

READING THE ROCK BIOGRAPHY:  
A LIFE WITHOUT THEORY?

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The nineteenth century British prime-minister Benjamin Disraeli once advised, 'Read no history; nothing but biography, for that is a life without theory' (Partington 1992, 248). Contrary to Disraeli, I want to argue that biography can *never* offer us a life *without* theory. Biographic narratives always select and emphasize particular facts from the vast archipelago of moments that constitute a lifetime; there is no such thing as a life story without theory. This point seems obvious if we agree that *all* narratives are the constructed by their writers, but it needs special emphasis because *biographers* sell their books by making very strong claims about their link to the subject matter.

I want to explore this issue by looking at biographies of Elvis Presley. Late in 1956 Elvis's manager Colonel Parker lowered a curtain of silence around his charge. When the singer died twenty-one years later, the Radio One director Johnny Beerling found so little information available on Elvis's personality that his unit could not make a planned memorial documentary. Despite all of Elvis's albums and feature films, at that time there were only four books on the star in print. The King's private life remained a mystery. However, soon writers received generous advances, fans started collecting Elvis-books, and some biographies were even translated into Japanese. By 1981 over thirty paperbacks and ten hardbacks were available (Walters 1981, 27). Now there are around ten times that number in the King's full bibliography and they portray him in a wide variety of ways.

In 1990, as the subtitle of her shocking book *The Elvis Files*, Gail Brewer-Giorgio invited readers to ponder, 'Was his death faked?' Playing with her phrase I would like to ask an even stranger question: was his *life* faked? By this I do not mean that there was no such person as Elvis Presley or that he was a fraud, but rather that we cannot separate his life from our knowledge of it. Biographies are one source of that knowledge. I will explore three different approaches they take (scandal, 'buddy' confessions and objectivity) and follow with an explanation of what rock biographies have to offer.

## SCANDAL

*Elvis What Happened?* was the first scandal biography about Elvis (West *et al* 1977). It was also the first insider-account of the King's private life and, published in 1977, appeared while the star was alive. Co-authored by his three sacked bodyguards (Red West, Sonny West and Dave Hebler), the book regurgitated ugly tabloid rumours in paperback form. When Elvis died on August 16<sup>th</sup>, shockwaves of grief created a great interest in reading about his life. Three months later *Elvis: What Happened?* had sold over 5 million copies. It even received movie offers (Eliscu 1977, 24). This 'Judas book,' as it became known, was a highly commercial product. It was copyrighted to World Media Incorporated, serialized in a top tabloid and excerpted in the *Ladies Home Journal*. Furthermore, it was co-authored by a professional journalist: the Australian tabloid reporter Steve Dunleavy.

Dunleavy worked for Rupert Murdoch's *National Star*. He took the bodyguard's rambling accounts and spun them into a seedy tale of guns, drugs and selfishness. *Elvis: What Happened?* begins in the confines of a Las Vegas hotel suite where an out-of-control superstar is issuing death threats against the man that stole his wife. The image was selected, slanted and designed to shock; as a work of scandal, the book was a *construction*. From his army spell onwards, Elvis Presley had an image that suggested he was a generous and benevolent man. *Elvis What Happened?* simply *selected* reports about his private life contradicting that *image*. At a Beverley Hills press conference the bodyguards said their anecdotes had been sensationalized (Presley *et al* 1980, 383).

*Elvis: What Happened?* set a trend in scandal books that peaked in 1982 with Penguin's first paperback edition of Albert Goldman's infamous volume *Elvis*. Although Goldman missed some key figures (such as Elvis' ex-wife, father and manager) his book was a product of comprehensive research. It was based on conversations with 600 people. Nevertheless, their comments were all filtered through the scandal approach. Goldman did not come up with the book's idea: as an English professor he was drafted in for his purple prose. Albert Goldman was, like Dr. Frankenstein, a maker of monsters.

When Elvis's friend Joe Esposito spoke on the talk show *Geraldo* in 1990, he said, 'Albert Goldman lives off people that are dead. He assassinates people after they die.' In that respect Goldman's satirical techniques remain impressive. Five of them will be noted here. Firstly, like Dunleavy, Goldman inverted Elvis's gentle image. Goldman's Elvis is more likely to be found pulling a gun on an autograph hunter than giving away his new Cadillac. Secondly, Goldman

turned what Gilbert Rodman calls Elvis's fertile contradictions into hypocrisy: he portrayed Elvis as a bratty child, an uncouth Christian and a hypocritical drug addict. Thirdly, Goldman pitted Elvis against everybody near. In this portrayal, Elvis hated his mother, 'raped' his concert audiences, and despised himself. Fourthly, Goldman attacked Elvis's masculinity by claiming he was a childish mama's boy who lacked virility. Finally, Albert Goldman understood Elvis Presley through metaphors of horror. To him, Elvis was a living-corpse with a morbid grasp on his girlfriend's arm; a rapist; a Frankenstein's monster.

The musicologist Charles Hamm wanted Goldman's *Elvis* reclassified as fiction (Frith 1994, 279). Yet it could be argued that all biographies border on fiction: no life without theory. The problem with Goldman was that he *severely* misrepresented Elvis, because he assembled the monster at his own feet. He began with the theory then distorted the facts to fit it; on the success of his book, Goldman secured a \$225,000 advance to write his next work on Elvis based on the highly debatable *premise* that the star committed suicide (Hopkins 1980, 250). In this style of writing, the story is written before the researcher reaches the field. Once they get there they have no interest in making changes. One way to move beyond such accounts is consider 'inside' authors who actually knew Elvis in his private life.

#### THE BUDDY BOOKS: PROFESSIONAL FRIENDS?

Like many of Elvis's entourage, the longtime Graceland houseguest Charlie Hodge now makes a living from exploiting the commercial potential of his anecdotes. In 1996 he told British fans: 'My memories of Elvis are the best! Top of the line!!' Memories of Elvis are big business. Nearly everyone around the King has his or her name on at least one book about the star. These 'buddy books' make strong truth-claims about going beyond the myth and introducing the reader to the 'real' Elvis. For example, Elvis's karate instructor, Ed Parker said that his almost anatomically titled *Inside Elvis*, offered 'an intimate revelation of the man behind the myth' (Parker 1978, *back cover*). Many buddy books take such claims to extremes: Elvis's Uncle Vester Presley said his book gave readers the 'real' Elvis, because he knew his nephew better than Elvis knew himself (Presley 1988, *front cover*).

Once authority is based upon how close the author was to Elvis, they dispute each other on those grounds. For example, the Memphis journalist Bill Burk (1997, 14) said that as Elvis's friend he was as close to the singer as anybody in Presley's entourage. To complicate things, Elvis's hairdresser Larry Geller claimed the star had a knack of making a lot of people feel like his best

friend. Surveying the market, one realizes that the books depend on their author's entrepreneurial claims rather than how near those people really came to Elvis. In fact, friends like Billy Smith (Elvis's cousin and perhaps his best friend in the 1970s) have no books of their own.

Furthermore, despite their strong claims to realism, the buddy books sometimes get their basic facts wrong. For instance in her 1977 book *My Life With Elvis* the Graceland secretary Becky Yancey insisted that her superstar boss never met President Nixon: as she recalled, Elvis's bodyguards were still in Memphis (Yancey 1977, 323). Now we know otherwise. So do books like these really offer us a life without theory?

Like the works of scandal, most buddy books are co-authored with journalists who act as translators, recasting reminiscences in the mold of *entertainment*. They think of the fans when digging out, analyzing, and presenting the facts. Also, like scandal accounts, buddy books are usually thematic. Instead of offering a chronology, they tell readers about Elvis's personality chapter-by-chapter, by exploring his early fame, the movie years, his fans, generosity, masculinity and tragic demise. Nevertheless, these books do not all say the same thing. In fact they form a terrain of contested representations.

One of the only books available while Elvis was alive came from the *Rolling Stone* writer Jerry Hopkins. Speaking at a University of Memphis seminar in 1979, Hopkins said the way that people will see Elvis in future depends on *who* writes the history books. Ironically it was Jerry himself. Secreted in the university archive, the research interviews he taped have become a reference point for the buddy book authors. For example, guitarist Scotty Moore's recent book *That's All Right Elvis'* contains quotations from the star's second manager (the late Bob Neale), and from Marion Keisker (the secretary who supposedly discovered Elvis). Both come from the Hopkins' collection. My point is that Jerry Hopkins decided upon the questions to ask his interviewees. There is no life without theory.

In this sense the buddy books are not immune from inter-textual interpretations of Elvis's life. No biographer is innocent. For instance Alan Fortas wrote his own book *without a co-author*, yet despite being a friend and employee of Elvis for twelve years, he explored the ideas of at least three biographers outside the inner circle (Elaine Dundy, Dave Marsh and Albert Goldman: see Fortas 1992, 66 + 104 + 151). Insider accounts set themselves up *against other representations*. They aim to 'set the record straight.' So these books go beyond Elvis to draw on the ideas that previous writers have had about him. The earliest popular books, like Hopkins

and Goldman, are therefore outposts on the map.

Furthermore, *social identity is relational*. Elvis Presley was a sensitive man with a highly diverse set of friends. Whether they were intelligent eccentrics like Larry Geller or unreconstructed Southern toughs like Red West, he met each of them on their own particular level. If any reader ever actually befriended the King, it would be likely that they too would come away with a slightly different account. This suggests that Elvis's friends did *not* reproduce him. Instead they inevitably added something new of their own. His life has been rewritten so many times that virtually no fact is left undisputed. Private details, such as the book Elvis was reading when he died, are almost impossible to verify: Elvis's Uncle Vester said it was the bible, his friend Joe Esposito said it concerned the Turin shroud, and two investigative journalists claim it was pornography (see Presley 1988, 110; Esposito 1994, 238; Thompson and Cole 1992, 24). In a climate of competition and dispute over the 'real' Elvis, one option is to step back and get a different perspective by looking at more objective accounts.

#### OBJECTIVE ACCOUNTS:

##### LAST TRAIN TO MEMPHIS?

Increasingly, Elvis fans are sick of best friend accounts. Attempts to boycott scandal books (and burn pages written by Albert Goldman) seem predictable, but many fans are also fed up with buddy books too. Confessions are seen as attempts to re-contextualize scandal and therefore betray the trust of a dead friend by once more *raking* over his private indiscretions.

Offering fans something different, biographers who did not know Elvis have found easy prey in the biased nature of best-friend stories. The rock critic Dave Marsh (1992, xiii), for example, dismissed buddy books with two words: 'sheer junk.' As a replacement, outside commentators have offered two main streams of writing: interpretations and chronological, balanced 'objective' accounts. I'll look at the top writers in each style.

The King of Elvis interpreters is undoubtedly Greil Marcus. His 1977 compilation *Mystery Train* contained a chapter on Elvis that was so influential it acted as a primer for *Time* magazine's Elvis obituary and President Carter's tribute speech (Cocks 1977, 26; Gregory and Gregory 1992, 141). Dave Marsh (1992, 245) claimed that before Marcus it was impossible to discuss Elvis Presley at all. Two years ago at the 'Elvis: Now and Then' seminar in Memphis, Professor Charles Wolfe said that some of his students were inspired to become Elvis fans by

reading *Mystery Train*. In that sense Marcus *re-performed* Elvis: rather than being un-critical or transparent, he kept the star's contradictions in play through a stream of vivid and symbolic prose. *Mystery Train* set the groundwork for later interpreters like Dave Marsh precisely because its author was *inspired* by Elvis and gave primary weight to his performance, not speculations about his personal life.

Yet for objectivity another book recently led the field: *Last Train to Memphis* by Peter Guralnick. *Last Train to Memphis* is a balanced, lengthy and high comprehensive account of Elvis's life up to 1958. Before Guralnick, serious authors were rarely able to write about Elvis without condescension. With a background in rock criticism, he created a book that retained support from both the New York Times and from Elvis's fans, because he treated the star less as a joke from low culture and more as a musician worthy of serious scholarship. Chris Giles, who runs Britain's only all-Elvis high street record store told me:

'There's only one book that stands head and shoulders above everything at the moment and that's the Peter Guralnick book... He'd done his homework warts and all... I think all the majority of Elvis fans want is honesty. They can take whatever Elvis was.'

The problem is that there may be no such thing available: no life without theory. Guralnick aimed to rescue Elvis from *myth* by marginalizing secondary material and letting his interviewees speak for themselves (Guralnick 1995, xiii). At the 'Elvis: Now and Then' seminar, when asked where Elvis would end up in his next book (currently available as *Careless Love*), he rather naively said, 'My commitment is to the story.' The problem with this is that a story can only make sense by selection, omission and construction. A story can never fully 'lead' its author because narrative-representations are constructed; interventions in the world, not neutral mirrors to it.

Guralnick is aware of such difficulties. In the preface of *Last Train* he says no singular story is possible, even in autobiography, and he can only offer *his* Elvis Presley. Yet he also appears to contradict himself by saying he is giving readers the chance to imagine *their own* Elvis (Guralnick 1995, xvi). If the writer *could* ever take a back seat, readers might find independent ways of building up the picture. That aim leads Guralnick to offer invitational phrases like, 'If you picture him, picture someone you might have missed' (Guralnick 1995, 22). Working at the sub-atomic level of biography, the statement equally applies to its author. In the final analysis an

objective biographer cannot give an objective description, only something that finds meaning in between the writer's imagined picture of a life and a picture emerging inside the heads of his or her readers.

So Disraeli was *wrong* when he said that biography is a 'life without theory.' Books on Elvis hold out the promise of a life they can never deliver. They offer ideas in human form. And they are *nothing if not* subtle works of theory. But please do not think that I am therefore dismissing Elvis's many biographers. They uncover new facts. They simplify his life enough for us to understand it, and they offer new opportunities to make emotional investments in the star. So biographers are, at best, like singers. By making (and re-making) the theory of a life, they become performers in their own right. They paint pictures with words and ask if we see what they see. Their work is therefore a creative field; Elvis's life might have ended two decades ago, but I have a feeling his life story is far from over.

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