

*R. Serge*  
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**PLASKETES**



*True*  
**DISBELIEVERS**

**THE** *Elvis* **CONTAGION**

*True  
Disbelievers*



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R. Serge Denisoff  
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*True  
Disbelievers*  
THE ELVIS CONTAGION

 Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1995 by Transaction Publishers

Published 2017 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 94-39013

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Denisoff, R. Serge.

True disbelievers : the Elvis contagion / R. Serge Denisoff, George Plasketes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 1-56000-186-0

1. Presley, Elvis, 1935-1977—Death and burial. 2. Presley, Elvis, 1935-1977—Influence. 3. Music fans—United States. I. Plasketes, George. II. Title.

ML420.P96D46 1995

782.42166'.092—dc20

94-39013

CIP

MN

ISBN 13:978-1-56000-186-7 (hbk)

To Jimmy Ellis  
What a long, strange trip it's been.  
RSD

To Julie Grace  
And it shook me and I'm still shaking now.  
GP



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## Foreword

Even before a body was entombed at a Forest Hills mausoleum, the rumors began. Some mourners at Graceland, fighting the August heat and humidity, started to whisper, “Elvis is alive.” The body in the coffin was a look-alike or a wax figure. The tom-toms of Elfandom took sides. Elfans accepted the medical examiner’s verdict. The disbelievers touted, based on fact or wishful thinking, nonsense. It was a hoax. The seeds of discontent were planted.

The Memphis authorities only watered the plants. Following Martin Luther King’s horrific killing, they should have known better. The Presley investigation was totally mishandled. As in the Dallas Kennedy assassination, the rush to judgment raised more questions than answers.

Geraldo Rivera “exposed” the judgment in a “20/20” program. Elvis, the show proclaimed, had died of a drug overdose, not heart failure. Gail Brewer-Giorgio’s short-lived *Orion* fueled the wax dummy theory. Steven Chanzas provided the body substitute model. Outside of a handful of supermarket tabloids, the entire issue was hardly front-page news.

In 1988, Louise Welling’s Kalamazoo sighting made Elvis a topic for Johnny Carson and the August *New York Times*. The rag mags, especially *Weekly World News*, had a field day. Giorgio’s *Is Elvis Alive?* paperback sold over a million copies. This book and its media coverage brought in converts. The momentum continued. Highly rated syndicated television specials aired.

Yearly the tabloids and disbelievers predict Elvis will return. Stay tuned!



## Acknowledgments

Researching *Inside MTV* was a horrific experience, having to go through a maze of secretaries, executive assistants, and harried interviewees. “Risky Business” was a delightful respite in lotusland. These folks are cooperative.

This project began with the input of a resident of Kalamazoo in April, 1990. The project was so bizarre, it was seductive, (little did we know). People in the so-called entertainment industry are comfortable with the media. Elfans and the disbelievers are another matter. Their world view is Elvis correctness. Elfans view probes inquiring into the superstar’s death as troublemakers. The disbelievers are basically secretive, at least some of them.

To unravel the Elvis scam took some time, at least two years longer than anticipated. Many people helped. Some do not want to be recognized. Valerie Gerkens and Pat Kane helped with the typing, even though the manuscripts were targeted to *Popular Music and Society*. Vicki Harris proved invaluable, processing and transcribing hours of tape. She was the one who found the 1988 Elvis tape to be questionable. The controversial Mary Smiley made much of this work possible. She had access to people who were totally uncooperative with media. The “evil witch” of Toledo landed outstanding interviews with Monte Wayne Nicholson, Liz Prince, Sandy Carlisle, and others. While we don’t agree with some of Mary’s views, she was a total asset to the book.

Ursula Denisoff was very helpful in talking to Major Bill Smith for five hours—more than the average mortal could endure. Bill Schurk of the Audio Center at Bowling Green State University library provided a considerable amount of material. A special thanks to Christine Ferreira. We sincerely thank all of these folks.

Penetrating the Elvis underground is no small task. MTV’s secretive-ness pales in comparison. (An indicator should have been Louise Welling’s cancellation of an interview following a three-hour drive to the state of Michigan.) Still, we plowed on despite considerable resis-

tance. Most of the interviewees remained “off the record,” meaning we could not use their names. They proved to be leads to be verified elsewhere. The “on-the-record” folks were helpful in varying degrees. We thank those listed here: Phil Aitcheson, Ed Annen, Gene Arthur, Edie Bippus, Sandy Carlisle, Ron L. Collamore, Luc Dionne, Pat Elliott, Jimmy Ellis (a.k.a. Orion), R. F. Ellis, Gail Brewer-Giorgio, John Grimes, Tina Grimes, Tom Haroldson, Jim Highley, Bonnie Kajkowski, Ray Kajkowski, Kate McNeil, Don Moran, Todd Morgan, Alenna Nash, Monte Wayne Nicholson, Sybil Presley, Elizabeth Prince, Roberta Searle (by phone and mail), Shelby Singleton, Mitch Slaton, Mary Smiley, Carole Taylor Smith, Major Bill Smith, Gene Smith, Larry Stidom, and L. H. Williams.

February 1994

# 1

## The Elvis Underground Network: True Believers or Voices in the Wilderness?

*"[T]hey also made a series of desperate attempts to erase their rankling dissonance by making prediction after prediction in the hope one would come true, as they conducted a vain search for guidance from the Guardians."*

—Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails*

*"'Things which are not' are mightier than 'things that are.'"*

—I Corinthians 1:23

*"A dead person is vulnerable in ways a living person is not."*

—Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis*

"I'm just rather amused that you believe that Elvis is still alive," said Oprah Winfrey. Gail Brewer-Giorgio politely answered she was merely a messenger exposing a musical scandal. Her communicative role had little to do with the journalistic "five Ws"—who, what, where, when, and why—or the value-free posture advocated by social scientists. The intellectual guru of the Elvis Lives network and its followers, known as "Gatheringites," put forth her case legitimately, refuting the findings of the Memphis power structure. Elvis did not die of a standard heart attack, as the medical examiner would stubbornly insist, stated Brewer-Giorgio in equally unwavering terms.

Brewer-Giorgio raised many questions left unanswered, which, if nothing else, provided digestible fast food for thought and placed an asterisk by Elvis's death in the minds of many. Oprah, appearing puzzled and totally unprepared, made light of the assertions. The popular host was aided by a disappointed studio audience whose expectations for kinky conversation had been dashed. Instead, the 20 May 1988 broad-

cast of the show featured the author of *The Most Incredible Elvis Presley Story Ever Told!* and *Is Elvis Alive?* lumped together with an array of “social deviants.”

Whether viewed as socially deviant or acceptable, the legion of “the faithful” who refuse to accept or admit that Elvis Presley died 16 August 1977 have been one of the irresistible forces behind the ever-expanding, elusive, and enduring Elvis myth during the past fifteen years. An Elvis Lives network of fervent believers and activity that includes a melange of sightings, conspiracy theories, and mass media coverage has evolved from the underground grass-roots level to a widespread phenomenon with social, religious, commercial, and ideological underpinnings. “Elvis’ disappearing body is like a flashing event at the edge of the black hole that is America today,” assert the authors of *Panic Encyclopedia*, a postmodern inquiry into cynical commodity.

The devotion and dynamic at the core of this cultural phenomenon provide a contemporary case that embodies numerous ideas about communication and sociological models and perspectives. Among the more obvious communication concepts evident in the Elvis underground are its activities as gatekeepers and agenda setting. As one of the central “doctrines” of the network, Brewer-Giorgio’s *Is Elvis Alive?* offers a series of conclusions, most of which fall into what sociologist Egon Bittner calls a “utopian mentality,” or in Leon Festinger’s vocabulary, “cognitive dissonance.” The premise of each of these perspectives, in simplest terms, suggests that believers have a point of view and do not want to be confused with opposing information. Contradictory facts or evidence, according to this view, are merely obstacles in the way of their “truth.” In the process, “isolated ideology” emerges, which, in the case of the Gatheringites, includes deification of the leader and consumerism.

The zeal displayed by the followers of the Elvis Lives crusade is also consistent with Eric Hoffer’s characterization of “true believers.” The course and consequences of the group are also relevant to Festinger’s studies on “prophecy failed.”

### **The Messengers: Gatekeepers, Guardians, Officials**

Eric Hoffer writes that “a movement is pioneered by [people] of words, materialized by fanatics, and consolidated by [people] of action.” This progression, a variation of news setting defined clearly, emerges when

tracing how the rumor, "Elvis is alive," has been cultivated from a popular folk story into the mainstream mass mediated network as a continuing cultural event.

Words are an essential instrument for preparing the ground for fanaticism and molding true believers for an active participation. Organizations and individuals such as author Gail Brewer-Giorgio, Major Bill Smith, and Steve Chanzas, among others, represent "people of words" for the Gatheringites and others. A sociologist refers to such leaders of a crusade as "officials," while Professor Leon Festinger uses "guardians" to describe those who guide and instruct. They not only prepare Elvis Alive images and information, but control, expand, interpret, and organize various messages that flow through numerous channels to fans and others in the audience.

As media spokespersons they structure and tie together the wealth of information regarding Elvis's life and death. In the process of selective perception, persuasion becomes a key technique. "Propaganda" penetrates only into those minds that are already open, and rather than instill opinion, it articulates and justifies opinions already present in the minds of its recipients. Gifted propagandists fashion messages that "bring to a boil ideas and passions already simmering in the minds of its hearers, and echoes their innermost feelings."

These Elvis Lives advocates have been effective, not only as persuasive Presley propagandists whose words both converted and reaffirmed the faith of listeners, but as Elvis entrepreneurs who recognize an audience of consumers and exploit the adulation. A person's preoccupation may become his or her occupation. What begins as an amateur interest may become a full-time job or devotion. That individual becomes a "professional discoverer," looking to broaden or generalize that interest to new situations. When a crusade has produced a large or active organization devoted to its cause, the "officials" of the organization are even more likely than individual crusaders to look to expand the horizons.

Irving Louis Horowitz's observations on the "entrepreneurial" and commercial nature of the gatekeeping process also prove insightful. He writes, "Access seems to boil down to proprietary considerations, strategic concerns of privacy, and a general premise that knowledge is a commodity that can be bought and sold and not just a natural resource to be captured in raw form."

The words and subsequent actions and consolidation of the Elvis Lives network originated with wishful word-of-mouth whispers at the time of his “alleged” death in 1977. In 1979, the same year the ABC news magazine “20/20” broadcast its Geraldo Rivera investigation, “The Elvis Cover-up” (13 September), Gail Brewer-Giorgio published *Orion*, a novel inspired by *The Passover Plot*. The premise asserts that a famous rock star escapes the chains of fame and fortune by faking his own death.

1988 marked the year “Elvis is alive” emerged from underground whispers to mainstream shouts. Major Bill Smith started the campaign with *Memphis Mystery* in 1987. The retired military man and record producer appeared on numerous talk shows and in the tabloid pages. Brewer-Giorgio was the chief catalyst for the cultural agenda triggering a chain reaction of activities and media coverage.

Brewer-Giorgio’s first national television exposure occurred 22 April 1988, on CNN’s “Larry King Live” show, where she hyped her Legend book, *The Most Incredible Elvis Presley Story Ever Told!* This was a week after syndicated columnist Bob Green picked up on the story after the rag mag *Weekly World News* coverage appeared in the supermarket checkout lanes. Brewer-Giorgio’s *The Most Incredible Elvis Presley Story Ever Told!*, in the hands of Tudor Publishing, was transformed into *Is Elvis Alive?*

Brewer-Giorgio’s book, *Is Elvis Alive?*, a self-described “elongated newspaper article” with documentation and a sixty-minute audio tape, does not declare that Elvis lives, but poses provocative questions surrounding the official accounts of the King’s demise. The book, which spawned a sequel, *The Elvis Files* (1990), tantalized suspicious and inquiring minds on its way to the number eight spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

While woman-of-words Brewer-Giorgio established herself at once as an official guardian, gatekeeper, and leader of the Elvis Lives network, Louise Welling may have been the “mother of sightings.” It was Welling’s “Elvis encounters” in the fall of 1987 that appeared to initiate the wave of UFO-like sightings that swept across the country in 1988. Welling claims she saw Elvis in Felpausch’s Grocery in Vicksburg, Michigan, and two weeks later ran into him at a Kalamazoo Burger King. When word spread about the sightings, signs proclaiming “Elvis Rents His Movies Here,” “Elvis Tans Here,” “Elvis Slept Here,” “Elvis Shops Here,” and “Elvis Worked Here” sprang up outside the city’s business establishments. This isolated incident burst into a national occurrence

as countless other people from coast to coast caught glimpses of Elvis at supermarkets, laundromats, bars, hotels, secluded cabins, crowded street corners, fast food restaurants, and a carnival in Denton, Texas, where someone spotted Elvis on the parachute ride.

Interest ran rampant. On 4 August a four-person team left Concord, California to locate Elvis. According to mission member Brett Howard, the search team spoke to 100 people in seven states—California, Arizona, Hawaii, South Dakota, Michigan, Alabama, and Tennessee—“who genuinely believe they saw Elvis and didn’t know who to call.”

Many apparently contacted Brewer-Giorgio. The movement “guardian” reportedly received countless phone calls and hundreds of letters from believers who claimed to have seen or talked with Elvis. Mojo Nixon and Skid Roper, the duo whose novelty songs, “Elvis is Everywhere” (1987) and “239-KING” (1989) were underground hits, responded with a 1-900-King hot line with recorded Elvis sighting updates. With the unrestrained gimmickry engulfing the sightings, it was surprising no one marketed a “Missing Elvis” or “Have you seen this man?” image on the side of a milk carton. The extensive activity prompted *Spin* staffer Jim Greer to include Elvis’s omnipresence on his “Ten Best” of the decade, with the comment, “Elvis made more personal appearances than any dead person since the Virgin Mary.”

The media coverage, both print and broadcast, was as widespread as the sightings themselves. Perspectives ranged from those as mainstream as Johnny Carson’s “Tonight Show” monologues and *Newsweek* and *New York Times* columns, to the tabloid fringe of the *National Enquirer*, *Sun*, *Globe*, *Star*, and the like. When the *Weekly World News* asked for its readers’ “I saw Elvis” stories, more than 450 letters poured in, placing Elvis in forty states.

Radio stations offered huge monetary “rewards” for anyone who could bring Elvis into the station. In June, when WEBF in Westport, Connecticut offered \$1 million, the station reportedly received 500 calls weekly for nearly a month. WKRC in Cincinnati, Ohio, KKEX in Portland, Oregon, WDAF in Kansas City, Missouri, and WTVN in Columbus, Ohio raised the offer to \$2 million. Nashville’s WWHY topped out at \$100 million for anyone who could deliver Elvis by midnight, 16 August, the anniversary of his death.

Authors, die-hard advocates, sighters, the Memphis mafia, and exploiters paraded through television’s talk show circuit for “wanted dead

or alive” discussions centering on theories and explanations ranging from cancer, murder, suicide, and drug overdose, to hoax, cover-up, and the federal government’s witness relocation program.

The overwhelming response seemed to indicate that an audience of true believers was receiving the messages, and whether or not Elvis was alive, the Elvis underground had established itself as an active social network. Following Brewer-Giorgio’s appearance on Fox TV’s “The Late Show” on 6 August 1988, a phone poll revealed that a majority of the 30,000 callers sampled believed Elvis is alive.

Although the numbers diminished significantly by 1991, there remained evidence that the Elvis Lives minority was established and its activities were ongoing. In a random sample of 1,000 adults, a *Time/CNN* poll found that 16 percent believed that “it’s possible Elvis *might* be alive.” A CBS-TV survey halved the number to 7 percent the same year.

### Historical, Religious, and Mythical Intersections

There are numerous historical and contemporary parallels that connect with the Elvis underground. Gatheringites and Elfans (Elvis fans) are similar in their commitment and character to the Millerite movement of the mid-nineteenth century. The groups meet the conditions set forth in Festinger’s cognitive dissonance scheme. Just as a large number of Millerites were convinced the world would end in 1843, there has been a significant number of faithful fans who believe Elvis has been alive for the past sixteen years. In both cases, “second coming” expectations provided clear implications for action, which followers engaged in. At a minimum, it involved spreading the belief and enduring the hostilities, skepticism, and scoffing of nonbelievers. To extremists, involvement meant neglecting one’s personal and “worldly affairs” in order to devote time, energy, resources, and in many cases, wealth, to the cause.

Many Millerites deposed themselves of almost all their belongings, worldly possessions, and money, rationalizing that those material things were unimportant because the world was going to end as predicted. The Gatheringites of the Elvis Lives network are similarly committed to their cause. They have prepared themselves, and others, for the time when circumstances will allow for the King’s return. Reuniting with Elvis is both a preoccupation and occupation for those devoted to the cause.

There are other religion-oriented connections that can be made with the Elvis underground. Jim Greer's comment about Elvis competing with the Virgin Mary for number of appearances by a dead person may not be as flippant as it appears when he wrote it in *Spin*. For centuries, people have flocked to the places where Mary is said to have appeared. Astonished worshipers return with miraculous accounts of weeping statues, peasant girls praying the rosary with the visiting Virgin, claims of the sun dancing and shooting out rainbows, plus instant healing of virtually every ailment, from backaches to cancer. "Even if only one in ten is authentic, the last 150 years have had the most apparitions in history," says Mark Miravalle, a Mariologist at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio.

There are obvious Presley parallels in the Marian movement. The best-known apparition sites—Guadeloupe, Lourdes, Fatima, and Medjugorje—are to Marians what Kalamazoo, Michigan has become to Elfans. Ironically, the pace of alleged Mary sightings has increased sharply during the late 1970s and through the 1980s, a period that coincides with the wave of Elvis sightings. Advocates claim there have never been so many widespread unusual sightings and occurrences involving Mary as have been reported during the past twenty years.

The events have spawned a Virgin Mary network of true believers and worshipers. Like the Elvis underground, the Marians have established an "organization" that includes dozens of prayer groups, seminars, and offices that spread the word of Mary's appearances and her messages. Typical is the two-year-old Marian Center in Delray Beach, Florida, where a staff of four is planning books on Mary in four different languages—English, Chinese, Russian, and Portuguese. Equally typical of the movement's true believer is the center's director, Don Ralph. Ralph is a car dealer who is among the 15-million plus visitors to Medjugorje, where six young people say Mary has appeared to them daily for the past eleven years. Like the Elfan who clings to one of Elvis's sweat-stained scarves, Ralph's Mary relic is a rosary, which he claims changed from silver to gold during one of his visits. In addition to the annual pilgrimages to sacred sites and testimonies of miracle and wonder, other dimensions of the Marian movement's strong current of activity and worship—such as souvenir statuettes, shrines, festivals, and gatherings—also resemble prominent features of the Elvis underground.

In April in southern Florida, a particularly popular location for Marian interest, thousands travel to a parish in Palm Beach County to venerate a crowned, jeweled statue of Our Lady of Fatima, built to resemble the figure children in Portugal reportedly saw in 1917. In September there is an annual Festival of Our Lady of Charity, which Cuban Catholics celebrate with a Mary statue at a local park. In Lubbock, Texas, the annual Festival of the Assumption attracts an average of 12,000 followers. In 1988, many in the crowd said they saw the faces of Jesus and Mary in the clouds. Joseph Januszkiewicz of Marlboro Township, New Jersey began seeing the Virgin Mary in the blue spruce trees in his back yard in 1990. When the news of the “appearance” spread through the Marian network, thousands of pilgrims traveled to the sacred sighting location.

Such Virgin visitations have become as common as Elvisitations at Burger Kings. Whether Guadeloupe or Graceland, Mary in the clouds or Elvis atop a Ferris Wheel at a carnival, the experiences, blind devotion, and activities of the true disbelievers of the Elvis underground and the Marians weave similar patterns.

The enduring cultural fascination with the Kennedy assassination represents another striking parallel with the Elvis underground. Here the linkage is more on a mythical, as well as commercial level, than a purely religious one. The post-mortem obsessions with Elvis and JFK both illustrate, among other things, the American tradition of twisting profit from any historic moment, no matter how tragic or perverse. In August, 1977, someone asked Elvis’s irrepensible manager, Colonel Tom Parker, what he was going to do now that Elvis was dead. “I guess I’ll just keep right on managing him,” replied Parker, not suggesting his client was still alive. Sixteen years and millions of dollars later, the Colonel’s comment still rings true as Elvis Presley Enterprises represents a commercial kingdom rivaled by few in the corporate or entertainment industries. While Walt Disney’s magical marketing may rival, if not exceed, Elvis’s sprawl, not even the recently crowned king and queen of pop—Michael Jackson and Madonna—have been able to quite reach the Presley tax bracket, which also lies beyond Trumpian proportions.

Though it, too, may not quite match the degree of Elvis’s excess, there is a well-established and enduring Kennedy cottage industry, a predecessor to the Elvis movement by fourteen years. Like the Elvis following, the JFK foundation is largely based upon a charismatic indi-

vidual, fervent fans, larger-than-life mythology, and a fatal and defining historical moment.

The commercial groundwork was laid one day after the Kennedy assassination in November, 1963, when Time-Life Incorporated bought the Zapruder eight-millimeter film of the tragic Dallas motorcade for \$150,000. That was only the beginning. In the thirty years to follow, the flow of activity has grown to encompass more than 2,000 book titles, a half-dozen newsletters (such as *The Grassy Knoll Gazette*), several computer networks, made-for-television movies, feature films ranging from *Executive Action* to Oliver Stone's *JFK*, and widespread ritual commemoration of the assassination every November. The JFK movement is congregation plus market, its core of consumers largely driven by fascination, doubt, conspiracy theories, and similar revisionist history intentions and set of "What happened?" questions similar to those that haunt and obsess the Elvis Lives faithful.

A survey of JFK-related popular periodical articles and media coverage over the years reveals an index with themes that are easily interchangeable with Elvis. A sampling of the list includes such "crossover" titles as, "The Entangled Kennedy Myths," "World of Mirrors," "Why We Still Don't Believe It," "Why We Still Have To Know," "Why We Still Care," "Taking A Darker View," "The Second Coming of Jim Garrison," and "Twisted History." Many titles of articles that focus on alternative death and conspiracy theories appear more incredible than credible, suggesting a sensational tabloid tone rather than serious journalistic inquiry: "Witnesses to Evil," "Was Oswald A Spy?," "Did JFK Really Commit Suicide?," "Did the Mob Kill JFK?," and "X Men and JFK."

Within such a network, memorabilia and merchandising are also predictably prevalent. Just as the Marians have their rosaries and other religious relics, Elfans their scarves and anointed artifacts, Kennedy collectors, too, value their sacred souvenirs. Real-estate developer Anthony V. Pugliese III is a good, if not extreme, example. In 1991, Pugliese paid \$220,000 at an auction for the Colt .38 gun used by Jack Ruby to kill Lee Harvey Oswald. The Kennedy collector quickly evolved into an assassination entrepreneur, determined to capitalize on his investment. He has been shooting an estimated 5,000 bullets through Ruby's historic weapon into a barrel of water in order to prevent disfiguration. He then sets each bullet in a museum-quality frame, along with a certificate of authenticity, and sells them each for \$1,495. In 1992 Pugliese acquired a

new treasure—the bloody toe tag that marked Oswald’s corpse in the morgue. Although he has yet to develop a marketing strategy for the item, he reportedly has profitable plans for the “Seance of the Century,” which would no doubt unite Elvis and JFK, and feature other central characters such as Ruby and Oswald.

The market—and, perhaps, more importantly to individuals like Pugliese—the demand for assassination memorabilia is significant. In the current Kennedy network, Ruby’s gun and hat could command bids in the \$2 million range. By comparison, Elvis might be considered a bargain. At a recent auction in Atlanta, Georgia, a London antique dealer paid \$180,000 for a guitar Elvis used early in his career. Not only was the amount surprisingly, if not shockingly, lower than anyone expected, so was the relative lack of interest in the forty-nine-year-old, blonde-and-brown Martin D-18 guitar. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid of \$5 million. Following a steady countdown to \$1 million, the auctioneer finally told the crowd, “You set the market.” London gallery owner Dicky Wakefield started the bidding at \$10,000. After three more bids, the rock and roll relic was “going, going, and gone,” sold to Wakefield, who admitted he was prepared to pay \$500,000 for the guitar, but did not expect to get it for that. Likewise, the seller, Red Baron Antiques’ owner Bob Brown, expected the instrument to bring as much as \$1 million. “People told me I should have taken it to England to sell and they were right,” lamented the dealer.

Masterful merchandising manipulative marketeers like Pugliese and Graceland Enterprises have become commercial cornerstones that tend to characterize contemporary cults. Some argue that the core of the Kennedy dissenters, in particular, is defined by more than just exploitation and enterprise, or the fringe element. In contrast to Elfans and religious sects, it may be the disbelief rather than the belief that is central, if not crucial, to the JFK cult’s identity, ideology, and activities.

“But the [Kennedy] consumers...aren’t exactly Trekkies or Elvis-sighters,” writes Jolie Solomon in *Newsweek*, in an issue that commemorated the thirty-year anniversary of the Kennedy assassination with thirty-three pages of reports and features focusing on “The JFK Cover-Up: Not What You Think.” “This is more cottage than industry, a community of true disbelievers, hungry for every morsel that might give further clues about who shot JFK and help them understand what it all means,” she writes. “If you lop off the nut fringe, if you lop off the

merchandisers, [you have the people] who believe that our public system of government is endangered, and that John Kennedy's death is a symbol or metaphor for this great loss...of mastery of public government," says David Wrone, who teaches a course on the JFK assassination at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.

After thirty years, there are few, if any, signs of fragmentation or abandonment among the true disbelievers. On the contrary, there are many indications that the following and fascination is growing. For example, there is a six-month waiting list for students interested in enrolling in Wrone's course. More than 400 people attended the third annual Assassination Symposium on JFK held in Dallas every November. While not the tourist attraction or religious Mecca that Graceland is, the book depository in Dallas has become an increasingly popular landmark for tourists every year.

The Kennedy conspiracy network no doubt received considerable impetus from Oliver Stone's 1991 film, which earned more than \$200 million (not including video sales), making it the highest grossing assassination product ever. Perhaps just as important as the earnings are the exposure and dissemination of ideas. *JFK* is comparable to the Elvis underground's documentary presentations such as *The Elvis Files*. Only *JFK*'s 188 minutes convey more credibility, in part because of the director's established successes as a filmmaker and "status" as an important sociopolitical, cultural commentator and chronicler, as opposed to a misguided voice that is lost in the wilderness. Stone's docudrama is a tool of both affirmation and propaganda, reinforcing existing beliefs among the true disbelievers, as well as at the same time planting persuasive seeds of doubt among potential converts to the Kennedy cover-up cause.

Signs of increased interest and involvement are apparent in other forms of mass communication as well. Books have been particularly valued by true disbelievers, dating back to the late 1960s when Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* and Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest* became the first entries in the Kennedy collection. That vast library would not be complete without a copy of the Warren Report, which had been out of print since the 1970s until Barnes and Noble recently reissued a new edition of the commission's summary.

The significant number of book titles that are out of print and the avid group of disbelievers with a wide range of conspiratorial tastes, all searching for that missing piece of the puzzle, have contributed to a phenom-

enal increase in mail-order business. Andrew Winiarczyk, owner of the Last Hurrah Bookstore in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, saw his Kennedy assassination mailing list expand from 400 to 1,400.

The assassination authors offer further proof that the primary motivation for involvement in the Kennedy movement is not necessarily financial gain. On the contrary, many resemble Millerites or members of other sects who were willing to invest resources or make significant personal sacrifices in order to passionately pursue activities and involvement with a cause or group. David Lifton, author of *Best Evidence*, which argues that Kennedy's wounds were altered to destroy evidence, admits that one of the main reasons he never got married is because he was more committed to researching the Kennedy assassination. "There always came a time where the woman realized I was more interested in the president's body than in her body," says Lifton, fifty-three, only partly in jest.

The assassination fascination with JFK parallels the dead-or-alive debate over Elvis. In both cases, the "mysteries" are no closer to being solved than they were thirty years ago or sixteen years ago. While there has been sufficient evidence to discredit various sets of beliefs, true believers and disbelievers remain determined to unravel or uncover "the truth" and to change the endings to the stories. "But the idea persists in our hearts that this has not yet passed into the mists of history," says Winiarczyk. "We can still do something about it." The Gatherinites of the Elvis Lives network are similarly committed to their cause. They have prepared themselves, and others, for the time when circumstances will allow for the King's return.

Active believers of the Elvis underground embrace the "doctrine" disseminated by the network of entrepreneurial "false prophets," "officials," and "guardians" such as Major Bill Smith, Shelby Singleton, and Gail Brewer-Giorgio. In addition to the regular tabloid coverage, the Elvis Underground Press publishes and distributes its own newsletters, as *Elvis Lives*. Comparable to the Millerites' newspapers *The Midnight Cry* and *Sign of the Times*, or JFK newsletters and conspiracy correspondence, *Elvis Lives* represents a valuable vehicle for support, persuasion, education, and perpetuation of a movement and its set of beliefs.

The monthly publication, edited by Ron L. Collamore and Kate McNeil, documents the activities of the group and conveys their fervor, devotion, and expectations. The primitive journalistic style and design

falls somewhere along the high school newspaper, underground or garage, Kinko's axis. Usually around fifteen Xeroxed pages—most typed, some hand printed—the newsletter is an Elfanatic forum featuring letters, correspondence to Elvis, friends, fans, testimonies, deaths, illnesses, changes of address, poems, prayers, activities, schedules, article and photo reprints, signs, revelations, and many other personal pieces of the Presley prophecy puzzle. The content and correspondence reveals that many believe Elvis is among the subscribers/readers of the newsletter created on his behalf.

The tone of *Elvis Lives* is predominantly religious in nature, with strong currents of patriotism throughout. Spirituality saturates the pages. The sense of reassurance, guidance, and instruction in the writings in the newsletter is similar to that which Festinger describes in his prophecy failed case study of Mrs. Marian Keech and the messages, teachings, and promises she received from her “Guardians” in outer space.

During the summer months of 1992, several issues of *Elvis Lives* devoted considerable space to Renee Ruell of Southgate, Michigan who shared “messages from Elvis,” many of which were deciphered from signs and scripture, as well as “truths of the seven veils.” Ruell's revelations triggered a wave of worshipping correspondence, which resounded like “amens” on the pages of the following month's issues. Susan Nolf's response in the August newsletter was representative of the enthusiastic chord Ruell's messages had tapped into among the *Elvis Lives* true believers. Nolf writes:

I for one accept it joyfully.... But I know there are some who don't accept it and I understand your denial.... But after reading it over and over again, and each time I read it, new things come to light. I don't fully understand it all yet. But I believe if we, the true believers, show our faith and give our support to Elvis, we shall understand it all. It is a strong true message from Elvis. You can believe it or deny it. It doesn't make any difference, in the end the truth will endear. Elvis said he wishes to thank us for our long suffering, patience, faith, and most of all, our love.... Yes, August 16, 1977, Elvis walked away from his fame and fortune, he didn't do it to cause pain, suffering, he did what he had to do.... Renee's letter tells a story, it has a beginning, but no end, why no ending, because when Elvis returns, he will tell us the ending.

*Elvis Lives'* editor, Ron Collamore, “endorsed” Ruell's vision in the October, 1992, newsletter. “Had Renee been dealing with the real Elvis?” he wonders. “Speaking for myself, I've seen enough evidence to support Renee. I'm convinced. The answer is definitely yes.”

The following entry printed below Collamore's statement of support reveals further evidence of the zeal of those involved in the underground. The item states that the newsletter's associate editor, Kate McNeil, has moved from her Texas home to Michigan.

McNeil's actions might be viewed as part of the true believer's spiritual quest. Following the steady stream of Elvis information disseminated by Reull, McNeil decided to visit the Michigan messenger to "see if I could learn something about Elvis and the rumours." McNeil provides a written account of her trip in the August, 1992 *Elvis Lives*. Her travelogue, appropriately titled "The Odyssey," is worthy of an installment of "Unsolved Mysteries" or the Leonard Nimoy-hosted "In Search Of." The situations, characters, and settings are fitting for an off-beat road flick. They include UFO greetings, an eating place called The Final Curtain, a truck driver who is an Elvis impersonator, and a tour of the Mecca of Elvis sightings and stories, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

It is clear from McNeil's characterization that Reull has achieved "Guardian" status as a messenger in the movement to whom followers look for guidance. "We met with Renee for three days. The woman is Wisdom personified. I'm still trying to absorb everything she taught us. We also were in touch with Elvis." In addition, the unwavering faith in Elvis's second coming is apparent. McNeil writes about meeting a reporter who works for a national network in Evansville, Indiana. "We talked to the head of the station and paved the way for Elvis to 'come home' without problems. All he has to do is say when."

The fervor surrounding Elvis's return is not simply a reaction limited to Reull's writings. That belief is a cornerstone of the Elvis underground's convictions, which has been expressed in various ways in the *Elvis Lives* newsletter. In July, 1992, a photo reprint shows a young girl and an older woman, presumably her mother, standing in front of the Graceland gates where they have tied a yellow ribbon. The girl, identified as Laura Winterheimer, is holding a poster with a familiar true disbeliever message: "We will support you until you can come home! We love you!"

Such images, as well as much of the correspondence in the newsletter, suggest that a younger generation, in particular children, seem targeted for conversion by parents or elders. Children's letters frequently appear. "Hi, I know you are alive.... I love you more than my boyfriend.... Can you mail a scarf(sic)?" writes nine-year-old Victoria Martin. Others include Jennifer Rodrigues, a seven-year-old, who writes,

"I love you Elvis. I wish my name was Priscilla. . . . I with I was with you Elvis" and Rachel Murony, six years old, "I would like to meet you but it cost to (sic) much money to go to Graceland."

Like the Millerites, the deep-rooted convictions and the significant investment of time, energy, and resources on the part of the Gatheringites of the Elvis underground has made it difficult for followers to abandon their second-coming belief about Elvis. In both cults, the belief was specific enough that confirmation or disconfirmation would be clear. For the Millerites, the world would or would not end during the specified time period; for Gatheringites, Elvis is alive.

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Millerites displayed a resilience that was strange yet admirable. They endured two consecutive disconfirmations of their end-of-the-world prediction before completely abandoning the belief following a third disconfirmation late in 1844. By comparison, the sustenance of the Elvis underground as a contemporary social network must be considered rather remarkable. Its group of gatekeepers, guardians, and true disbelievers exhibit a steady flow of activity that has continued into the 1990s. Nearly seventeen years following Elvis's demise, they withstood continuous ridicule and evidence contradicting their belief. Although there has been some retreat within the ranks and a steady erosion of support, there are few signs that would indicate a total abandonment of their belief system that Elvis is alive and waiting to return when the time and conditions are right.

The cognitive dissonance continues to unite a segment of followers. According to a recent 1993 poll of 1,240 adults conducted by sociologists at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, almost one out of ten southerners—approximately 100, or 8 percent of the people surveyed—still believes Elvis is alive. The data was accompanied by the usual round of nonbeliever skepticism. "I think some of these folks were having fun with us. At least I hope so," said doubting UNC sociologist John Shelton Reed.

For every piece of evidence contradicting the "Elvis Alive" belief, the fervor of the true disbeliever surfaces to counter the disconfirmation. "Shocking" new revelations appeared in tabloid headlines, while leaders frequent the television talk show circuit and firmly stand by their convictions in the face of hostile hosts and doubting studio audiences. As recently as 8 March 1993, "The Montel Williams Show" featured "people obsessed with Elvis."

The fervor, convictions, and character of the true believers of the Elvis Alive cult might best be captured in a poem written by Elfan Midge Smith, of Evansville, Indiana, which appeared in the August, 1992, issue of the *Elvis Lives* newsletter:

We need him back, for our lives will never be complete  
With our precious hero absent from the driver's seat.  
There has been so much confusion in this world going on.  
It will never stop as long as he has to stay gone.  
All we want to do is to protect him from his pain  
And to feel our efforts are not all in vain.  
Although we are constantly persecuted for what we believe,  
The day our hero returns is the day that our happiness  
is retrieved.  
Dear one, please hear our cries, see through our tears,  
For we feel that part of our souls have been missing  
for the past fifteen years.

The enduring Elvis Alive network is a contemporary affirmation of Eric Hoffer's view that "Fanaticism is a miraculous instrument of resurrection."

## 2

### Memphis: Rock's Watergate

“Now, don’t fall asleep,” cautioned the twenty-one-year-old Miss Traffic Safety, Ginger Alden. “Okay, I won’t,” answered Elvis, uttering his last words. He retreated into the spacious bathroom—housing a private pharmacy—adjoining the master bedroom, reportedly carrying Frank Adams’s *Face of Jesus*, an examination of the shroud of Turin controversy. Some biographers, such as Albert Goldman, identified the book as Ian Wilson’s *Shroud of Turin*, published in 1978. The book was later identified as being much more worldly. *Sex and Psychic Energy* graphically illustrated sexual positioning and astrology. Ginger rolled over in the massive bed, slipping into sleep.

Waking at 2:00 P.M., Ginger found herself alone, the bathroom door closed. Knocking, she called out, “Elvis, darlin.” “So I opened the door,” she recalled, “and that was when I saw Elvis.” In a paid interview sold to the *National Enquirer*, she expanded, “His eyes were closed but his face was a purplish color and swollen-looking. His tongue was sticking out of his mouth and he’d bitten down on it. I raised one eyelid and the eyeball was blood red—no white at all—and just staring vacantly. I searched for signs of breathing, but there weren’t any.” Frightened by the sight of the fetal body on the thick red shag rug, she called wardrobesman Al Strada. Strada was the assigned attendant for the day.

Encountering the bathroom scene, Strada phoned downstairs, summoning Elvis’s chief of staff, Joe Esposito. He remembers, “I ran up there and went into the bathroom and I found Elvis on the floor there, and I tried to call the fire department and I called the doctor and I tried to revive him, waiting for the ambulance to get there.” Joe told Larry King, “He was dead for a while.” Memories fade, but with twelve people crammed into the bathroom, there are many other recollections.

As Joe was administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Strada, according to conventional wisdom, desperately phoned for medical help. Dr. Perry Holmes was called, but was unavailable. A message was then placed to Dr. George Nichopoulos, Elvis's private physician, who was five miles away at Doctor's Hospital. The fire department was then summoned, half an hour after the alleged "discovery."

The Memphis fire department dispatcher, at 2:33 P.M., radioed, "Unit Six, respond to 3764 Elvis Presley Boulevard. Party having difficulty breathing. Go to the front gate and to the front of the mansion." Paramedic Charlie Crosby, with Ulysses Jones, Jr. of Engine House 29, answered the call, arriving at Graceland to discover panic-driven chaos on the second floor. Jones told an interviewer what he found. "From his shoulders up," he said, "his skin was dark blue. Around his neck, which seemed fat and bloated, was a gold medallion. His sideburns were grey. I knelt down and checked the pulse. No flicker from the eyes. He was cold." Charlie Hodge, the "scarf man" and rhythm guitarist, related, "Rigor mortis has already set in. And they were convinced he'd been dead since about ten that morning." Charles Crosby, another paramedic, confirms, "It looked like he had been dead for at least an hour." Five men removed the body, loading it into the ambulance. The vehicle left Graceland at 2:48 in the afternoon carrying Joe Esposito, Charlie Hodge, Al Strada, Dick Grob, and "Dr. Nick."

What followed was a bizarre series of statements and events giving birth to the Memphis mystery or a "musical Watergate." Ulysses Jones was approached by a Presley attendant. "We think he's OD'd." Al Strada reportedly was the insider and offered to provide the details.

Dan Warlick, twenty-five, an investigator for the medical examiner's office, was handed a note, "EP, OD, DOA, BMH. The big E.P." He called Baptist Memorial. They confirmed the coded message. Warlick, Sam McCachren, a homicide detective, and Jerry Stauffer, from the district attorney's office, drove to the mansion. Warlick found two spent syringes and an empty black medical bag. The investigator was astonished at the impeccably clean, sanitized bathroom with no drugs, legal or illegal, present. Warlick was clearly suspicious. "There are so many unanswered questions about Elvis's death for which I must find answers," asserted an ailing Vernon Presley. Fans and the media shared his sentiment. Listening to background police scanners, some Memphis newspeople made note of the famous address. Many speculated Vernon Presley must have suffered another coronary.

The white and orange emergency ambulance sped toward Memphis Baptist Memorial Hospital, sometimes hitting speeds of eighty miles per hour. Dr. Nick, massaging Elvis's heart, kept repeating, "Come on, Presley, breathe. Breathe for me."

Dr. Nichopoulos ordered Crosby to violate fire department rules indicating that in a life-and-death instance the patient be taken to the nearest hospital. Methodist Hospital South was the logical choice. Instead, the doctor insisted upon Baptist Memorial, seven miles from the eighteen-room Presley estate. Dr. Nick prevailed. One interpretation is that Baptist Memorial was a safe haven for Presley as the actual cause of his five previous stays were misrepresented by the medical center.

The speeding vehicle radioed the hospital, "Have a white male, approximately forty under CPR, no response." At the destination the Harvey Team, a team of resuscitation specialists, was called over the building's loudspeakers, "Harvey Team, report to E.R." The message was repeated. The team was to assemble in Emergency Room One. The ambulance arrived at Baptist at 2:56 P.M. The body was carefully placed on a gurney and wheeled inside.

Maurice Elliott, Baptist's vice-president of public affairs, had the unpleasant chore of holding at bay the ever-growing number of frustrated media people. At 3:00 P.M. word of Elvis's demise was circulating throughout the hospital. "They were on to us because Elvis had come into the hospital in a fire department ambulance." Continuing, "We were in a tough situation—because we knew Elvis Presley was dead, but we also had an obligation to his family. So we kept telling reporters that he was in respiratory distress—and we were working with him," said Elliott. Joe Esposito was to make the announcement. As the two men entered the administrative library, which was to serve as a temporary briefing room, Esposito, in a quivering and shaky voice, pleaded, "I can't do it. You do it." When it seemed as if time had stopped, the hospital spokesman read that Elvis Presley was pronounced D.O.A.—dead on arrival—at 3:30 P.M., possibly from a heart attack. The findings of the autopsy would be made available at an 8:00 P.M. press conference. Elliott recalled for the *Los Angeles Times*, "To tell you the truth I'm not sure what all I said at the time." The media frenzy began.

Wire services buzzed. "My stories," soaps, were interrupted by network news bulletins. Broadcasters, even "beautiful music" stations, relinquished regular programming to Elvis records found in the music libraries. Deejays were dispatched in haste by P.D.s (program directors)

neglecting to keep copies in stock. Two of the networks led the nightly news with the latest from Memphis. CBS was roundly criticized for failing to recognize the magnitude of the somber events at Graceland and Baptist Memorial. Replying, executive director Burton Benjamin said, "If on my epitaph it reads: 'This is the man who did not lead with Elvis Presley,' I can live with that." Many "black rock" executives disagreed, pointing to unusually low overnight ratings and a marked slump in audience share.

At 8:00 P.M. Dr. Jerry Francisco, Shelby County medical examiner, and Dr. George Nichopoulos, bedecked with diamond rings and gold neck chains, held a press briefing in a small conference room. Only twelve reporters were allowed in. An equal number of hospital personnel attended. Francisco began, "The results of the autopsy are that the cause of death is cardiac arrhythmia due to undetermined heartbeat." Francisco continued, "There was severe cardiovascular disease present. He had a history of mild hypertension and some coronary artery disease. These two diseases may be responsible for cardiac arrhythmia, but the precise cause was not determined. Basically it was a natural death. The precise cause of death may never be discovered."

Baptist Memorial's Dr. Eric Muirhead, a thirty-eight-year veteran and chief pathologist, was taken aback by the rush to judgment. The head of the eight-man team of clinical pathologists felt the autopsy, at best, was inconclusive. "We were appalled that he made that announcement," said Muirhead. "There were eight doctors there who disagreed with him." The cardiac specialist on the team was leery about Francisco's announcement. Further toxicological findings were called for. After the tests were completed, Dr. George Lundberg would later say, "I was amazed and appalled at what happened in Memphis, by what Jerry Francisco said. Jerry was entitled to his opinion, but he was simply wrong." A reporter, aware of the "body guard book"—*Elvis: What Happened?*—shouted at Nichopoulos, Was Elvis a heavy abuser of drugs? The silver-haired physician countered, "If he was taking cocaine, I would have known about it." He conveniently overlooked prescription drugs. Dr. Francisco added there was "no indication of any drug abuse of any kind." Later toxicological findings from three laboratories would dispute the statement. "I have to speak the truth as well as I understand it. These are not political decisions." The drug theory "made a great story, captured a big audience.... The mundane will not sell, the sensational will," the medical

examiner claimed in 1991. In the packed conference room the "cover-up" expanded.

Half an hour after the commencement of the press briefing, Dr. Harold Sexton of the autopsy group carefully wrapped up specimens for analysis at the nearby Duckworth Laboratory, bypassing the medical examiner's facilities. The University of Tennessee Medical Center also received body samples. Both reported the presence of multiple depressant substances. To further verify the findings, Sexton sent additional, more complete samples to Bio-Science Laboratories in Van Nuys, California, considered by many one of the leading forensic units in the United States. The name attached to the material was "Esther Moore."

In the twilight hours the body was conveyed to the Memphis Funeral Home, three blocks away from Baptist Memorial at 1177 Union Street. At noon the next day, the heavily guarded iron gates sprung open as a large white Cadillac hearse made its way up the curving quarter-mile driveway. Gleaming in the sun, the copper casket was carried inside through a side door and was positioned in the living room. It would later be moved to the Graceland entrance for the three-hour public showing.

Albert Goldman, according to a "source," reported that when the coffin lid was raised, those present were "horrified by his appearance." Unidentified members of the Presley family and the remaining retinue found Elvis "frighteningly different" in the casket. The embalmers failed in restoring the body. "The fat face swollen with engorged blood had proven an insurmountable obstacle to the local morticians" wrote Goldman. Elvis appeared to have a swelled head. Another biographer noted, "There was too much makeup and hair spray, creating a sort of mask grotesque." Vernon, unsuccessfully, banned photographic equipment to avoid pictures of the distorted corpse.

The mediocre reconstruction of the body and the over abundance of cosmetology created a sense of unreality that was difficult to overlook. Hairdresser Larry Geller was called in to repair a sideburn that had come loose. Aide-de-camp Charlie Hodge disputes this account. "When I was trimming his sideburns why didn't one of them fall off?"

At 3:00 P.M. the mansion's Music Gates swung open. Thousands of sun-drenched mourners pressed forward. Cries of "Medic, Medic" were heard. A minority hurriedly filed past the open \$15,000 coffin under an ornate crystal chandelier in the foyer. A white linen spread protected the thick red carpet underneath. Rick Stanley, Elvis's stepbrother, said,