

Graceland estate at the age of 42.

Having sold over 500 million records worldwide, Presley is recognized as the best-selling solo music artist of all time by *Guinness World Records*. He was commercially successful in many genres, including pop, country, rhythm & blues, adult contemporary, and gospel. Presley won three Grammy Awards, received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award at age 36, and has been inducted into multiple music halls of fame. He holds several records, including the most RIAA certified gold and platinum albums, the most albums charted on the *Billboard 200*, the most number-one albums by a solo artist on the UK Albums Chart, and the most number-one singles by any act on the UK Singles Chart. In 2018, Presley was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Contents

Life and career

1935–1953: Early years

Childhood in Tupelo

Teenage life in Memphis

1953–1956: First recordings

Sam Phillips and Sun Records

Early live performances and RCA Victor contract

Louisiana Hayride, radio commercial, and first television performances

1956–1958: Commercial breakout and controversy

First national TV appearances and debut album

Milton Berle Show and "Hound Dog"

Steve Allen Show and first Sullivan appearance

Crazed crowds and film debut

Leiber and Stoller collaboration and draft notice

1958–1960: Military service and mother's death

1960–1968: Focus on films

Elvis Is Back

Lost in Hollywood

1968–1973: Comeback

Elvis: the '68 Comeback Special

From Elvis in Memphis and the International

Back on tour and meeting Nixon

Marriage breakdown and *Aloha from Hawaii*

1973–1977: Health deterioration and death

Medical crises and last studio sessions

Final months

Death

Cause of death

Later developments

Relatives	<u>Riley Keough</u> (granddaughter)
Awards	<u>Rock and Roll Hall of Fame</u> (1986) <u>Presidential Medal of Freedom</u> (2018)
Musical career	
Genres	<u>Rock and roll</u> · <u>pop</u> · <u>rockabilly</u> · <u>country</u> · <u>gospel</u> · <u>R&B</u> · <u>blues</u>
Instruments	<u>Vocals</u> · <u>guitar</u> · <u>piano</u>
Years active	1953–1977
Labels	<u>Sun</u> · <u>RCA Victor</u> · <u>HMV</u> · <u>Allied Artists Music Group</u>
Military service ^[1]	
Branch	<u>United States Army</u>
Years of service	1958–1960
Rank	<u>Sergeant</u>
Unit	<u>Headquarters Company, 1st Medium Tank Battalion, 32d Armor, 3d Armored Division</u>
Awards	<u>Good Conduct Medal</u>

Artistry

Influences

Musicianship

Musical styles and genres

Vocal style and range

Public image

Relationship with the African-American community

Sex symbol

Equestrian

Associates

Colonel Parker and the Aberbachs

Memphis Mafia

Legacy

Achievements

Bands

Discography

Filmography

See also

Explanatory notes

Citations

General sources

Further reading

External links

Life and career

1935–1953: Early years

Childhood in Tupelo

Elvis Aaron Presley was born on January 8, 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi, to Vernon Elvis (April 10, 1916 – June 26, 1979) and Gladys Love (*née* Smith; April 25, 1912 – August 14, 1958) Presley in a two-room shotgun house that his father built for the occasion.^[8] Elvis's identical twin brother, Jesse Garon Presley, was delivered 35 minutes before him, stillborn.^[9] Presley became close to both parents and formed an especially close bond with his mother. The family attended an Assembly of God church, where he found his initial musical inspiration.^[10]

Presley's father, Vernon, was of German,^[11] Scottish and English origins.^[12] Presley's mother, Gladys, was of Scots-Irish with some French Norman ancestry.^[13] His mother and the rest of the family believed that her great-great-grandmother,



Presley's birthplace in Tupelo, Mississippi

Morning Dove White, was Cherokee.^{[14][15][16]} This belief was confirmed by Elvis's granddaughter Riley Keough in 2017.^[17] Elaine Dundy, in her biography, supports the belief.^[18]

Vernon moved from one odd job to the next, showing little ambition.^{[19][20]} The family often relied on help from neighbors and government food assistance. In 1938, they lost their home after Vernon was found guilty of altering a check written by his landowner and sometime-employer. He was jailed for eight months, while Gladys and Elvis moved in with relatives.^[10]

In September 1941, Presley entered first grade at East Tupelo Consolidated, where his teachers regarded him as "average".^[21] He was encouraged to enter a singing contest after impressing his schoolteacher with a rendition of Red Foley's country song "Old Shep" during morning prayers. The contest, held at the Mississippi–Alabama Fair and Dairy Show on October 3, 1945, was his first public performance. The ten-year-old Presley stood on a chair to reach the microphone and sang "Old Shep". He recalled placing fifth.^[22] A few months later, Presley received his first guitar for his birthday; he had hoped for something else—by different accounts, either a bicycle or a rifle.^{[23][24]} Over the following year, he received basic guitar lessons from two of his uncles and the new pastor at the family's church. Presley recalled, "I took the guitar, and I watched people, and I learned to play a little bit. But I would never sing in public. I was very shy about it."^[25]



A photo of Elvis's parents at the Historic Blue Moon Museum in Verona, Mississippi

In September 1946, Presley entered a new school, Milam, for sixth grade; he was regarded as a loner. The following year, he began bringing his guitar to school on a daily basis. He played and sang during lunchtime, and was often teased as a "trashy" kid who played hillbilly music. By then, the family was living in a largely black neighborhood.^[26] Presley was a devotee of Mississippi Slim's show on the Tupelo radio station WELO. He was described as "crazy about music" by Slim's younger brother, who was one of Presley's classmates and often took him into the station. Slim supplemented Presley's guitar instruction by demonstrating chord techniques.^[27] When his protégé was twelve years old, Slim scheduled him for two on-air performances. Presley was overcome by stage fright the first time, but succeeded in performing the following week.^[28]

Teenage life in Memphis

In November 1948, the family moved to Memphis, Tennessee. After residing for nearly a year in rooming houses, they were granted a two-bedroom apartment in the public housing complex known as the Lauderdale Courts.^[29] Enrolled at L. C. Humes High School, Presley received only a C in music in eighth grade. When his music teacher told him that he had no aptitude for singing, he brought in his guitar the next day and sang a recent hit, "Keep Them Cold Icy Fingers Off Me", to prove otherwise. A classmate later recalled that the teacher "agreed that Elvis was right when he said that she didn't appreciate his kind of singing".^[30] He was usually too shy to perform openly, and was occasionally bullied by classmates who viewed him as a "mama's boy".^[31]

In 1950, he began practicing guitar regularly under the tutelage of Lee Denson, a neighbor two and a half years his senior. They and three other boys—including two future rockabilly pioneers, brothers Dorsey and Johnny Burnette—formed a loose musical collective that played frequently around the Courts.^[32] That September, he began working as an usher at Loew's State Theater.^[33] Other jobs followed: Precision Tool, Loew's again, and MARL Metal Products.^[34] Presley also helped Jewish neighbors, the Fruchters, by being their shabbos goy.

During his junior year, Presley began to stand out more among his classmates, largely because of his appearance: he grew his sideburns and styled his hair with rose oil and Vaseline. In his free time, he would head down to Beale Street, the heart of Memphis's thriving blues scene, and gaze longingly at the wild, flashy clothes in the windows of Lansky Brothers. By his senior year, he was wearing those clothes.^[35] Overcoming his reticence about performing outside the Lauderdale Courts, he competed in Humes' Annual "Minstrel" show in April 1953. Singing and playing guitar, he opened with "Till I Waltz Again with You", a recent hit for Teresa Brewer. Presley recalled that the performance did much for his reputation: "I wasn't popular in school ... I failed music—only thing I ever failed. And then they entered me in this talent show ... when I came onstage I heard people kind of rumbling and whispering and so forth, 'cause nobody knew I even sang. It was amazing how popular I became in school after that."^[36]

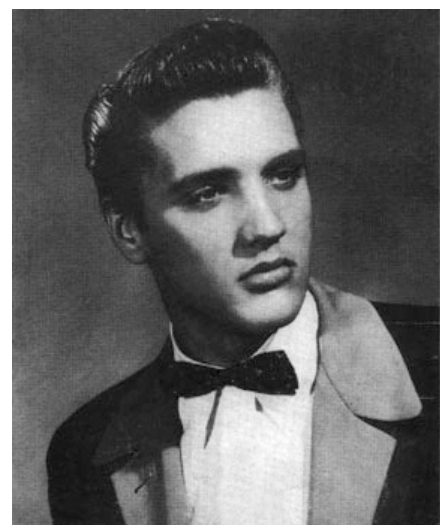
Presley, who received no formal music training and could not read music, studied and played by ear. He also frequented record stores that provided jukeboxes and listening booths to customers. He knew all of Hank Snow's songs,^[37] and he loved records by other country singers such as Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubb, Ted Daffan, Jimmie Rodgers, Jimmie Davis, and Bob Wills.^[38] The Southern gospel singer Jake Hess, one of his favorite performers, was a significant influence on his ballad-singing style.^{[39][40]} He was a regular audience member at the monthly All-Night Singings downtown, where many of the white gospel groups that performed reflected the influence of African-American spiritual music.^[41] He adored the music of black gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe.^[38]

Like some of his peers, he may have attended blues venues—of necessity, in the segregated South—only on nights designated for exclusively white audiences.^[42] He certainly listened to the regional radio stations, such as WDIA-AM, that played "race records": spirituals, blues, and the modern, backbeat-heavy sound of rhythm and blues.^[43] Many of his future recordings were inspired by local African-American musicians such as Arthur Crudup and Rufus Thomas.^{[44][45]} B.B. King recalled that he had known Presley before he was popular when they both used to frequent Beale Street.^[46] By the time he graduated from high school in June 1953, Presley had already singled out music as his future.^{[47][48]}

1953–1956: First recordings

Sam Phillips and Sun Records

In August 1953, Presley checked into the offices of Memphis Recording Service, the company run by Sam Phillips before he started Sun Records. He aimed to pay for a few minutes of studio time to record a two-sided acetate disc: "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin". He later claimed that he intended the record as a birthday gift for his mother, or that he was merely interested in what he "sounded like", although there was a much cheaper, amateur record-making service at a nearby general store. Biographer Peter Guralnick argued that he chose Sun in the hope of being discovered. Asked by receptionist Marion Keisker what kind of singer he was, Presley responded, "I sing all kinds." When she pressed him on who he sounded like, he repeatedly answered, "I don't sound like nobody." After he recorded, Sun boss Sam Phillips asked Keisker to note down the young man's name, which she did along with her own commentary: "Good ballad singer. Hold."^[49]



Presley in a Sun Records promotional photograph, 1954

In January 1954, Presley cut a second acetate at Sun Records—"I'll Never Stand in Your Way" and "It Wouldn't Be the Same Without You"—but again nothing came of it.^[50] Not long after, he failed an audition for a local vocal quartet, the Songfellows. He explained to his father, "They told me I couldn't sing."^[51] Songfellow Jim Hamill later claimed that he was turned down because he did not demonstrate an ear for harmony at the time.^[52] In April, Presley began working for the Crown Electric company as a truck driver.^[53] His friend Ronnie Smith, after playing a few local gigs with him, suggested he contact Eddie Bond, leader of Smith's professional band, which had an opening for a vocalist. Bond rejected him after a tryout, advising Presley to stick to truck driving "because you're never going to make it as a singer".^[54]

Phillips, meanwhile, was always on the lookout for someone who could bring to a broader audience the sound of the black musicians on whom Sun focused. As Keisker reported, "Over and over I remember Sam saying, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.'"^[55] In June, he acquired a demo recording by Jimmy Sweeney of a ballad, "Without You", that he thought might suit the teenage singer. Presley came by the studio but was unable to do it justice. Despite this, Phillips asked Presley to sing as many numbers as he knew. He was sufficiently affected by what he heard to invite two local musicians, guitarist Winfield "Scotty" Moore and upright bass player Bill Black, to work something up with Presley for a recording session.^[56]

The session held the evening of July 5, proved entirely unfruitful until late in the night. As they were about to abort and go home, Presley took his guitar and launched into a 1946 blues number, Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right". Moore recalled, "All of a sudden, Elvis just started singing this song, jumping around and acting the fool, and then Bill picked up his bass, and he started acting the fool, too, and I started playing with them. Sam, I think, had the door to the control booth open ... he stuck his head out and said, 'What are you doing?' And we said, 'We don't know.' 'Well, back up,' he said, 'try to find a place to start, and do it again.'" Phillips quickly began taping; this was the sound he had been looking for.^[58]

Three days later, popular Memphis DJ Dewey Phillips played "That's All Right" on his *Red, Hot, and Blue* show.^[59] Listeners began phoning in, eager to find out who the singer was. The interest was such that Phillips played the record repeatedly during the remaining two hours of his show. Interviewing Presley on-air, Phillips asked him what high school he attended to clarify his color for the many callers who had assumed that he was black.^[60] During the next few days, the trio recorded a bluegrass song, Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky", again in a distinctive style and employing a jury-rigged echo effect that Sam Phillips dubbed "slapback". A single was pressed with "That's All Right" on the A-side and "Blue Moon of Kentucky" on the reverse.^[61]

Early live performances and RCA Victor contract

The trio played publicly for the first time on July 17 at the Bon Air club—Presley still sporting his child-size guitar.^[62] At the end of the month, they appeared at the Overton Park Shell, with Slim Whitman headlining. Here Elvis pioneered 'Rubber Legs', his signature style dance movement that he is best known for.^{[63][64]} A combination of his strong response to rhythm and nervousness at playing before a large crowd led Presley to shake his legs as he performed: his wide-cut pants emphasized his movements, causing young women in the audience to start screaming.^[65] Moore recalled, "During the instrumental parts, he would back off from the mike and be playing and shaking, and the crowd would just go wild".^[66] Black, a natural showman, whooped and rode his bass, hitting double licks that Presley would later remember as "really a wild sound, like a jungle drum or something".^[66]

Soon after, Moore and Black left their old band, the Starlite Wranglers, to play with Presley regularly, and DJ/promoter Bob Neal became the trio's manager. From August through October, they played frequently at the Eagle's Nest club and returned to Sun Studio for more recording