

# Elvis: Direct from Graceland

Exhibition wall texts

Gallery 1: Early Years (first panel)

*"When I was a child, ladies and gentlemen, I was a dreamer."*  
Elvis Presley, 1971

## **The Boy from Tupelo**

Mississippi in the 1930s was a state battered by centuries of boom and bust, left desperately poor in the wake of the Great Depression. In a little railroad town called Tupelo, in the early hours of 8 January 1935, Gladys Love Presley laboured in the wooden shack her husband Vernon built with a \$180 loan and help from his brother.

Baby Jessie Garon arrived stillborn. He was laid in a small box on the kitchen table as Gladys, exhausted, realised that a second baby was coming. Desolation turned to joy as Elvis Aron entered the world at 4.35am.

Elvis's life seemed laced with a sense of mystical destiny from the very beginning. Vernon would later recall a glass bottle spontaneously shattering on a shelf as Elvis was born, a sign that Elvis had absorbed the life force of his brother. Vernon and Gladys fiercely protected their only son through childhood illnesses, insecure housing, and times when there wasn't money for three square meals.

When Elvis was 13 years old the Presleys left Tupelo, moving north along the great Mississippi River to the cosmopolitan centre of the South - Memphis - a thriving city with modern public housing, good high schools, and a kaleidoscopic music culture unlike any other place on earth.

Gallery 1: Early Years (near Sun Records)

*"I don't sound like nobody ma'am"*

Elvis Presley, 1953

## **That's All Right**

Fresh out of high school in 1953, Elvis spent \$4 to record two songs at the user-pays Memphis Recording Service, hoping to impress studio owner Sam Phillips who ran his Sun Records label from the same building. The awkward young customer was served by Marion Keisker, studio co-founder, who wrote a note against his name: 'Good ballad singer. Hold'.

About one year later, Phillips paired Elvis up with guitarist Scotty Moore and bass player Bill Black to see what they could do together. Taking a break from lacklustre studio session, the trio began fooling around with a sped-up version of Arthur Crudup's 1946 song 'That's All Right Mama'. Phillips put it on tape and Sun Records had an instant hit.

Elvis, Scotty, and Bill - The Blue Moon Boys - embarked on an intensive period of long nights in the studio and in the car, playing gigs right across the South. Elvis's time with Sun Records was prolific but short-lived. Just six months after the release of 'That's All Right', Elvis caught the eye of a canny talent manager named 'Colonel' Tom Parker. Parker moved swiftly to ingratiate himself with the Presleys and wrested full control of Elvis's career away from Sam Phillips within the year.

Gallery 2: Hayride to Hollywood (right hand side)

## **Hayride to Hollywood**

In October 1954 – still with Sun Records – Elvis played his first date at the Louisiana Hayride, a major country music show broadcast live on regional radio every Saturday night. ‘Colonel’ Tom Parker, a music talent manager with a colourful past and an exceptional talent for promotion, first watched the budding star in action on the Hayride stage.

Parker took over Elvis’s management in August 1955. By November, he had brokered the sale Elvis’s recording contract from Sun Records to major label RCA Victor for the unprecedented sum of \$35,000.

In January 1956, Elvis cut ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ in his very first day of recording for RCA. A few weeks later, he beamed into living rooms around the country in the first of 11 television appearances that year, with a riotous rendition of ‘Shake, Rattle, and Roll’.

Elvis intoxicated the nation’s youth and provoked vicious backlash from conservative personalities who railed against his distracting and ‘perverting’ influence. Public condemnation of Elvis was just as zealous as the adulation.

By March 1956 Elvis was in Hollywood, signing a multi-picture deal. In August, filming began on *Love Me Tender*. The movie premiered three months later with huge fanfare and massive box office takings, and yielding a formula of film-plus-hit-soundtrack which Parker and Hollywood executives would return to 30 times over the coming decade.

Gallery 2: Hayride to Hollywood (left hand side)

## **“It was a job.”**

In the first years of his film career, Elvis enthralled audiences with earnest, smouldering performances, styled in denim workwear and ne'er-do-well youth fashion. Before long, Hollywood transformed Elvis into a mischievous but clean-cut and suave leading man.

As his rough edges were steadily smoothed away by one formulaic film after another, ultra-manicured Elvis was becoming a caricature of middle American nostalgia. The world was experiencing social and political revolution shaped by political protest and sexual liberation. Hollywood Elvis seemed out of step with the new avant-garde who eschewed commercialism and made music for social change.

The 1960s wore on unhappily for Elvis the movie star, who was exhausted by back-to-back filming schedules and trapped by contractual obligations. Privately and in some candid interviews he expressed dismay at the quality of films he was offered and the music he was bound to record. He was increasingly embarrassed, frustrated, and creatively bereft.

But Elvis was a worker – and an inventor. He treated contracts as commitments: he showed up, followed direction, and worked amicably with co-stars and crews. And he began to chart a way out that would lead him to a revival before the decade was through.

## Gallery 3: Graceland

*"I'm going to keep Graceland as long as I possibly can."*

Elvis Presley, 1960

### **Graceland**

Graceland was built in 1939 by well-to-do Memphis couple Ruth Brown Moore and Dr Thomas Moore, on family farmland named after Ruth's aunt Grace.

Graceland was designed in a 'Southern Colonial' style, characterised by a white colonnaded front portico. The symmetry of the façade, and the home's setting well back from the road on a gentle rise, gave a feeling of elegant grandeur.

Elvis purchased Graceland in the spring of 1957 for \$102,500. He was 22 years old. Redecoration and additions were immediate - the iconic gates and exterior stone wall were installed just weeks after the Presleys moved in. Over the next two decades, Elvis regularly remodelled and redecorated his home with gusto and characteristic flair, resulting in an eclectic patchwork of design styles.

Since childhood, Elvis had dreamed of making enough money to buy a home for his mother's comfort and pride. Graceland was home to Gladys for just over a year; she passed away suddenly in August 1958.

For Elvis, Graceland remained a sanctuary for two decades, filled with sunny parties by the pool, early morning horse rides, joyful family Christmases, midnight feasts in the cosy kitchen, and long nights playing gospel music on the piano.

## Gallery 4: Army and wedding

### **Sergeant Presley**

In late 1957 Elvis was flying high with a string of hit singles and *Jailhouse Rock* hitting movie screens, when a question mark suddenly appeared over his future. Elvis received his draft notice for the United States Army just five days before his first Christmas at Graceland.

He did not want to leave his parents or his career, and Gladys worried herself sick about Elvis leaving home. But using his fame to avoid service was out of the question; Elvis was deeply bound by a sense of patriotic duty. He knuckled down for training in Fort Hood, Texas, then shipped out for 18 months' overseas service in Germany.

For Colonel Parker, this was a golden opportunity to reposition Elvis. The image of a decent young soldier could erase the moral panic associated with Elvis's rebellious look and sexy dance moves, as well as broaden his appeal and his customer base.

Between the United States Army press unit's diligent coverage of his adventures in Army life, and Parker's strategic song releases, Sergeant Presley would return Stateside more famous than ever.

But behind the perfect photographs was a man in lonely emotional tumult. Elvis was devastated when his beloved mother Gladys died very suddenly in August 1958, just weeks before he shipped out. Reeling from grief in a strange country where he least expected it, Elvis would meet the next great love of his life, Priscilla.

## Gallery 5: '68 Special

### **Elvis is back**

The NBC television special 'Singer Presents ... Elvis' is these days better known as 'the '68 Comeback Special' for the pivotal role it played in closing one chapter of Elvis's career and opening the next. The weary star's creative energy returned as he extricated himself from Hollywood, married his sweetheart Priscilla, and celebrated the arrival of baby Lisa Marie.

The special was envisaged by Colonel Parker as a wholesome evening of classic Christmas songs, but NBC hired a young director, Steve Binder, to devise something more interesting. His vision included costume design by Bill Belew, who worked cleverly with kernels from Elvis's cultural roots – the working-class dreamer, the Southern preacher, the youthful rebel – and recast them in a riveting contemporary take.

The potent combination of his best music, a rough edge in his voice, visible emotion, and the mature masculine sex appeal of his wardrobe sent a clear message to the world: Elvis was back.

Gallery 6: 1970s concert years

*"Bright light city gonna set my soul, gonna set my soul on fire"*  
'Viva Las Vegas', 1964

### **"Man, I like Vegas."**

Las Vegas in the 1960s was an oasis city fading around the edges. The heyday of Sinatra and the Rat Pack was over and hotel bosses were on the hunt for hot new talent.

Elvis had performed one show in Vegas in 1956. In a rare exception to the red-hot streak of that seminal year, he had bombed. His 'teenage' sound was unappealing to the middle-aged lounge club audiences.

13 years on, he had matured as a performer and so had his audiences.

The contract for his first Vegas engagement was signed in front of the press on the construction site of the International Hotel, signalling a brand-new chapter for Elvis and his host city.

Elvis delivered a stellar run of 57 sold-out shows over four weeks in 1969. His captivating stage presence and a carefully assembled band helped Elvis reconnect with his audience in a way that had been missing for the past decade. Over the next eight years, he performed over 600 shows in Las Vegas and hundreds more in stadiums across the USA.

Elvis worked again with '68 Special costume designer Bill Belew. For the Vegas stage, Belew first created slim tunic-style suits inspired by karate gi, the uniform of the martial art that Elvis had practised since his Army days. Before long, this look evolved into iconic one-piece jumpsuits decorated in a dazzling array of patterns and symbols.

Gallery 7: The man offstage (gallery with jewellery and outfits worn to meet Richard Nixon and accept Ten Outstanding Young Men Award)

## **Avoiding the public eye**

Off stage, Elvis was a private man. Since the age of 21, he could move around in public without being overwhelmed by fans apt to literally tear his clothes off.

Elvis became an expert at avoiding crowds. He hired out fairgrounds and movie theatres after they closed at night, went motorbike riding in the early hours, and socialised with trusted old friends at Graceland and in his Vegas suites. He rarely attended awards ceremonies or glitzy Hollywood events. In a time before social media and paparazzi, Elvis was able to keep his private life relatively private.

Colonel Parker's logic of scarcity value meant Elvis rarely appeared on television talk shows or gave one-on-one interviews like other stars of his era. Parker's favourite format was the press conference at which every reporter took a seat and politely waited their turn, in a room liberally papered with gaudy posters and novelty hats.

## **When Elvis met Nixon**

In December 1970, Elvis embarked on a spontaneous mission to Washington, enlisting longtime friends Jerry Schilling and Sonny West to join him. En route, he wrote to President Richard Nixon pledging loyalty - and requesting a federal narcotics badge.

An Oval Office staffer convinced Nixon to meet Elvis, who showed up with a gift of a Colt .45 pistol which was swiftly confiscated by the Secret Service.

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After chatting about the threat of anti-American attitudes in contemporary music, Elvis reiterated his request and Nixon obliged. Elvis, Sonny, and Jerry were given White House gift cufflinks, and after Elvis pointed out “Mr. President, they have wives, too,” they were also given brooches.

Elvis received his badge later that day.

## **Outstanding young man**

In 1970 Elvis was selected for the prestigious annual Ten Outstanding Young Men of America awards, by the United States Junior Chamber, or ‘Jaycees’, a civic organisation for people aged under 40.

To be recognised amongst young statesmen and future leaders must have moved Elvis, who was fascinated by history and politics, but not born into the privileges of college education and family connections.

Over a busy weekend in January 1971, official events included a ‘prayer breakfast’, a press conference, and a keynote by rising politician George H. W. Bush. At the awards gala, Elvis gave the only formal public speech of his life. He turned to music to express himself, quoting lyrics from ‘Without a Song’ by one of his musical heroes, Roy Hamilton.

Gallery 7: The man offstage (gallery with karate and horse riding gear)

## **Seeking solace**

Beyond the reach of stage lights and camera lenses, Elvis created a sanctuary for his most trusted inner circle at Graceland. There he was free to indulge in the pastimes which brought spiritual fulfilment and let him unwind: horse-riding, karate, reading, racquetball and, of course, music.

Elvis learned to ride properly in 1956 for his first movie role, in *Love Me Tender*. For Christmas in 1966, he gave Priscilla a much-loved horse named Domino. He purchased himself a golden palomino named Rising Sun; the Graceland stable became House of the Rising Sun. Elvis and Priscilla owned a ranch just over the Mississippi state line, named the Circle G, where they spent part of their honeymoon in 1967 and briefly experienced 'everyday' domestic life, away from both the public eye and the ever-present Graceland entourage.

Today Graceland is home to three rescue horses, Duke, Bandit, and a golden palomino named Tucker.

Gallery 7: The man offstage (gallery with motorcycle and household items)

## **Horizons and home**

Elvis was 'a searcher' from a young age. He was contemplative and introverted yet boldly followed his hunger for music and experiences to transport him beyond the world he knew. In adulthood this yearning became a profound fascination with the forces of destiny and initiative that drive a life forward. He sought answers in theology and philosophy from around the world.

Yet, Elvis never left North America aside from his stint in the Army. Little more than 100 miles separate the shack in Tupelo and Graceland, the home he chose when he could have gone anywhere. Many have speculated about what might have been different if his self-isolation had not been encouraged, if he had felt free to travel the world, to branch out socially and creatively.

But as far as anyone can know, everything he desired was right there at home around the piano at Graceland. Old friends, new records – and perhaps a custom motorcycle or two – were life's great pleasures for Elvis.

## Gallery 8: King of the stage

*“The fans want my shirt.  
They can have my shirt.  
They put it on my back.”*

Elvis Presley, 1957

### **King of the Stage**

Elvis loved a live audience. Between 1969 and 1977, Elvis played 1,100 sold-out concerts across the United States. He played two shows an evening and would stay up all night playing music to wind down from the fever pitch of the stage.

His shows were emotionally and physically demanding. Elvis gave every performance his all, out of respect for his fans, and gratitude for the life they had given him. He had an extraordinary ability to connect intimately with his audiences, and in January 1973 he took that to a global scale with ‘Aloha from Hawaii...via Satellite’.

But as Elvis understood better than anyone around him, it was impossible to maintain the perfect image and a relentless schedule of performing and recording. In his final years he lived in semi-isolation between Graceland and hotel rooms, with an entrenched coterie whose relationship to Elvis ambiguously straddled roles of employee and family. The boundary between the man and the star was blurring; Elvis was exhausted and in constantly declining health.

On 16 August 1977, aged 42, Elvis passed away alone at his Graceland home. Today, Graceland is a shrine to his life and career, a site of fan pilgrimage and quiet communion. It hums with inviting warmth and a magical sense of Elvis’s presence, and the feeling that he might once again come wandering down that driveway to sign autographs at the gates.