

**A**

**CHRONICLE**

**OF A**

**CULTURAL**

**OBSESSION**

**DEAD**

**ELVIS**

**GREIL MARCUS**

D E A D  
E L V I S

A Chronicle of a  
Cultural Obsession

Greil Marcus

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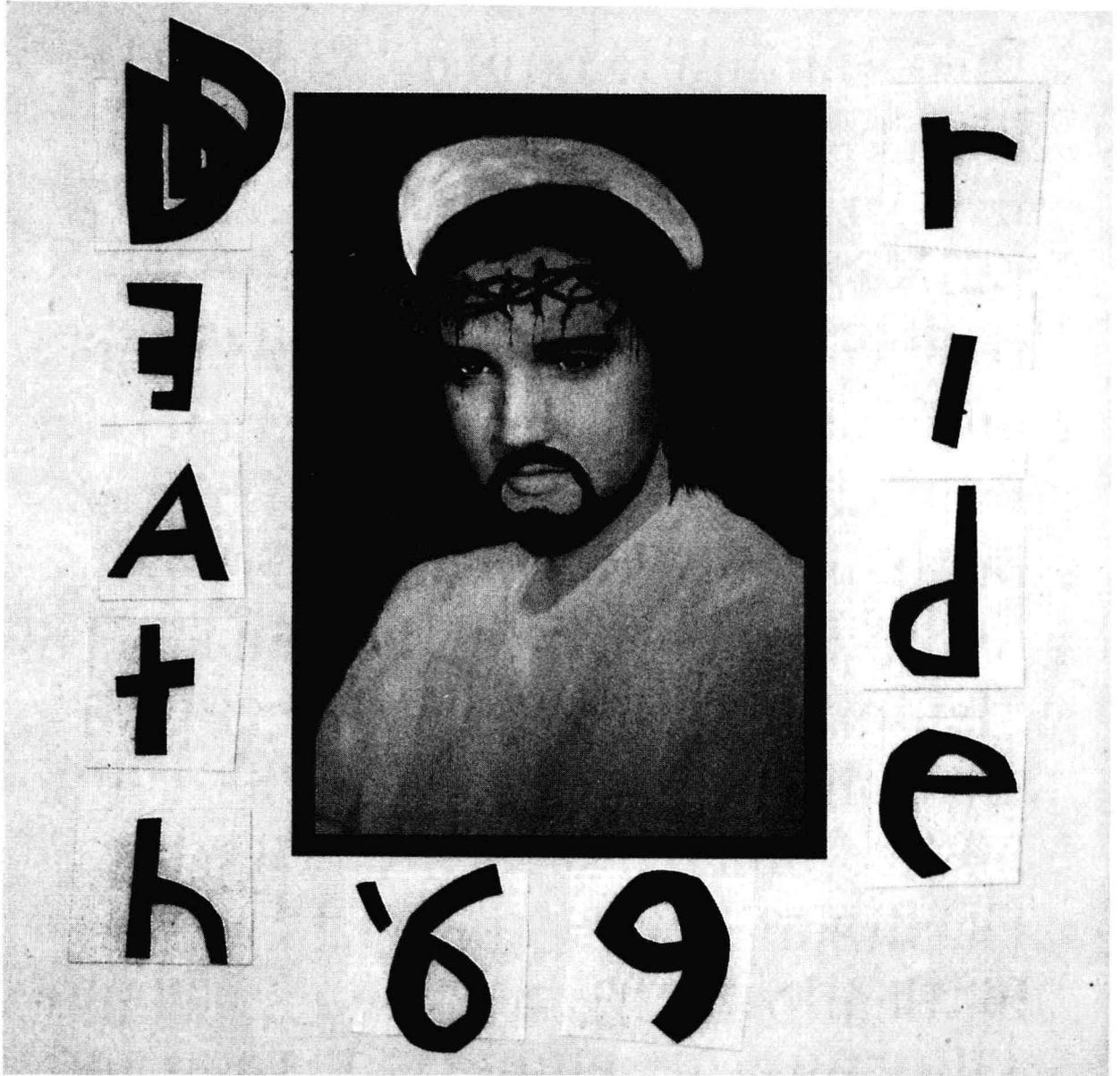
**for Dale and Steve Block**

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## INTRODUCTION

Elvis Presley's entry into public life came with such force his story was soon engraved into the cultural clichés that seemed to match it; the story became common coin because it already was. Birth in desperate rural poverty, a move to the city, a first record on a local label, unprecedented national and international fame, scandal, adulation; the transformation of a strange and threatening outsider into a respectable citizen who served his country without complaint, years spent dutifully making formulaic movies and unexciting music, marriage, fatherhood, a quiet

life behind the walls of his mansion; then a stunning return, loud and vibrant; and then a slow, seemingly irresistible decline: divorce, endless tours as lifeless as his old films, news replaced by rumors of terrible things, and finally early death. The dates are familiar: 8 January 1935 for his birth, in Tupelo, Mississippi; 1954, for his first record, on the Sun label in Memphis; 1956, for his first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*; 1968, for his comeback, on his own television special; 16 August 1977 for his death, at forty-two, at Graceland. The names are familiar: Vernon and Gladys Presley, his parents; Jesse Garon, the twin born dead shortly



Bar-min-ski (Bill Barminski), front sleeve of Death Ride '69 EP *Elvis Christ* (Little Sister), 1988.

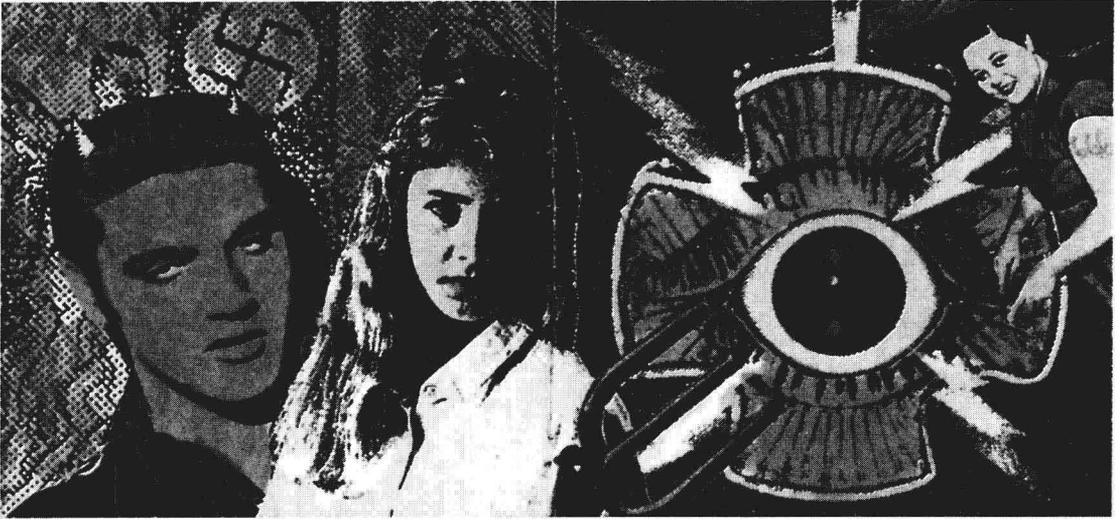
before Elvis, buried in a shoebox in an unmarked grave; Sam Phillips of Sun, who produced his first singles; Colonel Tom Parker, his manager from almost the beginning to well past the end; Priscilla Beaulieu, the teenager he met in Germany while in the Army, whom he married in 1967, the mother of his daughter, Lisa Marie, born in 1968, his sole heir. We know it all.

But as Charles Wolfe, professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, discovered in 1990 when he spoke to second and third graders at a mostly white, working-class public school in Jasper, Tennessee, there is another Elvis Presley, a fig-

ure made of echoes, not facts. “Do you know who Elvis Presley was?” Wolfe asked the children; though he found most of them confused as to whether the man was alive or dead, black or white, they did. “He was an old guy who was a king somewhere.” “He was a great big man and he invented rock ’n’ roll.” “He lives in a big house in Memphis and he only comes out at night.” “He’s this big black guy who invented the electric guitar.” “He was this guy who sang with his brothers Theodore and Simon” —a Chipmunk.

Between those Elvises are the Elvises I have followed since Elvis Presley’s death. The enormity of his

impact on culture, on millions of people, was never really clear when he was alive; it was mostly hidden. When he died, the event was a kind of explosion that went off silently, in minds and hearts; out of that explosion came many fragments, edging slowly into the light, taking shape, changing shape again and again as the years went on. No one, I think, could have predicted the ubiquity, the playfulness, the perversity, the terror, and the fun of this, of Elvis Presley's second life: a great, common conversation, sometimes, a conversation between specters and fans, made out of songs, art works, books, movies, dreams; sometimes more



Dave Abramson, collages from *Ahunka Lisa Marie* (Clambake Press), 1988.

than anything cultural noise, the glossolalia of money, advertisements, tabloid headlines, bestsellers, urban legends, nightclub japes. In either form it was—is—a story that needed no authoritative voice, no narrator, a story that flourishes precisely because it is free of any such thing, a story that told itself.

As a surprised, then amazed, then confused, finally entranced chronicler of this tale—in other words, simply someone who has paid attention to it—I am anything but its narrator. I have written sometimes as a critic, sometimes as a collector. Many voices speak in this book, often in images for which I've provided only captions and a context, often in streams of plain quotation, other people's words making cultural moments that need nothing from me. There is a good deal in this book I cannot explain. It's easy enough to understand a dead but evanescent Elvis Presley as a cultural symbol, but what if he—it—is nothing so lim-



Tony Fitzpatrick, *Memphis Tatoo King*, 1988.

ited, but a sort of cultural epistemology, a skeleton key to a lock we've yet to find? Certain questions occur again and again in these pages—in the conversation, in

the noise, I've listened in on. Right from the start (or, if you like, the end), people asked, did Elvis go to heaven, or did he go to hell? *Everybody* asked, especially people who believed in neither, but who were having a great time fooling with the notion—and then the conundrum

became a new language. As the story found its twists and turns, as it made a labyrinth, as it picked up speed, as it moved with the momentum of a flood in a mu-



seum, strange creatures appeared: Elvis Christ, Elvis Nixon, Elvis Hitler, Elvis *Mishima*, Elvis as godhead, Elvis inhabiting the bodies of serial killers, of saints, fiends. Each was a joke, of course; beneath each joke was bedrock, obsession, delight, fear. Even as Graceland Enterprises, Inc.,

the corporation Priscilla Presley formed to market the legacy, gained increasing legal control over the image of Elvis Presley, its meanings spun further and further out of control. They cannot be controlled, any more than, in the beginning, Elvis Presley's body could stop moving; the shade of Elvis Presley is now an anarchy of possibilities, a strain of freedom less clear, but no less suggestive, than the man ever was.

In this book, then, the reader will not find commentary on whether Elvis Presley is, in the official sense, "still alive," on the exact cause of his death, on Elvis impersonators. This is a book about what Elvis Presley

has been up to, in the last fourteen years: a small history of something much too big for one body, or one face. Elvis Presley made history; this is a book about how, when he died, many people found themselves caught up in the adventure of remaking his history, which is to say their own.

—GREIL MARCUS, BERKELEY,  
1 APRIL 1991