

## Graceland

Word count: 1,393

X marked the spot. X, according to our tour guide, may have marked the spot where he started off singing, but after he drank all those cups of coffee and him nervous about his last chance to impress Sam, he started bouncing around the room like cold lard on a hot fry pan. A few feet away you could see the small indentation dug into the original linoleum by the end pin of the Stand Up Bass. Slap those strings.

Sam, long time a radio disc jockey, thought his first recordings rather ordinary and, frankly, dull. He didn't think the young man was worth much effort. His sound was one of dozens. Sam's partner, however, remained convinced he had talent and after a year of pestering finally gave Sam an ultimatum: unless they give this young man a chance, she's leaving. The threat was genuine. Sam did the tech work; she did most of the typing and managed the office. After a couple of ballads, however, Sam's opinion of the young man hadn't altered. The boy was good, sure, but so were most of the singers who came knocking at the doors of his recording studio. Let the boy sing at church and make his mother proud. Let him keep his day job driving truck and delivering produce to Beale Street.

The group took a break, escaped to the restaurant next door, and drank coffee.

Scared, nervous, pumped up, the singer returned and stood where X now marked his spot. He cradled the Shure microphone. The pent up energy erupted. "That's Alright, Mama." he sang as he jumped, wiggled, swiveled around the room.

Sam looked up from the recording machine. "Is that you, Elvis?" Sam called out from the booth.

According to Sam's last will and testament, that very same vintage microphone stands beside the famous X. Sam wanted everyone who visited Sun Studio to get the chance to hold in their hands (and sing if they wished) the very same microphone Elvis used that day and for records later. Sacred space. Sacred artifacts. Sacred relics. Our hushed silence was votive offering enough.

Several years after producing "That's Alright, Mama" Sam sold the rights to Elvis Presley to RCA for \$35,000. Sam said it was the best deal he ever made. Sam's recording studio was good. It was, however, also local. Elvis deserved national promotion, a bigger stage. Elvis deserved more. Elvis deserved better. Besides, the \$35,000 allowed Sam the chance to introduce to the nation other newcomers. Johnny Cash. Carl Perkins. Roy Orbison. Jerry Lee Lewis. Just to name a few.

There are givers and there are takers.

A black and white photograph hangs on the sound proof wall of the recording studio. Only these photographs and a few framed letters have been added to the décor over the

last fifty years. In the photograph, Cash, Perkins, Lewis, and Elvis gather around a piano. The tour guide explained that there is a person missing, ignored by the camera lens. Elvis had brought a show girl back from Vegas with him and she was seated on top of the piano. It explains why Jerry Lee Lewis' eyes are focused elsewhere rather than on the music sheet.

Despite the drizzle trickling off the 3 inch brim of my fedora and the humidity making soggy the sweatband, it was an eager walk up the ten blocks of Union Street to Sun Studio. Some shrines for the pious cannot be missed. We had hoped for a place to grab some coffee and a bite to eat. Except for one internet café, the area offered more warehouses than amenities.

Food came after the tour, across town, just a few blocks east of the Mississippi River.

The unpredictable sheets of rain could have made standing out front of Gus's a miserable experience, as we and two dozen others waited an hour and half to get inside the concrete block building and gnaw on Gus's World Famous Fried Chicken. I had had a hankering for fried chicken for days. The rain fell. But misery or joy remains a choice. The waiting crowd pressed together beneath Gus's small awning. Some enjoyed long necks. One group of four shared a quart of beer. Jokes were shared along with introductions. "Where are you from? Are you here for the music fest? Wow, are you really from Pennsylvania?" A father and his two daughters were in town for a volleyball tournament, for which the storm made the whole team from Arkansas late. Another young woman, explained the popularity of rubber boots (what my half English wife calls, 'Wellies') among the young women attending the Beale Street Music Fest. Mud was something with which she was familiar, having grown up on a dairy farm in Missouri. "Have you ever milked a cow?" Mississippi riverbank plus steady rain plus thousands of tramping feet equals mud.

Thus can arise the camaraderie of the pilgrim oppressed. An impromptu kinship born of sufferings shared for the noble cause. As contented diners exited, squeezing their way through the crowd at the door, we counted down when it would be our turn next to gain paradise. Each diner assured us poor and hungry supplicants that the long wait was well worth it.

The rainfall of Saturday was the tail end of a massive storm front that had stalled over Tennessee. Tennessee, east of Memphis, was drenched. Nashville was inundated by the Cumberland River, cresting at historical levels. We in Memphis were only temporarily inconvenienced by a heavy Friday nighttime downpour and the drizzling gusts of Saturday. Side streets were cluttered with debris. One manhole cover lay pushed up and left askew by the volume and velocity of storm water.

Whereas Nashville's Grand Old Opry was ruined by flooding water, the gods of 'Rock & Roll' had been appeased by our piety. We awoke to a Sunday that promised sunshine. There remained one more shrine to visit. Nay, more than mere shrine. Our pilgrimage to the cathedral awaited.

On our way back from brunching with the ducks of the Peabody Hotel, applauding as they paraded from elevator to lobby fountain, we phoned to make sure the highways were passable, all road clear. They were. We grinned.

Convertible top down, trusting the sunshine favor of the deities, we arrived. It was, after all, Sunday morning. We had come to pay homage. For Memphis is the city of two kings.

I have been to the mountaintop. I have been to Graceland. I too joined those touring to recover a nostalgic age when we were thin, our hair thicker, and cars had bench seats.

Messages from pilgrims from around the world are scrawled upon the wall of the entrance gate. I gazed with my fellow pilgrims at the white living room. I toured among the holy vestments. I adored the Jungle Room, complete with trickling fountain. I marveled at the pool table, with the rip in the felt near the far corner pocket, surely to remind us mere mortals that even deities have their humble moments. I stood in line very near where the king of kings died at the age of 42. Prescription overdose? Watching the video in the Racquetball Court, it made perfect sense to me to learn that Elvis's special, "Aloha from Hawaii," enjoyed more television viewers than did the moon landing. That's alright. Then with fear and trepidation, I paused before the base of Elvis's grave in the Meditation Garden. TCP (Take Care of Business) and his trademark lightning bolt were cast in bronze on the lower portion of his grave.

Graceland itself (I'm excluding all the Graceland exhibits across Elvis Presley Boulevard: the Auto Museum, the Airplanes, the gift shops, the Hall of Costumes) was a much smaller place than I had imagined. But then, it's not really a place anyhow.

Where is Graceland? Graceland isn't a place, it's more of an attitude. It's a state of mind. It is everywhere, for those willing to receive. It is what you can experience, receive, wherever you go.

In the Meditation Garden, an eternal flame burns at the head of Elvis's grave. The names of those who contributed to this cubed marble memorial are carved into its side. Included among them is the physician who wrote the script for Elvis's prescriptions.

It is sad that Elvis himself didn't find enough grace even at Graceland.