'You told your story with class, mister. Elvis would be proud.'
PRISCILLA PRESLEY

George Klein

elvis

my best man

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About the Book

When George Klein was thirteen, he couldn't have known how important the new kid in class – the one with the guitar, the boy named Elvis – would become in his life. But from the first time GK (as he was nicknamed by Elvis) heard this kid sing, he knew that Elvis Presley was someone extraordinary. In this heartfelt, entertaining and affectionate memoir, George Klein writes candidly about their close friendship, which began at school and continued through Elvis's rise to fame and the wild swirl of his tumultuous life, right up to the singer's tragic death.

Writing with the authority of someone who was in the midst of it all, from the good times at Graceland and hanging out with Hollywood stars to butting heads with Elvis's iron-handed manager, Colonel Tom Parker, GK reveals who the King really was and how he acted when the stage lights were off. Full of anecdotes and first-hand accounts of some of the most defining moments in the legend's life, *Elvis: My Best Man* captures the true essence of the man behind the music.

About the Authors

GEORGE ‘GK’ KLEIN is a Memphis native and a pioneering disc jockey and television host. He and Elvis met in the eighth grade at Humes High in North Memphis, and they became lifelong friends. Today, Klein hosts a program for Sirius XM Radio’s Elvis channel, Memphis Sounds for WYPL-18 TV, and the Elvis Hour for WMC radio in Memphis, where he lives with his wife, Dara. He misses Elvis every day.

CHUCK CRISAFULLI is a veteran entertainment journalist and author, most recently of Go to Hell: A Heated History of the Underworld, and Me and a Guy Named Elvis, with Jerry Schilling.

George Klein

elvis

my best man

To Dara
Some things are meant to be. …


EN READ 'EM! Thank you

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I suppose I've been talking about Elvis since the day I met him as an eighth grader at North Memphis's Humes High School in 1948. Back then, I was amazed that this new kid in town had the talent and confidence to bring a guitar to school and sing "Old Shep" for our music class. From that moment on, in all the years I knew Elvis, he never stopped amazing me.

And the truth is, I've never really said goodbye to Elvis Presley.

It's been over thirty years since I last got to spend time with the man I was fortunate enough to consider my closest friend, but he's still a part of each and every day of my life. In my work in radio and television, I do all I can to keep his legacy alive, playing his music and speaking of his life to old fans and, I hope, new ones, too. I'm happy to promote that legacy by organizing and participating in many of the annual events that commemorate Elvis's life and music. And every day, without fail, I wear the jeweled gold ring he gave me as a birthday present.

So much has been written and said about Elvis Presley that for a long time I didn't feel the need to add my own book to the clamor. After Elvis's death, I was offered a fair amount

of money to write a “tell-all,” but that wasn’t the story I had to tell. Now, though, I’m old enough to know that I won’t always be around to speak of the Elvis I knew, and so it feels right to set my memories down in a more permanent form. I also feel that, as much as Elvis has been examined as a pop-culture icon, some important things about him have been missed.

The Elvis I knew wasn’t an icon. He was a real guy, and a real friend. He was also one of the smartest men I’ve ever met, and his deep, natural intelligence is something that doesn’t get discussed nearly enough. The other thing that’s often overlooked is how funny he was, and how much fun he was to be with. His life came to a tragic end, but I spent every moment I could with him because, simply, he was a fantastic guy to be around. The people who have been touched by his music are innumerable, but there are really only a very few of us who knew him as a friend. Having been one of his closest friends is an honor I’ll always feel proud and lucky to have had. I miss him every day.

In writing this book, I’ve had to rely on memory, and I’ve made every effort possible to make sure my memory lined up with the well-documented facts of Elvis’s life. Quoted material in this book may not be a literal transcription of what was spoken, but it’s what I remember hearing or saying. I hope I’ve been able to give the reader a vivid sense of what life alongside Elvis was like, from those first days at Humes to the last days at Graceland. I want this book to give readers a full, honest look at the talented, generous, intelligent, and ultimately human Elvis Presley that I knew. I want this book to stand as a tribute to a man who was a founding rock ’n’ roller and a phenomenal entertainer.

Most of all, I want to offer this book as a heartfelt and lasting “thank you” to Elvis, because the best moments of my life would not have been possible if he had not allowed me to be a part of his.

George Klein
Memphis, Tennessee
January 2010

INTRODUCTION

All the Way from Memphis

“GK, my man.”

Elvis was in a good mood. And when Elvis was in a good mood, everybody around Elvis was in a good mood.

“Hey, Elvis. Hey, everybody,” I answered.

“Get over here, GK,” he said. “Sit down and stay a while.”

He was looking relaxed, happy, and cool as could be sitting at the head of the table in the Graceland dining room. He gestured to the empty chair next to him on his right, so that’s where I took my seat, saying my hellos to some of the other folks at the table: Priscilla, Joe Esposito, Charlie Hodge, Richard Davis. It was a couple of days into the new year of 1969, and Joe, Charlie, and Richard were all working for Elvis—familiar members of our so-called “Memphis Mafia”—so it was no surprise to see them at this informal, post-holiday dinner. There were a few faces down at the other end of the table that weren’t seen as often at Graceland, faces that represented more of the business side of Elvis’s world: record producer Felton Jarvis, who’d become a trusted musical ally after working some of Elvis’s Nashville sessions a few years before; Freddy Bienstock, liaison to the Hill and Range Publishing company that

supplied and administered almost all of the songs Elvis recorded; and Tom Diskin, the right-hand man to Elvis's longtime manager, Colonel Tom Parker.

Elvis had been making me a welcome guest at Graceland since he'd bought the place back in 1957. In fact, I'd been with him when he looked at the property before he purchased it. I was comfortable enough at Graceland that, like most of us close to Elvis, I didn't really think of it as Graceland—it was simply "the house." But as many times as I'd been welcomed in, there was still something especially wonderful about being in Elvis's home during the holiday season.

This year, Elvis had gotten back to Memphis just before Christmas, having finished work on one of his Hollywood films, and I'd been happy to spend as much time with him as I could through the holidays. As always, Elvis and Priscilla had turned the Graceland grounds into a kind of winter wonderland, with sparkling lights strung up all through the property's magnificent oak trees, and a beautiful Christmas tree set up in the dining room. He loved the season, and this Christmas had been a particularly sweet one—it was his first as a father. On Christmas Eve a few of us had gathered at the house for a very warm and happy holiday party (with Elvis's father, Vernon, dressing up to play Santa Claus for the benefit of ten-month-old Lisa Marie). In the week between Christmas and New Year's we'd enjoyed several nights of private movie screenings at the Memphian Theater (Elvis liked the crazy comedy *Candy* with Marlon Brando), and we all rang in 1969 with a private party at the Thunderbird Lounge in midtown Memphis.

In the days after New Year's, Graceland returned to its natural rhythms—Elvis would come downstairs to have his dinner around ten P.M., and whoever was around was more than welcome to sit down and join him. This night, the table was laid out with some of his Southern favorites—meat loaf,

greens, mashed potatoes, cornbread. I'd learned years before that midnight meat loaf did not sit very well with me, so I'd gotten in the habit of eating before I came over, and then just nursing a Pepsi or having a little dessert when I sat with Elvis for his late supper. This night, I wasn't thinking about the meal at all, though. When I'd heard that Felton and Tom and Freddy were coming over, I knew business was going to be discussed. And I wanted to be a part of that conversation. I wasn't sure yet how I was going to say what I wanted to say, but I knew it had to be said.

Elvis was still feeling extremely proud and pleased with the *Elvis* TV special that had just aired on NBC at the beginning of December. After years of feeling stuck in mediocre films and stuck with mediocre material to sing, he had fought hard to make the kind of television show he'd wanted to make. He'd shaken off the advice of the not-so-easily-shaken Colonel Parker, who wanted his star client to make something along the lines of an hour of cozy Christmas carols.

Instead, Elvis had put together an incredibly exciting hour that paid tribute to his real rock 'n' roll roots while also showing himself to be an artist and entertainer still in his fighting prime: Elvis looking lean and mean in black leather. Elvis strapping on a guitar to jam with old band-mates Scotty Moore and D. J. Fontana. Elvis looking dangerous and powerful and relevant all over again. Elvis putting his heart into his performances and truly enjoying himself. That's the Elvis that so many of us around him had wanted to see again for so long, and that's what he gave us in that TV special. Apparently a good portion of the country had been feeling the way we did about Elvis, because his show was watched by almost half the nation's TV viewers the night it aired and wound up with some of the year's highest ratings for any kind of program.

Elvis had gotten some rave reviews in the press, too, and the only thing that bothered him about the response to

the show was that some people referred to it as a “Comeback Special.” He felt he’d never stopped working hard at what he was doing, and even if the movies and soundtrack albums he’d put his energies into weren’t always inspired, he didn’t consider that he’d gone anywhere that he had to “come back” from. Still, he knew he’d done some exceptional work, and I was thrilled that this good friend of mine, the most talented man I knew, had really put those talents to use again, rocking and rolling like only he could.

There was more good rockin’ to come in the new year, too. The Colonel had just worked out a tremendous deal for Elvis to make his return to live concert performances, with a month’s run of shows at Las Vegas’s brand-new International Hotel scheduled for the summer. Elvis was excited about getting in front of audiences again, and he liked to joke that the hotel and its showroom were being built just for him. For the first time in a long time, Elvis was feeling energized and optimistic about the path his career was taking.

On this particular night, when the group in the Graceland dining room had just about finished eating, Elvis pulled a small Hav-a-Tampa cigarillo from his shirt pocket. He’d become very fond of the thin, sweet, wooden-tipped cigars, though more often than not he’d just hold a cigar without lighting it up. The conversation slowly shifted from talk of the TV special to talk about the recent movies we’d seen and then toward some actual business. Felton mentioned that it was about time to start putting together Elvis’s next recording session for an RCA album.

“Yeah, I know it,” said Elvis, rolling the cigar through his fingers. “We’ll get it worked out.”

The session was supposed to happen soon at the RCA studios in either Nashville or Los Angeles, and Felton started going over which session players would be available in the upcoming weeks. Elvis always wanted to work with a

strong rhythm section, and there was a bit of concern that L.A.'s top session drummer, Hal Blaine, was booked up and wouldn't be available for the recording dates. Felton had a few suggestions about suitable replacements, and went on to discuss other players who were or weren't available. Freddy Bienstock said that Hill and Range had plenty of new material to present to Elvis.

I sensed a dip in Elvis's happy mood. For all that had been going well recently, it'd been a long time since he'd had a real hit record, and at that point the thought of going to work in a recording studio probably seemed like just that—going to work. The more the session plans were discussed, the more that happy holiday mood seemed to be slipping away. Elvis had done so well with the TV special and was so excited about the upcoming concerts, it just seemed a crying shame that making great records couldn't be a part of his newfound satisfaction as well.

To me, it was not a question of ability or desire. Elvis had just shown us he was in top form, and though we didn't talk about it much, I knew he'd like nothing more than to be at the top of the charts again. I'd come to believe that getting there was simply a matter of where he recorded and what he recorded. He could certainly make any studio his own—he'd done that right from the start, cutting his first Sun records with Sam Phillips at the small, cozy Memphis Recording Service studio. But he'd never really enjoyed the bigger, fancier studios he'd worked in. It didn't matter how new the recording gear was or how expensive-looking the facilities were, Elvis worked by feel, and it'd been a while since he'd recorded in a place that had the right feel. On top of that, Elvis had a terrific ear for selecting great material to perform, but there'd been too many sessions lately where there just wasn't anything great for him to pick from what Freddy Bienstock and Hill and Range presented him with.

I knew exactly where he could find the feel and the material he was after.

But I also knew very well that it wasn't wise to come at him with some big career-related suggestion in front of a lot of other people, especially a mix of business associates and Memphis Mafia guys. As open and generous as Elvis was, he had a strong sense of pride, and you didn't ever want to do anything to embarrass him. That was a surefire way to find yourself permanently standing on the wrong side of the Graceland gates. If you had something important to say to him, especially about his work, the smart thing to do was to ask him if you could speak in private, and then soft-sell him on whatever suggestion you were making. You had to keep things subtle enough so that he could feel he was making his own decisions. He never tried to make the rest of us feel small, but the fact was that he was the superstar, not us. You had to keep in mind that as much as Elvis loved and respected his friends, he didn't want to be pushed around by them either.

I knew all that, but maybe I was feeling a little cocky at the table that night because my own career was bringing me everything I'd ever wanted from a life in broadcasting. I was the red-hot, number-one rock 'n' roll disc jockey in Memphis, and I had a popular TV show called *Talent Party* that was Memphis's answer to *American Bandstand* and *Shindig!* I made my living maintaining a feel for the pulse of what was going on in music, and I knew that Elvis appreciated that. When it came to rock 'n' roll, I had a damn good ear for what was hot and what wasn't.

Now I was sitting as close to Elvis as I could possibly be, with our chairs just about six inches apart. As Felton and Tom and Freddy talked up the plans for the upcoming session, I watched Elvis flip his cigar around in his fingers with nervous energy, his face tighter and his expression darker than it had been before. I knew the smart way to approach Elvis, but I decided not to be so smart.

I raised my hand and said softly, “Elvis, can I say something?”

The table quieted. Elvis looked over at me with a slightly puzzled expression. “Yeah, GK. Say whatever you want.”

So I said it.

“Elvis, you are the greatest star who ever lived. You define what a superstar is. Your popularity is worldwide and you’ve got more star power and more talent than anybody. You’re the most versatile singer I’ve ever heard. You can sing anything.”

Just out of the corner of my eye I saw Elvis raise his eyebrow a bit, wondering what I was getting at. He was smart enough to know I didn’t raise my hand just to tell him how great he was.

“Elvis, you know you can sing anything. But it just makes me sick that you are getting nothing but B-side material to work with. You’re the greatest singer in the world, you could have the greatest writers writing for you, but you’re only getting lousy B-side crap material because writers are being told they have to give up a part of the publishing and ownership of the songs to get anything through to you. The top writers today aren’t going to go for that anymore, Elvis. They won’t give it up, and they shouldn’t. Elvis, you can’t be at your greatest if you’re not getting great material. And it’s a shame, because if you got your hands on some great songs, you’d have number-one records.”

I paused a moment to get my breath. Elvis was still and quiet, and there was dead silence at the table. I figured I might as well go all the way now.

“Elvis, getting good material is just half of it. You’re sitting here, a superstar, being told which musicians you can or can’t get and being told when and where you should record. Elvis, just ten miles north of here is American Sound Studios, where they’re cutting the greatest hits in the world right now. It’s in North Memphis, a mile and a

half from our old Humes High, near the corner of Thomas and Chelsea. It's a small funky studio with the kind of feeling I know you like. It's not fancy, it's not state-of-the-art, but they're cutting fantastic records there. 'The Letter' by the Box Tops. B. J. Thomas's 'Hooked on a Feeling.' 'Angel of the Morning' by Merrilee Rush. All hits. Wilson Pickett's recorded there, so has Neil Diamond. Dusty Springfield just cut 'Son of a Preacher Man' at American—she came all the way from England to record right there in North Memphis, Elvis. And it would be a dream come true for the guys at American if you'd record over there. With some great songs to work with at American, I know you'd have yourself some hit records, Elvis. It's what you deserve."

I don't know if it's possible to get deader than dead silence, but it was awful quiet around that table.

For the first time, I got real nervous. I'd seen people get close to Elvis and then get shut out because they crossed a line with him. It would be so easy for him now to pretend that nothing had just happened, to make some kind of joke to the rest of the table and then shut me out. The thought of not being welcome in Elvis's home was terrifying. I loved this guy more than any friend I'd ever had, and I couldn't imagine anything much worse than losing my friendship with him. But it truly felt worth the gamble to try to do everything I could to help him get back on top.

There still wasn't a damn sound at the table, though I was sure everyone could hear my heart pounding through my chest.

Elvis slowly flipped that little cigar around in his fingers, then his eyes went up and he kind of squinted like he was looking at something beyond the ceiling. He turned to me, looked at me hard, and pointed an index finger right at me.

"GK's right," he said. He turned to the others at the table. "George is right."

Those sounded like just about the sweetest words I'd ever heard, and I was overcome by such a mixture of happiness and relief that it took me a moment to register another sound I was hearing: Priscilla and the guys around the table were cheering. Charlie Hodge reached over to high-five me, and Felton jumped out of his seat with a whoop. "I can get you into American, Elvis. I can get you songs by Jerry Reed, Mac Davis—whatever you want. We can make it happen."

"I've got a line to Neil Diamond," I told Elvis. "I know for a fact he'd be honored to write something for you."

Elvis nodded, then put the cigar in his mouth and bit hard on it. "I don't give a damn where the material comes from," he said. "I don't care about publishing or percentages or what the writers get or what we have to pay for. I just want some great goddamn songs."

Everyone around the table whooped again. Well, almost everyone. While I'd been speaking my piece I'd been very careful not to make any eye contact with Tom Diskin or Freddy Bienstock. I didn't dislike either of them personally, but both of them represented a way of doing business that treated Elvis like a product rather than a true entertainer—like an act to be hyped rather than an artist to be supported. Now, with a couple glances in their direction, I could tell from their tight smiles that they were not happy with the turn the evening had taken. And I knew they'd be reporting every word that had been said back to the Colonel just as soon as they could get to a hotel phone.

I knew it wasn't smart to get on the wrong side of the Colonel, but this night I didn't care. I felt I had done right by my friend Elvis.

I got a nudge from Elvis's elbow and turned to look at him. He looked back at me for just a beat and then gave me a wink. That said everything I needed to hear.

We all got up from the table and started to move to the back den off the kitchen, everyone still talking excitedly

about what might happen when Elvis got his hands on some great songs. Marty Lacker, another Memphis Mafia member, was in the den, and he was equally excited by the news. He'd done some work for American Studios and also thought it would be a perfect spot for Elvis. Felton Jarvis came up to me with a huge smile on his face and before I could say a word he grabbed me and gave me a bear hug. "George, I've been thinking exactly what you were saying, but I could never say it. I always feel I'm between a rock and a hard place trying to please Elvis and the Colonel and RCA. I always figured if I spoke up, I'd lose my job. But you said it, man, you said it."

I barely had time to thank him for the support when he called over my shoulder. "Elvis, I can call American right now. We can really make this happen."

"Well, make the call," said Elvis. "The sooner the better."

Felton left to use the phone in the kitchen, and I went over to stand by Elvis. He looked at me, with that hint of smile creeping on his face again.

"Shoot, GK—you look a mess. You got your nerves in the dirt."

"Phew, Elvis. I took a hell of a chance. But you know it was from the heart."

"I know it, George," he said. "You were right, though. And when you're right, you're right."

I stood there, breathing a little easier now, as the rest of the guys talked and kidded with each other. Then Felton stepped back into the room.

"Hey, Elvis. We're booked into American Studios. Next Monday night."

Another cheer went up. Elvis was heading back to North Memphis. Back to our old neighborhood.

Back to where it all began …

CHAPTER ONE

The Kid Who Sang

HUMES HIGH SCHOOL was a great big brick building on North Manassas Street in North Memphis—the biggest building around in that part of town—and it served as the junior and senior high school for kids in our working-class neighborhood. In the fall of 1948 I was ready to start eighth grade, my second year at Humes, and frankly I was looking forward to it. I liked being in the big building, moving from class to class, having my own locker, and being a part of a big group of kids—a group that included quite a few pretty girls. There was just one problem in going back to school, and that was a particular class on my fall semester schedule that I desperately wanted to get out of: Miss Marmann's music-appreciation class.

Humes had plenty of tough teachers, but Miss Marmann was one of the toughest, and in a school full of some pretty tough kids, the ones who were troublemakers in other classes always sat up straight in Miss Marmann's class and took care not to get caught chewing gum. Even by the standards of '48, Miss Marmann was "old school"—rumor had it that she was extremely prone to whacking inattentive students with a special ruler she kept on her desk.

I appreciated music well enough, but I wasn't too crazy about getting whacked, so before classes began that fall I

looked for a way out. The rule at Humes was that if you were a member of the marching band, you didn't have to take the music-appreciation class, so I signed up for band tryouts and said I was interested in taking up the drums. I discovered that there were a lot of kids trying out for band just to get out of Miss Marmann's class—and I guess in that way she really did encourage music appreciation. But the tryouts consisted of a fairly complicated written test and music test, and apparently I didn't do too well on either one, because I was quickly judged not to be marching band material.

But, you know, if I could have played drums worth a lick, I might not have met Elvis Presley.

School began and Miss Marmann certainly lived up to her reputation. She really did wield a ruler, but as it turned out, she and I got along okay. It seems we both felt that much of the popular music of the day was dull, repetitive, and without merit. One afternoon when she was complaining about how our exposure to music was limited to a few hit songs, I raised my hand and chimed in that "Dance, Ballerina, Dance" by Vaughn Monroe was getting played over and over again on the radio, and it drove me nuts. Rather than reach for her ruler, Miss Marmann actually smiled a little and said, "That's a very good example, George."

Our lack of interest in songs from the hit parade was probably the only thing Miss Marmann and I agreed on when it came to music, though. She felt we'd all be better off listening to Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven. I didn't really know yet what the music I wanted to hear on the radio might sound like, but I was pretty sure it wouldn't be played by an orchestra.

In November, Miss Marmann's class was joined by a new kid whose family had just moved up to Memphis from

Tupelo, Mississippi. I'm sure the teacher said his name and introduced him to the rest of us, but he didn't really stand out much and I didn't take much notice of him. Didn't take much notice, that is, until a few weeks later, on a Friday, when Miss Marmann announced that since Christmas was coming up soon, instead of doing regular music lessons the following week we would have a "special treat": we'd get to sing Christmas carols together. This didn't sound too "special" to me, but the new kid raised his hand right away.

"Miss Marmann?" he called out.

"Yes, Elvis?"

"Do you mind if I bring my guitar to class and sing?"

There were a few little snickers and laughs. Back in 1948 there wasn't anything cool about a thirteen-year-old kid playing a "country" instrument like a guitar. Cool would have been bringing your football or your boxing gloves to school. But this kid wanted to bring in his guitar, and he wanted to sing. He was over on the left-hand side of the classroom, and I was all the way on the right side, but I found myself staring across the rows of desks at this new kid. Elvis Presley was his name.

Miss Marmann hushed the snickerers in the class, though she also seemed a little surprised at the request. "Yes, Elvis—that'd be fine," she said. "Bring your guitar to class."

The next Monday we all took our seats in music class and sure enough, there was Elvis Presley with his guitar. When Miss Marmann called on him, he picked up that guitar, walked to the front of the classroom, and sang us two songs, neither one a Christmas carol. First was "Old Shep," a heartbreaker about a boy and his dog, and then "Cold Icy Fingers," a funny sort of ghost song. As he strummed his last chord, there was a moment of shocked silence, then just a smattering of applause.

I think our classmates had probably been expecting something outright awful—something they could laugh at.

But the kid really could sing and play, and frankly, I was blown away. First of all, it was impressive that this kid had some talent, but to see him get up in front of a class—in the classroom of one of the strictest teachers in school—and sing out so strongly and easily, I'd just never seen anything like it. I'd been going to the movies and half-daydreaming about a life in showbiz, but I didn't really know how I'd ever get there. Right here at Humes High, though, was a kid unafraid to put himself in the spotlight. That amazed me and affected me.

For the first of many, many times in my life, I thought, "Damn, that guy's cool."

It'd be nice to say that Elvis Presley and I were inseparable buddies from that moment forward, but that wasn't quite the case. I introduced myself to him at some point, and we talked a little when we had the chance, becoming two guys who were happy to see each other in the halls. I do remember him saying that he'd also tried out for the marching band but had been rejected. (I'm still not sure why a guy with his talent didn't get in, but I'm thankful for it.)

Elvis and his family were then living in a rooming house on Poplar Street, though they soon moved to the government-sponsored housing projects at Lauderdale Courts. I lived right across the street from Humes with my mom and sister, and when we kids got out of school at three-fifteen, Elvis would head his way and I'd go mine. Looking back, I know he and his family had been dirt-poor in Tupelo and were trying hard to fit in and make things work in their new hometown.

My family had come from a little farther away, but was working just as hard to get by. My mother and father were both Orthodox Jews. She was from Russia, he was from Poland, and they both fled their homes in the twenties as anti-Semitism flared across Eastern Europe. My mother had relatives in Chicago, but her passage to the U.S. was

sponsored by a Jewish lawyer in Memphis, and it was through him that she met my father. They settled into a little home on Leath Street in North Memphis, had my sister Rosie, then my sister Dorothy, and then me. My parents had escaped before the rise of Hitler and had begun to build a new, better life in America, but things took an unfortunate turn when my dad got very ill. In fact, I barely remember him as a part of my childhood, and to be honest I'm not even sure what he suffered from. I just have a few vague memories of going to visit him at a special hospital in Hot Springs, Arkansas, where he was laid up for the last couple years of his life.

We weren't ever wealthy, but we did well enough that I wore clean clothes and always had something to eat for dinner. My dad had started a produce business before he got sick, buying fruits and vegetables from farmers and selling them to grocery stores, and with the money he made he bought two small houses in North Memphis—one for us to live in and one to rent out. After he passed away, we lived partly on that rent money, and my mom also worked as a seamstress, altering suits at one of the nicer tailor shops in downtown Memphis. As soon as I was old enough I began working, too: I took on a paper route and hustled up extra money any way I could, doing things like selling balloons at parades.

There weren't a lot of Jews in North Memphis, and I know there are some places in the South where my family would not have felt welcomed, especially given the high tensions during World War II. But my family was so easily accepted and got so used to fitting in that the one time I came face-to-face with prejudice, I didn't know what it was. When I was in seventh grade, my first year at Humes, an older kid walked up to me one afternoon and called me a "Jew baby." Maybe he expected me to burst into tears or take a swing at him, but I just stood there staring at him because, frankly, I didn't know if "Jew baby" was supposed

to be a bad thing or a good thing. So I asked the kid, “What’s a ‘Jew baby’?” The question kind of threw him off, and, as it turned out, he couldn’t come up with an answer. He just shrugged and walked away, and I never heard words like that again.

By the time I was in school at Humes, I had a routine I followed almost every day after school: I made a quick stop at a local snack shop for a cold drink or a piece of candy, then I rushed home to spend some time with the one luxury item in my home: a great big floor-model console radio. As a little kid, I’d rarely missed an episode of the adventures of the Green Hornet, the Lone Ranger, or Superman. Now I listened to Bill Gordon, the afternoon disc jockey on Memphis’s biggest station, WHBQ. Gordon played the hits of the day—the kind of stuff that left Miss Marmann unimpressed—but he was a funny, energetic on-air personality, and he was the first guy I ever heard who would talk over records and make jokes about what he was playing.

For more excitement, sometimes I’d give the radio dial a spin from WHBQ at 560 up to WDIA 1070. In 1949, WDIA became the first radio station in the South to hire black on-air talent, beginning with disc jockey Nat D. Williams. Williams, and later fellow deejays such as Rufus Thomas and a very young B. B. King, would play a very different-sounding music for the city’s sizable black audience. It was by tuning in to WDIA that I started to hear music unlike anything I’d ever heard on the hit parade: songs by Big Joe Turner, the Clovers, Fats Domino, Ruth Brown, and Johnny Ace. This stuff sounded wild and a little dangerous, and I couldn’t get enough of it—even if I didn’t always understand the things that were being sung about. Quite a few of my classmates felt the same way, and it became kind of a fad to try to write down the words we could catch when a new song was played on WDIA and then bring them

into school the next day and try to figure out exactly what we'd heard.

I know that in some homes, kids caught listening to "race music" would have been grounded or worse. But my mother never saw any point in getting upset about what I was listening to. She'd seen some real troubles over in Russia and was happy to have what she had in the United States. As long as I wasn't getting into fights, wasn't being brought home by the police, and was pulling decent grades, she wasn't going to get too upset about where I set the radio dial.

As I moved through Humes High, Elvis and I ended up having quite a few classes together, including a typing class that I think we both barely passed. I'd occasionally see him around town, too. When the Mid-South Fair came to the Memphis Fairgrounds in 1950, a few buddies and I figured out that there was a spot behind some carnival tents where you could climb a cyclone fence to sneak in and save yourself the fifty-cent admission charge. One night, I was halfway up the fence when I felt something give it a shake. I looked to my left and there was Elvis, halfway up his section of fence and just as happy to be saving his fifty cents.

I guess everybody in high school is looking for some way to be their own person—to gain a little bit of notoriety. Back then, the common ways to get noticed were by being an athlete or a cheerleader or a part of school politics, and I took the political route. I became editor of the school paper, editor of the yearbook, and by senior year I was the class president. I kind of enjoyed being able to get along with all sorts of classmates—the athletes, the brains, and the ones who were a little different. By tenth and eleventh grade Elvis was bringing his guitar in more and more often to

sing at little class events like a homeroom party. By senior year, Elvis was very clearly different.

The most obvious thing about him was that he dressed differently. Most of us were wearing jeans and plain, collared shirts. But you never saw Elvis in jeans. (I'd learn later that he hated them—they reminded him of the work clothes his family had worn at their poorest.) Instead, he'd wear black slacks with a pink stripe down the side and a black sport coat with the collar turned up. He'd let his hair grow out and had it combed back high. And he had those sideburns. What's amazing to me now is that the look he had back then wasn't the fashion of the day for anybody else in any part of Memphis I knew about—it was just pure Elvis. But at the same time, as distinctive as his look was, he was low-key about it and never seemed to be angling for any special attention. He got his notoriety in a quiet but unmistakable way. Like a velvet hammer.

Elvis wasn't quite as handsome in those years as he would become—he hadn't quite grown into his looks yet. So most Humes girls weren't sure what to make of this very different classmate. On the other hand, some of the guys at Humes felt that someone so different deserved to be given a hard time. One day he was cornered in a Humes bathroom by a tough group who brandished a pair of scissors and said they were going to cut off his hair. He tried to fight them off, but his pompadour was only saved when one of the strongest, most fearless guys at Humes, Red West, happened to walk into that bathroom and saw what was going on. Red told the would-be barbers that if they wanted to cut Elvis's hair they'd have to cut his first, and that was the end of that.

The crowning moment of my time at Humes came at graduation, when, as class president, I got to make a speech to the whole school. For Elvis, I think the highlight came during our yearly senior-sponsored talent show, when he got up in front of a packed auditorium and sang Teresa

Brewer's "Till I Waltz Again with You." I remember being struck by the fact that some of the roughneck football guys who had given Elvis the hardest time applauded and whistled their support for him at this performance.

I said to one of them, "You're clapping like crazy—I thought you didn't like Elvis."

"Aww, Elvis is okay," the kid said. "We messed with him a little but he took it just fine. Besides, he's part of our class and he's the best singer up there."

I couldn't argue with that.

Throughout my Humes High days, the more I listened to WDIA, the more I became infatuated with the music I heard there, and the less interest I had in the smooth, vanilla-type pop records that were being put out by the likes of Doris Day, the Ames Brothers, and Mitch Miller. DIA signed off at sundown, though, so the place to hear new sounds at night was WHBQ. The station had a late-night show called *Red, Hot and Blue* that was hosted by a wild, one-of-a-kind madman named Dewey "Daddy-O" Phillips.

Dewey had started out as a salesman in the record department at Grant's department store in Memphis, where he'd taken to moving the merchandise by getting on the store's PA system and hawking his favorite records with a speedy, wild patter that was part hillbilly, part jive cat, part auctioneer, and part lunatic. Customers flocked in just to hear him at work, record sales in the store shot up, and it wasn't long before WHBQ decided to take a chance by putting the completely untrained and inexperienced Dewey on the air. He was a hit there, too, and by 1951 his tremendously popular show was on the air from nine P.M. to midnight six nights a week. *Red, Hot and Blue* was where we kids turned to hear the fresher, more exciting sounds of doo-wop, jump blues, deep country, and, especially, what was being called "rhythm and blues."