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THE KING IS DEAD; LONG LIVE THE KING:
THE LEGACY OF ELVIS PRESLEY

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If I said I was going to begin this evening by making some comments regarding the election of 1992, you would surely think that I was referring to the presidential contest between George Bush I and Bill Clinton. And, in a way, you would be correct, as will shortly become evident.

However, there was another nationwide election held in 1992, and, for those invested in it, it was as hotly contested, as fraught with future implications, and as critical to their psychic stability as the presidential election. In one aspect, at least, it mirrored that contest, offering voters a choice between the young and the old.

The two campaigns were launched almost simultaneously when, in February 1992, during the opening weeks of the presidential primary season, two paintings of Elvis Presley were unveiled at the Las Vegas Hilton. As the New York Times reported:

> In one corner there is young Elvis, rendered…as the essence of "swoonability," leaning forward into his microphone, cradling it lovingly, a loose strand of hair dangling on his forehead…In the other corner is a mature Elvis, inspired by his 1973 Aloha From Hawaii Concert, dressed in the trappings of royalty, a heraldic white jumpsuit with a high star-studded collar. (Brown, New York Times)

It was the first - - and last - - occasion in 152 years that the public was allowed to preview - - much less the opportunity to vote for - - a stamp design. By the time the United States Post Office released its Elvis choices - - after nine years of intense lobbying, featuring 60,000 letters from 150 fan clubs (Brown, New York Times) - - twenty-five countries already had Elvis stamps and Tanzania - - to sidestep controversy and to bolster its foreign exchange earnings - - had ten versions. (The Other Election, New York Times)

For some columnists, commentators, and cartoonists, in the words of Greil Marcus, "interest in the Elvis stamp seemed to outstrip public concern for the primaries themselves…the stamp election was more fun, and perhaps more meaningful than the real one." (Marcus, New York Times)

Whether this apparent dissatisfaction with the electoral process should be blamed on the candidates, the system, the public, or the mass media, is the subject of another paper, but one thing is clear: Elvis remained in the building throughout the entire presidential year. (Rodman, pp.91-92)

Bill Clinton cast his vote early, declaring himself a lifelong Elvis fan and a proponent of the younger Elvis postage stamp. When the press corps following his campaign nicknamed him "Elvis" - - or "Elvis with a calculator" - - his own staffers riposted by issuing them credentials featuring an Elvis image. Some observers believe the turning point in Clinton's primary campaign - - after he had fallen behind Bush and Perot - - was his appearance on the Arsenio Hall Show. Mr. Hall's first question to Mr. Clinton - -

why did he support the younger Elvis postage stamp - - was followed in good time by Clinton taking saxophone in hand and blasting out "Heartbreak Hotel." In the words of Greil Marcus:

> Clinton stepped forward as if to say: Alright, who cares, rip it up. For the first time in the campaign, Bill Clinton was more Elvis than calculator. The spirit of freedom in Elvis's best moves was the freedom of self-discovery - - and that night Bill Clinton accepted the gift. Playing the old song as best he could, he was more fan than star, more himself than Elvis, but perhaps just Elvis enough. (Marcus, quoted in Rodman p.91).

Later, when Clinton had the Democratic nomination in hand, Elvis was listed as the convention's "entertainment coordinator," and Clinton's running mate, Al Gore, opened his acceptance speech by claiming that his dream had always been to come to Madison Square Garden and be the warm-up act for Elvis. (Rodman, pp.89-93)

George Bush countered with his own strategy, one that seemed to risk alienating working-class white southerners who formed the core of Elvis Fandom. Said Bush: "Clinton is on all sides of every issue; he's been spotted in more places than Elvis Presley." Later he claimed that "Clinton's economic plan was 'Elvis economics.' America will be checking into Heartbreak Hotel." And again: "I finally figured out why Clinton compares himself to Elvis. The minute he has to take a stand on something, he starts wiggling."

But Clinton got the final word:

> President Bush is always comparing me to Elvis in unflattering ways. I don't think he would have liked Elvis very much and that's just another thing that's wrong with him. (Rodman, p.90)

Bill Clinton won his election - - as did the younger version of the Elvis Presley postage stamp, by a three to one margin, after one million votes had been cast. The postage service printed five hundred million stamps, the largest commemorative issue ever, many of which were snapped up at noon January 9, 1993, the first day of the sale, as thousands of collectors and Elvis Presley fans jammed post offices throughout the United States.

Was Elvis a factor in Bill Clinton's election? Who's to say? But if he was, the reason why, according to Greil Marcus, is this:

> Slap Elvis on anything and you'll be noticed. Elvis in a speech is a guaranteed soundbite on the evening news. But if Elvis is a hook, he's also a hook lodged in millions of hearts. You are guaranteed a response when you pull the Elvis cord, but there is no guarantee what the response will be. (Marcus, New York Times)

I became interested in Elvis Presley late in life, about seven or eight years ago, and it is an attachment that, when all the facts are considered, has a little basis in rationality. I am

not a music person; I don't listen to music, past or present. I could hardly name twenty musical artists or songs from the past twenty years. I do have a vague recollection of some popular artists and songs from my high school and college years, but, in all honesty, once one gets past the Beatles, the Supremes, the Four Tops, and the Beach Boys, I am seriously handicapped.

As for Elvis Presley, until recently my feelings mirrored those of Erika Doss in her book Elvis Culture:

> I hardly thought about him before and certainly had not grown up an Elvis fan…I put him in the past tense: fifties, fat, finished, forgotten. (Doss, pp.22)

Yes, he had sung "Hound Dog" and "Don't Be Cruel" when a young man, but then went on to make a series of forgettable movies which all looked and sounded alike. I don't recall his 1968 Comeback Special or his Aloha From Hawaii Concert, other than a hazy image of the jumpsuit and cape he wore for the rest of his career. I don't remember where I was when I heard that Elvis had died; my response would have been: too bad; he wasn't that old.

And in the years since his death, if I had been aware of Elvis Presley at all, it would have been as much of America perceives him: a weird icon, perhaps a t-shirt, a black velvet wall hanging, a commemorative dinner plate, the inspiration for numerous caricatures, impersonators, or imitators, the idol of thousands of devoted but misguided fans, or "the subject of a handful of TV movies: just one more confused star, an ordinary boy with a bit of talent and a lot of nerve who lost his way." (Marcus, Dead Elvis, p.33)

All that changed for me when I picked up a book in the library entitled Last Trail To Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley, by Peter Guralnick. It had received glowing reviews, so I thought I would give it a try. It's a mesmerizing tale really, five hundred pages that cover principally five years, 1954 through 1958, almost a day-by-day chronicle of the young singer's meteoric rise to fame and fortune: his initial recordings at Sam Phillips's Sun Records studio in Memphis, Tennessee; his early barnstorming days in the Southeast as a rockabilly singer, where he drew increasingly large and adoring crowds; his seduction by Colonel Tom Parker, who managed his transition to a national rock-and-roll star and negotiated his contract with RCA; his television appearances on Stage Show, Milton Berle, and the Ed Sullivan show, which showcased not only his musical talent, but also his provocative performing style; his four early films, including Love Me Tender and Jailhouse Rock, which shaped his star image; and finally his induction into the Army and the death of his beloved mother, Gladys. He was the most famous man in America and he was not yet twenty-four years old.

It's all amazing, but, in essence, I became enamored of Elvis Presley because of this story, which has been retold many times.

Sam Phillips, a native of Florence, Alabama, moved to Memphis in 1945 because he loved the blues and thought it was a center for black music. (Halberstam p.467)

He believed that the downtrodden Negro should be able to share in the American dream, and in 1950 with his friend Marian Keisker, a local radio announcer, opened a studio at 706 Union Street, a place, in Marian's words, "where black people could come and play their own music, a place where they would feel free and relaxed." (Guralnick, p.61)

The fledgling Sun Records label has three hits by the summer of 1953 when a shy woebegone eighteen-year-old boy walks into the studio cradling a beat-up child's guitar and forks over $3.98 to make a personal record for his mother. But he is actually auditioning, because while waiting for the record to be printed he says to Marian:

> If you know anyone who needs a singer...what kind of singer are you, she asks...I sing all kinds...who do you sound like, she asks...I don't sound like nobody, he says. (Guralnick, p. 63)

Since Sam says to the boy, "We might give you a call sometime," he stops by the studio a few times, talks to Ms. Keisker, even cuts another record, but nothing happens, not for a year, until Sam makes a record for a group called the Starlight Wranglers and recommends the boy to Scotty Moore, the group's guitarist. (Guralnick pp.90-91)

On Monday evening, July 5th, 1954, Scotty, his bass player, Bill Black, and the boy show up at Sam's studio. They work on a couple of songs for hours, not really getting anywhere, about to give up in frustration, when all of a sudden, says Scotty, "Elvis started singing this song, jumping around and acting a fool, and then Bill picked up his bass and I started playing with them. Sam stuck his head out of the control booth and said, what are you doing, and we said, we don't know. Well back up, he said, try to find a place to start, and do it again." (Guralnick, pp. 93-95)

The song is "That's Alright Mama," and they work on it that night over and over, refining it until, when Sam plays it back for them, Bill said, "We couldn't believe it was us." After the session is over and everyone has gone home, Sam sits in his studio and, as he told a Memphis reporter several years later, thinks about how black rhythm and blues appealed to white youngsters, but somehow they resisted buying it. He gets to thinking how many records he could sell if he could find white performers who could play and sing in this exciting way. (Guralnick, p. 96)

Two nights later, Sam calls his friend Dewey Phillips, a popular DJ at WHBQ, who on his show "Red, Hot, and Blue" had introduced young white Memphis kids to black music. (Halberstam p.460) He receives 3000 letters a week and forty to fifty telegrams a night. Once, when he asked his listeners to blow their horn at 10:00 in the evening, the Memphis police chief called to remind him of the city's anti-noise ordinance. (Guralnick, p. 97)

Dewey stays up all night thinking about the record Sam played for him before finally deciding to play it on his show the next evening. Sam hasn't even recorded the flip side, but Dewey plays it anyway.

> The response is instantaneous. Forty-seven phone calls come in right away, along with fourteen telegrams; he plays the record seven times in a row, eleven times, seven times over the course of the rest of the program. In retrospect it doesn't really matter; it seems as if all Memphis is listening as Dewey encourages his audience to join them in the discovery of a new voice. (Guralnick p. 100)

Minutes later Dewey calls the Presley home to get Elvis down to the station for an interview. One question he makes it a point to ask is where Elvis goes to high school. He wants to get it out that Elvis goes to the white high school because a lot of people listening think he is colored. (Guralnick, p. 101)

I will return to this story indirectly in a few minutes when I attempt to explain Elvis's posthumous career, but first I want to relate another story which will also play a part in that explanation. This story is briefly described in Guralnick's book but appears in more detail in another work I found extremely useful, Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend by Gilbert Rodman.

On June 5, 1956, Elvis Presley makes his second appearance on the Milton Berle Show. "Heartbreak Hotel," his first RCA record, is in its sixth week as the number one song in the country. In the past two months Elvis has given more than fifty live performances from Ohio to California, signed a seven-year three-movie contract with Paramount Pictures, and been the featured subject in articles in Life, Time, and Newsweek. Since January he has made seven primetime appearances on national television. "Rock and roll is the rising wave in popular music, and Elvis is the hottest rock and roll musician in the country." (Rodman, pp. 146-147)

"Wearing dark baggy pants, an oversized light colored jacket, and a two-tone wide-collared, open-neck shirt," (Rodman p.149) Elvis for the first time on national TV has left his guitar behind and is free to "dance, twitch, gyrate…to shake, rattle, and roll to his heart's content with his scandalous pelvis in full view of the television audience." He leads off with "Hound Dog" and his performance that night will launch that song - - which he had not planned to record at all - - on its way (along with its flipside "Don't Be Cruel") to the biggest single of the year. (Rodman, p. 148)

"Throughout the first verse Elvis shakes and shimmies...his shoulders twitch, his feet dance about frantically…he mimics the verse ending drum riff with an equally rapid series of piston-like spasms from his legs…he pauses and straddles the microphone with his legs bent at the knees." Through four more verses Elvis wiggles and gyrates with increasing fervor. The cameraman tries a tight shot of Elvis's face, but gives up because he can't keep up or because the director decides that's not where the action is. (Rodman, pp. 149-150)

The song ends, Elvis steps back to take a bow, and the band goes into a slow grinding reprise.

> Elvis shuffles and shimmies his way back to center stage, humping the microphone as he moves forward, his torso twitching suggestively. The verse ends with another rapid-fire drum riff and again Elvis's legs do a jackhammer imitation of the beats...he finishes by pivoting his body ninety degrees around, hovering on tiptoe, knees bent, his left hand dipping between his legs, almost grabbing his crotch. He grinds his way through one more verse and closes the song with an unbelievable spasm of lower body motion. (Rodman, pp.150-151)

The Milton Berle show tops Phil Silvers Sergeant Bilko for the first time that season, instantly transforming Elvis into a nationally controversial figure. He is attacked as "an immoral degenerate, who is corrupting U.S. teens with shameless displays of filth and perversion." (Rodman, p.151) Elvis - - and the rock and roll movement of which he is the vanguard - - are now seen as a threat to mainstream United States culture and must shoulder the blame for juvenile delinquency, a widespread breakdown of morality and values, race mixing, riots, and irreligion. (Guralnick, p. 285)

Suddenly Elvis Presley has become a force that must be reckoned with. (Rodman, p.153)

As he is today.

Now I need to share one more story to set the stage for explaining Elvis's persistence on the contemporary landscape.

Flash forward thirty-one years to August 16, 1977, 3:00 in the afternoon. A crowd estimated at anywhere from 70,000 to 100,000 waits to pass through the fieldstone walls of Graceland Mansion, walk up the winding drive, enter the Georgian portico, and filter by the inert body of the deceased Elvis Presley. Some have waited since 3:00 A.M., twelve hours, in a line that stretches at one point one mile north and south of the gated 3346 Elvis Presley Boulevard. They have come for one last look at their idol, who died suddenly and unexpectedly of an apparent heart attack at 2:30 P.M. the previous afternoon. (Bailey and Duerksen, Memphis Press – Scimitar)

Inside the foyer visitors are allowed only a few minutes to accept, comprehend, and finally leave the scene which will be indelibly etched in their minds: the dead singer, his face waxen and puffy, dressed in an immaculate white suit, white shirt, and blue collar. (Bailey and Duerksen, Memphis Press – Scimitar)

Flowers and wreaths line the drive up to the mansion gate, so many it takes one hundred vans and four hours to transfer them to the Forest Hill Cemetery where the body is to be interred. (Harris, Memphis Press – Scimitar) Private guards, policemen, National Guardsmen, are all over the lawn and around the house to keep out thousands trying to climb over the walls. Each person who enters is reminded that no cameras are allowed. (Bailey and Duerksen, Memphis Press – Scimitar)

The gates are suppose to close at 5:00 P.M., but under intense pressure from the swarming crowd are allowed to stay open an extra ninety minutes; even then, thousands

disperse in anger and frustration at being denied one last look at the one they love. (Bailey and Duerksen, Memphis Press – Scimitar)

One of the crowd, Phillip Foley, tells a national TV interviewer: "Elvis stood good in America, something that has molded our lives. He'll be in our memory until we die...people aren't here so they can say they were at Graceland the night Elvis died; they're here because it's the only way the common people can pay their respects." (Bailey and Goodman, Memphis Press – Scimitar)

Perhaps Jackson Baker, also in the crowd, says it best. He met the singer when they were neighbors in 1955 and Elvis came to use his telephone. "It was strange. He had two or three Cadillacs out front, but no telephone...it would be hard to name another figure in the world who has had a larger influence on the twentieth century...for a lot of people, right here, this gate is the center of the universe." (Bailey and Goodman, Memphis Press – Scimitar)

And it still is - - twenty-five years later.

Hold those three images in your mind's eye: Elvis, Scotty, and Bill cutting a blues record in Sam's Memphis studio, played a few days later on Dewey's radio show; Elvis gyrating wildly during a stirring rendition of "Hound Dog" on the Milton Berle Show with the subsequent outrageous public reaction; and thousands of distraught fans passing through Graceland to see Elvis one last time. Elvis lives on in many forms and manifestations, and in those marvelous images lie the reasons why.

One afternoon when I was working on this project, my Assistant walked into my office and asked what I had been doing, since I hadn't put out any work for her in the past couple of days. When I told her I was working on a presentation on Elvis Presley for the SPHEX Club, her first response was, the Sex Club, that sounds interesting. What do you wear? After I explained the noble objectives of the SPHEX Club, she started telling me how she had just heard a story on Paul Harvey about a minister who calls himself Elvis Priestly and wears a white jumpsuit to preach to his congregation. She didn't get the name of the church; it could have been a legitimate denomination with an unusual minister or one of a handful of "Elvis" churches that have sprung up over the past few years, like the First Church of Elvis (Austin, Texas), the Greater Las Vegas Church of Elvis, or the First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine (mostly on-line). (Doss, p. 108)

I told my Assistant that what she had heard was not that unusual. It was just another sighting, because the truth is that the king is everywhere and he's constantly re-establishing his claim to royalty.

But don't take my word for it.

Frank Sinatra said: "I'm just a singer. Elvis was the embodiment of the whole American culture."

John Lennon said: "Before Elvis there was nothing."

Ronald Reagan said: "Elvis epitomized America...there will never be anyone like him."

Margaret Thatcher said: "I loved his music because he was my generation. But then again, Elvis is everyone's generation and always will be." (O'Meara, Insight)

Leonard Bernstein called him: "The greatest cultural force in the twentieth century." (Rodman, pp.130-131)

In August of 2002, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elvis's death, a remix of "A Little Less Conversation," originally from the 1968 Presley film "Live A Little, Love A Little," catapulted to number one on the pop charts in the U.S. and U.K. It sold 67,000 copies in Britain on the first day. Six days after its release in the U.S. it enjoyed sales seven times higher than those of the closest contemporary artist.

Elvis Presley was the most successful first year licensee in the history of the lottery industry. Fifteen states have Elvis Presley lotteries.

Elvis's record sales are in excess of one billion globally, more than anyone else in recorded history. Elvis still holds the record for the most chart singles, the most top ten singles, and the most weeks at number one. With the release of "A Little Less Conversation," he passed the Beatles for the most number one hits.

More than 600,000 people go to Graceland every year, making it the second most visited home in the United States, behind only the White House. Nearly one-half of these visitors are under thirty-five.

Every year thousands of fans descend on Memphis to celebrate Elvis Week and observe a candlelight vigil on his death day, August 16th. In a typical year, five thousand participate; on an anniversary year, twenty-five thousand; on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elvis's death, seventy thousand showed up.

More than 3500 Elvis impersonators are officially licensed to perform in the United States alone. The total number of Elvis impersonators is estimated at over 20,000.

Elvis is the only performer to have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and the Gospel Hall of Fame. His three Grammy awards were all for gospel recordings.

There have been approximately 1400 books published about Elvis.

The National Archives has more than nine million photographs. The one of Richard Nixon shaking hands with Elvis in December 1970 after appointing him an honorary member of the Narcotics Bureau is still the most requested.

Elvis has left the building turns up 65,000 hits on Google. (O'Meara, Insight)

The annual revenues of Elvis Presley Enterprises, which controls, markets, and licenses the Elvis Presley name, exceed $100 million. (Doss, p.220)

RCA still derives 50% of its annual revenues from the sale of Elvis recordings. (Doss, p.225)

Elvis's ability to take over the news for the most bizarre and seemingly obscure reasons was best demonstrated when the trade journal Advertising Age noted that the celebrity who appeared most often on the covers of national magazines during June 1989 was Danielle Reiley Keogh, who beat out the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Madonna, and the recently deceased Gilda Radner. Who was this Keogh person? Well, she was Elvis's first grandchild, born May 29, 1989. Twelve years after his death and across two generations, Elvis made headlines in cover photos simply by having a grandchild. (Rodman, p.5)

Contemporary music and fiction are replete with Elvis references. I spotted him in two popular novels I read recently, by Patricia Cornwell and Steven Hunter. In this passage from his 1990 novel, The Innocent, Ian McEwan captures the impact of the new rock and roll music and its youthful prophet on British and American servicemen in Berlin hearing them for the first time:

> In April came a song that overwhelmed everybody...it was no use at all for jiving. It spoke only of loneliness and despair. Its melody was all stealth, its gloom comically overstated. Leonard loved it all, the forlorn sidewalk tread of the bass, the harsh guitar, the sparse tinkle of a barroom piano, and most of all the tough, manly advice with which it concluded - - now if your baby leaves you and you've got a tale to tell, just take a walk down lonely street. For a time the radio station was playing "Heartbreak Hotel" every hour. The song's self-pity should have been hilarious. Instead it made Leonard feel wordly, tragic, and bigger somehow. (Marcus, Dead Elvis, p.189)

In 1992 Elvis was sighted on the campus of the University of Iowa when Professor Peter Nazareth announced a course entitled "American Popular Art: Elvis as Anthology." The course turned into an international media event with many reporters playing the story for laughs, some displaying scorn and ridicule, all at the least implying that the subject was not appropriate for a major research university - - all of which led Professor Nazareth to respond: "Here's a figure who has been so much a part of people's consciousness. Shouldn't we examine what that means?" (Rodman, pp.75-76)

The irony of course is that those same stories which denied that Elvis was important enough to merit a college course only worked to thrust him more squarely into the limelight. (Rodman, p.177)

Elvis has been sighted close to our home here in Lynchburg.

In 1981 a resident of Charlottesville, Lilly Mae Painter, legally changed her name to Elvis Aaron Presley. Now, Ms. Presley reports, she is no longer an obsessive fan of her namesake, having suffered a car accident in 1983 which convinced her that God was more important than Elvis. (Rodman, p.4)

In 1986 Kim Epperly and her husband Don, of Roanoke, Virginia, began construction of their miniature Graceland, which today includes dollhouse size replicas of Elvis's Memphis mansion and Tupelo birthplace, the Roanoke Civic Center (where he performed four times), Elvis's airplanes, cars, his motorcycles, and a working fountain. Ten thousand people a year visit their shrine. Some of them might even join Kim in reciting parts of this poem, which she had a friend write for her ten years after Elvis's death:

> The wander of you shall never diminish
> We shall stay loyal until the finish...
> Miniature Graceland flows with your music,
> Open to the public, we shall never abuse it.
> You shall always live on in my heart and my mind,
> Miniature Graceland, Elvis Presley's memorial shrine.
> Memories like you are far and few.
> Elvis, we built it for the love of you. (Doss,pp.242-244)

According to Darrell Laurant, who wrote about him in 1999, a former Elvis impersonator - - with the clippings to prove it - - lives in Lynchburg. His name is Wallace Burford and, as he says, "Some people play golf, some people bowl...I'm into Elvis." In Glendale, Arizona, he worked as a DJ at an oldies club and started a group called "Elvis Fans Around the World." When he returned to Lynchburg in 1996, he went into Elvis withdrawal because "I haven't been able to find any Elvis clubs around here." Burford's proudest possession is a large oil painting of Elvis in his concert outfit with a Hawaiian lei around his neck. Says Burford: "I paid $200 for that, on time. It took me almost a year to pay it off, but I really wanted it." (Laurant, News & Advance)

A Lynchburg couple, Bobby and Carolyn Wade, have turned the basement of their Moorman Drive home into a "true Elvis cornucopia," but since they also collect Coca-Cola memorabilia, in this case Elvis must share the spotlight. Elvis pictures, statues, clocks, tins, cans, mugs, flags, magazines, afghans, signs, towels, singing jugs, singing telephones, and teddy bears fill every nook and cranny of the room. The most interesting decoration to me when I visited the Wade's home was a ceiling with inlaid tile consisting of original Elvis albums, every one he made, according to Bobby Wade. (Patterson, News & Advance)

These collections, however, pale in comparison to that of Paul McLeod and his son, yes, Elvis Presley McLeod, who call themselves the world's number one Elvis fans. In their 1853 white clapboard antebellum home in Holly Springs, Mississippi, named Graceland Too, they have amassed a collection of, they claim, ten million items of Elvis Presley

memorabilia. I am not going to catalog any of these, but suffice it to say that the house is plastered floor to ceiling with "everything Elvis." Both McLeods describe themselves as diehard Elvis fans. In the words of the younger McLeod: "My father and I have dedicated ourselves to preserving the legacy of Elvis Presley in the occurrences of our daily lives. This is our way of paying tribute to a man who has given so much to us." They have also assembled the world's largest Elvis archives, filling more than one thousand notebooks with forty thousand newspaper clippings and collecting eleven thousand video tapes and audio cassettes. (Doss pp.33-40)

Sometimes things can get out of hand. In the early 1990's Paul McLeod's wife, Seretta, asked him to make a decision: her or the Elvis collection. In Paul's words: "Well, you can see what happened. We were married twenty-three years." (Doss, p.39)

Few Elvis collectors seem to be in it for the money. Says Bill DeNight, President of the Burning Love Fan Club: "I have about three quarters of a million dollars worth of Elvis memorabilia - - all thirty-eight liquor decanters, all 117 Elvis plates, all the coins, all in seventeen glass showcases. I have had offers, but I'd never give it up, it means too much to me." (Doss, p.65)

Elvis can be sighted in six hundred fan clubs worldwide, two hundred in the United States, varying in size from a handful to the 1,200 members of the Elvis Presley Burning Love Fan Club. The majority of fan club members are white, female, between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five, and middle class. (No surprises there I guess.) Eighty percent of these clubs pay homage to Elvis through fundraising, to echo Elvis's charitable giving during his lifetime. Patty Anderson of Elvis Presley Enterprises estimates that Elvis Fan Clubs have donated up to two million dollars to Memphis charities over the past twenty years. "It's all part of taking care of Elvis by defending his image... Testifying to the true Elvis, telling the world who Elvis really was, and correcting media errors is the mission of most clubs, like Expressly Elvis in Colorado, whose stated goal is 'to further his memory in the love, compassion, and music Elvis Presley left to us all.'" (Doss, pp.54-56)

This discussion of Elvis sightings and Elvis fandom now leads me back to the third of those three images I evoked: the crowds gathering at Graceland the day of Elvis's funeral. For what is the deepest desire of most Elvis fans but to visit Graceland? "His estate has become the object of veneration for thousands of fans who visit every year, or wish they could. In the words of one: 'Graceland is like the worshipping ground for all Elvis's fans.' " (Doss, p.86)

There is no doubt that Graceland plays a central role in Elvis's contemporary iconic status. The real question is whether Elvis's fans have conferred this role by their visitations or if somehow the place itself has contributed to or initiated his posthumous career. My principal resource, Gilbert P. Rodman, argues the latter.

Rodman claims that "Graceland gave Elvis's stardom a highly visible, physical anchor in the real world." (Rodman, p.99)

> It has been linked in the public eye with him from the day he bought it in 1957 until the day he died...and beyond. From almost the first moment of his stardom, Elvis was associated with a very specific site on the map (not just a region or city, but an actual street address) in a way that no other star ever was - - or has been since...thus transforming his home into a publicly visible site of pilgrimage and congregation. (Rodman, p.102)

Furthermore, says Rodman, Elvis's decision to remain in Memphis with his parents contributed to his lifelong and posthumous stardom in a number of other ways. As opposed to others who took up residence in Hollywood or New York City, it reinforced his non-pretentious, regular-folks character. As the only game in town, it placed him on a more prominent pedestal than he would have been in those other cities. And the visibility of his home and its central geographic location in Memphis made it more accessible to fans and tourists than it would otherwise have been. (Rodman, p.106)

As a matter of fact, in their study of Christian pilgrimages in Europe, Mary Lee and Sidney Nowlin note that these sites are commonly marked by two features: they are centrally located in order to attract the largest number of devotees, and they are often found in places that are uncomfortable and hard to reach. (Doss, p.86) Which leads to another convincing argument for Graceland's role in Elvis's ubiquity: its identity as a religious site.

For many fans, Elvis worship has taken on the trappings of a religion. There is no doubt that his role in their lives is similar to that played by a major religious figure. (Rodman, p.112)

In the words of Kikki Apostolakos, whose Memphis apartment is covered with images of Elvis - - pictures, posters, album covers, tapestries, and with pictures of Elvis and Jesus hanging side-by-side in her bedroom: "There is a distance between human beings and God. That is why we are close to Elvis. He is like a bridge between us and God. I believe in Jesus Christ and I believe in God, but Elvis was special. Elvis was in our time. He was given to us to remind us to be good." (Doss, p.70)

I have already mentioned the phenomenon of Elvis churches. These are only one of several manifestations of Elvis's contemporary deification, which include prophets (impersonators), sacred texts (records), disciples (fans), relics (scarves, Cadillacs and the rings he bestowed on fans and friends), pilgrimages, and all the appearances of resurrection. And, as more than one Elvis scholar has pointed out, there's a strange similarity between Elvis's backup group, the Jordanaires, and the place of Jesus's baptism, the Jordan River. (Doss, p.72)

The impersonator plays an important role in the Elvis religious experience, serving as "a conduit between the spirit of Elvis and the gathering of his fans." (Rodman, p.114) Furthermore, by empowering and giving comfort to the audience, he allows its members

to lose their inhibitions and at some level feel love for another person, as they do for major religious figures. (Chadwick, p.195)

But Graceland and the Elvis Presley birthplace, just a few miles down the road in Tupelo, Mississippi, are the major forces promoting and preserving Elvis's deification. "Obviously they serve as destinations for holy pilgrimages, sacred places that the true Elvis devotee is compelled to experience firsthand." (Rodman, p.116) And the fact that Graceland visitors are usually headed solely towards their single sacred destination - - Graceland - - and that many try to time their visits to coincide with Elvis holy days - - his birthday and his death day - - further mark them as pilgrims rather than mere tourists. (Rodman, p.118)

But beyond that, the holiness of Graceland and the birthplace are reinforced - - even defined - - by what Elvis fans do there. Besides walking in his house, gazing at his possessions, mourning at his gravesite, even taking a piece of dirt home with them, (Doss, p.89) many are likely to participate in an Elvis-inspired ritual. (Rodman, p.117) Witness the all-night candlelight vigil which is held on the anniversary of Elvis's death, culminating Elvis Week:

> Beginning on the afternoon of August 15th fans gather in front of Graceland's melody gates...most clasping candles. Around 9:00 P.M. a dignitary lights a torch from the eternal flame of Elvis's grave and walks down to Graceland's gates. The gates open...and fans snake their way up the mansion's steep pathway to the Meditation Gardens for a brief private tribute, each bearing a glowing candle...The sounds of insects, murmurs, Elvis's music broadcast over loudspeakers, the spectacle of Graceland lit up, flickering candles, and an endless parade of fans, the smell of wax, perfume, and flowers, the damp oppressive heat, the presence of tens of thousands of people make the candlelight vigil a spectacular ritual. (Doss, p.97)

Once, observing this ceremony, Ron Rosenbaum, in the New York Times Magazine, asked this pertinent question: "Is this the way it was when Christianity was formed?" (Chadwick, p.xxii)

Graceland is further marked as a sacred place by the gifts and offerings left at Elvis's gravesite in the Meditation Gardens and even along the wall boarding the Graceland property: flowers, pictures, photographs, dolls, records, handwritten messages, ex-votas, teddy bears - - all attesting to his fan's love, devotion, gratitude, and grief. (Doss, p.99)

A final contribution that Graceland makes to Elvis's continuing stardom is "its role as a physical site where Elvis fans can congregate and come to have a sense of themselves as a community." Whereas other fan communities must meet at convention centers or at ballparks on specific dates - - and must share these properties with other groups - - Graceland is a "real world site where its fan community can take on a stable, permanent existence." Furthermore, "Graceland is a place where Elvis fans are free to express their fanaticism comfortably without fear of embarrassment. With the support of the

Graceland community behind them, they are less inhibited about promoting their hero publicly." (Rodman, pp.120-128)

If Graceland has helped keep Elvis alive today, so has the simple statement: "There are enough Elvises to go around for just about everybody." (Rodman, p.39) As Kevin Quain puts it: "Elvis's longevity is largely due to his flexibility - - his willingness to take the shape of what we most want to see. Whether our fantasies are psychic, cosmic, sexual, financial, or religious, Elvis accommodates all of us." (Doss, p.16) V.K. Brock says: "Elvis is different things for different people." (Rodman, p.40) In that statement, he is talking about myths, and in 1982 Graham Marsh wrote: "No myth is large enough to contain Elvis." (Rodman, p.40)

To develop this concept of "flexibility" or "multiple mythologies," drawing on material from two of my sources, Rodman and Doll, I propose four mythical images of Elvis which are key to understanding his posthumous career: his racial image, his sexual image, his image as the embodiment of the American dream, and his image as a representative of a Southern rural subculture. What is most revealing about these images of Elvis is the dual or dialectic nature of each one - - black vs. white, male vs. female, communal vs. individualistic, sacred vs. profane - - and how Elvis has the unique capacity to encompass these competing and contradictory dualities simultaneously. (Rodman, pp.41-42)

With a little creativity, I believe these mythical images can be represented by our two remaining story pictures: Elvis's first recording in Sam Phillips's studio and Elvis's memorable performance on the Milton Berle Show. It may also be useful to keep in mind the young and old postage stamp pictures of Elvis.

Elvis's first record had a black rhythm and blues song, "That's Alright Mama," on one side and a white hillbilly standard, "Blue Moon Of Kentucky," on the flip side. Accordingly, some view Elvis as an integrator who brought blacks and whites together by the music he sung; others view him as "the triumph of white race-based privilege and hierarchy." (Doss, p.270)

Certainly Elvis's early career reflects a deep intentional identification with black culture. He consciously courted black music, black musicians, and mixed audiences. His liberal borrowings from what the recording industry calls "race music" - - rhythm and blues, black gospel, and soul - - which he publicly acknowledged - - set his popularity in motion. He greased his hair with one of black America's favorite products, Royal Crown pomade, and shopped at a well-known Memphis fashion store for blacks. His on-stage body movements and performance style imitated black entertainers. (Doss, pp.170-172)

He created recording performing opportunities for many black musicians. As Little Richard said years later: "I thank the Lord for sending Elvis to open the door so I could walk down the road." (Doss, p. 174)

He appealed to black teenagers as well as white, according to Greil Marcus, not because he "sounded like one of them," but because "he had the nerve to cross the borders of race." (Doss, p.176) Mass hysteria erupted when he appeared in front of a black audience at Memphis station WDIA's Goodwill Review in 1956. (Rodman, p.53)

Linda Rae Pratt has even suggested that "Elvis didn't always appear fully white...In most pictures Elvis might resemble a blue-eyed Adonis, but in some of those early black-and-white photographs - - with his sultry eyes, his flared nostrils, his southern lips - - he looked black and white." (Marcus, Dead Elvis, p.157) (One writer has even suggested that Elvis had Jewish antecedents!)

By contemporary standards, "he was doing something daring and dangerous...He was actively engaged in race mixing...He proved that black and white tendencies could coexist and that the product of this coexistence was not just palatable, but thrilling." (Rodman, p.50) This mythical image of Elvis persists today.

But so does another one - - the triumph of whiteness.

Charges of racism and racist remarks - - which I won't repeat - - have circulated about Elvis since the fifties. Most of them stem from legitimate black anger about how Elvis "stole the blues" and profited from black culture and how Elvis - - not Little Richard or Chuck Berry - - has been crowned the King of Rock and Roll. (Doss, p.173) While one day Little Richard can thank the Lord for sending Elvis, on another he says: "I think Elvis was more acceptable being white in the period...I believe if he had been black, he wouldn't have been as big as he was." (Rodman, p.49)

Later he says, "I know they called him the King of Rock and Roll, but if he is, who crowned him - - and why was I not invited. How can a white boy be the King of Rock and Roll." (Rodman, p.49)

Reinforcing these sentiments are the facts that today almost all Elvis fans are white and they tend to see Elvis as all-white: the southern separatist, the country rocker, the all-American soldier, the Las Vegas showman dressed up in a white jumpsuit. (Doss, p.196) The racism of many of Elvis's fans made an ugly appearance in the summer of 1994 when the marriage of Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley was denounced as an act of treason and an unforgivable slight. (Doss, p.164)

But myths die hard and, although Elvis's identification with black culture seems passe', the current "myth" of Elvis as a white hero hasn't totally erased the myth of Elvis as a figure of integration. Professor Rodman argues that "both myths are now active in the terrain of U.S. culture and have been since the early stage of Elvis's career...That is not to say that both myths are equally true, but only that they both work...for different audiences and different contexts. Each interpretation of Elvis's racial politics explains in part his cultural significance." (Rodman, p.56)

The second dual image observers of the Elvis phenomenon are confronted with relates to his sexuality or gender identification.

On the surface Elvis appears to be the embodiment of masculine sexuality. In the words of Lester Bangs:

> Elvis Presley was the man who brought overt blatant vulgar sexual frenzy to the popular arts in America...Elvis alerted America to the fact that it had a groin with imperatives that had been stifled...Elvis kicked "How Much Is That Doggie In The Window" out the window and replaced it with "Let's f_____." (quoted in Rodman, p.59)

According to this version of the myth, Elvis was an incredibly virile superstud whom women were powerless to resist; his gifts were the freedom to engage in and to celebrate uninhibited animal passion. (Rodman, p.59)

But critics have identified another side to Elvis's sexual image, that of the "teddy bear." In fact Linda Rae Pratt claims that the "vision of Elvis as the embodiment of libidinal energy" is more created and adhered to by men than by women, to whom Elvis projects "a quality of tenderness, vulnerability, and romantic emotion." (Rodman, p.60) One fan testified that, hearing of his death, "my overwhelming feelings and memories were of warmth and affection for a very deep friend." (Rodman, p.61) In 1992 People magazine crowned Elvis both "King Leer" and the "King of Hearts." (Rodman, p. 63)

If these feelings about Elvis disclose a feminine side, his early body movements and later style of dress are even more revealing. They challenged conventional gender roles. (Rodman, p.67) David Shumway says:

> Elvis was the first male star to display his body as an overt sexual object. In calling attention to himself as sexual, he violated the taboo against male sexual display. In violating this taboo, he became, like most women but unlike most men, sexualized. (quoted in Rodman, p.67)

His costumes and face and eye treatment became obviously androgynous:

> He wore ruffled pink shirts and black pants with pink stripes, deliberately claiming girl colors...His guitarist, Scotty Moore, once remarked, "I thought my wife was going out the back door." He painted himself in black mascara and royal blue eye shadow...He had his nose fixed, spent hours doing his hair, and courted fashion designers to dress him up in glamorous gold lame tuxedos or fringed and bejeweled jumpsuits. (Doss, p.127)

Two sources I have used point to Elvis's androgynous sexuality as playing an important role in his continuing presence - - and they identify the Elvis impersonation phenomenon as a very obvious example. Certainly Elvis Presley is the most widely impersonated celebrity in the history of the world - - but what is more striking is the androgynous

nature of Elvis impersonations. As Margarie Garber has observed, the adjective most commonly attached to the noun impersonation, besides Elvis, is female. Like a woman "Elvis is produced and exhibited as detachable and imitable body parts that have a life and movement of their own. Also, like a woman, Elvis is a marketed body - - exhibited, put on display." (quoted in Rodman, p.70)

And although impersonators may choose Elvis's jumpsuit costume because it's "just plain more fun," it's also his most blatantly androgynous persona and the one that seems to appeal to the most fans. (Doss, pp.158-161)

In summary, few other celebrities have crossed the boundary of gender identification like Elvis has. And no other dead celebrities are as alive today as Elvis is.

The third mythical image which is useful in understanding Elvis is the one that views him as the embodiment of the American dream. His is the rags-to-riches story of a boy who rose from the obscurity of a Memphis machinists shop to fame and fortune. As our local Elvis fan, Wallace Burford, put it: "I think I relate to Elvis because we were both born in the South and we both grew up in poverty." (Laurant, News & Advance) So, is this what Elvis and the American dream are all about? His fans see their triumphs - - and failures - - as mirrored in the career of Elvis Presley. Is this reflection enough to account for his staying power in our consciousness?

Professor Rodman, drawing on social critics like Greil Marcus, Dave Marsh, and Michael Ventura, posits two versions of the American dream.

The first version says that the American dream is "a collective dream of America rooted in notions of community and based on hopes for upward mobility, equality, and freedom for broad segments of the population." It can be summed up in the phrase: "We're all in this together." (Rodman, p.83) Radio talk show hosts might categorize this version as a liberal one.

Critics Marcus and Marsh ask us to imagine Elvis as shaping and invigorating this conception of the dream by inventing not only himself but a whole new community - - black and white, male and female, rich and poor, urban and country, and democratic - - to listen to and respond to and accept his music. "He created a personal culture out of the hillbilly world that was his given...and he made that personal culture public in such an explosive way that he transformed American culture." (Marcus, quoted in Rodman, p.84)

"He performed in song what Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed in sermon." (Chadwick, p.xvi)

In the words of Greil Marcus:

> Even when he sings American trilogy, there is no John Brown in his battle hymn, no romance in his Dixie, no blood in his slave song...None of the old songs matters anymore because he has not committed himself to them...It is in this

> sense that an audience is confirmed, and America comes into being...The divisions America shares are smoothed away...The version of the American dream that is Elvis's performance is blown up...to contain more history, more people, more music, more hopes. (Marcus, Mystery Train, pp.124-125)

Thus Elvis, the poor, rural, white, working-class southerner, becomes a source of racial and cultural enlightenment - - and a civil rights pioneer. (Chadwick, p.xvi)

Elvis's democratization of the American dream is particularly poignant because of his roots. At the time of his rise, one of America's most enduring prejudices was directed against southern working-class whites who were viewed in toto as bigots and racists. By bringing their conception of an integrated culture and a "good time" vision of life to a broader American audience, by demonstrating the affinities of southern white and black culture, Elvis and his rockabilly compatriots took at least a small step towards dissipating that prejudice. (Chadwick, p.17)

Elvis is compelling because he built a better world not only for himself, but for all of us. (Rodman, p.84)

But he did build a better world for himself - - and by doing so represents the other version of the American dream, the version rooted in notions of individualism, where upward mobility is the domain of a chosen few with talent and brains. In other words, it's "every man for himself." (Rodman, p.83) And Elvis is the "classic American success story, rising from a two-room Tupelo shack to a marble-pillared mansion on a hill." (Guralnick, quoted in Rodman, p. 84)

Another way of looking at these versions is to note that the communal one - - the Martin Luther King dream of an egalitarian and harmonious America - - has faded from the scene to be replaced by the individualistic one built around selfish goals, crass commercialism, greed, and personal financial security. An idealistic American dream has been replaced by a more realistic, contemporary, and, yes, conservative one.

Similarly, an idealistic perception of the young Elvis - - a real fine, decent boy, in Ed Sullivan's words (Rodman, p.61) - - who exhibited self-respect, humility, and family love and who expressed through his music integration and equality - - deteriorates over time into a tragic reality, characterized by "the shallow Hollywood movies, the bloated excess and laziness of later years, the drift into isolation, loneliness, paranoia, obesity, and drug abuse" - - proof that dreams like his come true only in fairy tales or movies - - and never in the South. (Rodman, p. 163)

Elvis's detractors - - specifically non-southerners - - point to Elvis's failures as proof that the American dream - - in either version - - does not come easily to the South, and, when it does, it is weighed down by the special burdens and contradictions that shape the region. As Linda Ray Pratt wrote in 1979:

> The inability of Elvis to transcend his lack of respectability despite a history-making success story confirms the southern sense that the outside world thinks southerners are freaks, illiterates, sexual perverts, and lynchers...At the very moment when southerners proclaim the specialness of Elvis, they understand it to mean that no southern success story can ever be sufficient to satisfy a suspicious America. (Chadwick, p.xxi)

For the true Elvis fan, however, despite the pitiful decline of his later years, Elvis never abandoned his roots and thus remained faithful to the democratic version of the American dream. As Janice Gregory says, unlike other celebrities, Elvis

> ...never strayed far from home...It is one thing to be a self-made enterprise. It is quite another to keep dressing in strange clothes, to decorate your house in a way not approved by House Beautiful, to give away Cadillacs instead of endowing a hospital wing, to stay in Memphis rather than move to New York, and to keep your same friends year after year. (Chadwick, p.235)

> Elvis is a powerful symbol for anyone who's ever wanted a better life. He produced more music, sold more records, filled more auditoriums than the privileged. But he shut no door behind him. He allowed us all to think that he belonged exclusively to each one of us...His life was a statement that it is possible to come from nowhere, to make the big time, and still be true to who you are. (Chadwick, p.236)

We accept Elvis's humility, openness, loyalty to his roots, and democratic spirit because we believe it is genuine. In spite of his flaws, his story moves us and resonates. While we know that the real world is often one of success at a bitter price, it's comforting, enobling, and uplifting to imagine and hope for the incarnation of the better world his voice promised us. In these terms, Elvis embodies both versions of the American dream: their successes, their failures, their possibilities, and their contradictions - - another reason why he refuses to leave the building.

A fourth mythical image sees Elvis as representative of a rural white Southern subculture and its contradictory ideology, which is defined by a dialectical struggle between the sacred and the profane.

An obvious example of this duality is "the Southernist inclination to engage in socially unacceptable hedonistic behavior on Saturday night but attend church on Sunday with a passion for the puritanical." (Doll, p.13) Likewise the tendency to sentimentalize, romanticize, or make sacred the family - - which was the center of existence - - Southern womanhood - - whose virtue and purity must be protected at all costs - - and a rural lifestyle - - which had to be abandoned by many who fled to the industrialized cities - - is offset by more profane aspects of that same society, especially a predilection for violence. Dueling, cruelty towards blacks before and after the Civil War, recreational activities such as firearm sports, stock car racing, and cock fighting, are all manifestations of this predilection (Doll, pp.14-15).

Thus Elvis, the wholesome, sacred, decent boy, but with a seamier, profane side, becomes the mirror image of the dual-natured subculture that spawned him and the majority of his fans.

In fact, the new type of music he popularized represents in itself a merging of the sacred and the profane. The black rhythm and blues he coopts and incorporates into his repertoire, according to theologian James Cone, rejects all distinctions between flesh and spirit, or body and soul, and acknowledges that there can be no wholeness without sexuality. This fusion between piety and hedonism is operative in the sensual nature of black religious music, where, as theologian Alan Watts says: "Without the lustiness of sex, religion is joyless and abstract; without the self-abandonment of religion, sex is mechanical." Thus, in rhythm and blues, in black religious music, and in Elvis's rockabilly creation, spirit and spirituality (the sacred) is inseparable from nature and sexuality (the profane). (Chadwick, pp.116-118)

More significant than the music is the outrageousness of Elvis's performing style, "suggestive, vulgar exhibitions tinged with the kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and bordellos." (Quoted in Chadwick, p.113) However, since this is still a boyish, vulnerable Elvis who loves his mother and lives at home with his parents, his sexual energy is counterbalanced and suddenly more acceptable - - at least to his adoring teenage fans, if not to their parents.

Similarily, in Elvis's later Las Vegas years, his fans are able to reconcile and accept his excesses and self-indulgence by sacrelizing other characteristics:

> His penchant for violence and obsessiveness with weapons is balanced by his legendary devotion to his mother, his Christian beliefs, and his love of family; his buying sprees are countered by stories of his unlimited generosity, such as giving Cadillacs and jewelry to strangers; and, although he is sick and broken down by drug abuse and weight gain, he continues to perform because he does not want to disappoint his fans. (Doll, p. 187)

Elvis's contradictions are resolved by sentimentalizing his destructive lifestyle; his dark side is masked by the myth of a man devoted to his family and the performer devoted to his audience (Doll, p.187).

A third way to explain Elvis's continuing presence, after considering Graceland and his mythical images, is to examine his impact on U.S. popular culture, a term encompassing a wide range of beliefs and patterns of behavior. Such a definition allows one to include romance novels, soap operas, comic books, horror movies, professional sports, and, of course, Elvis as examples. (Rodman, pp.134-139)

And now I ask you to recall Elvis's gyrating performance of "Hound Dog" on the Milton Berle show in 1956 which shocked so many viewers and provoked such outrage. My resource, Gilbert Rodman, argues that "this performance was the pivotal moment after

which neither Elvis nor rock and roll nor U.S. culture would ever be quite the same again." (Rodman, p.151)

> The reaction is as significant as the broadcast. For...if this isn't the moment when Elvis and rock and roll stake their claim to the cultural terrain, it is at least the moment when they are recognized as a threat to the mainstream culture...The country now seems divided into two opposing camps, the first being far too excited by Elvis and his music to let him fade away, the rest too outraged and appalled...to keep silent any longer. (Rodman, p. 152)

About Elvis's early TV performances, Greil Marcus says:

> Elvis, perceiving the limits of what America had learned to accept as shared culture, sets out to shatter them. He turns inward toward the camera and suggests a body in freedom, a kind of freedom for which at the time there was no acceptable language; then he turns away and suggests he is only kidding; then he moves in a manner so outrageous, memory cannot hold the image. (Marcus, quoted in Rodman, p.155)

These performances introduced audiences to a new attitude and a new style, which enabled them to view the world and their place in it in a revolutionary way.

The changes he wrought are so permanently a part of our society as to be virtually invisible today - - "the world is still changed as he changed it" - - which is why audiences viewing his 1956 performance today merely ask, "What was the fuss all about?" (Rodman, p.156)

In an obituary he wrote for Rolling Stone magazine in 1977, Dave Marsh described Elvis's impact on U.S. culture with these words:

> If an individual of our time could be said to have changed the world, Elvis is the one. In his wake more than the music is different. Nothing and no one looks or sounds the same. His music was the most liberating event of our era because it taught us new possibilities of feeling and perception, new modes of action and appearance, and because it reminded us not only of his greatness but of our own potential. If those things were not already so well integrated into our lives that they have become commonplace, it would be simpler to explain how astonishing a feat Elvis Presley's advent really was. (Marsh, quoted in Rodman, p.157)

Texas singer/songwriter Butch Hancock said Elvis's 1956 dance was "so strong it took an entire civilization to forget it" (quoted in Rodman, p.153) because, in Greil Marcus's words, "the message then was shocking but now it is not even a message." (quoted in Rodman, p.157)

What specifically were the changes in attitudes and social behavior that Elvis brought about?

In 1956, when Elvis burst upon the scene, rock and roll was perceived as a threat to mainstream U.S. culture; now it is the essence of that culture, being used to sell everything from automobiles to raisins. (Rodman, p.167) Rodman argues that the centrality of rock and roll music in our lives today is attributable to Elvis Presley; only he had the charisma, ambition, determination, talent, and instinctive media savvy "to transform the fifties musical genres, attitudes, and social practices into a coherent cultural formation." (Rodman, p.160)

Bruce Springsteen once described Elvis's impact this way: "It was like he came along and whispered a dream in everybody's ear - - then we dreamed it." Only it was a different kind of dream. "In this one hard work was no longer the necessary route to the top. Rather it revealed that one could have it all while having fun." (Rodman, p.163)

> It was the idea that Saturday night...could be the whole show. You had to be young and a bit insulated to pull it off, but why not, why not trade pain and boredom for kicks and style. (Marcus, quoted in Rodman, p.163)

Upon Elvis's death, President Jimmy Carter, paraphrasing Henrik Hertzberg, released this statement:

> Elvis Presley's death deprives our country of a part of itself. He was unique, irreplaceable...A symbol to people the world over of the vitality, the rebelliousness, and the good humor of his country. (Chadwick, p.232)

To embrace freedom, to treasure innocence, to practice self-expression, to evince a sense of humor - - the ability to laugh at, even mock, oneself - - this is the revolutionary message which Elvis created and symbolized for one generation and bequeathed to its successors.

Elvis taught audiences - - especially commonfolk - - how to question authority and at times rebel against all forms of restraint. His costumes, his movements, his facial expressions, said to his fans that they were free to act and think and move in unconventional ways. Rock critic Tony Smucker recalls Elvis as "the man whose TV appearances inspired my brother to wear blue jeans to church." Carl Perkins assessment was: "He never really died and he never will. You don't change as much of the world as Elvis Presley changed it - - hair styles, clothes, moods, looks, sideburns, he cut a path through this world, he's going to be history and he should be." (Rodman, p.162)

Finally - - and this is admittedly a broad claim - - he called a new community in existence - - "a community centered around rock and roll" - - the youth community that later initiated so many social and cultural upheavals. (Rodman, p.162)

Michael Ventura says:

> When Elvis Presley hit the charts in 1956, there was no such thing as the youth market. By 1957, almost solely through the demand for his recordings, there suddenly was one. It was a fundamental structural change in American society. In a few years we would learn how fundamental, as that market revealed itself also to have the qualities of a community, one that had the power to initiate far-reaching social changes…the anti-war movement, the second wave of the civil rights movement, ecology, feminism, the higher consciousness movement. (quoted in Rodman, p.163)

Or as John Trudell says in his 1992 poem "Baby Boom Che".

> I mean Elvis made us move
> Instead of standing mute he raised our voice
> When we heard ourselves singing something was changing
> You know like for the first time we made a collective decision about choices…
> Man, like he woke us up. (quoted in Rodman, p.96)

But really, after all is said and done, after culture, myths, and Graceland have been analyzed and explicated, has something not been left out? How do you explain the increased activity in a pregnant woman's womb or a ten-year-old child's request to turn up the sound when Elvis comes on the radio, both stories told to me by the child's mother.

So…what about the music, stupid? Most of the sources I have consulted have minimized the importance of Elvis's music in his continuing presence in contemporary society. Their message is that at the heart of all the stories and commentaries we don't find Elvis's music; we find his public - - and flexible - - persona: his attitude, his style, his personality. The significant changes he brought about are not as much related to his music as much as they are social, they claim.

If one was to make just a few comments about his music, one could say first, as William Buckley said, "Elvis Presley had the most beautiful singing voice of any human being on earth." Or, as Alana Myles says in her 1991 single "Black Velvet," "Every word of every song that he sang was for you." (Doss, p.12) Or one could point to the incredible variety of his musical output, exemplified by his later concerts which featured rock hits of the day, rhythm and blues, rockabilly, gospel, ballads, patriotic revivals. Or one could admire the pure emotion of performances like his 1968 Comeback Special, during which, as Greil Marcus describes it:

> …the band runs hard at the music and Elvis lunges and eats it alive. No one has ever heard him sing like this; not even his best records suggest the depth of passion in this music…Shouting, crying, growling, lusting, Elvis takes his stand and the crowd takes theirs with him…It was the finest music of his life. If there was music that bleeds, this was it. Nothing came easy that night and he gave everything he had, more than anyone knew was there. (Marcus, The Mystery Train, p.126)

But, even in these descriptions, Elvis the singer is overwhelmed by so many other images of Elvis - - some of which I hope you have seen and enjoyed tonight - - because the simple fact is that Elvis was, and certainly is today, so much bigger than his music. "He contained, and contains, multitudes." (Marcus, Dead Elvis, p.9) - - both in his persona and in his vast audiences: young and old, black and white, male and female, rich and poor, country and city, 50-60-70's, and on into the years since he died. Which is why he persists in our consciousness.

I don't know how appropriate this story by Greil Marcus is to my final point, but I want to retell it anyway. In a 1991 novel called Dixieanna Moon by William Price Fox, a young New Yorker and an old southern hustler join forces to stage the ultimate revival show. One night, driving through the South, the New Yorker picks up an old Sun single on the radio. "Wonder what he was like," he says to his carney mentor. "He won't like anyone," was the reply. "You start trying to compare Elvis to something and you can forget it...All you can do with a talent that big and that different is sort of point at it when you see it going by and maybe listen for the ricochet." Says Greil Marcus, "We are the ricochet." (Marcus, Dead Elvis, p.39)

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MINUTES OF THE 1266th MEETING OF THE SPHEX CLUB
October 21, 2004

Acting in the absence of President Dolan, Secretary Sigler convened the 1266th meeting of the Sphex Club of Lynchburg at 8 pm on Thursday, October 21, 2004 in the Board Room of Genworth Financial. Members Bell, Buhler, Elson, S. Harris, Huston, Marcy, McIntosh (in tuxedo), Moon, Schewel, Sigler, Snead, Sweeney, Tiller, Wilson, Wimer, and Wood and emeritus member Quillian were present. Members Atkins, Booth, Cardwell, Garren, D. Harris, Guillerman, Ledford, Muhlenfeld, Payne, Petty, Sorenson, Sweeney and emeritus member Booth offered their regrets to the speaker. The speaker then introduced his guests, Don Orr, George Dawson, his mother Eileen Schewel, and Margaret Quillian.

After noting that members Buhler, Gilmer and March had also been present for the October 7 meeting, which had been cancelled, the Secretary read the minutes of the September 23 meeting, which were approved as read. Under the guise of new business, and in a spirit quite different from the frenzied election atmosphere that gripped the preceding meeting, Member Wood read a letter from Member Buhler requesting that he be allowed to move to emeritus status. Recognizing member Buhler's long-standing participation, the membership reluctantly agreed. This leaves the current active membership at 32, with three vacant positions.

The Secretary then introduced Member Marc Schewel, whose inaugural paper was entitled "The King is Dead; Long Live the King: The Legacy of Elvis Presley." Our speaker began his remarks by referring to the '92 election, which was hotly contested, fraught with future implications, offering voters a real choice. Of course, he was referring to the vote for which painting of Elvis would appear on the US postal stamp. Turning as he would often to a series of excellent audiovisual aids, Member Schewel illustrated the two paintings, one of a young Elvis and the other of a more mature, caped entertainer. Bill Clinton, who tied his political fortunes to a strong identification with Elvis, voted for the younger Elvis. Both won their elections.

Mr. Schewel then noted the ubiquity of Elvis, even today, many years after his death. He recounted the emergence of his own interest in the Elvis phenomenon, which began only a few years ago, and which was not based on music or firm childhood recollections. Prior to that, he was vaguely aware of velvet wall hangings, decorative plate offers on TV, Elvis imitators, and a series of forgettable movies. That changed when, in a wonderful example of serendipity, he checked out of the library "Last Trail to Memphis: the Rise of Elvis Presley," by Peter Guralnick. Our speaker became enamored of this story of the meteoric rise of the young singer.

He then briefly retold the story, beginning with Sam Phillips and Sun Records, the appearance of a shy 18-year-old with a few dollars to record a song for his mother, the eventual recommendation by Phillips of the boy to sing with another group, the ultimate emergence of "That's Alright Mama," with Elvis as the lead singer, and its immediate impact on the Memphis music scene.

Mr. Schewel then recounted Elvis's second appearance on the Milton Berle show, almost two years later, in June of 1956. He had by then signed with RCA, signed a movie contract with Paramount, had made seven appearances on prime time TV and had done more than 50 live performances in the previous two months. Mr. Schewel quoted extensively from various reviews of the appearance—all of which, despite their outrage at his performance, concluded that the young Elvis had become a force to be reckoned with. Then our speaker moved forward 31 years to August of 1977, recounting the scene at Graceland as thousands of fans and mourners lined up

for more than a mile waiting to pay their last respects to the King.

Much of the remainder of the paper built on these three images, Elvis at Sun Records, Elvis singing Hound Dog on the Milton Berle show and thousands of distraught fans at his funeral to try to understand the Elvis phenomenon—the king is everywhere and he's constantly reestablishing his claim to royalty. He quoted extensively from various sources as he began this difficult task. He pointed out that on the 25th anniversary of his death, he had a number one hit on the charts in the US and the UK, that his record sales are still in excess of 1 billion annually, that more than 600000 people visit Graceland each year, that more than 3500 Elvis impersonators are officially licensed to perform in the US alone, that more than 1400 books have been written about Elvis and that the National Archives has more than 9 million photographs.

Our speaker rapidly sketched out a variety of other indications of Elvis' enduring popularity, ranging from references in popular contemporary novels to college courses that deal with Elvis, to persons changing their names, to persons constructing miniature versions of Graceland, to poetry written in his honor, to Elvis collectors, and to his many fan clubs. He spent some time analyzing the role played by Graceland in Elvis' continuing iconic status—arguing among other things, that Graceland plays a role similar to the sites chosen by Christian pilgrimages in Europe and that it is, for many, an essentially religious site. He pointed out that, for many fans, Elvis worship has all of the trappings of a religion.

Member Schewel then proposed four mythical images that help to explain his posthumous career: a racial image, a sexual image, his image as embodiment of the American dream, and his image as a representative of a rural Southern subculture. Each of these images has a dual nature—black versus white, male versus female, communal versus individualistic, and sacred versus profane. Elvis had the unique capacity to encompass these competing and contradictory dualities at the same time. Our speaker illustrated these images through two additional story pictures—Elvis' first recording, and his performance on the Milton Berle show. His first record had a black R & B song "That's Alright Mama" on one side and a hillbilly standard, "Blue Moon of Kentucky" on the other. Some view Elvis as an integrator, bringing black and white together, while others see him as an icon of white race-based privilege and hierarchy. He was able to appear black and white at the same time. Today, almost all fans are white. Member Schewel than analyzed each of the other three images in considerable detail, with clear examples of each dichotomy—masculinity and androgyny, the democratization of the American dream, although which American dream he epitomized might be questioned, and the struggle between a Southern inclination to raise Hell on Saturday night and attend church on Sunday.

He then discussed other aspects of Elvis' impact on American culture, especially American musical culture. But, he argued, Elvis the singer is overwhelmed by so many other images that one must conclude that he is bigger than his music. Member Schewel concluded his paper by quoting from a novel. . ."He (Elvis) won't like anyone—You start trying to compare Elvis to something and you can forget it. . .All you can do with a talent that big and that different is sort of point at it when you see it going by and maybe listen for the ricochet"—perhaps we are the ricochet.

Members then provided a spirited mix of reactions and reminiscences of their own memories of the King. Secretary Sigler reluctantly adjourned the meeting at 9:40 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Julius Sigler, Secretary