

DIDN'T

HAVE

TO DIE

†
ELVIS
AARON
PRESLEY
JANUARY 8, 1935
AUGUST 16, 1977

SON OF
VERNON ELVIS PRESLEY
AND
GLADYS LOVE PRESLEY
FATHER OF
LISA MARIE PRESLEY

HE WAS A PRECIOUS GIFT FROM GOD
WE CHERISHED AND LOVED DEARLY
HE HAD A GOD-GIVEN TALENT THAT HE SHARED
WITH THE WORLD AND WITHOUT A DOUBT
HE BECAME MOST WIDELY ACCLAIMED
CAPTURING THE HEARTS OF YOUNG AND OLD AHEAD
HE WAS ADMIRER NOT ONLY AS AN ENTERTAINER
BUT AS THE GREAT HUMANITARIAN THAT HE WAS
FOR HIS GENEROSITY AND HIS KIND FEELINGS
FOR HIS FELLOW MAN
HE REVOLUTIONIZED THE FIELD OF MUSIC AND
RECORDED HIS MOST HONORED AWARD
HE IS A LIVING LEGEND
EARLY IN THE 1950S HE WAS CALLED
GOD BY THE PEOPLE WHO LOVED HIM
CALL HIM BY NAME
HE WILL BE
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How an encounter that never happened might have helped to change history if it had

By Shawn Poole

Ever since he was a child, Bruce Springsteen has been strongly influenced by the artistry of Elvis Presley. Over the years, the “E Street”/“Elvis” connection has remained strong. Most recently, Springsteen participated along with E Street Band members Nils Lofgren and Patti Scialfa in the *Elvis: Viva Las Vegas* television special (now on DVD in the U.S., where it hit #1 on the Billboard DVD sales chart), and its accompanying soundtrack album. E Streeters Garry Tallent and Max Weinberg also were on hand at this year’s Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony to induct Elvis’ original drummer and bassist, D.J. Fontana and the late Bill Black.

Presley was only forty-two years old when his life tragically ended. “They found him slumped up against the drain,” Bruce Springsteen would later sing of his fallen idol, “with a whole lot of trouble running through his veins; Bye-bye, Johnny; Johnny, bye-bye; You didn’t have to die; you didn’t have to die.”

While Elvis’ premature decline and death did absolutely nothing to stop his immense cultural influence, it did rob the world of many more years of music from this great artist. It also ensured that Bruce Springsteen would never get another chance to meet the man who initially inspired his own musical career. (He had two chances: one famous unofficial chance when he jumped the wall at Graceland in 1976 and one not-as-famous in 1977 when local concert promoters offered Springsteen an official chance to meet Elvis backstage before his final Philadelphia concert.)

But what if Bruce *had* gotten to meet Elvis before August 16, 1977? Might things have turned out any differently for either or both of them, as well as the many other lives they affected? In this work of speculative fiction, Shawn Poole ponders the possibilities, poignantly reminding us of the promise and potential that tragically disappeared in that long ago summer.

Memphis, Tennessee was sweltering in the mid-July heat. The summer of 1977 was in full swing and for the first time in years, Elvis Presley had a real shot at topping the pop charts again. More importantly, the troubled superstar was on the verge of gaining something much more valuable than yet another number-one single.

Presley had taken shelter from the oppressive heat by remaining inside the cool confines of Graceland, his fabled mansion, but he was by no means idle. He and his band were busy recording various versions of “Fire”, an unreleased Bruce Springsteen composition. The song had been written especially with Elvis in mind. Springsteen himself interrupted work

on his new album (which had begun only about a month earlier, just after finally settling his lawsuit against former manager Mike Appel) to travel to Graceland. Bruce was invited by Elvis and came simply to observe the sessions in Presley's makeshift home studio. A fan since childhood, Springsteen was naturally eager for the chance to witness his ultimate musical inspiration singing one of his own songs.



The two stars met backstage about seven weeks earlier at Presley's most recent Philadelphia concert, where Bruce first told Elvis about "Fire". Bruce attended the concert and was invited backstage by local concert promoters to meet Elvis beforehand. Presley and Springsteen seemed to hit it off quickly, despite Bruce's initial reluctance to meet his hero in the flesh. Elvis was particularly tickled by Bruce's story of once climbing the wall surrounding Graceland late at night in an effort to try to meet Presley. Springsteen was very different from most other young rock stars of the seventies. Elvis could greatly identify with Bruce's American working-class roots and was especially impressed by his deep knowledge of American musical traditions.

More importantly, Presley had found some genuine inspiration in Springsteen's tale of his difficult but ultimately successful effort to gain complete control of his musical career, which culminated in his recently settled lawsuit. Elvis (quietly and tentatively at first) began reconsidering his own business relationships, particularly his partnership with long-time manager Tom Parker.

At the "Fire" recording sessions, Bruce also introduced Elvis to his friend (and new, though not yet official, manager), former rock critic Jon Landau, who had accompanied Springsteen to Memphis. Landau had a keen understanding of Presley's artistry and of music-business issues in general. In fact, Elvis wound up spending more time discussing the overall state of his career with Landau and Springsteen than he did actually working on "Fire". Both Bruce and Jon recommended that Elvis contact their key legal and financial advisors to discreetly examine Presley's managerial contracts and other fiscal arrangements in more detail.



As fate would have it, the world would have to wait almost ten more years to hear a recording of "Fire". While the '77 "Fire" sessions failed to produce a version of the song deemed worthy of release, they initiated something of far greater value: a rejuvenated Elvis Presley. Thanks to his encounters with Springsteen and Landau, Presley started to slowly and purposefully "clean house", ending harmful personal and professional relationships and assembling a new set of trusted advisors and associates with much higher standards and ethics.

It would take almost a decade to complete, but beginning this transformation would ultimately prepare Presley for what would later become known as his "second comeback". Even the mere hint that things could be changing for the better, however, was enough to motivate Elvis to begin curtailing his abuse of prescription drugs, though he was still years away from fully recovering from his addiction.

Elvis first had to temporarily halt all of his touring and recording activities, which he eventually was able to do with some extra money in the bank from his rearranged business relationships. Once any pressing obligations to tour or record were eliminated, Presley privately withdrew to begin improving his physical health, focusing on his obesity and drug addiction. He also got more of a chance to truly rest, relax and recreate with friends and family.

With a professionally monitored program of exercise, diet and drug-addiction therapy, Elvis eventually became much stronger and healthier. He didn't lose all of his excess weight but more importantly, he completely stopped the drug abuse. Even with the few remaining extra pounds, Presley looked healthy and handsome again. Years later, Elvis would attribute





some of his success in this area to his friend Bruce Springsteen's non-judgmental but adamant anti-drug stance. (Springsteen and Landau stayed in touch with Presley during his self-imposed exile, occasionally offering their encouragement and support.)

As Elvis temporarily stepped out of the spotlight, Bruce Springsteen's star continued to ascend. During many of his concerts in these years, Springsteen would often sing one of Elvis' hits and tell his audiences about the impact that Presley's music had on his life. (Especially stunning was Bruce's radical rearrangement of "Follow That Dream", a minor Presley hit from one of his early-sixties movies.) Bruce began a working relationship with some of Elvis' key touring associates, as well, including sound engineer Bruce Jackson and concert sound specialists Clair Brothers Audio. He refrained, of course, from ever publicly discussing Elvis' current private life, other than briefly noting onstage that Elvis was missed and wished well. Springsteen also refrained from publicly performing "Fire", secretly hoping that at some point in the future, Presley could try his hand at recording the song again.

By 1985, Bruce had achieved major rock stardom with the *Born In The U.S.A.* album and tour. During this period, rock critic and Springsteen biographer Dave Marsh wrote, "For the first time since Elvis Presley, the king of rock and roll is native-born...."

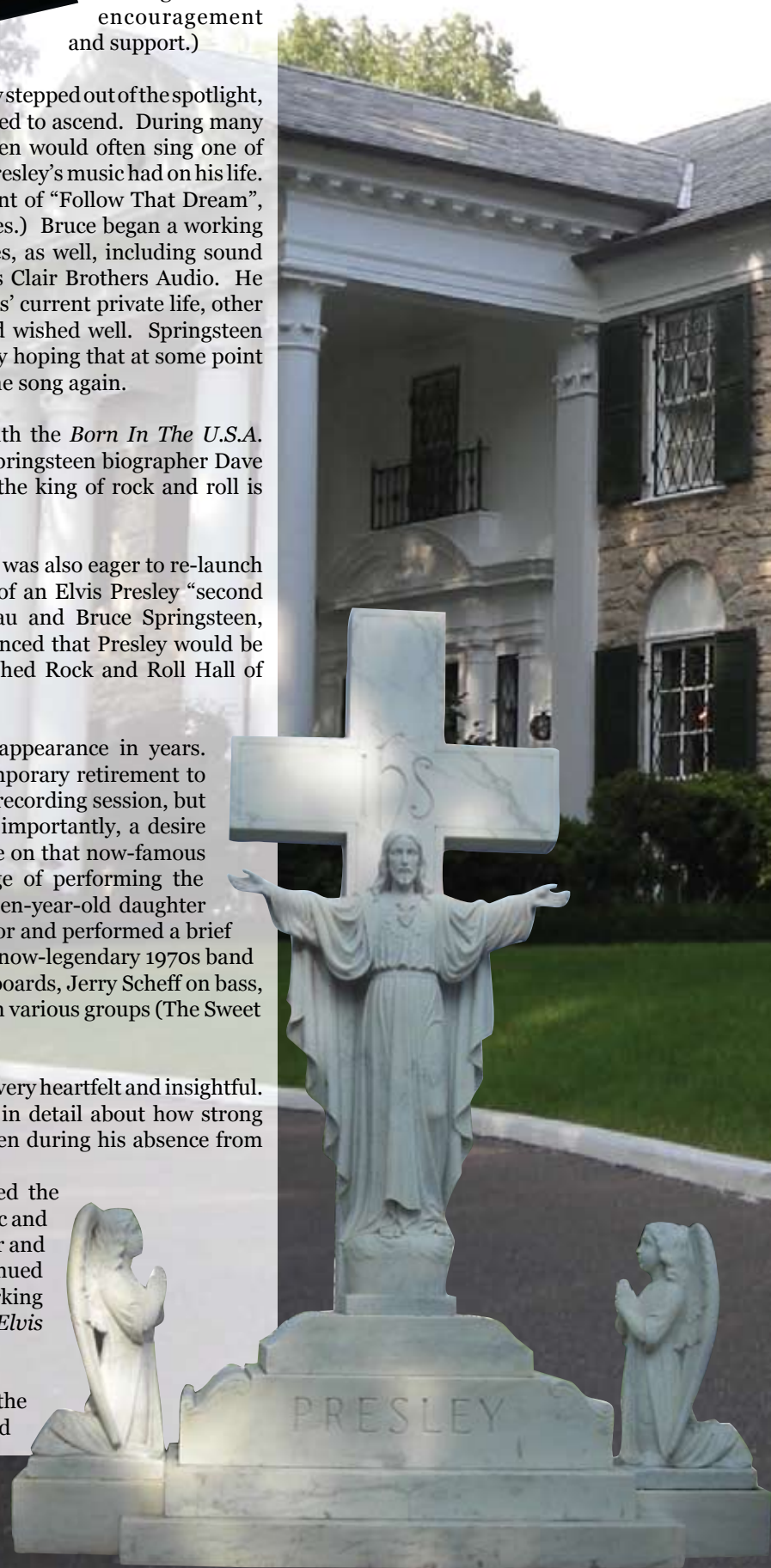
Elvis was very pleased with his friend's success, but he was also eager to re-launch his own career. Somewhere along the line, the idea of an Elvis Presley "second comeback" album, co-produced by Elvis, Jon Landau and Bruce Springsteen, emerged. The idea really took off when it was announced that Presley would be among the first inductees to enter the newly established Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in January 1986.

The induction dinner was Elvis' first major public appearance in years. (One year earlier, he was very tempted to end his temporary retirement to participate in U.S.A. For Africa's "We Are The World" recording session, but a lingering sense of not quite being ready and, more importantly, a desire to not obscure the focus of the project kept Elvis home on that now-famous evening.) Bruce Springsteen was given the privilege of performing the induction. Elvis arrived to much fanfare, with eighteen-year-old daughter Lisa Marie by his side. He gratefully accepted his honor and performed a brief but brilliant medley of several of his hits backed by his now-legendary 1970s band featuring James Burton on guitar, Glen Hardin on keyboards, Jerry Scheff on bass, Ron Tutt on drums and a variety of backup singers from various groups (The Sweet Inspirations, J.D. Sumner & The Stamps, etc.).

As always, Springsteen's remarks on Elvis' impact were very heartfelt and insightful. They deeply moved even Elvis himself. Bruce spoke in detail about how strong Presley's international cultural influence remained even during his absence from the stages and studios.

At the induction dinner, Springsteen also emphasized the distinctively American character of Elvis Presley's music and persona. Therefore, even after the dinner was long over and the Presley/Springsteen/Landau album project continued to develop, it was only fitting that the record's working title also eventually became the official release title: *Elvis Presley: American*.

Unlike most other Springsteen recording projects at the time, *Elvis Presley: American* was recorded and released



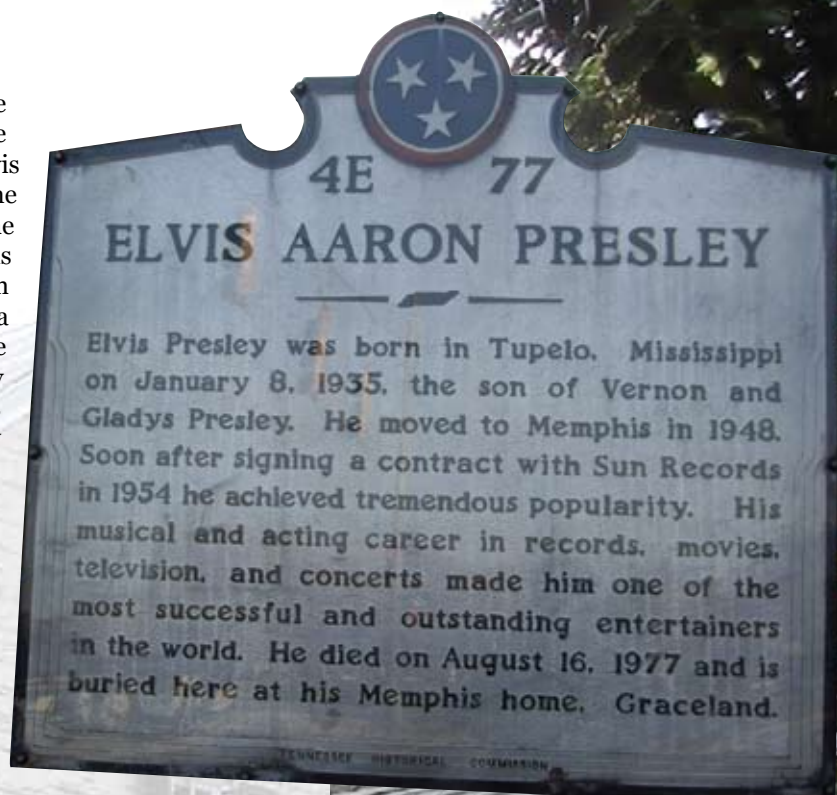
very quickly. Work began quietly in Memphis in the autumn of 1986, after Springsteen finished putting the final touches on his own long-awaited live album. Elvis recorded at Graceland in his newly refurbished home studio (with Toby Scott at the console), using mostly the same group of musicians who accompanied him at his Hall of Fame induction performance. Bruce Springsteen and members of the E Street Band performed only in a few "guest-spot"-type appearances, along with some other famous musicians, most of whom were also lucky enough to contribute songs to the project. By the year's end, most of the basic tracks were finished and ready for mixing by Bob Clearmountain. A few months later, the entire album was ready for mastering by Bob Ludwig. Annie Leibovitz began shooting her first-ever photos of Elvis Presley for the cover and inserts. (*Elvis Presley: American* would also be the first new Presley album simultaneously released in the LP, cassette and CD formats.)

Like all other Presley records, none of the songs were written originally by Elvis, though his performances, song selections, production and arrangement contributions remained characteristically unique.

While Elvis was mainly recording with his regular backup band again, the goal for this comeback album was to offer both longtime fans and new listeners an Elvis record quite unlike any other he had done before. At the same time, *Elvis Presley: American* provided Presley with a way of communicating to the world the many changes he had gone through over the past decade. As the title implied, the album would also explore Elvis' vision of his native land and his global status as an embodiment of its ideals.

When it finally hit the stores in early May of 1987, *Elvis Presley: American* treated both old fans and new to sixteen new Presley tracks, four of which were written by Bruce Springsteen and one of which was a new version of an old Presley hit ("Follow That Dream"), rewritten and rearranged by Springsteen and Presley. In order of appearance, they were:

1. "American Girl" (written by Tom Petty; Petty assisted on guitar and backing vocals---previously recorded by Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers)
2. "Gimme Back My Bullets" (written by Gary Rossington and Ronnie Van Zant; Nils Lofgren assisted on guitar and Garry Tallent assisted on bass ---previously recorded by Lynyrd Skynyrd)
3. "Nothing Compares 2 U" (written by Prince; Prince assisted on piano ---previously recorded by The Family).
4. "Your Bright Baby Blues" (written by Jackson Browne; Browne assisted on backing vocals---previously recorded by Jackson Browne)
5. "Two Faces" (written by Bruce Springsteen; Springsteen assisted on guitar ---previously unreleased song).
6. "Work To Do" (written by O'Kelly, Ronald and Rudolph Isley ---previously recorded by The Isley Brothers).
7. "Mansion On The Hill" (written by Bruce Springsteen; Emmylou Harris assisted on backing vocals and Danny Federici assisted on accordion- ---previously recorded by Bruce Springsteen)
8. "Johnny Bye-Bye" (written by Chuck Berry and Bruce Springsteen; Springsteen assisted on guitar, Max Weinberg assisted on drums ---previously unreleased song about the murder of John Lennon incorporating lyrics from Chuck Berry's "Bye Bye Johnny").
9. "America" (written by Sammy Johns---previously recorded by both Johns in 1975 and Waylon Jennings in 1984 - Elvis' version was based more on Jennings', which updated some lyrics and added a full-band arrangement).
10. "Way Back Home" (written by Johnny Bristol, Wilton Felder and Gladys Knight; Clarence Clemons assisted on saxophone and Patti Scialfa assisted on backing vocals---previously recorded by Jr. Walker & The All Stars).
11. "Fire" (written by Bruce Springsteen; Springsteen assisted on backing vocals ---previously unreleased song).
12. "Bring Him Home" (written by Alain Boublil, Herbert Kretzmer and Claude-Michel Schönberg---previously recorded by Colm Wilkinson in the



Original London Cast of *Les Misérables*).

13. "Never Too Old" (written by John Mellencamp; Mellencamp assisted on backing vocals ---previously unreleased song).

14. "The Harder They Come" (written by Jimmy Cliff ---previously recorded by Jimmy Cliff).

15. "American Tune" (written by Paul Simon ---previously recorded by Paul Simon).

16. "Follow That Dream" (written by Ben Weisman and Fred Wise; additional lyrics and arrangement by Elvis Presley and Bruce Springsteen; Springsteen assisted on guitar and backing vocals, Roy Bittan and Danny Federici assisted on keyboards and accordion ---previously recorded by Elvis Presley).

The album was immensely successful, spawning several hit singles, much radio play across the dial and initiating a whole new wave of "Presleymania". Elvis even made his first set of music videos for the MTV generation. (For the videos, photo shoots and other public appearances, Elvis had forsaken the onstage jumpsuits of the seventies and replaced them with brightly-colored shirts, pants and sports coats, not unlike many of his fifties-era clothes. The extravagant jewelry of the seventies, however, remained on his fingers and around his neck).

The album's release was followed by an equally successful summer stadium concert tour of the U.S. and, beginning in the early fall of '87, Elvis Presley's first-ever world tour. (The London show featured a particularly moving version of "Johnny Bye-Bye" with all three surviving ex-Beatles joining Elvis' band.) Everywhere he went, Presley was hailed once again as the great American artist he was and is.

Bruce Springsteen, of course, was a surprise guest during encores on several nights, offering backing guitar and vocals on "Fire" and "Follow That Dream". (He even showed up one night sporting the same Elvis-influenced gold tux that he had worn earlier in the year to induct Roy Orbison into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.) Elvis usually introduced the man who became both his co-producer and his friend with a sly wink and a grin, saying "Ladies and gentlemen....the man who was born to run things in the studio...your Boss and mine....Mr. Bruce Springsteen."

In turn, Bruce consistently ended those guest appearances on Elvis' stage by quickly shaking Presley's hand and shouting into the microphone "Long live Elvis!" before leaving. It was an affectionately humorous jab at the popular notion of Elvis as "The King", a nickname Presley hated at least as much as Springsteen disliked "The Boss". At the same time, however, it succinctly expressed the joy that all in attendance felt over the fact that such a beloved artist was indeed still alive, healthy and productive again. Finally, it was also a sincerely fervent wish that this reality would remain so for many years to come. Thanks to a chance backstage meeting with one of his biggest fans a decade before, Elvis Presley was now in a much better position to make that wish come true.

[Special thanks to Henry Klingeman, whose spark started this fire.]



Elvis Presley Automobile Museum