

i, Elvis

CONFESSIONS OF A COUNTERFEIT KING



The acclaimed author of *Stark Raving Elvis*
goes undercover as an Elvis impersonator

William McCranor Henderson

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Praise for ***Stark Raving Elvis:***

"A disorienting, funny, sad book."—*The Boston Globe*

"Henderson pulls off the hat trick: a breezy, highly readable character study, an indelible modern fable set in the kingdom of The Idol Rich, and a titillatingly oblique consideration of The Pelvis himself. . . . There is dark fun to be had in *Stark Raving Elvis*, and Henderson has it. This is a nifty, aptly titled read."—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

"A sharp, well-written work about the hopes and crumbling dreams of a man who struggles to live his dreams of another man's life."—*Houston Chronicle*

"An alternately funny and scary look at one man's American Dream corrupted into nightmare."—*Heavy Metal*

"Fascinating and frightening . . . at the heart of rock there is cold-blooded nihilism, nowhere more aptly captured than in the contest for Elvis impersonators that is the core of Henderson's novel."—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"*Stark Raving Elvis* is no mean feat. It possesses an authentic feel, its language is raw and energetic . . . the real thing."—*Houston Post*

"Henderson has a real feel for the sad, ridiculous squalor in America. . . . What he does best, though, is transform the seedy into musical prose."—*Boston Magazine*

*For Elvis Presley,
who made it all possible*

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

First of all, my thanks to John Talbot, who had the inspiration, and Miriam Altshuler, who helped connect the dots, then tossed me the pen. If not for them the world would be short one middle-aged Elvis impersonator.

For their interest, participation, and support along the way, I'd like to thank T.J. Anderson, John Cady, Patty Carroll, Liza Collins, Doc Franklin, Jackie Franklin, Charles Gauthier, Gary Goldstein, Everette "Lumber King" Greene, Peter Guralnick, Ollie Hallowell, Keith Henderson, Todd Jones and Huge Sound, Larry Lee, Bruce Lichtenstein, Sebastian Lockwood, Ray Maas, Fetzer Mills, Rebecca Mills, Dale Volberg Reed, John Shelton Reed, Mike Rosen, Yaniv Rozen, Caroline Saltonstall, Lee Smith, Skip Snyder, Cheryl Trapanier, Rooster Van Dyke, Robert Washington, David Williamson, and John Lincoln Wright.

And many, many thanks to the indispensable Rick Marino, mentor and guide, and all-around great guy.

Chapter

1

When the letter came from my agent, I let it sit on the table for a while—generally, agents telephone when the message is urgent, as in *money*. Besides, I was in summer mode, not doing anything promptly if I didn't have to. My family and I were on vacation in Rhode Island. The days were balmy and golden and we were spending them on the beach or the tennis courts, or (in my case) taking long Dagwood Bumstead naps on one of the couches. When I finally opened the letter, it was at the end of a long day swimming, riding bumper boats, and taking a few swings at a local batting cage with my young daughters. I was feeling every bit of my fifty-plus years. "I've been talking to an editor at Berkley about you," Miriam wrote. "We discussed a possible mass market edition of *Stark Raving Elvis . . .*" (My interest level perked up sharply. This was my first novel, by that time ten years old, and we were trying to get it back into print.) "But he has another idea too."

With great tact she described what was an absurd proposition for a guy in my position: a college teacher, a middle-aged father with a young and demanding family, but (and here was the glint of plausibility) a man who had once, years ago, written a novel about an Elvis impersonator.

The editor was looking for a writer with exactly my background—and someone who was enough of an exhibitionist to “take on the life of an Elvis impersonator”—that is, don a wig and jumpsuit and actually perform, travel, enter contests, whatever it took to soak up the reality of that surreal existence—and write a book about it.

“What do you think?” I asked my wife.

She reread the letter and her nose wrinkled. “Kind of a strange idea. Like asking you to run away with the circus. And aren’t those Elvis suits awfully expensive?”

Yes, they were. I had heard that a proper Elvis jumpsuit could run you anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000.

By coincidence, just the week before I had been on the phone with an old friend from Boston. Ollie was an industrial show producer who had just staged a sales convention in Hawaii for Simplex, the time-clock and alarm company, in which three top executives appeared on stage at the climax of the show as three different incarnations of Elvis. The big cheese, a corpulent giant, wore the white jumpsuit while his two lieutenants cavorted in black leather and gold lamé.

“These were all corporate tough guys,” said Ollie. “All pretty strait-laced, but they went for it, wigs and all.”

This wasn’t as strange as it may have seemed. I had recently heard about a national gathering of CEOs, where a chorus of ten corporate big bosses appeared decked out as Vegas-era Elvises, complete with jumpsuits, phony coifs, and rubber guitars.

Ollie said, “Something about Elvis really appeals to men in menopausal transition nowadays. And there’s a lot of that—I mean, all around me everyone’s having some kind of midlife crisis. They’re sprouting ponytails, leaving their wives, taking up the saxophone. In any case, if you ever want to hit the road as Elvis, I’ve got the suits.”

We had a good laugh.

The truth is, I’ve always felt that a midlife crisis, like a Land Rover, was a luxury I couldn’t afford. Nevertheless, I caught myself starting to think about this project in eerily practical terms: could Ollie *really*

part with one of those suits . . . and how much alteration would it need . . . ?

I called Miriam. "Does this editor know how old I am?"

"Oh, sure. Your age isn't a problem. In fact, it's really an advantage. A thirty-two-year-old doing Elvis—that's not much of a story. But *fifty-two*—" She let it dangle. I finished it in my mind . . . *fifty-two*, that really takes you somewhere: MIDDLED-AGED COLLEGE PROFESSOR BUMPS AND GRINDS . . . now there's a concept with real profile!

After all, didn't this kind of foray into the unknown have an honorable history? Hadn't George Plimpton turned a chance assignment at *Sports Illustrated* into a lifetime of "let me try it" books, culminating in his latest caper—horseshoes with George Bush? Hadn't the very term "gonzo journalism" been coined by Plimpton's darker cousin, Hunter Thompson?

Between the two of them, Plimpton and Thompson had defined the outer limits of participatory journalism. Plimpton's unflappably healthy bonhomie was always in good taste, while Thompson literally kicked the story to life by loading up on booze and drugs, placing himself awkwardly at the epicenter of the event.

I had no idea where I might fit along the spectrum marked off by these two notables. But the more I thought about it, the more I understood it was the "gonzo" part—DOING IT—that attracted me. I had turned out enough free-lance journalism to know that I had no desire to "cover" stories as an invisible reporter, even in the somewhat more visible tradition of John McPhee or Tom Wolfe.

As much as I admired the work of these men, straight reporting wasn't for me. I was always looking at my watch, yawning, daydreaming, wishing I could wrap it up, write the story, and be done. In fact, I had become a fiction writer precisely *because* "making it up" presented such interesting (and inescapable) challenges. I think it was this, the prospect of being allowed to create a good part of the story through my own choices and behavior, that finally won me over. The central events would be of my own devising, yet I wouldn't have to

produce them out of the thin air of imagination: what more could a fiction writer possibly desire?

Taking a train into New York, I dropped by the Berkley Books office on Madison Avenue.

John Talbot, the editor, was clearly a man who saw book projects as totems of his own enthusiasms, seeds springing to life when placed in the hands of the right author. Talbot was a lot younger than I thought he would be, tall and boyish, a cross-bred fan of Plimpton, Thompson, and Elvis Presley. To him, the notion of impersonation contained the essence of something resolutely American. He spoke of Cameron Crowe, who passed himself off as a high school student to write *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Talbot himself had hung out at a midtown gym, pretending to be a boxer, sparring on his lunch hour, not to write about it, but to experience the zesty thrill of slipping into another skin. (Wait a minute, I thought, aren't editors supposed to *lunch*? A wine spritzer may have replaced the old three martinis, but . . . workouts on the light bag?)

He and his girlfriend had recently made a pilgrimage to Graceland. They had stayed at the Days Inn next door, where you can watch Elvis movies 24 hours a day. When the time came to tie the knot, they fully intended to be married by an Elvis impersonator. His eyes were bright and full of the future.

"There's an organization for Elvis impersonators," he said, "but I can't find them. You must know something about this . . ."

"I'm afraid I don't. Do they have an 800 number?"

"See what you can find out."

When I wrote *Stark Raving Elvis* none of the events I imagined—a major Elvis impersonator's contest, with national TV coverage, a convention of international "pro" impersonators in Las Vegas—had ever taken place. I had to make them up. By now, life had long since caught up with (and passed) art: these things, and more, had come to exist in the real world. And I didn't have a clue.

Here's what I did know: Elvis, as Mojo Nixon put it, was everywhere, and Elvis impersonators were now a growing slice of the general population. They were generally thought of as nut cases—sad, fat, sick jokes. Some impersonators were, in fact, over their heads, but the good ones—and I had seen a few—hardly deserved to be held in contempt, or treated with campy derision.

John Talbot agreed. "I want to make sure we see eye to eye on this: I'm not interested in knocking anybody, bashing Elvis, that sort of thing. I'm a genuine fan, my heart's on my sleeve. We're talking about something unique and precious here, and I don't want to have any part of trashing it."

There had certainly been plenty of trashing: almost before the King's body had gone cold, there was a flowering of Elvis-related popular fiction. Impersonator fiction had become a virtual subgenre. In most of the stories I had read, the impersonator was a lost, troubled person or else a tool of some evil political force. Impersonator fans were depicted as fat, tasteless, low-class slobs, the kind of insensate rabble that can easily be manipulated to violence by cunning demagoguery.

Not having reread *Stark Raving Elvis* in ten years, I felt a twinge of guilt: were my own hands clean? Had I done a job on Elvis impersonators in that book? Wasn't its hero, the impersonator, a driven borderline schizophrenic? Yes. Didn't it present an international gathering of Elvis impersonators as having something of a circus atmosphere? I suppose so.

Yet the book took the basic endeavor seriously and was probably the only fiction ever written that said, in effect, doing an Elvis impersonation well was more than just okay: it could be majestic.

I left John Talbot's office without committing myself. As a reality check, I tried the idea out on a few old friends. Even the hippest of these—one a writer, another a musician—seemed to greet the notion with caution and the kind of polite reserve you maintain when a friend

tells you, "To hell with it—I'm going to join the Marines" or "I've had it with marketing, I'm going to Hollywood to be an actor!"

One old friend, Phillip, actually tried to save me from myself. Phillip's twin passions were literature and baseball. He took me to the White Horse Tavern for a few beers. As we stood at the weathered old bar, where Dylan Thomas had thrown down untold pints, I felt he was trying to push his point by the very choice of venue. This was literary New York, a haunt that stood for twentieth century poetry, respect for the combined tradition of English literature and the flourish of bohemian intellectualism.

"I'm going to tell you something that you probably won't hear from anybody else, okay? I'm going to be an aggressive busybody."

"Well, okay."

"Don't do this thing, Bill. Fiction is in a tailspin. TV has just about killed it off. TV, movies, rock 'n' roll culture and the kind of nonfiction book this guy wants you to write. Don't do it. Don't betray your craft."

"Let me get this straight: you're saying that I shouldn't write non-fiction, or . . . or what?"

"Well, that's part of it."

"What's the other part? Let me guess: it's the subject matter, isn't it?"

"Well—sure. I mean, Elvis impersonators . . ." He screwed his face into a cross-eyed fright mask.

"But I wrote a *novel* about one and nothing awful happened to me."

"But this time they'll have you running around publicly in an Elvis suit. They'll want you to sing 'Love Me Tender' at book singings. Nobody'll ever take you seriously again."

"It certainly didn't ruin George Plimpton to run around in a football uniform or a baseball suit."

"But, ah—"

"Ah, what? It's so different somehow?"

"Sports . . . sports is different."

"How?"

"It just is."

Different. Okay, I got it: sports were respectable. Mainstream. Sports, like war, came closer to holding up the mirror to real life. Elvis? A marginal entertainment obsession hovering on the edges of social pathology.

Back in Rhode Island I asked my ten-year-old daughter, "What would you think if I put on an Elvis Presley suit and dark glasses and a black wig and got up in front of crowds of people to sing songs with a band?"

Her eyes blinked and widened: "Dad," she said solemnly. "That would be so cool!"

I had been a musician of sorts, years back. In my single days around Harvard Square I had played fiddle for a singer-songwriter named John Lincoln Wright, who was (and is) something of a legend on the New England barroom circuit. As a member of John's "wall-of-sound" country rock ensemble, The Sour Mash Boys, one of my duties was to provide occasional harmony vocals.

Aside from humming "oooooh" or "aaaah" into a backup mike, however, my singing was restricted to one solo number, called off by John when he had to leave the stage unexpectedly. This was "Fly Trouble," a chatty talk-novelty, originally recorded by Hank Williams, that you could hardly call singing. Not that I couldn't carry a tune. I had sung in church choirs, Gilbert & Sullivan, that sort of thing. But something about stepping out in front of a band froze me. On stage, I preferred the invisible, mute presence of back-up musician; I was happy to be part of the support troops, nothing more.

And yet . . . and yet . . .

I think I had always had the yen to sing. In the mid-60s, when Bob Dylan defined a new pop paradigm, that of singer-songwriter, I was seized with a compulsion to try out my own songs in one of the small,

smoky folk clubs that were springing up like urban mushrooms. I bought a guitar and learned a few chords. In the privacy of my own bedroom I crooned standards like "I Ride an Old Paint" from the Pete Seeger songbook. But the leap to public performance seemed impossible.

I took the chicken's way out and enrolled in a course at the New School. It was called something like How to Sing Folk Songs and everyone in it had some kind of social maladjustment that made each class meeting many times more excruciating than it would have been just to show up at Gerde's Folk City on hoot night.

I know that now. Then, however, the icy experience of stumbling through "In the Early Morning Rain" just seemed to prove that this wasn't my cup of tea. No matter how compelling my fantasies, I was just not made to stand up and sing in public.

But now, it was 30 years later. Now perhaps I was dog-eared enough not to be so damned precious about myself. College teaching had worn away my fear of being the focal point of attention. Parenthood had gotten me used to all kinds of public self-expression ("Put the candy bar back in the rack, dear. Back in the rack. Right now. One . . . two . . . three . . .")

Perhaps fear of "looking bad" in front of strangers had gone the way of my hair. Would I now, finally, be able to pull this off? At 52, you recognize a "last chance" when it stares you in the face. I might make a serious fool of myself—but wouldn't I be a bigger fool to let this last chance pass me by?

Chapter

2

There are two standard places to start the story of Elvis: the beginning (guitar-thumping manchild bursts out of nowhere) or the end (fat celebrity drug addict plods to his death). These are the points of visceral fascination: Elvis making it . . . Elvis losing it. And for many, that's all there is. But *That's the Way It Is*, which I always thought was Elvis's best live concert documentary, reveals a splendid Las Vegas Elvis, slim, sexy, and completely in control of an act designed to showcase his charisma. The image is so indestructible it survives even his own impish impulses to undermine it, mock it, in mid-act.

How could I ever hope to get up and do anything approaching what I was watching?

But as the tape rolled on, something curious happened: the more I watched, the more I began to believe in the possibility that I too could do this thing! Gradually, Elvis's charisma stopped intimidating me and started to inspire me. Perhaps this is what great popular entertainers do: connect with an area of imagination inside everyone that is boundless in its sense of possibility.

The late poet James Dickey once offered a theory of why the homespun poet-celebrity Rod McKuen, who wrote so awfully, was so vastly popular with ordinary people: they felt he wrote no better po-

etry than *they* would write, if they just got around to it. Elvis gave me that feeling: he seemed to be only doing what I could do anyway, if I wanted to. Even as I marveled at his virtuoso moves, something made me feel them in my own body.

I CAN DO THIS! I CAN! I thought.

I grabbed a yellow pad and began to scribble down code names for various movements and gestures.

the lasso

the squat

the arm fling cutoff

the fist pump

the shaky leg

the body palsey . . .

There was a large mirror in the TV room. I tried a few moves. Yes, yes—they looked halfway decent. My wife, an ex-dancer, drifted into the room and watched me try a few pseudo-karate kicks.

"You're not going to have any trouble with this," she said.

"I've made a decision on John's offer," I said to Miriam on the phone.

"Mm?"

"I'd like to do it."

She seemed surprised. "That's wonderful! I was sure you were going to say no."

"Fabulous!" said my friend Ollie when I phoned him. "Do you want me to send the suits overnight? I could FedEx them."

"No, no. We're driving back to North Carolina in a few days. And anyway, I don't exactly have a lot of pressing gigs lined up. There's no rush. Just when you can."

"Oh, this is too much. I *love* it! Beware the jumpsuit, however. It's going to be awfully roomy."

"That's okay, the price is right."

"And Bill."

"Yes, Ollie?"

"Just don't get carried away. Remember the ponytails, new wives, new lives. Be careful."

That was an interesting notion. That I might, as Carol had suggested, run away with the circus.

I didn't think so.

On the other hand, Elvis impersonation did seem to exert a strong psychic influence on its practitioners. Only two years after Elvis's death, a photo study of Elvis impersonators appeared called *All the King's Men*. For years it remained the only extant nonfiction book on the subject, and as I leafed through it, it seemed to have stood up pretty well. What I found remarkable in 1979 (and even more so now) was how mature a phenomenon Elvis impersonation already was at that time, and how fully this early book captured the varieties of impersonator types.

There was the "surgical" Elvis, Dennis Wise, who underwent a number of operations to "reshape his cheekbones, nose, lips, and mouth to resemble the Elvis Presley of 1972."

Another impersonator, Steve Wayne of Springfield, Illinois, displayed a list of "50 similar characteristics of Steve Wayne and Elvis Presley, as compiled by the Steve Wayne Fan Club."

1. Shy
2. Humble
3. Very reserved
4. Gentle
5. Soft-spoken
6. Generous
7. Honest
8. Sincere