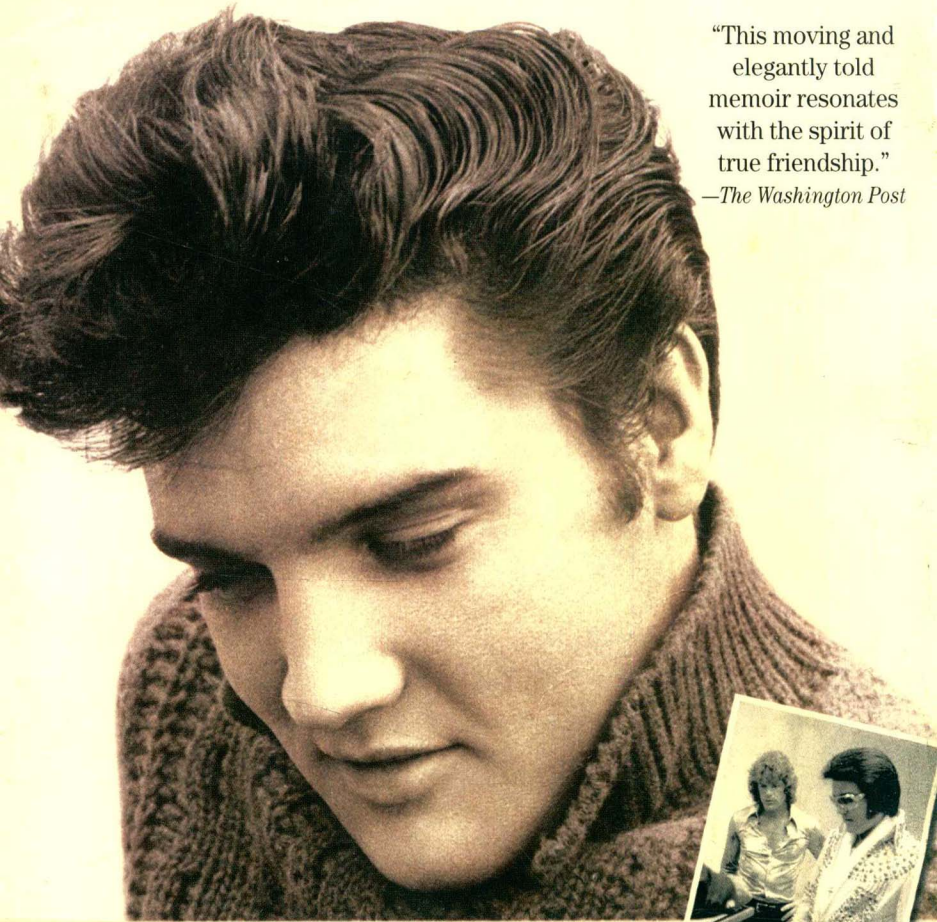


"This moving and elegantly told memoir resonates with the spirit of true friendship."  
—*The Washington Post*



# Me and a Guy Named ELVIS

MY LIFELONG FRIENDSHIP  
WITH ELVIS PRESLEY  
JERRY SCHILLING  
WITH CHUCK CRISAFULLI

FOREWORD BY PETER GURALNICK



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A GUY NAMED  
**ELVIS**

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## **Praise for *Me and a Guy Named Elvis***

"Schilling has the goods—where else can you read about the King giving karate lessons to Liza Minnelli in a hotel room while Chubby Checker and porn star Linda Lovelace looked on?"

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Thoroughly enjoyable. . . . Schilling's heartfelt narrative makes this more than just another piece of Elvis product."

—*Publishers Weekly*

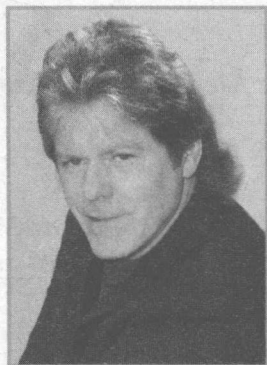
"Jerry has an insight . . . [The book] shows the human side of Elvis."

—*The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis)

"A nuanced account. . . . Schilling's memoir is of a man of considerable dignity and humility."

—*The New York Sun*





MICHAEL SIMON

Jerry Schilling has spent forty years in the entertainment industry working as an actor, a film editor, a producer, and a manager for such acts as the Beach Boys and Jerry Lee Lewis. His producer credits include nine documentaries on Elvis Presley, Time Warner's ten-hour series *The History of Rock 'n' Roll*, and A&E biographies of Brian Wilson and Sam Phillips. A former creative affairs director for Elvis Presley Enterprises, he lives in the West Hollywood Hills home that Elvis gave him.

Chuck Crisafulli is a veteran entertainment journalist and the author of several books, most recently *Go to Hell: A Heated History of the Underworld*.

*Dedicated to the one I love . . . Cindy*

## FOREWORD

. . .

BY

PETER GURALNICK

I don't have any trouble recalling my impressions of Jerry Schilling when we first met in 1989. He was hard at work on the set of the thirteen-episode *Young Elvis* television series that he was coproducing for ABC. This particular set was located at the Vapors, a club out by the Memphis airport, and I was interviewing Jerry for the first time for the biography of Elvis on which I had recently embarked. It turned out to be unlike any interview I had ever done—or any interview I have done since. Here we were in a room needing very little in the way of transformation to approximate the setting for one of Elvis's earliest public appearances. And here was Jerry, with a roomful of people (actors, camera operators, writers, researchers, technicians) hanging on his every word—unquestionably giving them his full attention but at the same time doing all he could to turn some of that attention to the importunate interviewer. He thought long and hard about every question I asked, his answers were complex, coherent, the furthest thing from glib, but as often as not they were interrupted by the need to excuse himself politely. "I'm sorry, Peter," he would say, "can you hold on a second," as he went off to attend to a problem on the set. It might be a matter of historic verisimilitude, it could be a question of dramatic motivation or the eruption of some minor conflict that needed to be addressed. Whatever it was, Jerry was determined to deal with it on the spot, to do all in his power to get it right. And when he returned to our perch at the edge of the action—the time elapsed might have been anywhere from five minutes to half an hour—he always picked up his answer just where he had left off.

That's the picture of Jerry that remains indelibly imprinted on my memory. As long as I've now known him, that's how I continue to see

him: thoughtful, gracious, quietly in charge; a born diplomat, but one who takes his mission far too seriously to be thought of as, simply, the most relaxed person in the room.

Maybe that's why it worried me a little when Jerry told me he was finally planning to write his own book. Not because I doubted that Jerry would work hard to tell his story, or because there was any question in my mind that he had a story to tell. From the friendship that had grown out of our initial interviews, I had come to know Jerry as a man with his own carefully thought-out insights and perspectives on everything from film, music, politics, and the music business to the vagaries of memory, history, and wishful historical thinking. No, what worried me about Jerry writing a book on a subject he knew so well, and one about which he had thought so long and so hard, was not that he wouldn't take it seriously enough but that he would take it *too* seriously, that it might place too much of a burden on him to confront hard truths not so much about others as about himself.

I shouldn't have worried. What Jerry has written in *Me and a Guy Named Elvis* is an account of one man's experience, a personal memoir that, while it places its narrator squarely in the midst of historic events, never claims credit for those events in the way that so many self-serving memoirs are inclined to do. It is a balanced treatment of a complex subject, the story of a lonely boy who struggles with the contradictions in his own life and the society in which he grows up. It's a Memphis story, a book about race and rock and roll told, to begin with, through the eyes of a child. Most of all, though, it's a story of friendship and growth, one that focuses on the demands and rewards of love, and, ultimately, the necessity of forging an independent identity of one's own.

At the center of it, of course, is the figure of Elvis Presley, whom Jerry met at twelve when the nineteen-year-old singer, with one record on the radio, welcomed him into a Sunday-afternoon touch-football game. There are any number of surprising behind-the-scenes glimpses of this Elvis, the off-stage Elvis whom Jerry would come to know over the next twenty-three years, an Elvis whom readers will certainly recognize from the celebrated public image but will rarely have seen in such relaxed and unposed settings. It is a nuanced portrait, sharply drawn, closely observed, but never presented with anything less than heartfelt feeling. There are illuminating insights into such frequently misunder-



stood figures as Vernon Presley and Colonel Parker, and telling individual portraits of each of the guys around Elvis, so often lumped together as a cartoon collective. What I think distinguishes the book most of all, though, is its emotional honesty, the generosity of spirit with which Jerry seeks to emulate his friend and mentor. Things are rarely all one way or another in Jerry's account, but at its heart is the simple declaration, "I think of Elvis every day." After reading this book, there can be no doubt of the truth of that statement.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wouldn't want to speak for Elvis Presley and tell you that I was his best friend. But I can tell you this: He was *my* best friend.

I met Elvis when I was just a boy and he was a teenager. I met him on one of the last weekends before he became "Elvis," when he was simply a truck driver who did some singing on the side.

I knew him for twenty-three years, and in those years I grew up with him, lived with him, worked for him, learned from him, laughed with him, and shared one amazing experience after another with him.

Elvis was the first rock-and-roll superstar. And he became one of the world's biggest movie stars. But I didn't know him as a star; I knew him as a friend. In writing this book my hope has been to present Elvis not as the larger-than-life figure known around the globe, but as, simply, a very real and quite remarkable human. That's important to me because as Elvis has become an icon and a figure of legend, I think an appreciation of his humanity has been lost. Viewing Elvis as some kind of rock-and-roll superhero doesn't do justice to his very human struggle, his talent, his life, or his legacy.

He was my friend, and this book is, above all, a story of friendship. The book is also a personal history, and, as such, it's a work of memory. Sifting through six decades' worth of memories has been no easy task, but wherever possible, efforts have been made to ensure that the "history" part of the personal history is accurate. My life's history is very much interwoven with Elvis's, and much of his life has been extensively documented. So, if it was possible to look up or double-check a who, what, when, or where, I've done it.

Documents don't often capture the more personal moments of life,

though, and that's where memories must be sorted out. In thinking back on my life and experiences, I've tried to balance the way I remember things now with the way I might have experienced them at the time. I've tried to be as honest as possible about how and why things happened, and have tried to resist the temptation to describe a past I might wish for rather than the one I experienced.

The places, people, and events of the book are real—as I remember them. No scenes have been invented, no characters made up, and the timeline of events reflects a real chronology. The dialogue people speak in these pages may not be a verbatim transcription, but always reflects the words I remember hearing. In just a couple of cases, when it wasn't possible to contact someone from my past, I've changed a name in deference to the sensitivity of the situation described.

People have been making up all kinds of stories about Elvis since his first record came out, and in the years since his death the stories have become so big that my friend's very real life has often been obscured, or ignored. In putting this book together, I've discovered again and again that, with Elvis, the truth is the best story of all.

ME AND  
A GUY NAMED ELVIS

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## IF I CAN DREAM

July 11, 1954 began as a hot, lazy Sunday, just another sticky summer day in North Memphis. And I was a scrawny twelve-year-old kid, living at the little brick duplex my father rented on Breedlove Street, looking for some way to fight off the boredom of one more stretch of sweltering afternoon.

My father worked long shifts at the Firestone factory, and that Sunday, his day off, he was sleeping in. My closest friend—the kid next door, Wayne Martin—was off somewhere on an outing with his family. It looked like I was going to be on my own for the day, so I decided to kill some time by wandering over to Guthrie Park.

The park was maybe a half-mile from my daddy's place, down Chelsea Avenue, an open field of scraggly grass and dusty patches laid out in front of an elementary school and a community center. Close to the street was a kiddie wading pool, and a little farther back was a playground, some basketball hoops, and a horseshoe pitch—where I'd learned to enjoy the satisfying clang of a shoe hitting the iron post.

As I arrived at the park, the heat of the day was broken by just a hint of breeze drifting over from the Mississippi River. There were a few moms watching their splashing toddlers at the wading pool, and a bunch of older kids out on the grass. I figured I'd walk around to the community center to see if anything half-interesting was going on inside. The sky was a hazy, summer gray, and I guess I was lost in a bit of haze of my own. It took me a moment to realize that my name was being called out from across the park.

"Jerry! Hey, Jerry. C'mere!"

It was one of the older kids out on the grass. I recognized him as a

local boy named Red West, one of the toughest guys I knew of in North Memphis. Red had been a ferocious All-Memphis football player at Humes High School, and he and his family lived over in a low-income housing project that had the very fitting name Hurt Village. Just knowing a guy was from Hurt gave him a kind of battlefield credibility around North Memphis. Kids in my neighborhood whispered stories about the rough gangs that lurked around Hurt, and how you'd be lucky to get out of there alive if you were ever foolish enough to walk through the projects alone at night.

I wasn't sure how Red knew my name, but I figured he might know my older brother, Billy Ray, who'd been a pretty strong football player at the private high school he'd attended across town. Maybe Red had heard that I was turning out to be a decent wide receiver on the team from my Catholic grade school, Holy Names. Football was the one thing I felt good at. My grades were lousy, I didn't have a lot of friends, but on the Holy Names football field I was having my first taste of personal success. It didn't really matter how Red knew me, though—I wasn't going to ignore the call. I started over to the group of older boys, trying to throw just a touch of Brando from *The Wild One* into my walk.

"Hi, Red," I said when I got to them, immediately hating the fact that my voice sounded so little, so young. So not Brando.

I didn't know the other guys, and I didn't pay too much attention to them. I assumed they were either from Hurt or Humes.

Red looked me over hard for a moment.

"Jerry, we're a player short of a six-man game here. You want to play ball?"

Of all the things I thought Red might ask me, I hadn't seen this one coming. A chance to play football with Red West and some older kids? Of course I was in.

"Sure, Red. I'll play."

"All right, then," he growled. "We got a game. Full blocking. Two-hand touch. Let's mark out a field."

Red and a couple of the guys walked off to figure out the out-of-bounds and goal lines. The other two players started warming up by throwing long passes to each other. I kept my eyes on Red, who wasn't a real big guy but a commanding figure anyway. I had a feeling that with him, even a touch football game was going to be played hard and rough.

With the field set, the guys regrouped.

"Our ball," said Red. "We'll take Jerry. The rest of y'all get back on some defense."

Three of the guys broke away and took positions down the field. I followed Red and another boy and we leaned together in a tight huddle behind our starting line of scrimmage. Red handed the ball to the other boy.

"What's the play, man?" Red asked him.

I looked to this guy who Red had just made our quarterback—really looked at him for the first time—and felt a jolt.

It was him.

There wasn't any one thing about this other guy that hit you right away. He was wearing plain work pants and a white T-shirt. He had blotches of acne on his face and neck. He was kind of on the skinny side. He certainly didn't look any tougher than Red West.

But he had a cool I'd never seen before in person. His hair was greased and swept up and back into some very impressive ducktails, the kind of look I wanted as soon as I could get away from the disapproving nuns at Holy Names. You had to put some work into hair like that, and you had to know that it marked you as a probable juvenile delinquent in the eyes of grown-up North Memphis.

There was something about the way this guy stood and leaned into the huddle—nonchalant, but no-nonsense. Something a little loose, but cocky, too. It looked like he was pulling off the Brando thing without even trying.

It had to be him.

A couple of nights before I'd heard a brand-new song on the radio—so new the record wasn't even out yet—and had been amazed to learn that the singer was a boy from Humes High in North Memphis. This had seemed astonishing to me—how could a guy from my neighborhood have a song on the radio? And a great song at that—a song that really stood out among all the hot R & B records I'd heard on the show that night. For the last two days I'd been wondering—what guy in North Memphis could make a record like that and get it on the radio? This guy across from me in the huddle looked like he could.

"All right, now—what's your name? Jerry?" asked the quarterback.

"Yeah."

"You can catch a football?"

"Yeah."

"You know how to run a slant?"

"Sure."

He held his hand out, palm up, and sketched out a play. "You run down the sidelines about ten yards—run it easy, not full speed. Red, you go up the middle and buttonhook. Jerry, when you see Red make his turn, you hit the gas, man, and run your slant. If you get past whoever's covering you, the ball's coming to you."

"Yes, sir."

The quarterback's serious expression shifted a bit. He looked at me dead-on. He had ice-blue eyes, and when he looked straight at you, you felt it. A little twist of half-smile showed up on his face.

"'Sir?' Hey, Red, I like this kid's attitude," said the quarterback.

"He's all right," said Red, giving me a clap on the back that just about knocked the breath out of me.

Red didn't introduce us. I didn't hear his name spoken by any of the other guys. But I didn't have to hear it. I knew who he was.

This was the boy from Humes High named Elvis Presley.

My mother, Dorothy Schilling, died when I was a little over a year old. She contracted rheumatic fever shortly after I was born, and spent most of a year in bed, wasting away. The disease was close to a death sentence back then, but it wasn't always quick. From what I was told later by my grandmother and my aunts, my mother held me as much as she could for as long as she could. But eventually her skin was so sensitive that even the weight of the sheets was painful, and I can only imagine the heartache she must have felt not being able to hold her new baby to her.

My mother's dying request to her mother, my Mamaw Gilkey, was to secure a promise that my brother and I would be loved and taken care of when she was gone. Mamaw delivered wonderfully on that sad promise. I grew up with a fair amount of confusion about how exactly I fit into my family, but I never doubted for a moment that my Mamaw loved me with all of her heart.

From bits of conversations—little hushed pieces of grown-up talk I'd occasionally catch as a kid, I got the impression that my mom had been happy, pretty, and the kind of person who took care of everybody