gospel music.

In the 1970s, he said gospel music, "... puts your mind to rest. At least it does mine, since I was two."

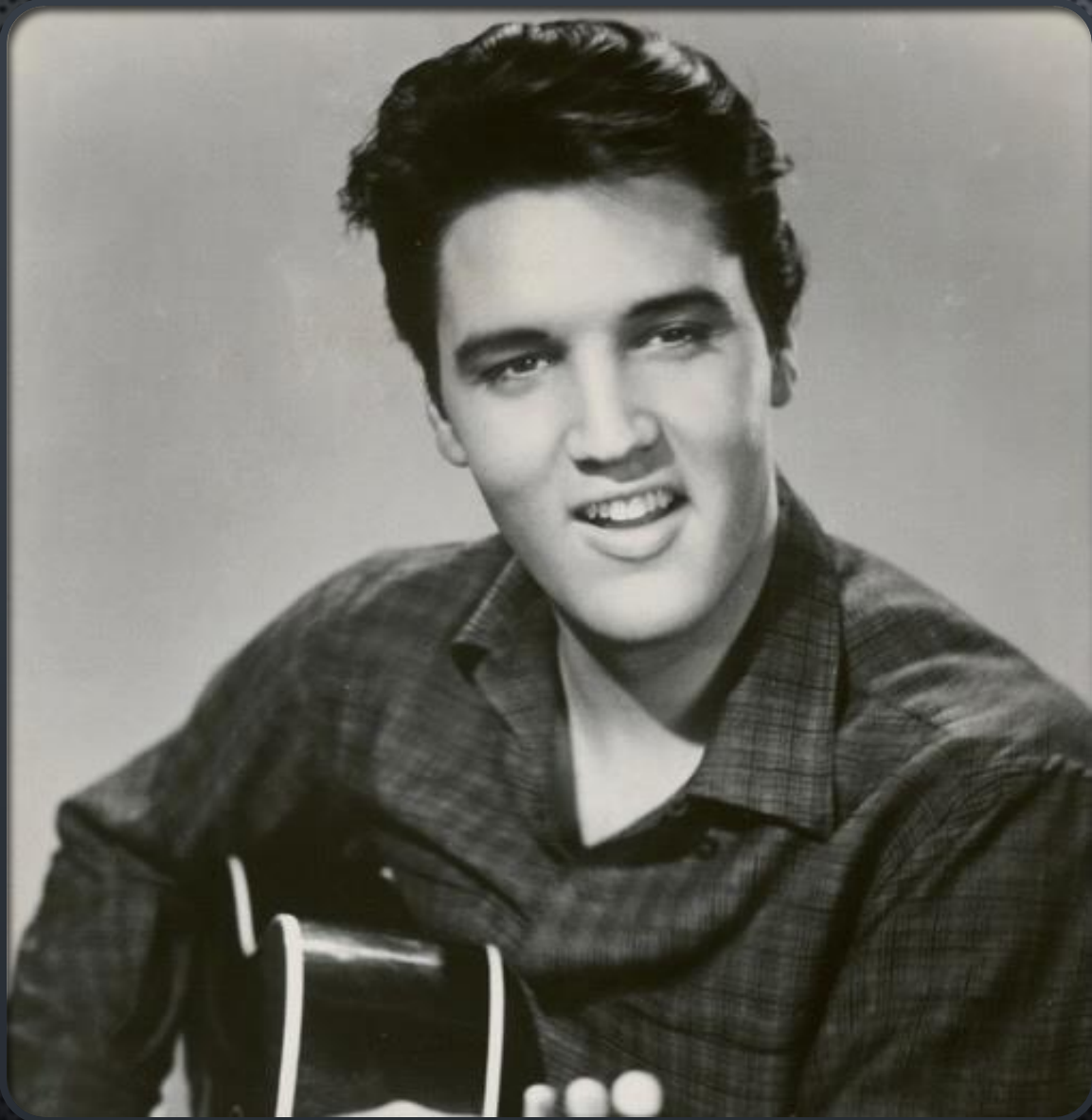


IMAGE / New York Public Library

Early in his success, Elvis talked to *Photoplay* magazine about his childhood dreams...

“I know that when I was four or five all I looked forward to was Sundays when we all went to sing at our church.

I loved the music and sang as loud as I could. We borrowed the style of our psalm-singing from that of the early Negroes—a rolling, rhythmic style, with everybody swaying in the church. This was the only singing training I ever had. I never had lessons.

As I got older, I used to sing solos, and my ambition as a young teenager was to be a quartette gospel singer.

I loved the old church filled with sunlight and my mother and father singing beside me. We forgot our problems.”



Gladys Presley had a gift that she passed on to her son.

She was a spectacularly good dancer with a natural sense of rhythm.

Vernon was handsome but wasn't much for working. Early in life, Elvis set a goal of providing for his family.

Gladys, Vernon and 2-year-old Elvis, 1937



The Presleys spent weekends attending tent meetings and often sang as a trio.

As a child, Elvis noticed how the preachers masterfully moved around their stages and how the audiences reacted.



Elvis, in 6th grade,
right end, 2nd row from top.

When Elvis was ten, his fifth-grade teacher, Oleta Grimes, daughter of Orville Bean, was so impressed with Elvis' singing, she urged him to compete in the talent contest at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show – the high point of the year in Tupelo.

Standing on a chair to reach the microphone, Elvis sang his favorite ballad, *Old Shep*, about a boy and his dog.

According to biographer Elaine Dundy, Elvis placed second, won \$5, and was elated by the experience.



For his 11th birthday, Gladys and Vernon gave Elvis an \$8 guitar from the Tupelo hardware store.

His uncles, Johnny Smith and Vester Presley, his Assembly of God pastor and the local DJ Mississippi Slim, helped Elvis learn how to play his guitar.

Elvis never got to be much of a guitar player – he used it more as a prop - but he began bringing his guitar to school to entertain classmates at lunchtime.



IMAGE / Public Domain

During World War II, Vernon had a steady job working for the WPA and, briefly, was doing pretty well. In August 1945, he bought a 4-room house from Orville Bean and became a deacon of the church.

But, within a year, disaster struck again. Vernon transferred the \$30-a-month mortgage to a friend and the Presleys moved to the edge of Tupelo's poor black neighborhood. A few months later, they moved to a more prosperous black neighborhood.

After a few more moves in Tupelo, in late 1948, the Presleys packed up and moved to Memphis where they lived first in a rooming house and then in public housing.

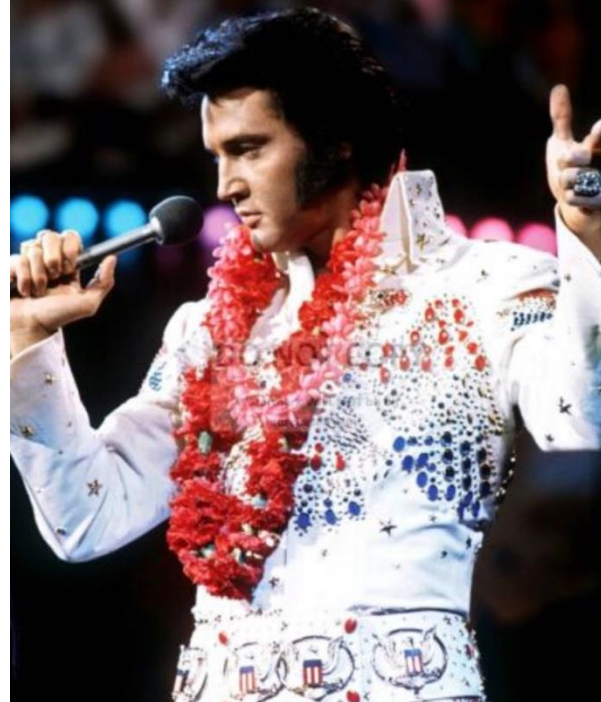


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Elvis was teased and bullied throughout his school years in Tupelo and Memphis. Beside his mother and his church, Elvis had one other tool to sustain him through trials – humble newsboy Freddy Freeman, aka Captain Marvel Jr. Elvis was a huge fan of the comic books.

To save Freddy's life, Captain Marvel transferred some of his super-powers to him: superhuman strength, speed and wisdom, among others.

Throughout his life, Elvis styled his hair with a curl hanging over his forehead, dyed his hair jet-black, wore capes, and adopted Captain Marvel's lightning bolt as his talisman.

And he always retained the humble persona of Freddy Freeman.



In Memphis, Elvis attended Humes High School where, in 8th grade, he got a C in music and his teacher told him he couldn't sing. Elvis brought his guitar to school the next day to prove her wrong. They ended up agreeing that he could sing, she just didn't like his type of singing.

Every year Humes held a concert as a fundraiser. In Elvis' senior year, 30 acts participated. The winner was chosen by the applause of the 1600 students in the audience. Elvis was the clear winner.

Elvis later said his journey to stardom started that night. He was overwhelmed and gratified by the response to his performance.

But after graduation, he got a job in a paint factory – getting up at 3 a.m. to work the early shift.



9th Grade,
Elvis at top, right



CHASING HIS DREAM

On a Saturday afternoon that July, Elvis stopped by Sun Records hoping to be “discovered.” Owner Sam Phillips was out, but Elvis went ahead and paid \$4 to record *My Happiness* and *That’s When Your Heartaches Begin*.

Office manager, Marion Keisker, was impressed and noted on a card, “Good ballad singer. Hold.” She mentioned Elvis to Phillips. Elvis later attributed his success to Marion’s “faith” in him. “If it wasn’t for that lady, I would never have got a start. That woman, she was the one who had faith, she was the one who pushed me.”

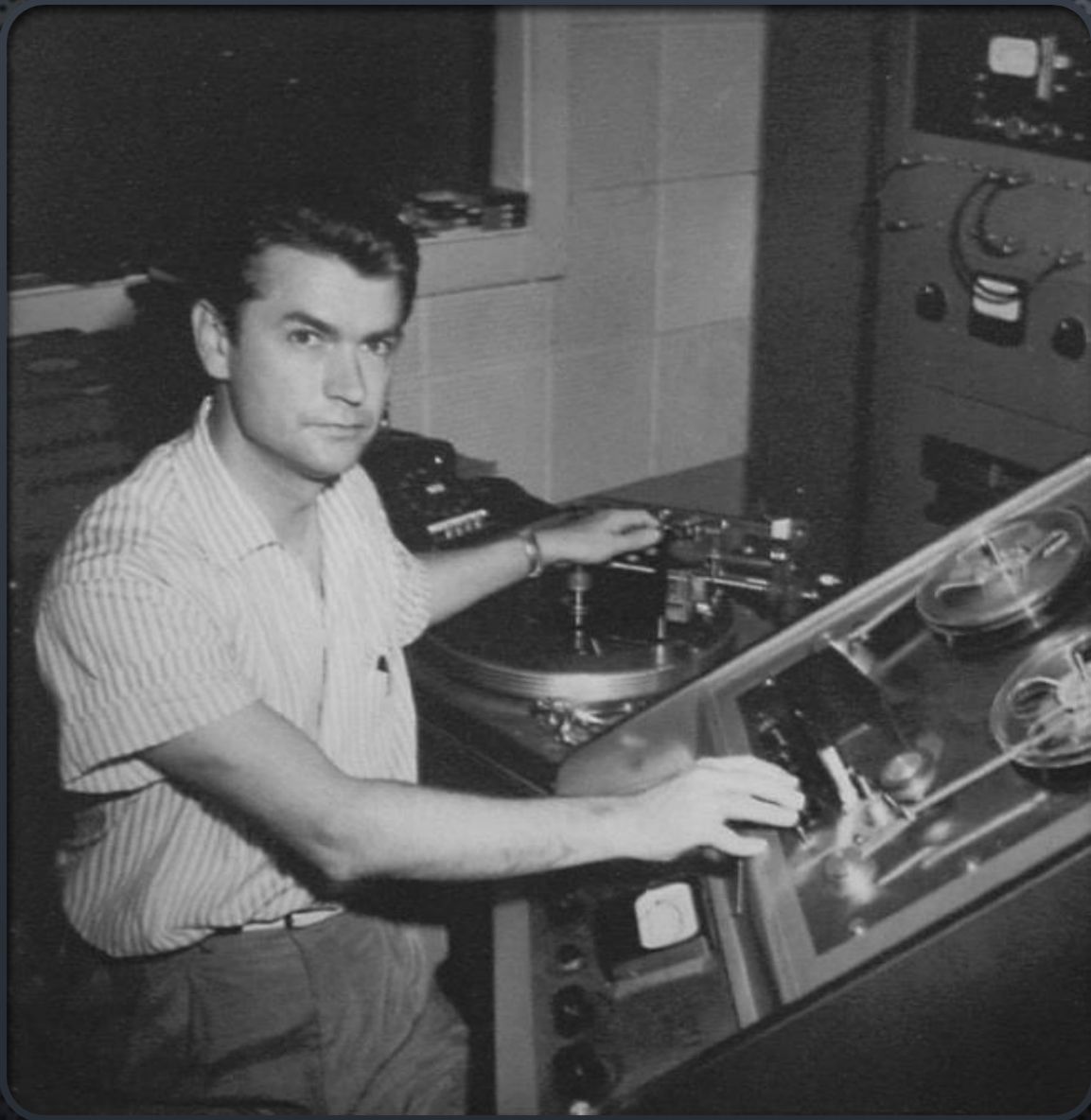


IMAGE / Public Domain

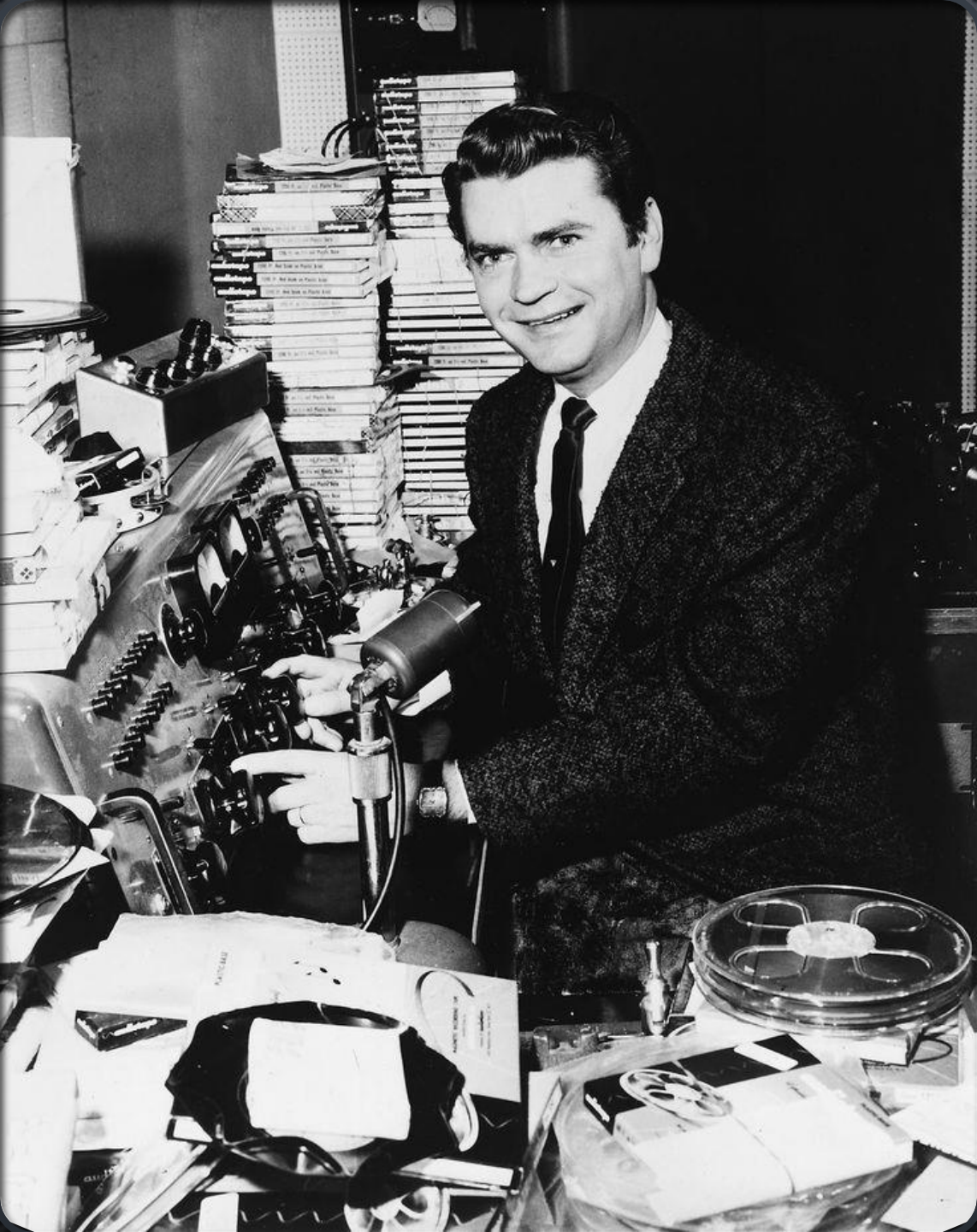
Six months later, Elvis stopped by again. This time, Sam Phillips was there. They recorded *I'll Never Stand In Your Way* and *It Wouldn't Be The Same Without You*.

That spring, Sam received a song from the writer who had produced Sun's first hit record. He tried it out on a few singers but wasn't happy with the results.

Nudged by Marion, Sam reached out to Elvis who later said, he ran all the way to the Studio.

Still not satisfied, Sam connected Elvis with two of the finest musicians in Memphis, guitarist Scotty Moore and bass-player Bill Black.

In early July, they scheduled time in the studio.



For hours they worked on slow ballads – Elvis’ supposed strength – and got nowhere.

Then, during a break, Elvis started fooling around and singing a “fast rhythm and blues number” to ease the tension in the room.

Sam shouted from the control room., “That’s great! That’s how you gotta sing. Let it go. Sing up a storm.”



Elvis, Bill Black, Scotty Moore, and Sam Phillips.

Years later, Scotty Moore described the magic moment on Monday night, July 5, 1954, “Elvis started clowning around, he picked up his guitar and started dancing around and started singing *That’s All Right, Mama*, and Bill picked up his bass, started slapping it, just more or less clowning and I joined in and that’s it ... really, it’s just one of those things.” Sam Phillips had finally heard the elusive sound he’d been searching for.



Sam Phillips, Elvis Presley and Marion Keisker
in front of Sun Records.

According to Elvis, “I never sang like that in my life, until I made that first record ... I remembered that song because I heard Arthur (“Big Boy” Crudup) sing it, and I thought I would like to try it. That was it.”

From that moment, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind, Elvis was on his way to stardom.

That’s All Right, Mama was released July 19, 1954, and sold 20,000 copies. It peaked at #4 on the Memphis record charts.



Sam Phillips knew everyone in the music business in Memphis.

After the boys headed home, Sam called DJ Dewey Phillips (no relation) at radio station, WHBQ. Dewey had a popular program called *Red, Hot & Blue*. Sam played *That's All Right, Mama* over the phone for Dewey.

When Dewey played the song the following night, the switchboard lit up with calls asking him to play it again.

On July 7, the boys returned to the studio to record a B-side for the record. They settled on *Blue Moon of Kentucky*.

A replica at Sun Records of Dewey Phillips' booth at WHBQ.



IMAGE / User:Debby white, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Another friend of Sam's arranged to have the trio play at Memphis' Overton Park bandshell in late July.

Elvis described the event for *Photoplay*...

"When I went on, I made myself forget me. I sang *That's All Right, Mama* and gave it all I had.

Suddenly the teenagers at the back of the audience started screaming.

I finished—and they screamed louder and louder. I was scared. I didn't understand it.

But, when I knew they were screaming for me, I felt something big and wonderful had begun."

By the end of the summer, Elvis was the hottest act in the South. Asked about those days in 1973, Scotty Moore said, "You know we were moving so fast we really didn't stop and think about anything."



Elvis, Scotty Moore and Bill Black were booked to play the *Grand Ole Opry* - the “Mother Church of County Music” - then based at historic Ryman Auditorium - in Nashville on Saturday, October 2, 1954.

Afterwards, *Opry* manager Jim Denny told Sam Phillips, Elvis was “not bad” but not a fit for the program. The astute Denny was right. Elvis had moved past country music into an as-yet-unnamed new genre.

Elvis never returned to the *Opry*.

Two weeks after the disappointment at the Opry, Elvis scored a huge hit at the edgier *Louisiana Hayride* which was broadcast every Saturday night to 198 radio stations in 28 states, mostly in the south and southwest, from Shreveport's Municipal Auditorium which seated 3,500.

The *Hayride* booked Elvis, Scotty and Bill for 50 performances from October 1954 to December 1956 and opened the door to the entertainment circuit of one-night gigs throughout the South.

Over the next fifteen months, they calculated they clocked about 100,000 miles.





IMAGE / Public Domain

Because Elvis was a minor, Vernon and Gladys signed a contract naming Scotty Moore as Elvis' manager on July 12, 1954.

It rapidly became obvious Scotty couldn't keep up with managing Elvis' career while traveling and performing.

By December, Scotty was replaced by Memphis DJ Bob Neal who had arranged the group's appearance at the Overton Park bandshell.

Neal placed ads in trade papers promoting Elvis as "the freshest, newest voice in country music."



During those months on the road, Elvis honed his skills as an entertainer in front of audiences and cameras.

By the time 1956 rolled around and television offers began pouring in, Elvis was a remarkably polished performer.

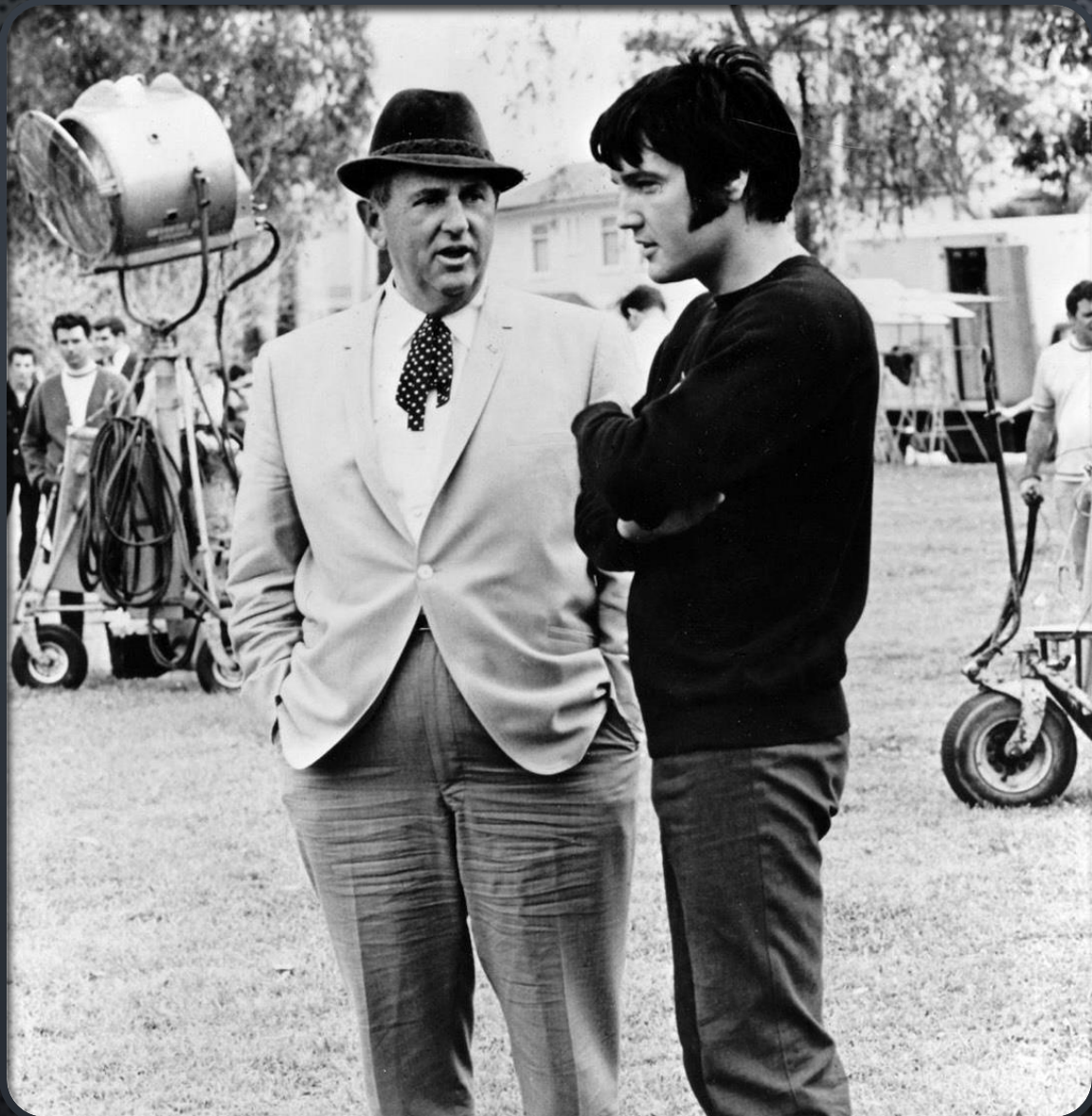


IMAGE / Public Domain via Wikicommons

Impresario and one-time carnival barker, Colonel Tom Parker appeared on the scene in January 1955.

Recently fired by his premier client, country music star, Eddy Arnold, Parker was eager to find an act with lots of potential.

By the end of the year, the wily Parker had arranged a recording contract with RCA and scheduled network television appearances. In March 1956, Parker became Elvis' sole manager.

According to Priscilla, Elvis didn't mind paying Parker half his earnings – that's how valuable Parker was to him. They were a team.

Col. Tom Parker and Elvis, 1969



Thanks to Elvis' hard work and success, the Presleys moved to 1034 Audubon Drive in Memphis on March 20, 1956.

Even bigger things were ahead.

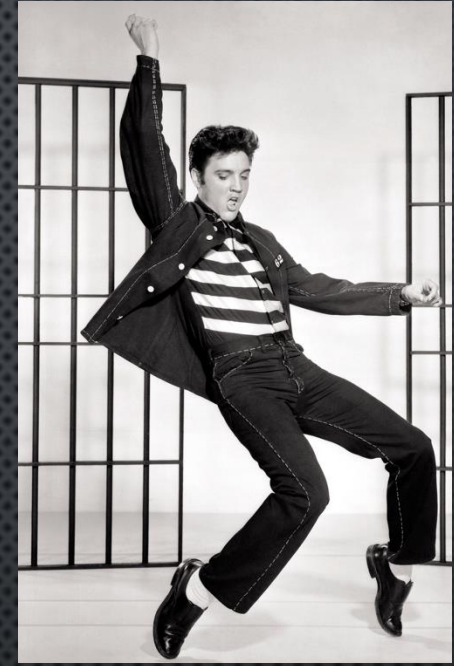
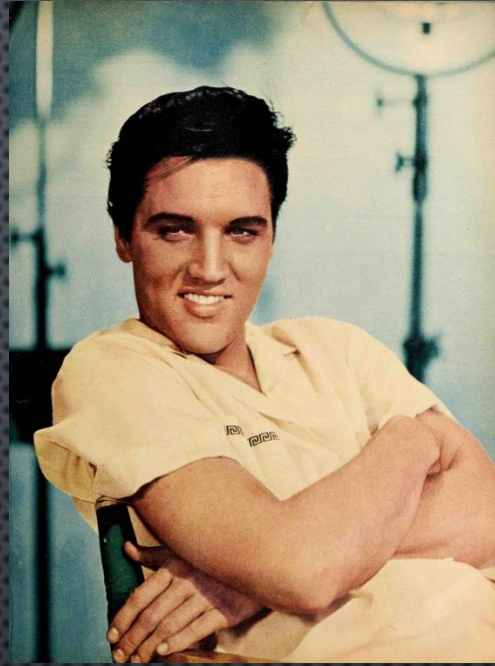
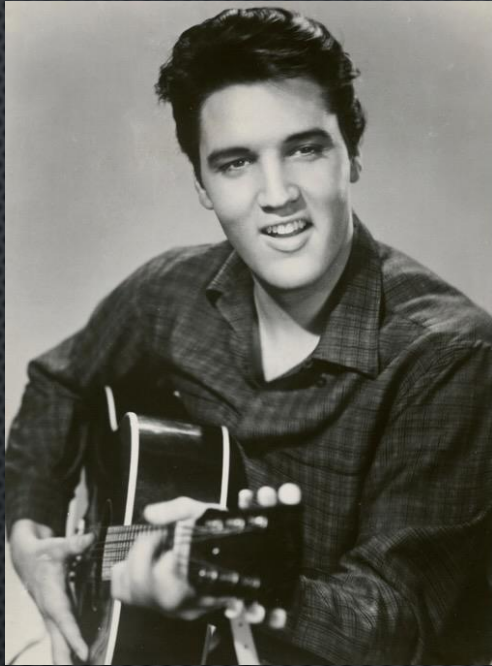


Rejected a year earlier by influential TV host Arthur Godfrey, on January 16, 1956, Elvis made his network television debut on *Stage Show* hosted by big band leaders, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey – the first of six appearances.

Over the next few months, Elvis rocketed to the top – *The Ed Sullivan Show* – and was paid an unheard of \$50,000 for three appearances. Standing next to Elvis, Sullivan told his audience, “This is a decent, real fine boy.”



Eight years after the Presleys fled Tupelo ahead of their creditors, September 26, 1956, was declared Elvis Presley Day at Tupelo's Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show. It must have seemed like a dream.



On the heels of an impressive appearance on the Milton Berle Show in the spring of 1956, Elvis signed a contract with Paramount for one movie and an option for six more. Filming began in August on *Love Me Tender*. *Loving You*, *Jailhouse Rock* and *King Creole* rapidly followed.



Now in the big-time, polished by Hollywood, Elvis and his newly-signed back-up group, *The Jordanaires*, recorded their first album at the RCA studio in New York City, in January 1957.

In the 1970s, when Elvis was asked why he wasn't still working with *The Jordanaires*, he shook his head and replied, "I can't get them to leave Nashville." Like Scotty Moore and Bob Neal, they were happily settled in stable lives in the capital of country music.



In March 1957, 22-year-old Elvis paid \$100,000 for a 14-acre property in south Memphis called Graceland. It was a present for his mother.



In 1958, Elvis was drafted by the United States Army.



IMAGE / Public Domain

On top of the world in 1957, in January 1958, Elvis received a notice from his draft board.

Gladys' health has been failing for some time, but the news that Elvis was being drafted left her distraught. She was terrified he would be in danger.

When she died that August of hepatitis and heart failure, Elvis lost his best friend and his tower of support.

His mother's blend of unfailing love, faith, optimism and her abiding belief in his talent was impossible to replace. Priscilla wrote in *Elvis and Me*, Gladys was "the love of his life."

Family members said he was never the same after Gladys' death.



He was inconsolable over the loss of his mother.

When Vernon got involved with a divorcee in Germany the following year – a woman he eventually married and divorced - Elvis was horrified. His solution was to find someone to talk to and confide in.

Trapped by celebrity, he couldn't casually meet someone in the usual ways, so he asked a friend to find him an American girl – ideally someone friendly, outgoing and beautiful.

Elvis' friend soon spotted 14-year-old Priscilla Beaulieu writing letters at an American army base snack bar. He introduced himself and asked if she'd like to meet Elvis Presley.

Top: The house Elvis rented in Germany.
Priscilla Beaulieu, 1960.





After a seven-and-a-half-year complicated courtship, Elvis and Priscilla married in Las Vegas on May 1, 1967. Their daughter, Lisa Marie, was born the following year.

When Priscilla left Elvis in 1972 for her karate instructor, he set about replacing her with women who resembled her.

First with Miss Tennessee, Linda Thompson, from June 1972, until she had enough of his infidelities, and left in late 1976.

He rapidly replaced Linda with someone who looked even more like Priscilla, Ginger Alden. The King could not be seen without a Queen.

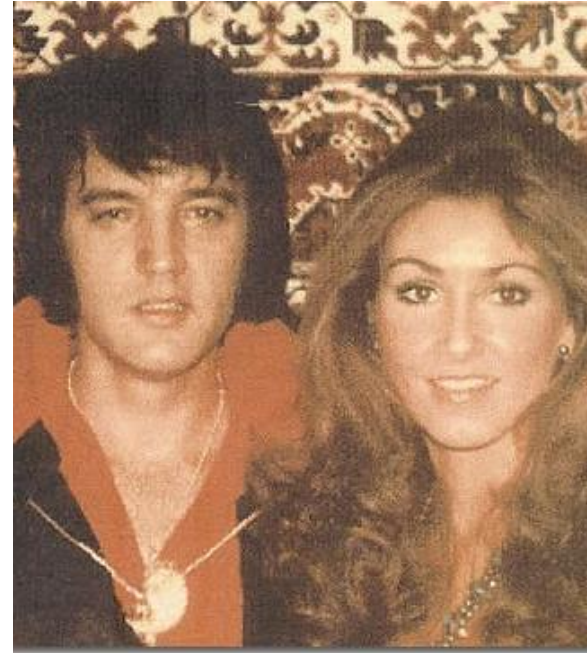




IMAGE / Public Domain

After returning from Germany, Elvis made over 20 films – as many as four in one-year – and had grown tired of the formula. Thanks to the Colonel’s negotiating skills, he was wildly rich but by the end of his contract, he was ready for something new.

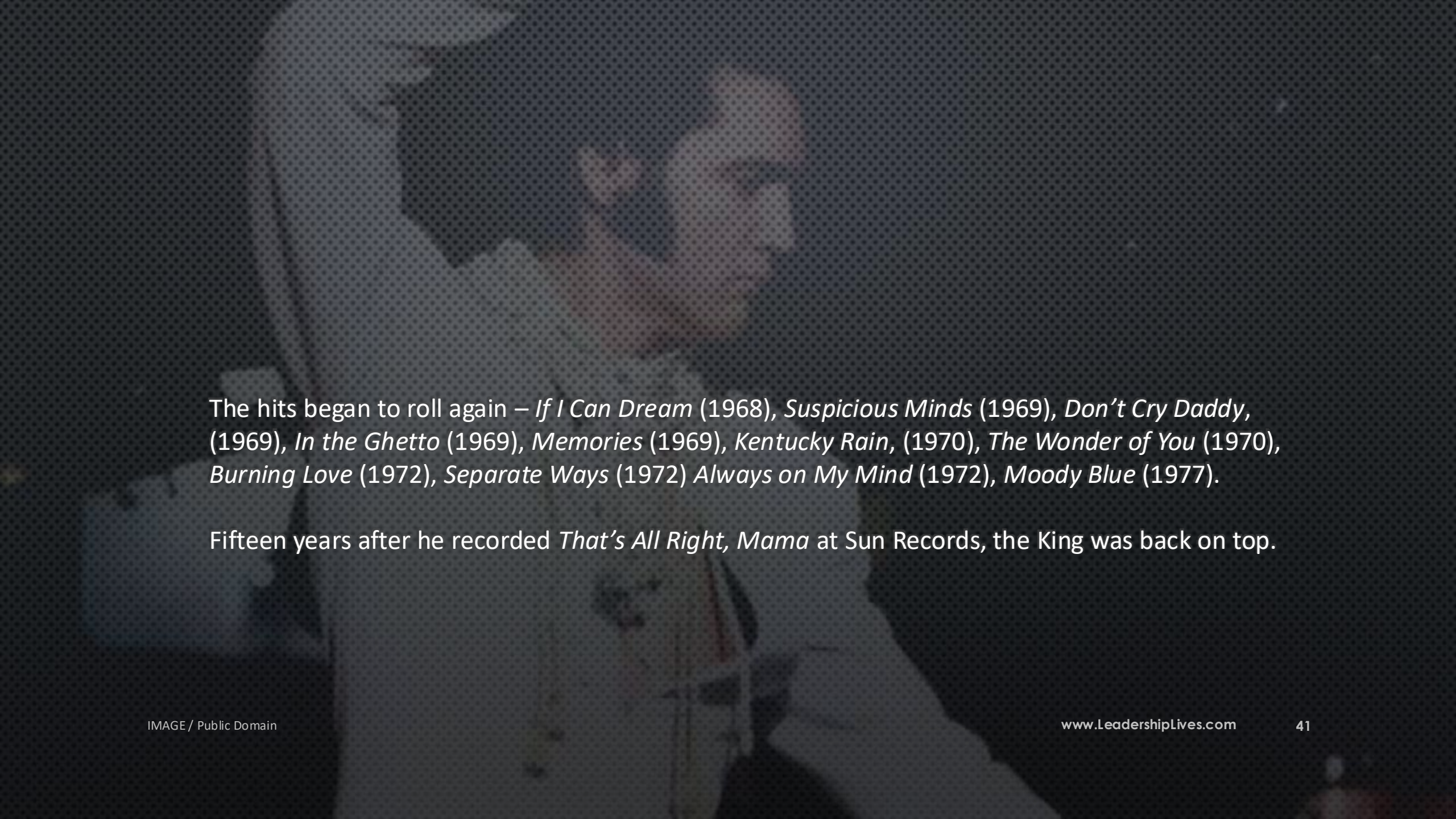
In early 1968, the Colonel negotiated a Christmas program with NBC – known as the 1968 Comeback Special.

The program was a smashing success and blasted open the door to a new chapter in his career – Las Vegas, concert tours, more TV and documentary film specials – including *Aloha from Hawaii* which was broadcast around the world.



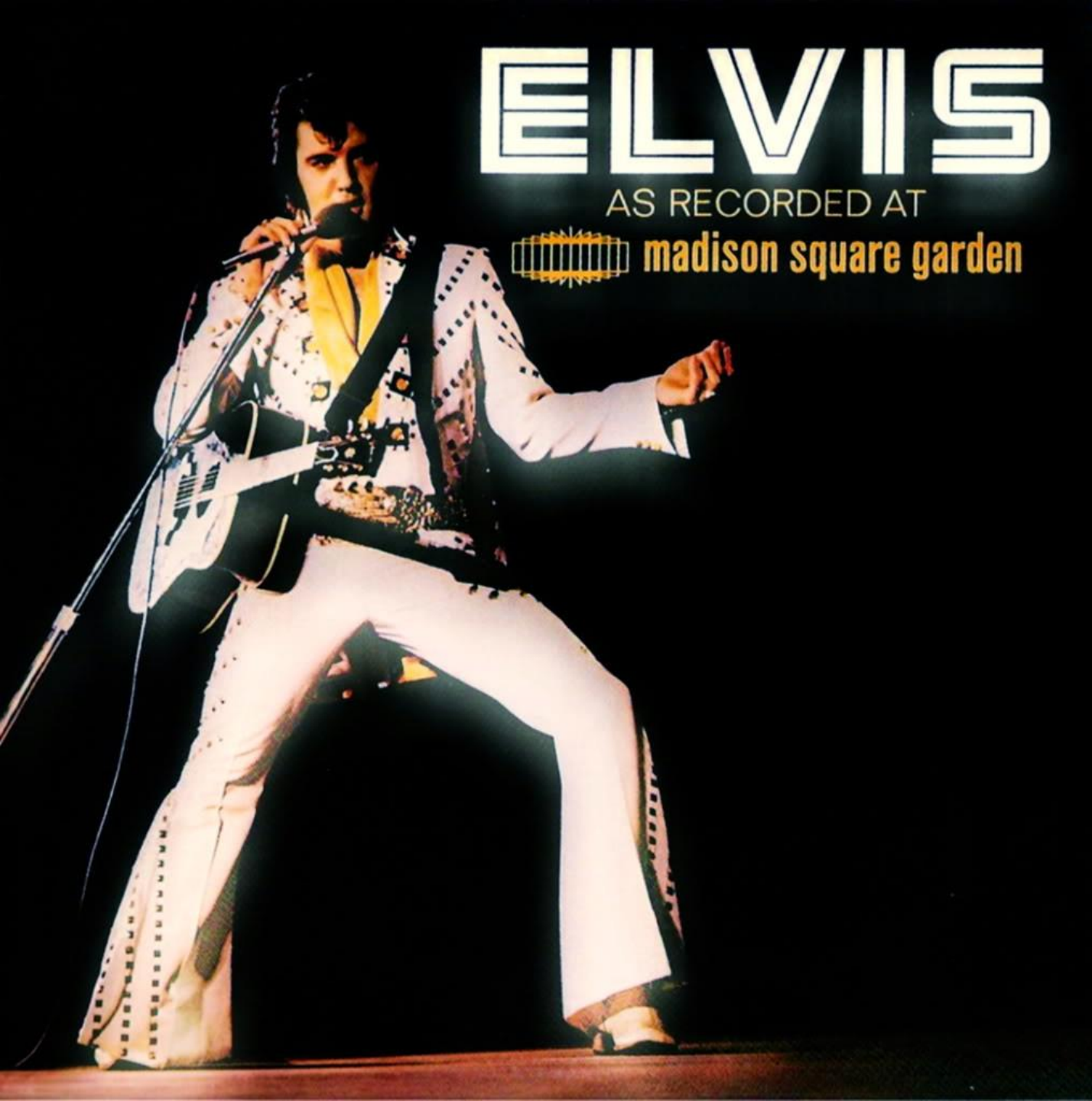
Flying into Houston in February 1969, Priscilla spotted the Astrodome from the sky and was shocked that Elvis could fill the football venue. He played six sold-out shows before a total of 207,494 people and earned one-million dollars in three nights.

America buzzed with speculation. Elvis might start doing live concerts again for the first time since the 1950s.



The hits began to roll again – *If I Can Dream* (1968), *Suspicious Minds* (1969), *Don't Cry Daddy*, (1969), *In the Ghetto* (1969), *Memories* (1969), *Kentucky Rain*, (1970), *The Wonder of You* (1970), *Burning Love* (1972), *Separate Ways* (1972) *Always on My Mind* (1972), *Moody Blue* (1977).

Fifteen years after he recorded *That's All Right, Mama* at Sun Records, the King was back on top.



ELVIS

AS RECORDED AT



madison square garden

In 1972, Elvis scheduled a concert in New York for the first time.

As soon as the concert at Madison Square Garden was announced, the tickets sold out – four performances before 80,000 fans.

Asked why it took so long for him to come to New York, always humble, Elvis responded he had to wait his turn to get into the Garden.

Performing again before live audiences, Elvis tapped Hollywood costume designer, Bill Belew, who came up with the iconic jumpsuits bedecked with jewels. They tried a number of colors but white worked best under the concert lighting of the era.

In real life Elvis stood just about 6' but clad in the jumpsuits, wearing boots with heels, on stage he now looked superhuman – the very embodiment of his superhero.

And like those long-ago preachers of his youth, Elvis commanded the stage.





IMAGE / Public Domain

On August 16, 1977, less than two months after his final concert, Ginger Alden discovered 42-year-old Elvis Presley's lifeless body at Graceland.

Like his outstanding dancing skills, Elvis inherited from Gladys a heart that gave out too soon.

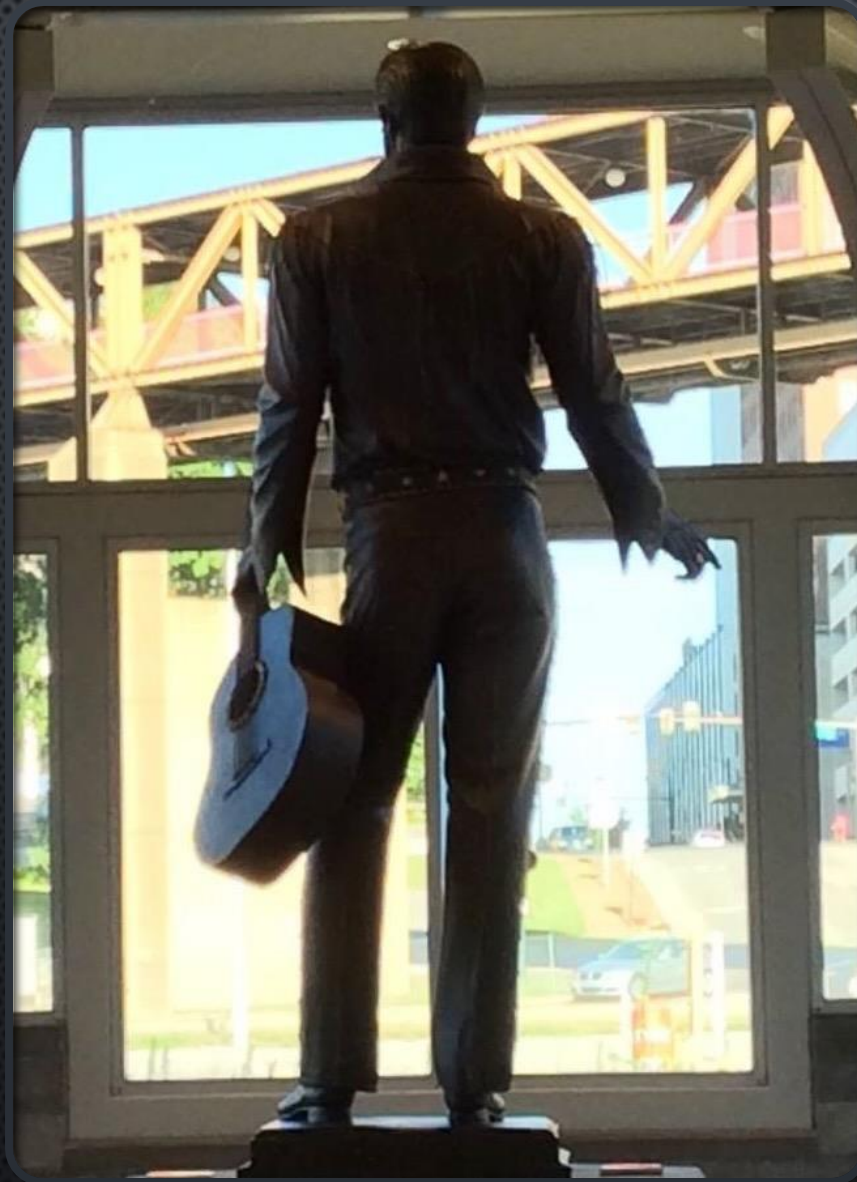


IMAGE / Margot Morrell

IF I CAN DREAM

“Out there in the dark,
there's a beckoning candle, oh yeah
And while I can think, while I can talk,
while I can stand, while I can walk

While I can dream,
oh, please let my dream
come true, right now.”

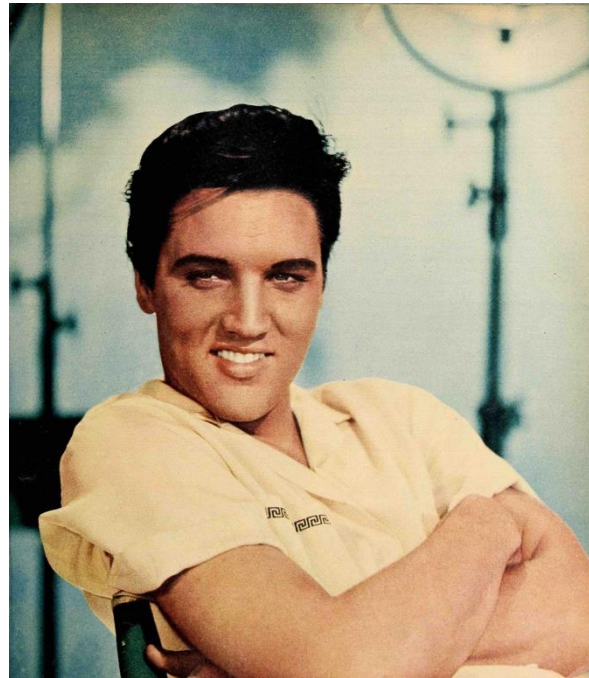
POINTS TO PONDER...

- Did Elvis mention to Marion Keisker that he had won the Humes' talent contest earlier that year? Would that have sparked her interest? What did spark her interest in him?
- Was Elvis' singing style influenced by living in Tupelo's black neighborhoods?
- Elvis failed two auditions in the spring of 1954 and was told more than once he couldn't sing, where did he find the inner strength to continue to pursue his dream?
- Elvis, like every celebrity, paid an enormous price for fame – was it worth it?
- Elvis recorded hundreds of songs, but he was at his best when the song touched a personal note – *Always on My Mind* was recorded shortly after Priscilla left him. *Polk Salad Annie* and *In the Ghetto*, talk about growing up poor. *If I Can Dream* was based on Elvis' thoughts on the 1968 assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

For more photo-essays on people who
have pursued their dreams, visit
www.LeadershipLives.com

MARGOT MORRELL

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Many, many thanks to...

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<http://www.scottymoore.net/sam.html>

<http://www.elvis.com.au>

PHOTOS:
Wikimedia
NYPL

Fabulous tours of Graceland, Sun Records, Studio B in Nashville and where it all began, Elvis' Birthplace in Tupelo, MS.



Priscilla, Lisa and Elvis, ca. 1969.