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Nearer, My God, to Thee. **Elvis Presley and The Gospel** **in His Music, Life and Legacy**

Abstract

The roots that raised Elvis Presley to become the man that he is in history, are not found in rock'n'roll but they go much deeper. They are found in the Gospel, in what Joe Moscheo defined as “the Gospel side of Elvis”. This paper highlights the gospel music of Elvis Presley and its vast impact on American society and religion. One of the aims of this article is to underline the impact that sacred music had over Presley’s artistic work and how Elvis and his Southern spirituality influenced the history of Christian music. One more important aspect of this paper argues the worldwide role Presley had as an evangelist of the Gospel, and how he influenced Christian identity and its values among Americans. This paper tried to answer to Mark Duffett’s question¹: “If star musicians are positioned as centers of attention, what happens when they use their privileged position in the spotlight to offer a ‘spiritual’ message?”. As a result, this paper offers original contents of Elvis Presley’s faith and spirituality and is intended as a starting point for future studies. Surprisingly, few researchers have evaluated the effect the singer had on evangelization and gospel music development. Previous studies have mostly paid attention to the role that Elvis played on the Rock’n’Roll scene and the iconic legend created around him. They forget that the Gospel is a key part of Presley’s life and music.

Keywords

Elvis Presley, Music, Gospel, Christianity, Evangelization, Spirituality, Segregation.

¹ M. Duffett, *Elvis’ Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?*, “Religions” 6 (2015) 1, p. 1. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6010182>.

1. Gospel Influences in Early Life

To what extent did Elvis Presley define a distinctive Southern spirituality? What impact did he have on gospel music history over the two decades between his first gospel record on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and his sad death in Memphis in 1977? Elvis Presley has been referred to as the pioneer of Rock'n'Roll and he is widely hailed as “The King” of this genre, even though the only Grammy Awards he ever won was for his gospel music. Elvis lived during the period when America was swinging between a progressive lack of religious values and new ways of evangelization in churches and revival camps. Music was one of these ways: it could express the lightness of the Christian message and lead people back to churches. Elvis’ music invites audiences to look for Jesus, as in the words he sang in the medley, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus/Nearer, My God, to Thee*, which was released in 1972: “Look full in His wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His wonderful grace”.

Charles Huges², director of the Memphis Center at Rhodes College, writes that for Elvis, “Gospel was one of the most important elements in his musical identity”. Elvis Presley’s discography includes a high number of gospel songs, from traditional hymns like *How Great Thou Art* and *Amazing Grace*, to more modern hits like, *A Thing Called Love* and *If That Isn’t Love*. Even without recording hundreds of gospel songs such as those of James Cleveland³, Presley spread religious music worldwide with so much clamor that he could be also defined as the “King of Gospel music.”⁴ Presley himself admitted that his true life’s ambition was to become a gospel performer.⁵ Raised in the Pentecostal denomination of Tupelo, Mississippi, the child Elvis soon learned the rigorous expectations with respect to moral behavior of the First Assembly of God. It was a small congregation of about 25 members, some of whom were relatives of Elvis, like his father’s cousin, Sayles Presley, who was one of the principal singers. In this church, Elvis started to incorporate religiousness and a deep love for gospel music. Every Friday evening, the best quartet shows were never

² H. Meyer, *The Gospel Truth: Elvis Never Lost His Faith*, “Usa Today Life”, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/nation-now/2017/08/12/gospel-truth-elvis-never-lost-his-faith/561747001/> (10.08.2021).

³ J. Cleveland was an American gospel singer, musician and composer. He is known as the “King of Gospel music”.

⁴ Elvis Presley recorded about 60 gospel songs.

⁵ J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 112.

missed by young Elvis who, sitting in the first rows, perceived “The Blackwood Brothers”, the “Statesmen” or the “Stamps” (this one will work for him years later) as his heroes. He was impressed by how wonderfully they praised God with their powerful voices, with enthusiasm, dancing and charisma. As he listened to these quartets, he realized that his dream was to become a gospel singer.⁶ The Reverend Frank Smith taught Elvis a few chords and guitar runs, since Elvis wanted to be a member of the choir, even if the pastor considered him to be not such a good singer.⁷ It might be said that Elvis’ music passion started earlier, when he was two year’s old, when he slid down his mother’s lap, joining in to sing with the church choir. “He was too little to know the words”, recalled his mother, Gladys Love Smith, “but he could carry the tune and he would watch their faces and try to do as they did.”⁸ It was from her that from an early age, he learned to love God, family and people: as Elvis said, “mama had something real good and I want what my mama had.”⁹ Elvis’ family was very poor. They lived in Shake Rag, a black ghetto, where Elvis made some Afro-American friends. When Elvis was three-years-old, his mother had to work hard picking cotton, while his dad, Vernon Presley, was serving a jail sentence on account of a forged cheque. This background remained vivid in Elvis’ memory all his life. In those cotton lands, the child first assimilated the essence of African Americans’ spirituals: the sad but hopeful message of redemption to those whom can not be redeemed on this earth. Spirituals always reminded Elvis how a mother can bear and suffer for the sake of her son. The death of Gladys in 1958, at age of 46, from heart failure, was a dramatic episode in Elvis’ life. His roots and his mother’s teaching always called him back. If he felt down, he “could settle down by singing gospel music and he’d soon be himself again.”¹⁰

The closeness to Afro-American music intensified when the Presley family moved to Memphis in 1948. He deepened his knowledge of their music, especially gospel songs, which he “secretly” listened to during their religious functions, since a white man could not attend an Afro-American religious service.

⁶ Cfr. J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, pp. 27–29.

⁷ P. Guralnik, *Last Train to Memphis. The Raise of Elvis Presley*, United States of America 1994, Back Bay Books, pp. 17–19.

⁸ P. Guralnik, *Last Train to Memphis. The Raise of Elvis Presley*, United States of America 1994, Back Bay Books, p. 14.

⁹ J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 51.

¹⁰ J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 95.

At that time, Elvis was often mocked and bullied by his classmates and teachers because he was “the white kid who lived in the ‘colored’ section of town.”¹¹ It was a hard time for Presley who lived in extreme poverty. One day he saw his father sitting at the edge of the bed, his head between his hands, with a worried countenance because there were so many bills to pay and he could not see any way out; Elvis set down next to him and said: “Don’t worry dad, things will gonna change, I know it. If you have **faith** like a grain of a mustard **seed**, you can say to this mountain ‘move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible.”¹² Then Elvis asked God to intervene with His grace in order that he could help his family. He sincerely believed that someday, a miracle would happen. This verse, the “Seed Faith” verse was one of his favorites; he truly believed in it.¹³

In 1956 something finally occurred. Elvis Presley decided to record two songs at Sun Studio of Memphis for his mama’s birthday. That particular studio was reputed to be unconventional in its choices, so probably Elvis felt it was the right place to introduce his unusual music. The director of the Studio, Sam Philips, found in that young Southern boy what he always was looking for: a white man who could sing like a Black gospel singer.¹⁴ Philips was searching for someone who could bring the Black world into White culture. He knew that his country would never make room for an Afro-American to do that. With the first records, *That’s All Right Mama* and *Blue Moon of Kentucky*, at Sun Studio, Elvis released for the first time in the history of music, a new style, interpreting the song with syncopation in an almost hiccup-like sound.¹⁵ The tempo which Elvis used on his rock’n’roll hits was simply the legacy of gospel music he had heard since he was a child. However, Presley’s music remains something original: not completely

¹¹ S. L. Hoppe, *May Way. How Elvis Presley Became Elvis*, Chattanooga 2013, Pine Rose Press LLC, chapter 3.

¹² N. Adams, *The Rebel and The King*, United States of America 2012, 5 Water Dancer Press, pp. 54–55.

¹³ In 1970 Elvis wrote and recorded the song *Only believe* (1971, from the album “Love Letters from Elvis”): the verse he sang “All things are possible if you only believe” is without a doubt a master print of what he believed about the biblical passage of the “Seed Faith”.

¹⁴ S. L. Hoppe, *May Way. How Elvis Presley Became Elvis*, Chattanooga 2013, Pine Rose Press LLC, p. 24.

¹⁵ S. L. Hoppe, *May Way. How Elvis Presley Became Elvis*, Chattanooga 2013, Pine Rose Press LLC, p. 29.

Black, not White, not pop, not country,¹⁶ but rather, a mix of all these things. In this way, he became the first eclectic singer capable of interpreting differently so many wide musical genres.

2. Black gospel, Southern Gospel and spirituality on stage

When Elvis brought to the public a song that combined White and Black sounds, the music industry was particularly resentful of the success of someone who was so unlike conventional musicians.¹⁷ They promoted a more European style of music, that is, typical songs leaning toward Broadway musicals and Hollywood songwriters, not the homegrown deep Southern genre Elvis was proposing. As Sherry Lee Hoppe, stated,¹⁸ “fusing country westerns, R&B, and blues, as Elvis did, was heresy [...] Tangentially, tied to black music, the controversy created around Elvis could be compared to the Civil War”. Fame came to Elvis as soon as hard critics accused him of immorality. Lee Hoppe said that at the time, the central conflict was among generations, not between races, as in Civil War.¹⁹ In fact, Elvis was also accused of increased juvenile delinquency among the young generation who loved his music. Nevertheless, the issue appears to be mostly racist. Critics accused Elvis’ music as being an indecent expression of “animals” (Blacks) and religious ministers burned his records, saying his songs were diabolic. Elvis’ friend, Nick Adams, said Elvis was sorry, when Baptist preacher Robert Gray condemned him in *Life Magazine* declaring that if Presley was offered his salvation, he would probably say “No thanks, I’m on top”. Adams defended his friend saying very few people are more thankful or grateful to God than the Presleys, and he reported what Elvis told him: “There is a God somewhere watching you, watching every move you make. And if I do something wrong, he knows it. And somewhere, sometimes I will answer for

¹⁶ S. L. Hoppe, *May Way. How Elvis Presley Became Elvis*, Chattanooga 2013, Pine Rose Press LLC, p. 30.

¹⁷ S. L. Hoppe, *May Way. How Elvis Presley Became Elvis*, Chattanooga 2013, Pine Rose Press LLC, p. 61.

¹⁸ S. L. Hoppe, *May Way. How Elvis Presley Became Elvis*, Chattanooga 2013, Pine Rose Press LLC, p. 62.

¹⁹ S. L. Hoppe, *May Way. How Elvis Presley Became Elvis*, Chattanooga 2013, Pine Rose Press LLC, p. 62.

my wrongdoings. And don't think that I haven't done anything wrong because somewhere along in life everybody gets off the track, but it's their duty to their God and their loved ones to get back on the right track."²⁰

Since Rock'n'Roll music could not be appreciated, Elvis decided to bring to the fore a genre that could be shared both by White and Black cultures: at his third and final appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1957, Elvis insisted that he would perform *Peace in the Valley*, a gospel song. Elvis sang this gospel between White and black Sounds. He wanted to show that if the combination of two different sounds creates a new and captivating music, the same thing could happen with the union of two different cultures. The challenge was greater because he sang the Christian Gospel of justice and liberty for all men. Nevertheless, people loved Elvis' television appearance, concluding that "after all, Elvis was a good American boy."²¹ Later on, the song was recorded by Presley with other three gospel tune; this fact led him to record an entire album of gospel songs. In this way, Presley demonstrated how a rock singer could also sing the Gospel, and that gospel music could also be sung into a pop contest. "He was one of the people that demonstrated at that key moment in American musical history that gospel could and should be directly a part of the pop conversation". As documented by Joe Moscheo, "Gospel music was important enough to him that he didn't mind insisting on a certain amount of reverence and decorum, even from people to whom the music was unfamiliar."²² There was a reverence and a sweetness that he gave to his gospel better than other singers. He favored the popular form of Southern Gospel that was performed by quartets: there was a low bass part balanced by that one of a high tenor. The two parts, the lead (or melody) and the baritone harmony, provided balance. The term White gospel song and the more specific Southern gospel music were used to specify something different from Black gospel songs.²³ Elvis sang many gospels with the

²⁰ N. Adams, *The Rebel and The King*, United States of America 2012, Water Dancer Press, pp. 56–58.

²¹ M. Maffi, *La cultura underground*, Bologna 2009, Odoja, p. 128.

²² J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 65.

²³ For more information about Sothern gospel and Black gospel music see C. R. Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*, Georgia 1995, University of Georgia Press, p. 201; For more information about history of Christian music in United States of America see A. Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music. From Gregorian chant to black gospel. An illustrated guide to all the major traditions of music in worship*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1996.

same expressive intensity of Blacks, even if he was performing a Southern gospel song. It's the case of Darrel Glenn's song, *Crying in The Chapel*: here it is evident how Elvis' performance pertained much more to the R&B black group "The Orioles" than Glenn's version. The same happened to Presley's beloved gospel song, *You'll Never Walk Alone*, that sounds very similar to the songs of Mahalia Jackson, the Afro-American gospel singer. *I'm Gonna Walk Them Golden Stairs* from the "Stamps" is another example: Elvis converted this Southern gospel song into a music with deep Black sound. Elvis also sang original Black gospel songs like *By and By*, *Joshua Fit the Battle in Jericho*, and *Down by The Riverside*.

Elvis did not detach singing from prayer. As he sang, he prayed. Elvis always preferred religious songs with placate tones, using an "a cappella" form for creating a better atmosphere conducive to prayer. We can see this predilection in Elvis' live performance of *Sweet, Sweet Spirit*:²⁴ He let the "Stamps" sing the song while he was transported by the melody; his eyes closed and his head softly bowed, permitted him to better incorporate the sweet words of the lyric. Moscheo remembered: "Looking back, it impresses many of us that by this simple gesture, Elvis was introducing a positive faith message to thousands upon thousands of fans and concert-goers."²⁵ Initially, religious music was confined only to churches, revival camps or gospel quartets. With Elvis, gospel music was spread internationally. Elvis was the first singer to introduce religious music at Las Vegas concerts. He had no fear that the Sin City might not welcome the Christian message he wanted to share. References of God were present not only in his gospel songs, but also in some other ones he changed, by adding, for instance, a simple invocation which rendered the song a prayer to God. *Just Pretend* and *Let it Be Me*²⁶ are two good examples of country and romantic songs converted into authentic prayers of contrition and true love for the Lord. Cheryl Thurber said "Elvis was especially successful with inspirational songs that were on the borderline between pop and gospel [...] He sang them with an emotional impact [...] Elvis had a quality of sincerity and intimacy in his voice that has been matched by few performers". We can say that before Elvis, people who wanted to listen to gospel songs had limited choices; after Elvis, Christian music could be easily listened to anywhere.

²⁴ *Elvis on Tour*, Documentary directed by P. Adidge, 1972.

²⁵ J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 65.

²⁶ *Elvis: That's the Way it Is*, Documentary directed by D. Sanders, 1970.

3. Faith, hope and love: an American Trilogy

Presley was very sensitive to the issue of racism. Music is a universal language that easily imposes itself on mass culture; this power, the power of music, was used by Elvis to remind his listeners of the responsibilities that men must take on. One of these responsibilities concerns brotherhood between all men. Elvis aimed to remind his listeners what Christian identity involves. Presley's music let us understand that a man cannot profess himself to be a Christian if he doesn't consider Blacks as sons and daughters of the same God. Elvis couldn't understand why such a simple concept was not accepted by so many Christians. For this reason, Elvis was one of the most influential men against racism, even if he never participated in any protest event; rarely, besides performing in his concerts, he appeared on television, and during his few interviews, he never passed social comments. He preferred to convey his message through his music. His speech, when he introduced the country-gospel song *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* was particularly notable: "So help your brother along the way, no matter where he starts. For the same God that made you, made him too."²⁷ When Elvis was invited to perform in a concert at the Astrodome of Texas, in Huston, he discovered that Black people were forbidden to enter the show. He declared that he would never sing in Huston if Black people were excluded. As a result of this threat, his Black fans could finally watch the show and Elvis sang one of his best performances.

In January 1973, the King of Rock'n'Roll had the opportunity to spread his music to millions of people. He performed in *Aloha from Hawaii*, a concert that took place at the Honolulu International Center (HIC) in Hawaii, and which was aired in over 40 countries across Asia and Europe. *Aloha from Hawaii* was the first live satellite concert with a single performer. Shooting began at midnight in order that the show could be viewed live by everyone in the world. It became a success that passes through the annals of history for being the most watched television transmission, much more than 1969 moon landing. The viewers who attended the concert are estimated to be between 1 billion and 1.5 billion. During the show, Elvis performed *An American Trilogy*, a song that deserves a special focus. *An American Trilogy* could be seen as the resume of Elvis' beliefs and biography. The title of the song indicates a blend of three classic American songs: *Dixie*, *The Battle Hymn of The Republic* and *All My Trials*. Elvis was communicating all his patriotism as he sang the open lines of *Dixie*, the battle anthem of the

²⁷ *Elvis: That's the Way it Is*, Documentary directed by D. Sanders, 1970.

Southern states: “Oh I wish I was in the land of cotton/old times there are not forgotten/ look away, look away, look away Dixieland”. Right after *Dixie’s* lines, Elvis ties up with the insistent refrain, “Glory, Glory Hallelujah!” which belongs to the Northern and abolitionist march of *The Battle Hymn of The Republic*. Then, in the middle of the song, he masterfully inserts a completely different melody: the sound of drums, which evokes the war advance, makes place for *All My Trials*, a sweet African-American spiritual with the tones of a lullaby. The American trilogy ends with the thunderous refrain “Glory, Glory Hallelujah/His truth is marching on!”. With the amalgamation of these three songs, Elvis was shouting out to his American audience for the end of a division between South and North and the conclusion of a separation between Whites and Blacks. Living in Tupelo and then in Memphis, Elvis soon realized that all men are equal, especially when confronted with suffering. Furthermore, they are all equal in the eyes of God who judges everyone equally. It makes no sense to talk about Blacks or Whites when all men have to follow the same path of justice. This is the true march (“His truth is marching on”) that everyone must strive for.

The lyrics of *All My Trials* are very painful and moving. This verse talks about a father who is close to death. With the serene acceptance he urges his child not to cry:

So hush little baby
don't you cry
you know your daddy's bound to die
but all my trials Lord will soon be over.

It is not clear who the agonized father in the song is. It can be a soldier or a war civilian victim, but references are not explicit. We only know it is about a father who is dying and consoling his child. The unknown man, the ordinary man, is the factual central character of the story. Death cannot frighten him, because it is not the annihilation of a man. It is rather the reckoning after all the efforts fought with faith, the awareness of redemption. Masterfully, in the first words “So hush little baby / don't you cry”, Elvis conveys the painful but contained agony of such a heartbroken separation. When Elvis sang *An American Trilogy in Aloha from Hawaii*, he was facing an unexpected divorce and the consequence of parting with his only daughter. Probably, Elvis felt in his own heart, those words of the song, just as if he was speaking directly to his little beloved daughter. The power of the faith of a dying man, the tender love of a father for

his son: these are the only elements that can conquer hatred among men. Faith and love can unify peoples; they are the only weapons against the battles of life.

While Elvis sang “bound to die” softly, a choir rises heavenly. The choir recalls a host of angels ready to take up to Heaven that father who has just ended his victorious battle; Also, the way Presley sings the long note “all” when he intones “but *all* my trials Lord” suggests the ascension. The “unknown” protagonist is, in effect, like a leader who continues his march, holding his head up high, in spite of the fact that he was approaching his death. The biblical reference is implied: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”²⁸ Nearly at the end of the song, a solitary sound of a flute rises sweet and melancholy. Like a tribute, it resumes the Southern march. Originally, the song was supposed to end at this point, but Elvis decided to introduce the refrain once again: a roar breaks that harmonic ecstasy, the drums return to vibrate impetuously, and Elvis’ voice is very powerful:

Glory, Glory Hallelujah
His truth is marching on!

An American Trilogy is not only a masterpiece for Elvis’ career and his signature concert song of the 1970s. It is also a concrete example of his huge worldwide impact on Southern spirituality and Christian identity. In other words, as well indicated by Charles Reagan Wilson,²⁹ spirituality uses the concert stage to challenge listeners to go beyond divisive ideologies and to lead people to question their identity. The theologian, Tex Sample, has perfectly reached the heart of the matter: “I am by now struggling with the question of my own identity as a southerner, an American, and a Christian” here ported after he listened to the song.³⁰ With *An American Trilogy* Elvis manifests the virtues of faith, hope and love: a trilogy of values that should forge the United States of America and every man all over the world.

²⁸ Timothy 2, 4:7.

²⁹ C. R. Wilson, “Just a Little Talk with Jesus” *Elvis Presley, Religious Music, and Southern Spirituality*, “Southern Cultures”, 12 (2006) 4, pp. 86–87.

³⁰ T. Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God*, Nashville 1998, Abingdon Press, p. 103.

4. Elvis' spirituality in music

Marian Justice Cocke, personal nurse of Elvis Presley since 1975, declares that nowadays, few people know just how religious Elvis was. But at his time, people “valued such spiritual-moral qualities as religion and manners.”³¹ Marian Cocke described Elvis as someone “very close to God”, a man who “knew that his talent was given to him by God, and he wanted to return to God what was rightfully His.”³² One of the ways he did this was by helping many people, paying mortgages and medicines for those in need, providing work, and giving gifts to people he didn't know. “All I ever wanted” said Elvis, “is to help people, love them, lift them up, spread some joy.”³³ Regarding the meaning of being religious, Elvis declared during an interview: “I believe in God; I believe in Him with all my heart. I think being religious means that you love God and that you are grateful for all He has given, and want to work for Him. I owe everything that's happened to me to Him. God is always there to pick you up if you should fail. A heart and song upon your lips for God loves you.”³⁴

Elvis began to feel uncomfortable with his fame and fortune since he had to leave a church function before the service was over, due to the uproar created by his presence. In a fan-magazine interview, Elvis listed “not being able to attend church regularly” as one of his ten top dislikes.³⁵ This fact forced him to follow preaching on television. Every Sunday, Elvis never missed the television function, not matter if he was in the middle of a rehearsal.³⁶ However, many times, Elvis manifested his desire to go to church regularly again. Elvis' great concern was to achieve closeness to faith and God in spite of fame. One of the verses underlined in his Bible is Luke 9:25 “For what is a man advantage if he gains the whole world and lose himself or be cast away?”. That explains his tremendous love

³¹ C. R. Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*, Georgia 1995, University of Georgia Press, p. 113.

³² M. J. Cocke, *I Called Him Babe. Elvis Presley's Nurse Remembers*, Memphis 1979, Memphis State University Press, p. 21.

³³ *Elvis on Tour*, Documentary directed by P. Adidge, 1972.

³⁴ E. Presley, 28 August 1956 at the 20th Century-Fox Studios Interview, Hollliwood; Cfr. Darrin Lee Memmer, *Elvis & Kathy – Together at the Houston Summit '76: The Human Spirit Triumphs Over Sickness*, United States of America 2017, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform.

³⁵ J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 50.

³⁶ Cfr. J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street.

for gospel music and his many contributions to people. There is no question that “the combination of preaching from television and the words and image of the gospel he sang, Elvis managed to achieve what he thought was his closest possible approach to a ‘normal’ devotional life”, as Moscheo stated.³⁷ The bond he established with religious music and his Southern spirituality, permitted him not only to remain closer to God, but also “to awaken in all these young people a closer relationship with God.”³⁸ Well known is the episode when after hearing a fan girl screaming “Elvis, you’re the king” he turned to her and softly, but firmly, replied that he was not the king because the only king is Jesus Christ.³⁹ This is a scene which has been reported several times. Throughout his music, he conveyed a religious message. “Why music?” asked Elvis Presley’s step-brother Billy Stanley in his book, *The Faith of Elvis*: because “music touches the heart directly. Elvis was committed to using this powerful tool to reach as many people as possible.” He reflected what Samuel Hill has called the central theme of Southern religion: the abiding evangelical impulse toward conversion as the essence of religious faith.⁴⁰

Billy Stanley recalls how Elvis used to teach religiousness to his step-brothers: before their first meeting, as Elvis took time to put his six-year step-brother to bed, he knelt at the edge of the bed and taught Billy the evening prayer: “Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for this day and for our many blessings. I want to thank you for bringing these three little boys into my life. I promise to love and protect them, for the rest of my life.” As Billy recalls, “From the day we met until our last conversation, he shared that faith with me.” “It began with a special bedtime prayer our first night at Graceland and ended just two days before his death in a conversation about Jesus, love and forgiveness.”⁴¹ The issue of Divine forgiveness became very dear to Elvis, especially during the latter period of his life. Just few days before his death, Elvis confessed to his brother that he was reflecting on his own sins. “I pray for that. I knew I was doing wrong, but I never

³⁷ J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 51.

³⁸ Cfr. P. Guralnik, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*, United States of America 1999, Little Brown, pp. 175–176.

³⁹ D. Hart, *The Ear of the Heart. An Actress’ Journey from Hollywood to Holy Vows*, San Francisco 2013, Ignatius Press, p. 73.

⁴⁰ C. R. Wilson, “Just a Little Talk with Jesus” *Elvis Presley, Religious Music, and Southern Spirituality*, “Southern Cultures”, 12 (2006) 4, p. 87.

⁴¹ B. Stanley, *The Faith of Elvis. A Story only a brother can Tell*, United States of America 2022, Nelson Book, p. xiii.

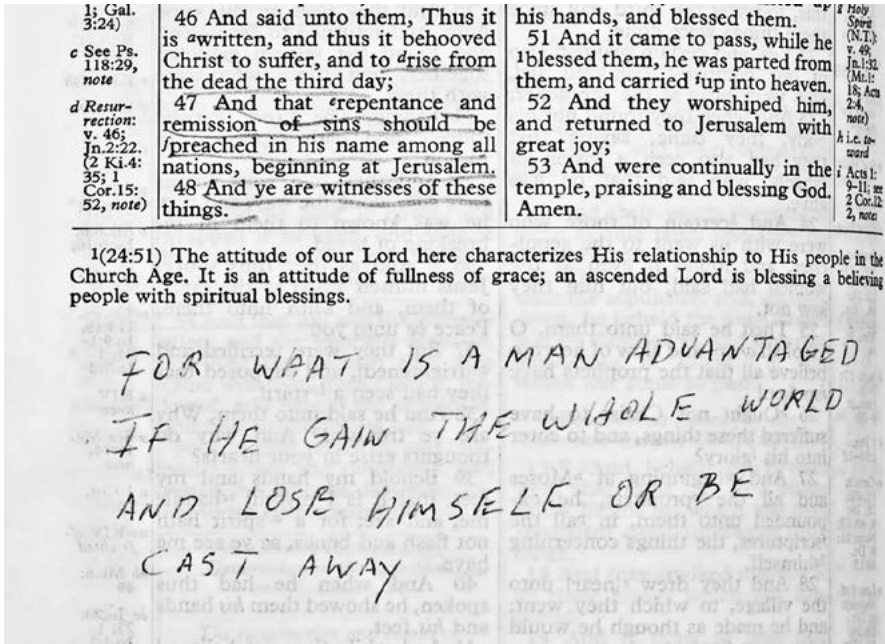


Figure 1: Handwritten notes by Elvis in a 1967 Bible. Source: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20150107-long-live-the-king> (20.11.2022).

lost my faith” Elvis said.⁴² *An Evening Prayer* is a majestic song about God’s forgiveness, which he recorded in the Album, *He Touched Me*. It is not a song about a prayer, it is rather a sung prayer:

If I have wounded any soul today
 If I have caused one’s foot to go astray
 If I have walked in my own willful way
 Dear Lord, forgive.
 Forgive the sins I have confessed to Thee
 Forgive my secret sins I do not see
 Oh guide, watch over me and my keeper be
 Dear Lord, Amen

The need for spirituality intensified in Elvis during the 70s. Struggles and uncertainties led him to seek answers to many theological questions. In 1972 Elvis recorded a song that stood out more than the others: *Miracle of The Rosary*. Why did a Baptist like Elvis with far less knowledge about Catholicism, decide to sing such a prayer addressed to the Holy Mother, Mary? It was not the first time that a traditional Catholic spirituality resonated with him. When he was in the Army in Bad Nauheim, Germany, in 1958 he became a friend of Monsignor Thaddeus Malanowski who was at that time the Catholic chaplain of the Army base. During the meeting Elvis opened his wallet and showed Fr. Malanowski a photo of his mother’s grave with a huge statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the grave. “It led me to believe his mother might have died a Catholic,” he said.⁴³ In 1975 Elvis shared with his medical doctor George Nichopoulos some books as *The Incarnation* by St. Athanasius and the sermons of St. John Chrysostom, demonstrating his will to learn more about the early Church.⁴⁴ In the same year, Presley welcomed backstage the television evangelist Rex Humbard and his wife Maude Aimee. Maude told

⁴² B. Stanley, *The Faith of Elvis. A Story only a brother can Tell*, United States of America 2022, Nelson Book, p. 185.

⁴³ Celebrating Monsignor Thaddeus Malanowski | Diocese of Bridgeport (bridgeportdiocese.org); Cfr. Thaddeus F. Malanowski, *Sacrifice for God and country*, Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, Lexington 2011, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁴ G. Nichopoulos, *The King and Dr. Nick. What Really Happened to Elvis and Me*, Nashville 2009, Thomas Nelson Inc., pp. 81–82.

Elvis she was praying, so he could be a *bell sheep*. In other words, she was praying that Elvis could lead millions of people to the Holy Land through his songs. Meanwhile, Elvis was facing a hard time due to many physical illnesses⁴⁵ and he broke into tears when he opened himself up to Humbard.⁴⁶ Many times Elvis manifested to be aware of the fact that he did not have much longer to live and he feared that his daughter, Lisa Marie, would never remember his father's faith: "What about my baby girl? How is Lisa Marie going to know the most important thing about her daddy when she grows up?" he asked his friend Larry Geller on one occasion.⁴⁷

The Gospel and religious music seem to have consoled Elvis more than ever throughout his last three years of life. Calls to faith were very persistent in his music during this period. Maybe the awareness of his frailty led him to sing on stage the country gospel song, *Help Me*, several times. This song tells the story of a tired man pleading for guidance and strength from God:

Lord, help me walk another mile, just one more mile
I'm tired of walking all alone.
Lord, help me smile another smile, just one more smile
You know I just can't make it by my own.

One gospel song became a clear expression of what he was passing through: that is the 1977 live version of *Where No One Stands Alone*. Here, every word of the song is embodied meaningfully and intensely, asking God to "please take my hand, let me stand where no one stands alone". The mood of these verses could be resumed in some notes Elvis apparently wrote to himself in December of 1976:

"I don't know who I can talk to anymore. Nor to turn to. I only have myself and the Lord. Help me, Lord, to know the right thing"

⁴⁵ For more information read S. A. Hoedel, *Elvis. Destined to Die Young*, Michigan USA 2021, Elvis Author LLC, pp. 435. According to this book, Elvis had many congenital health issues which lead him to die young, as well as many members of his family died at young age because of similar diseases.

⁴⁶ Cfr. J. Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, pp. 128–129.

⁴⁷ L. Geller, *Leaves of Elvis' Garden. The Song of His Soul*.

And:

“Prayer is my only salvation now. I feel lost sometimes...”⁴⁸

During his last years of life, Elvis changed his musical repertoire: less rock and many romantic ballads, and many more gospel songs. His manner of performing was changing too: the provocative movements of the 50s had been removed a long time before. In the special television CBS “Elvis in Concert” (June 1977), fans manifested their appreciation for Elvis’ religiosity. This concert was one of his last ones. It is evident how much more intimacy emanated from the words of the song *How Great Thou Art*, converted into “How Great *I think you are*” (italics mine). The well-known *Unchained Melody* symbolizes Elvis’ last performance in this concert. The words are emotional and meaningful:

Time goes by so slowly
And time can do so much
Are you still mine?
I need your love
God speed your love to me.
Lonely rivers flow
To the sea, to the sea
To the open arms of the sea
Lonely rivers cry
Wait for me, wait for me
I’ll be coming home, wait for me.

Originally, *Unchained Melody* was a romantic song, but Elvis sings it like a spiritual song, putting all his soul into it. Therefore, Elvis Presley’s version of *Unchained Melody* seems also not to be addressed to an earthly love. Instead, it is a heartbreaking appeal of love to God. He asks God to speed His love to him, because he is ready to go to the open arms of the sea. He asks God to wait for him because he’s coming home. Despite his notable physical decline, Elvis invested all his energies to create such an ecstatic song which thus became one of his

⁴⁸ J. Osborne, *Word for Word*, USA 2000, Harmony Books, cited in Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis*, New York 2007, Center Street, p. 130.

signature tune. At the end, he took the leave of his audience saying “until we meet again, God bless you.”

However, these sentiments of pain and weakness were alternated with ones of confidence and praise to God as he sang, “So help me Jesus, my soul is in your hands” in *Why me, Lord?* And words of hope as we can find in one of his favorites songs *You’ll Never Walk Alone*: “After a storm there’s a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark / Walk on with the hope in your heart and you’ll never walk alone”. The song *The Wonder of You*, was specifically addressed to the Lord.⁴⁹ It reminds us that Jesus is the only consolation, the only One who is always there to lend a hand when no one else can understand you:

When no one else can understand me
when everything I do is wrong
You give me hope and consolation
You give me strength to carry on
And you’re always there to land a hand in all I try to do
That’s the wonder of You.

The lyrics of all these songs express a high range of feelings, but most of them disclose accounts of confidence and acceptance. Maybe this confidence can be resumed with Elvis’ comment, once said to his friend: “when and where we meet again it will be more beautiful than we could imagine here on earth.”⁵⁰ This statement seems to be elicited from the words of *Peace in The Valley* performed at Ed Sullivan Show eleven years before:

Oh well, I’m tired and so weary
But I must go alone
‘Til the Lord comes and calls
There’ll be no sadness, no sorrow
No trouble I see
There will be peace in the valley for me.

⁴⁹ *Elvis by the Presleys*, documentary directed by R. Krug, 2002.

⁵⁰ K. Westmoreland, letter of September 1977. Grazie Elvis – Elvis Presley Official Fan Club: LETTERA KATHY WESTMORELAND – SETTEMBRE 1977 (grazielvis.it) (29.10.2022).

5. Conclusions

The present study tried to demonstrate the impact of Elvis' faith as it emerged in his music. It is possible to resume three main points that characterized this paper. Firstly, Elvis was able to unify White and Black worlds through gospel music, and he led people to question about what really means to be Christian. Secondly, Elvis demonstrated that religious music could also be interpreted as a powerful tool of evangelization. Thirdly, Elvis promoted gospel music throughout the whole world, and with so much feeling, as has never done it before. We can say that Elvis' faith blossomed into his gospel songs as one of the best expressions of his life. A pair of questions are expected to be asked: did Elvis introduce his music at the appropriate time? Was he a *bell sheep*? Without a doubt, every great man was born at the right time. Elvis surely found a fertile ground where he could sow the Gospel's seed. But it is also true that his charisma led people to appreciate gospel music. Even today, it awakens the faith in the hearts of many listeners. Elvis Presley has always displayed the will to walk by God's side and to encourage people to do the same thing. Like the title of his song, he wanted to be "nearer, my God, to Thee".

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