

putting up with me all those years. Also, my sister, Anne Grenadier, and in memory of my brother-in-law, Bernie Grenadier.

LAMAR FIKE: To my darling wife, Mary, and to the memory of my beloved mother, Margaret.



PROLOGUE

The flickering television images of Elvis Presley—the rough-and-ready Hillbilly Cat swiveling provocatively on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the 1950s, the lean-and-leathered god of *The Singer Special* of the '60s, and the grotesquely puffy, jumpsuited caricature from his last live concerts of the '70s—are so ingrained in the American consciousness as almost to be snapshots from the family album.

Indeed, it is hard to find a more perfect symbol of all that is glorious and horrific about America—about the American dream turned nightmare—than Elvis Aaron Presley, who rose from wrenching Mississippi poverty to nearly unfathomable wealth as the high priest of pop. For his trouble, this American original changed not only the course of popular music, but American *thought*, only to die at forty-two, discouraged, disillusioned, and all tubbed out on drugs, cheeseburgers, and deep-fried peanut butter sandwiches. To some, it seemed a dramatic comeuppance, a tawdry end to a tacky life.

Yet perhaps no other great American has been as fully exploited and least understood. For while Elvis was the most significant folk hero of the twentieth century, he rarely spoke about himself and certainly not to the public—never, in the twenty-one years of his professional career, granting even one in-depth interview. A fascinating enigma—a mystery that will never be completely solved—he is, as critic Steve Simels dubbed him in a reference to the classic film *Citizen Kane*, “The ‘Rosebud’ of our popular culture.”

There is the notion that Elvis Presley, infinitely complex, yet simple, was unknowable because he didn't know himself, that there was no real Elvis, only a mythological figure he invented

when he sang. The man himself, the theory goes, was little more than an empty vessel into which his detractors poured their fears and his loyal flock their fondest hopes and dreams. Maybe so.

But the people who came closest to knowing Elvis Presley, the man, were his inner circle of friends and employees—the Memphis Mafia, as the press called them, the rock 'n' roll version of Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack, the young men who traveled everywhere with him as both companions and quasi-bodyguards.

Only they knew that within Elvis Presley, who survived his twin brother at birth, two beings existed—codependent but incompatible and worlds apart. One, a virtual innocent, wore black lace shirts, strummed a guitar, and sang, as writer Lucian Truscott IV once put it, “an elegant hybrid of nigger and ‘neck.” This Elvis, while a shy mama’s boy, challenged every show business convention, operated from a position of supreme confidence, sang gospel music in his quiet moments, and addressed his elders as *sir* or *ma’am*.

But the other Elvis, a man’s man who courted danger, inevitably got him into trouble. Never rising above the self-destructive ways of his luckless family, he was insecure, restless, paranoid, menacing, and eternally suspicious, a fan of the worst kind of show business excess, both personally and musically. Eventually, his public persona, draped in outlandish stage costumes and capes, became a cartoon.

As one, Elvis became one of the highest-grossing motion picture stars and the unequivocal King of Rock ‘n’ Roll. He holed up in a mansion of a prison called Graceland, a vampire who came alive at night and sucked at the nectar of whatever, and whoever, caught his fancy. He gave away Cadillacs to his cohorts and to strangers. He was a hero. Yet as the other, he patrolled the red velvet tombs of Las Vegas at dawn, held pistols to the heads of his friends, and allowed his wife, Priscilla, and his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, to orchestrate his life and violate his career. In retaliation, he fed his self-loathing a continuous flow of pills and too soon died, sprawled on the floor of his bathroom, purple under his own weight.

The job of keeping the dark Elvis under wraps fell to Colonel Parker. But on a day-to-day basis, it landed squarely in the lap of the Memphis Mafia. They did their job, and usually did it well. Just how well comes across in the *New York Times* review of the

documentary *Elvis on Tour*: “The film strips away the storybook myth to find underneath a private person who is indistinguishable from the public one, except for the fact he dresses with somewhat less flamboyance.”

Rock writer Dave Marsh, in his 1982 book, *Elvis*, called the Memphis Mafia “loadies and stooges . . . buffoons, yes-men, gold-diggers and dull thugs . . . the most small-time sidekicks that any great man has known.”

Certainly the twenty or so men who filtered through Elvis’s entourage were not hired for their business acumen or for their ability to advise him on matters public or private. Nor did Presley invite it, and to ensure that, he picked companions who came from, as one of them puts it, “the same little world.” He saw in them, more than anything, a buffer zone—the one group of people with whom he could be himself, free from the pressures of being Elvis Presley.

“There were some dumb asses in the group,” one of them concedes, and the dimmer ones didn’t last long in Presley’s employ. But the majority of the core group of the Mafia were never as simple-headed as the press assumed—surely not the reliable, take-charge Marty Lacker, the Mafia’s foreman, who handled many of Presley’s daily business demands; the frequently disruptive Lamar Fike, head of Elvis’s transportation (and also Presley’s premier whipping boy), later an advance man with Colonel Parker on the road; or Billy Smith, Elvis’s first cousin, embittered about the way Presley’s outrageous fame forever changed his family, but who served as a stabilizing factor in Elvis’s volatile life and became the singer’s confidant in his last days. If ever Elvis Presley had a best friend, it was Billy.

That they remained loyal to him, despite Presley’s verbal and physical abuse, speaks more about their love for him than it does about their paychecks. Without them, Presley surely would have died years earlier. “We literally kept him alive,” says Fike, who remembers too many close calls.

The recollections of Smith, Lacker, and Fike, presented here in oral history form, are more than just memories of their glory days with the King. They are unscheduled stops, to borrow a metaphor from rock chronicler Timothy White, on Elvis’s runaway “Mystery Train.” And as primary testimonies about every personal and professional turn of events in the Presley saga for

him not around, and it's not easy. We all sit down and just look at each other. And we miss him very much."

In some ways, talking for this book was cathartic. By looking back on how Elvis lived his life and trying to explain why he made the choices he did—what motivated him to produce his art, as well as the ultimate horror of his end—they also explored the unraveling of the Mafia itself. This is a story about what it's like to be a witness to history and about the toll that it takes on the psyche, especially when history ends tragically. Not surprisingly, their perceptions of events that led to that end do not always agree.

Their hope in discussing their extraordinary experience—how Presley acted within the group, how the group survived as other members of Presley's camp tried to break it up, and how it was torn asunder after he died—is to shed new light into the few remaining dark corners of the Presley saga. To those who question their right to expose this information, they correctly reply it was as much their lives as it was his.

My own affinity with Elvis Presley goes back almost as far as theirs. I had just turned six when Elvis made his first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and, like all of America, I sat transfixed in front of my family's television set, astonished by the urgency of this human comet who was just passing through. As a child shackled to two weekly drudgeries—classical violin lessons and Saturday morning allergy shots—the high point of my young existence was listening to Top 40 radio and buying 45 rpm singles at the hi-fi shop after my Saturday appointment.

Most of my records were by Elvis (though others such as Fats Domino also made the grade), and as I listened to them—to a kind of Southern experience that was far more deeply rooted than my middle-class Kentucky upbringing—I wanted to know everything there was to know about a man who sent up such an electrifying cry and shuddering moan. Eventually, this fascination set me on a lifelong path of writing about popular music and its culture.

On August 16, 1977, I was celebrating my twenty-seventh birthday when the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, for which I freelanced as the pop music critic, telephoned to say that Elvis Presley was dead. Could I find his stepgrandmother, who lived in town?

thirty years—from 1947, when Smith was first able to form important impressions of his older cousin, until the day Presley died in 1977—they also forge their own form of illumination, especially since Smith speaks candidly here for the first time about their remarkable relationship.

As such, these often poignant vignettes amount to as close a psychological profile as anyone will ever get of Elvis Presley and present a serious look at the phenomenal and tragic evolution of a supremely gifted and equally troubled native genius. Never was so influential a man so poorly prepared for his fate—nor so ineptly schooled for its consequences.

This book, however, is as much about the Memphis Mafia—about what it was like to be in the shadow of the King, enjoying a vicarious, shared identity—as it is about Presley. In some ways, they were like the Italian Mafia, adhering to a veil of secrecy in hiding the truth; serving twenty-four-hour-a-day allegiance to their employer rather than to their wives and families; collecting tiny salaries; enduring personal slights and belittlement; and expected to do anything to show their devotion, including stopping bullets, if necessary.

Why did they stay? The answer is long and complicated, but also short and obvious: Elvis was their drug of choice.

While many people who spend their lives in the service of famous people eventually come to despise them, that never happened with the Memphis Mafia, who even after decades still believed that being in Elvis's presence somehow protected them from the evils of the world. "It never entered my mind that he would die," says Lacker. "That's just the way he affected us. I thought we'd all die before he would."

When he did die on August 16, 1977, it changed their world forever. Many of them discovered they'd been handicapped by their years of living a fantasy—that they had no knowledge of how to exist in the workaday world, so insulated had they been behind the gates of Graceland. Some of them found that without Presley's reflected glory, their status—and their relationships with others—quickly changed. It was a frightful awakening.

"The hardest thing I've had to do since he died is to develop another life," admits Fike. "None of us was equipped for his death. You can look at every one of us, and we all have the same problems. We all fight the business world. We try to survive with

I struck out with Mrs. Presley, but the next day the paper sent two reporters to Memphis to cover the outpouring of grief that attended Presley's funeral. I was one of them and John Filiatreau the other. John and I were standing in the press pool in front of Graceland when Presley's head of security, Dick Grob, came out with a bullhorn, stood directly in front of us, and announced, "Any members of the press who want to view the body line up behind these two."

And in we went. No, the body, dressed in a white business suit, a blue shirt, and a silver tie, did not look like Elvis Presley. And yes, it held a waxy hue. But it was still Elvis Presley in that casket, with the roots of his sideburns—as white as an undisturbed snowbank—badly in need of dyeing.

So many times as a child, I thumbed through the pages of fan magazines, staring at the voodoo sensuality etched on Elvis's face and at the ordinary faces of the young men who formed the knot of his friendships. I wondered then what it was like behind the gates at Graceland. How had they lived their lives there? How had Elvis—and his parents—borne up under the crushing weight of fame? And what about the Memphis Mafia? Was a life of running errands for the King really so grand?

I began to learn the answers that week in Memphis as my paper decided to publish a rotogravure extra on Elvis and asked me to interview anyone who knew him. I had never been to Memphis before and had no contacts. Bill E. Burk, who had written dozens of Presley columns through the years for the Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, took pity on me and introduced me to a number of people, including Alan Fortas, a core member of the Mafia for twelve years. It was Alan who, in time, brought me to this project.

The interviews for this book took place over a three-year period and were conducted in hotel rooms, homes, offices, and restaurants in Memphis, Nashville, and Louisville. I interviewed each person separately, many times, and we had several joint sessions, events that always sparked high emotion and often differing opinions and recollections of the same event. The transcripts of these interviews formed a four-thousand-page mountain.

In the course of this book, the astute reader may find that the principals sometimes talk authoritatively about events that happened before they joined the group. A neat trick, to be sure. But since Presley's death, they have spent their lives in search of the

"Rosebud," doing genealogical research in libraries, with each other, and with other members of the Smith and Presley families.

Like the survivors of a bad car wreck in which only the driver was killed, Billy Smith, Marty Lacker, and Lamar Fike are in some ways closer than blood relatives, bound by a singular shared experience, by pride and shame, and by remorse. Today, eighteen years after Elvis's death, not a week goes by when they don't see him in their dreams. A way of righting old wrongs, of saying things that never got said?

More likely a specter on the lam—Presley's own way of letting them know he's still around. Prone to long religious diatribes in the last half of his life, Elvis once lectured the group about the hereafter. He told them that if he went first, they'd better be good, because he'd be watching everything they did. "I'll haunt your asses!" he warned.

And so he does.

Alanna Nash