

THISWEEKEND

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Elvis Presley performs in "Elvis: That's The Way It Is," in 1970.

Inside the final burst of Elvis Presley's creativity 48 years after his death

BY MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES - Two and a half years before he died, Elvis Presley sat on the floor of a walk-in closet at the Las Vegas Hilton and discussed a project that might have changed the course of his life.

The meeting, as recounted by Presley's longtime friend Jerry Schilling, put the King of Rock 'n' Roll face to face with Barbra Streisand, who'd come to see Presley perform at the Hilton in March 1975 then sought an audience after the show to float an idea: Would Presley be interested in appearing opposite Streisand in her remake of "A Star Is Born"?

At the time of the duo's conversation - Schilling says that he, Presley's pal Joe Esposito and Streisand's boyfriend Jon Peters squeezed into the closet with the stars in a search for some quiet amid the commotion backstage - it had been six years since Presley had last played a dramatic role onscreen; Streisand's pitch so tantalized him, according to Schilling, that they ended up talking for more than two hours about the movie.

"We even ordered in some food," Schilling recalls.

Presley, of course, didn't get the part famously played by Kris Kristofferson - a casualty, depending on whom you ask, of Streisand's insistence on top billing or of the unreasonable financial demands of Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker. (In her 2023 memoir, Streisand wonders whether the character of a self-destructive musician was in the end "a little too close to his own life" for Elvis' comfort.)

Whatever the case, Schilling believes that the disappointment over "A Star Is Born" set Presley on a path of poor decision-making that effectively tanked his career before his tragic death at age 42 on Aug. 16, 1977 - 48 years ago.

"That was the last time I saw the twinkle in my friend's eye," Schilling, 83, says of the sit-down with Streisand.

An intriguing new boxed set commemorates the King's final burst of creativity. Released this month in five-CD and two-LP editions, "Sunset Boulevard" collects the music Presley recorded in Los Angeles between 1972 and 1975, including the fruit of one session held just days before the meeting about "A Star Is Born." These were the studio dates that yielded songs like "Separate Ways," which Elvis cut amid the crumbling of his marriage to Priscilla Presley, and "Burning Love," his last Top 10 pop hit, as well as 1975's "Today" LP, an exemplary



Jerry Schilling and Pricilla Presley attend a special screening of the premiere of the biographical motion picture, "Elvis," on June 12, 2022, at Graceland, in Memphis, Tenn.

showcase of Presley's latter-day blend of rock, country and blue-eyed soul.

Is yet another repackaging of Presley's music really something to get excited about? The Elvis industry has never not been alive and well over the half-century since he died; in just the last few years, we've seen Baz Luhrmann's splashy big-screen biopic, the latest book from the singer's biographer Peter Guralnick (this one about Parker) and not one but two documentaries about the so-called '68 comeback special that heralded Presley's return to live performance after nearly a decade of film work.

More gloomily, "Sunset Boulevard" arrives as Priscilla Presley - who got her own biopic from director Sofia Coppola in 2023 - is making headlines thanks to an ugly legal battle with two former business partners she brought on to aid in managing the Presley brand. (The feud itself follows the sudden death two years ago of Priscilla and Elvis' only child, Lisa Marie Presley.)

Yet the new box offers an opportunity to ponder the curious position Elvis found himself in once the glow of the comeback special had faded: a rock and roll pioneer now strangely removed from the culture he did as much as anyone to invent.

"Sunset Boulevard's" title, which the set shares with Billy Wilder's iconic 1950 movie, can't help but evoke the spoiled grandeur of an aging showbiz legend. It also refers to the physical location of RCA Records' West Coast headquarters at 6363 Sunset Blvd., across the street from Hollywood's Cinerama Dome. Now the site of the L.A. Film School, the building is where the Rolling Stones recorded "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" and Jefferson Airplane made "Surrealistic Pillow" - and where Presley set up in the early

'70s after cutting most of his '60s movie soundtracks at Radio Recorders near the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and La Brea Avenue.

By 1972, rock had long since evolved beyond the crucial influence Elvis exerted at the beginning of his career. Nor was the King particularly dialed into what was happening in music while he was busy in Hollywood.

"We weren't as exposed as much as I wish we would've been to everything going on," Schilling says on a recent afternoon at his home high in the hills above Sunset Plaza. A core member of Elvis' fabled Memphis Mafia, Schilling has lived here since 1974, when Elvis bought the place from the TV producer Rick Husky and gifted it to Schilling for his years of loyal friend-employment.

"When you're doing movies, you're up at 7 in the morning and you're in makeup by 8," Schilling continues. "You work all day and you come home - you're not necessarily putting on the latest records."

More than the growling rock lothario of Presley's early days - to say nothing of the shaggy psychedelic searchers who emerged in his wake - what the RCA material emphasizes is how expressive a ballad singer Elvis had become in middle age. Schilling says the singer's romantic troubles drew him to slower, moodier songs like "Separate Ways," "Always on My Mind" and Kristofferson's "For the Good Times," the last of which he delivers in a voice that seems to tremble with regret. (Presley had to be cajoled into singing the uptempo "Burning Love," according to Schilling, who notes with a laugh that "when it became a hit, he loved it.")

But in the deep soulfulness of this music you're also hearing the rapport between Presley and

the members of his live band, with whom he recorded at RCA instead of using the session players who'd backed him in the '60s. Led by guitarist James Burton, the TCB Band - that's Taking Care of Business - was assembled ahead of Elvis' first engagement at Las Vegas' International Hotel, which later became the Las Vegas Hilton; indeed, one of "Sunset Boulevard's" more fascinating features is the hours of rehearsal tape documenting Presley's preparation in L.A. for the Vegas shows that began in 1969.

The sound quality is murky and the performances fairly wobbly, as in a take on "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" where Elvis can't quite seem to decide on a key. Yet it's a thrill to listen in as the musicians find their groove - a kind of earthy, slow-rolling country-gospel R&B - in an array of far-flung tunes including "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me," "Good Time Charlie's Got the Blues," even the Pointer Sisters' "Fairytale."

In one rehearsal recorded Aug. 16, 1974, Elvis cues his band to play the Ewan MacColl ballad made famous by Roberta Flack: "'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Friggin' Face,'" he calls out as we hear the players warming up. Then they all lock in for a closely harmonized rendition of the song so pretty there's something almost spooky about it.

Sitting next to the balcony he was standing on when he got the phone call alerting him to the news of Presley's death, Schilling takes clear pleasure in spinning well-practiced yarns about his years with Elvis: the time John Lennon told him to tell Presley that he grew out his sideburns in an attempt to look like the King, for instance, or the audition where Elvis took a flier on a relatively unknown drummer named Ronnie Tutt who ended up powering the TCB Band.

He's more halting when he talks about the end of his friend's life and about what he sees as the lack of a serious artistic challenge that might have sharpened Elvis' focus. Staying on in Vegas a bit too long, making so-so records in a home studio set up at Graceland - these weren't enough to buoy the man he calls a genius. Does Schilling know if Presley saw "A Star Is Born" when it came out at the end of 1976?

He considers the question for a good 10 seconds. "I don't know," he finally says. He started tour managing the Beach Boys that year and was spending less time with Presley. "He never mentioned it to me. I wish I knew. There's probably nobody alive now who could say."

REVIEW

'People Like Us' is one of the year's best novels

BY CHRIS HEWITT
The Minnesota Star Tribune

The title of Jason Mott's oddly riveting "People Like Us" refers to several groups: Black people (like its three narrators), Europeans, writers, Southerners, Americans, those who feel left out.

"I wonder what it feels like to be somewhere in this world and not feel like an outsider," says a guy named Dylan in a poignant exchange late in the novel. Dylan is like all of the other characters in "People Like Us" - particularly the Black ones - who feel so alienated by the gun-loving, police-over-reaching culture of America that they're searching for somewhere else.

I rarely think to write about a book's design, but it's worth addressing because Patrice Sheridan's work on "People Like Us" is so handsome, clever and useful. A cartoony cover image of someone who has lost his fedora while being flattened by one of those stickers they put on award-winning books represents one of two main narrators, who tells us he's known for the "n-word," his National Book Award (not incidentally, Mott won that prize for his last novel, "Hell of a Book").

The author, nicknamed Johnny Wordcount, is on a book tour in Europe and each of his chapters opens with a silhouette of his face, wearing that fedora. The other main narrator is Soot, a character from "Hell of a Book," who is grimly preparing a speech at an unnamed Minnesota university. His mission is to calm fears after a recent school shooting (we know the place is fictional because its official colors are the least likely combo for a major Minnesota university: green and gold).

You may have wondered about the adjective "oddly" before the word "riveting" in this review's first paragraph. Usually, riveting would imply breakneck action or suspense, but not much happens in "People Like Us." Wordcount has an assassin on his tail but the assassin, Remus, only appears once in a while and may be a figment of our narrator's imagination, anyway.

What makes "People Like Us" riveting is the question we keep asking ourselves: What do these narrators have to do with each other? Their voices are dramatically different - Wordcount wisecracks like crazy whereas Soot, haunted by recent tragedies, is solemn. Still, it's tempting to think they're versions of the same man, especially since both have reluctantly purchased guns, are writers, are Black and seem to be stuck at a crossroads.

But other details don't match. Neither do those silhouettes, which is where the third narrator I alluded to comes in, and where the design offers a little thrill of recognition. The final chapter is preceded by a silhouette that belongs to neither Wordcount nor Soot. But, if you've seen a few photos of Mott, you'll realize it's him. Eventually, Mott confirms that in a brief coda that helps connect everything we've read.

Satiric but also big-hearted, "People Like Us" is a hugely ambitious book. It takes big swings at topics many people like us are struggling to understand. It doesn't always connect, but that barely matters in a work that insists we must keep trying to put together words that help each other make sense of the world.

One sign of Mott's assurance is Soot's speech. It's a huge ask - Could any speech help, for instance, the Sandy Hook Elementary parents? - but Mott spends most of the book setting up Soot's impossibly big moment of comfort and wisdom. And, when we get there, the writer and his character knock it out of the park.

People Like Us

By: Jason Mott.
Publisher: Dutton, 270 pages.