

REBEL ARCHIVES PRESENTS

Sweet Sweet Spirit



*The Gospel Music Of
Elvis Presley*

David Parker



Sweet Sweet Spirit



An expanded version of an article originally published in **Elvis Unlimited** magazine:



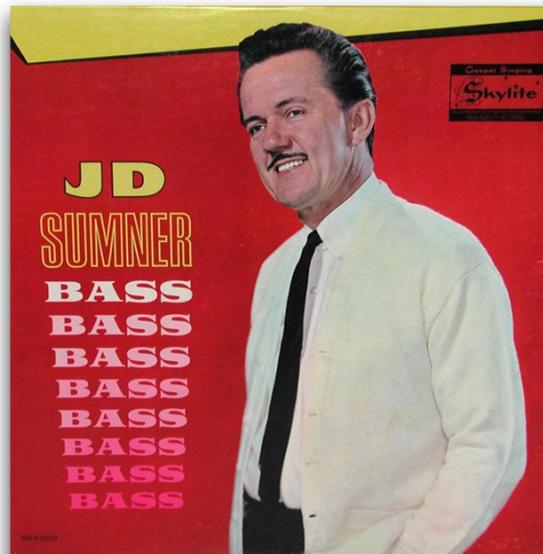
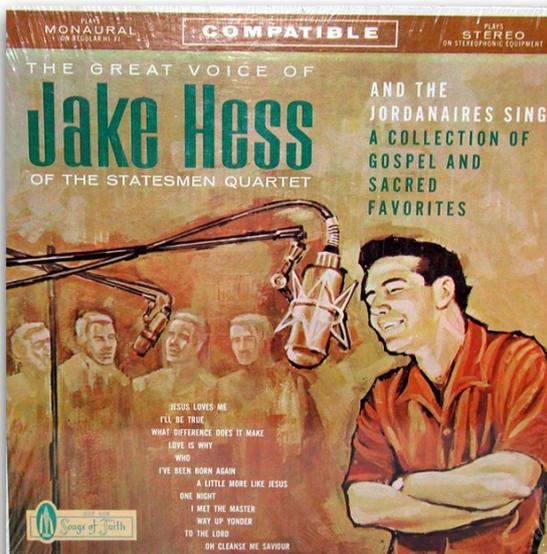
Las Vegas, Nevada, December 7th, 1976: After performing the “Hawaiian Wedding Song” Elvis tells the audience, “there’s something that I wanna do before I leave here, because we’ve never done this before...if you don’t mind, I know you’ve been sitting here for a long time, (but) I’d like to do a couple or three spiritual songs for you”. Elvis is planning an impromptu gospel medley of “You Better Run” and “Bosom Of Abraham”, and will sing the bass parts, whilst Charlie Hodge takes over lead vocal duties.



Before he starts singing a member of the audience calls out “you’re the king!” to which Elvis replies, “thank you sir, I’m fixing to sing about him”. This moment really sums up Elvis’ love of gospel music, and his attitude towards his own faith, and as it was recorded during one of the shows from his final Las Vegas season, it also provides a timely reminder that gospel music was an important influence on both Elvis’ music, and his stage performances, from his first recordings right up until his last.

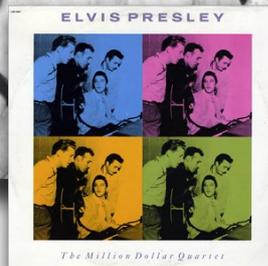
The Presley family moved to Memphis in 1948, and Elvis would attend the First Assembly of God Church with his mother Gladys. Gospel music was undoubtedly his first love, and both the singing and physical performance styles of gospel quartets such as The Blackwood Brothers and The Statesman Quartet were a huge influence on the young Elvis. James Blackwood recalled, “The story got out that he auditioned for The Blackwood Brothers and we told him he couldn’t sing, but this is entirely untrue. I don’t know where this story got started, but there was not a vacancy in The Blackwood Brothers and he did not audition for us”.

Elvis certainly admired The Blackwood Brother’s bass singer J.D. Sumner, and was also a fan of the bass singer from The Statesmen “big chief” Jim Wetherington, along with their lead singer Jake Hess, but after choosing to record pop ballads for the first two demonstration discs he recorded for Sun records back in 1953, Elvis’ singing career started off in a somewhat different direction. Whilst Elvis didn’t record any gospel music during his time with Sun records, the influence of gospel music is certainly evident in both the music Elvis, Scotty and Bill were creating, and Elvis’ own unique vocal style that was beginning to attract so much attention across America’s southern states.



It's no co-incidence therefore, that when Elvis made a return visit to Sun Studios on December 4, 1956, and the informal session that came to be known as the "Million Dollar Quartet" was recorded, gospel music featured heavily throughout the session, and the participants Elvis, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis, knew all of these songs by heart. It's fascinating to listen to the three young rock 'n' roll singers, who were criticised by the media at the time for playing what was termed vulgar music, or the devil's music, sharing their enjoyment of the gospel music they were brought up with.

In 2006 the famed "Million Dollar Quartet" tape was finally released in its entirety by Sony/BMG, and this recording provides a fascinating insight into the influence of gospel music on both Elvis and his Sun Records label-mates.



Amongst the gospel performances committed to tape that day were four selections that Elvis would later go on to record. These were; “When The Saints Go Marching In”, “Peace In The Valley”, “Down By The Riverside”, and “Farther Along”.

A further home recording of “When The Saints Go Marching In”, which also dates from December 1956, was issued on the box set, “Platinum: A Life In Music” in 1997.

According to Gordon Stoker of The Jordanaires the vulgar tag that was directed towards Elvis’ stage movements, “really hurt him”. The group’s Ray Walker also made reference to this saying, “actually he cried when people were putting him down about that, and he thought, well what else can I do, that’s all I’ve ever known, I do it in church, you know”.

It certainly wasn’t Elvis’ intention to offend anybody with his stage movements, but the media reaction towards them continued to cause controversy, and by the time he appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show for the third time on January 6, 1957 the cameramen at the CBS Studios in New York City were ordered to film Elvis from the waist up.

The third Sullivan show is also notable, as this was the first time that Elvis featured a gospel performance during one of his TV appearances.



The song was “Peace In The Valley”, and was a favourite of Elvis’ mother’s.

Gordon Stoker of The Jordanaires recalled that the show’s producers were not keen on including a gospel song during Elvis’ appearance: “We went to New York for the Ed Sullivan show, and they did not want “Peace In The Valley...they did not want a gospel song on that show, and (Elvis) said, “No, I told my mother that I was going to do ‘Peace In The Valley’ for her, and I’m going to do it”.

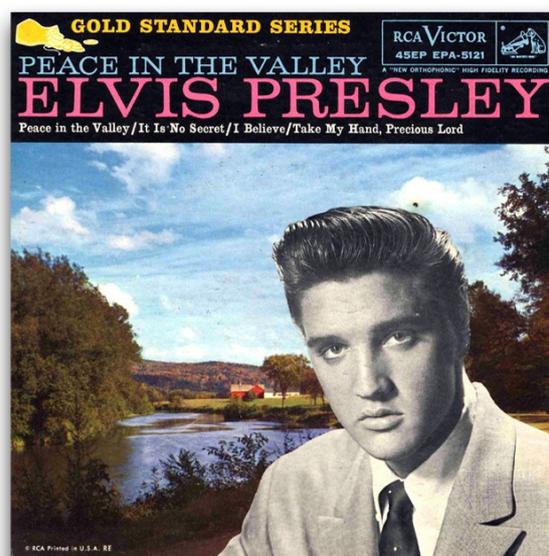
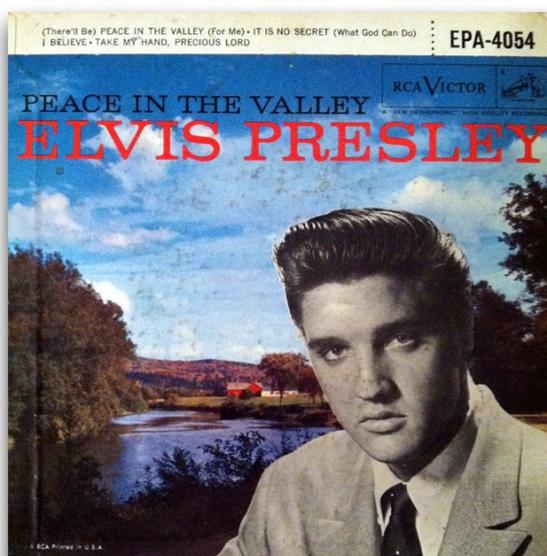
Elvis would record the song during a two day session at Radio Recorders in Hollywood between January 12 – 13, 1957. These were the first gospel recordings Elvis would cut for RCA, and along with “Peace In The Valley”, “I Believe and “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” were also recorded with vocal accompaniment from the Jordanaires.



A fourth gospel performance “It Is No Secret” was recorded later the same month, and the four songs were released on the “Peace In The Valley” EP later the same year.

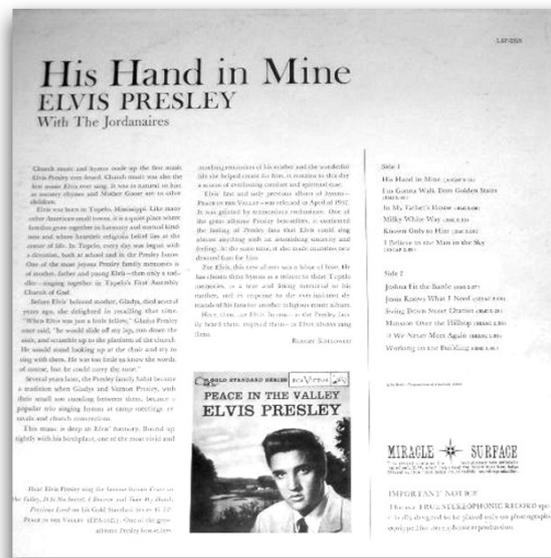
In October of 1957, Elvis’ first Christmas album was issued, and the four gospel selections from the “Peace In The Valley” EP were also included on this album.

The EP proved to be a very popular seller over the years, and was also given a later re-issue on RCA’s Gold Standard Series.



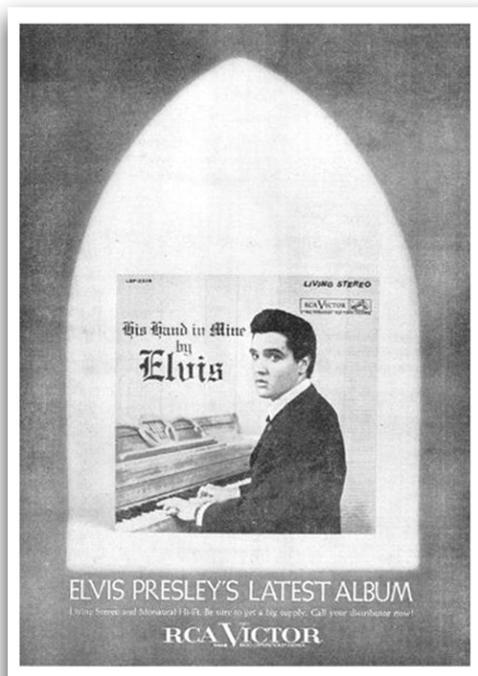
Elvis wouldn't get the chance to record any further gospel material until after his discharge from the US army in 1960, but gospel music remained part of his life, and he would continue to listen to, and perform gospel songs privately, now that his fame prevented him from attending church services, as he had done when he was growing up.

Following his discharge from the US army and subsequent secular and soundtrack sessions, Elvis recorded his first full gospel album "His Hand In Mine" at RCA's Studio B, Nashville between October 30 – 31, 1960. Once again The Jordanaires were on hand to provide the vocal accompaniment, and the album was obviously a labour of love, including songs made famous by both The Blackwood Brothers and The Statesmen Quartet. One of the album's tracks, "Working On The Building" had also been a gospel hit for Elvis' own vocal group The Jordanaires.





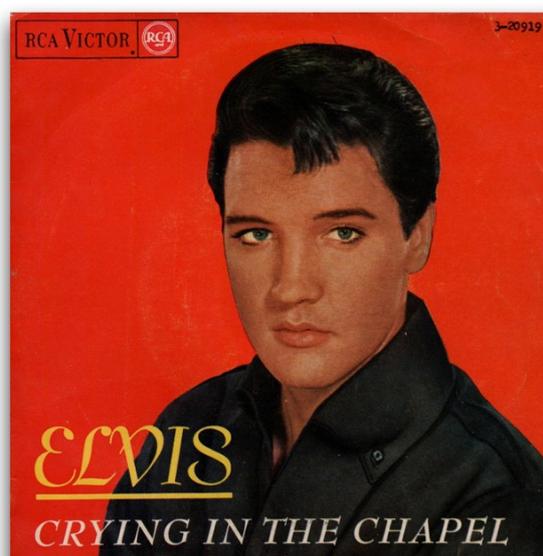
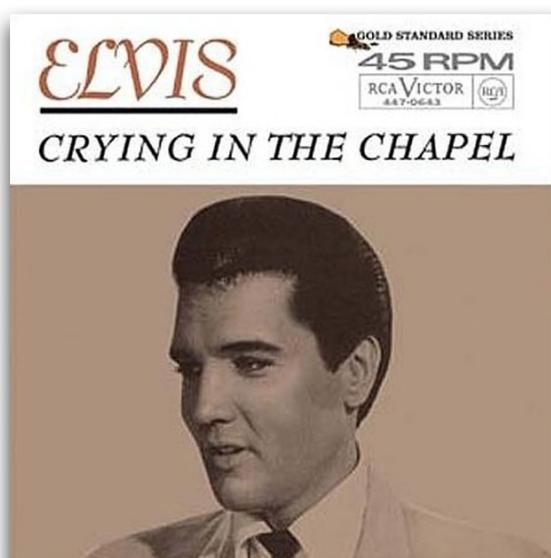
The album reached the respectable position of number 13 on the Billboard pop charts, and has proved to be very popular with both the fans and the wider public over the years. Tony Brown the piano player with the vocal group Voice, who toured with Elvis in the seventies, said of Elvis' gospel performances, "his demeanour when he was singing gospel music was shown in his face, you could tell that it was a deeper love (he had) for that music, than the secular mainstream songs that made him a star".



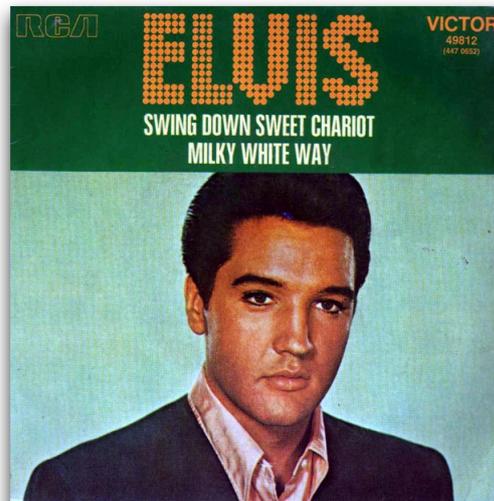
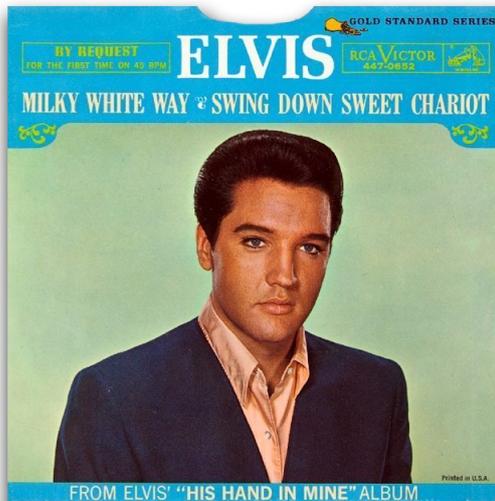
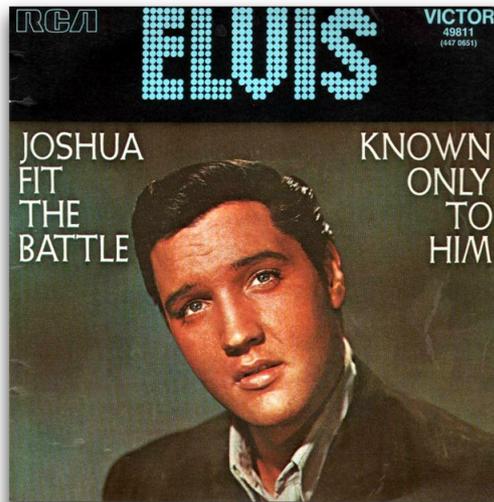
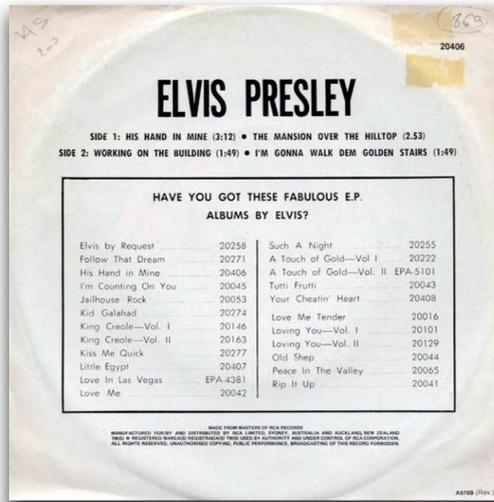
An additional song recorded at the "His Hand In Mine" sessions titled "Crying In The Chapel", was left in the can until 1965, when it was issued as a single coupled with "I Believe In the Man In The Sky".

Artistically 1965 was not a good year for Elvis. Beatlemania was in full swing, and the only new material Elvis recorded was for movie soundtracks of declining quality. Whilst not indicative of the times, this beautiful five year old gospel performance gave Elvis a number three hit in his native U.S. whilst reaching the number spot in the U.K.

Whilst it would take another few years before Elvis' career was well and truly back on track, the success of "Crying In The Chapel" proved that a good Presley recording could still capture the public's imagination, and when Elvis resumed his RCA recording career in Nashville during May of 1966, gospel music was very much back on his agenda



In early 1966 RCA released two singles from the "His Hand In Mine" album as part of their Gold Standard reissue series. "Joshua Fit The Battle" was coupled with "Known Only To Him", whilst "Milky White Way" was coupled with "Swing Down Sweet Chariot".

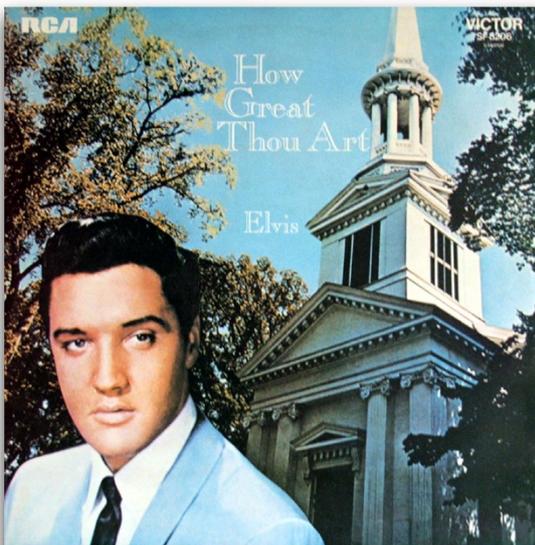
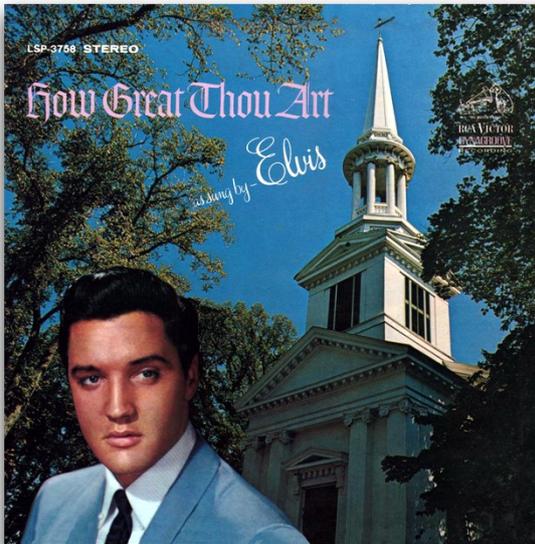




Elvis' next soundtrack album release, "Frankie & Johnny", also included a medley of two songs that dated back to the informal 'Million Dollar Quartet Sessions'; "Down By The Riverside" and "When The Saints Go Marching In".

Whilst the "Frankie & Johnny" album was disappointing, and showcased a singer clearly bored with much of the material on offer, it was a very different Elvis that arrived at RCA Studio B, Nashville in May of 1966 to start work on his second gospel album "How Great Thou Art".

Elvis was far more focused on this particular project, than he had been on any of the soundtrack material he had recorded the previous year.

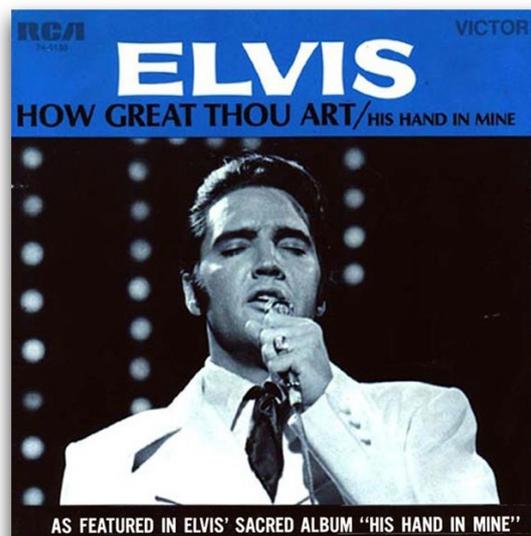
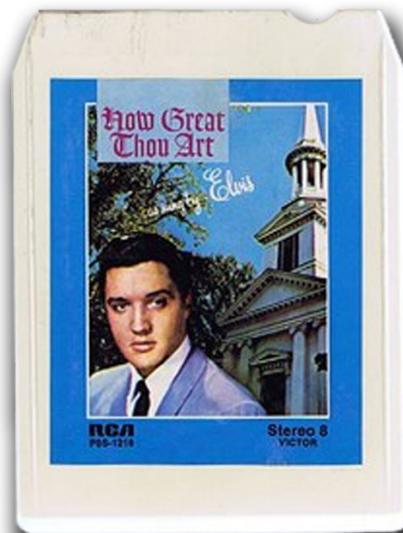
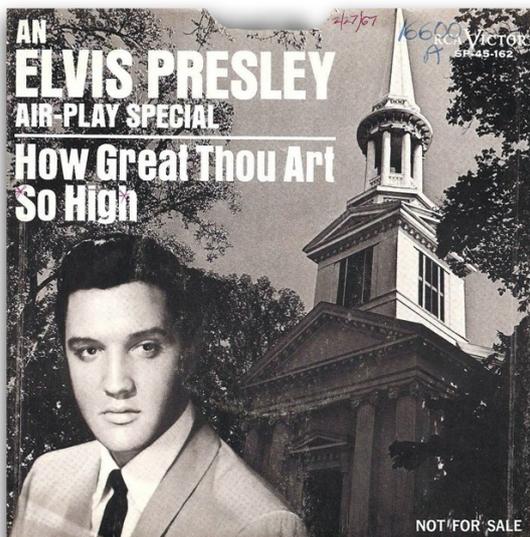


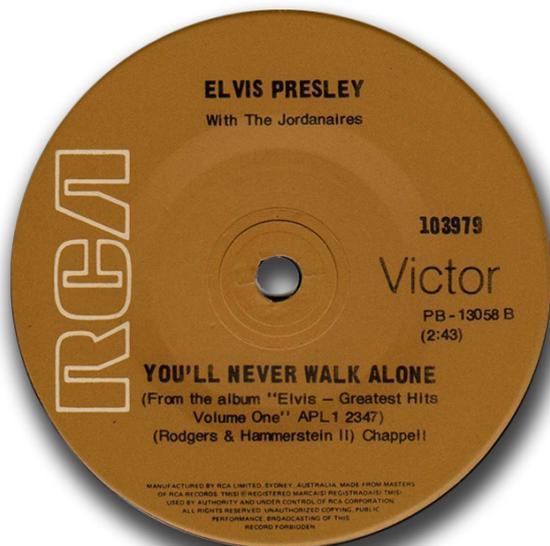
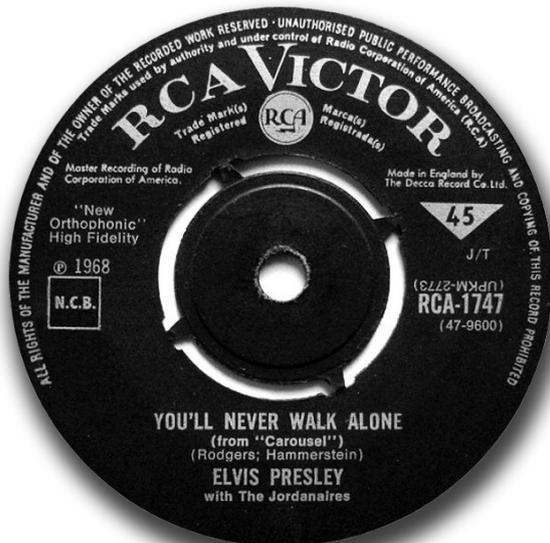
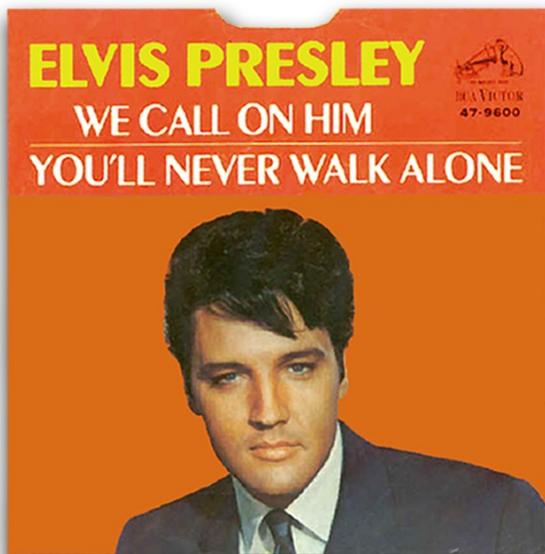
Recordings took place between May 25 - 28, 1966, and along with The Jordanaires, the sessions were boosted by the presence of a second gospel quartet, The Imperials, formed by one of Elvis' favourite gospel singers, Jake Hess.

Jake had previously been part of The Statesmen Quartet, and was undoubtedly one of Elvis' major musical influences.

The album included songs made famous by The Golden Gate Quartet, The Harmonizing Four, and Jimmy Jones, and like "His Hand Mine" showcased Elvis in fine voice, and obviously enjoying the recording sessions immensely

The album won Elvis his first Grammy Award for Best Sacred Performance, and reached number 19 on the Billboard pop charts. When Elvis started touring again in the 1970 the album's title track would be added to his stage repertoire, and became the highlight of many live performances.





The "How Great Thou Art" sessions were significant in that they produced Elvis' first non soundtrack recordings in two years, and really signalled the start of his artistic re-birth. Whilst Elvis was still tied to the Hollywood contracts during this period, and further soundtrack sessions followed, the quality of these recordings started to improve as Elvis was finally given more mature screen roles.

Elvis also continued to record secular material in RCA's Nashville studios, and a back to the roots approach started to emerge as the seeds of Elvis' great comeback were sown.

A September 1967 session which produced classic rhythm and blues recordings such as "Guitar Man," "Big Boss Man" and "High Heel Sneakers" also saw Elvis cut a version of "You'll Never Walk Alone". A song recorded by one of Elvis' favourite singers, Roy Hamilton.

Elvis started off by accompanying himself on piano, as he would have done during countless informal singing sessions over the years, and a full band arrangement was gradually worked out, with Elvis giving an impassioned vocal performance.

The beautiful modern gospel, "We Call on Him", was also recorded at these sessions, and both tracks were coupled together and issued as Elvis' 1968 'Easter Special' single.

Elvis' 1968 NBC TV Special is best known for the two 'sit down' shows which featured Elvis on lead guitar belting out rhythm and blues numbers as if his life depended on it. These were certainly the defining moments of the special. Performances that reminded the public of what was great about Elvis Presley in the first place, and showed the singer that he still had what it took to return to the stage, and reinvent himself as a modern, contemporary artist.

Side 2 Mono
LPM-4088 (WPRM-8052)

Elvis
Elvis Presley

- *1 Dialogue: Where Could I Go But to the Lord (Coats)
Up Above My Head (Brown); Saved (Leiber-Stoller)
- 2 Dialogue: Blue Christmas (Hayes-Johnson)
Dialogue: One Night (Bartholomew-King)
- 3 Memories (Strange-Davis)
- *4 Medley: Nothingville (Strange-Davis)
Dialogue: Big Boss Man (Smith-Dixon)
Guitar Man (Hubbard); Little Egypt (Leiber-Stoller)
Trouble (Leiber-Stoller); Guitar Man (Hubbard)
- 5 If I Can Dream (Brown)

From the Original Sound Track
of the NBC-TV Special

* Recorded in Stereo

MADE IN CANADA BY RCA LIMITED
FROM MASTER RECORDED BY RCA, LOS ANGELES
© 1968 RCA RECORDS, A DIVISION OF RCA BROADCASTING SYSTEMS, INC.
COLUMBIA, BROADCAST SYSTEMS

SINGER presents

ELVIS

**TUESDAY
DEC. 3rd
NBC-TV
IN COLOR**

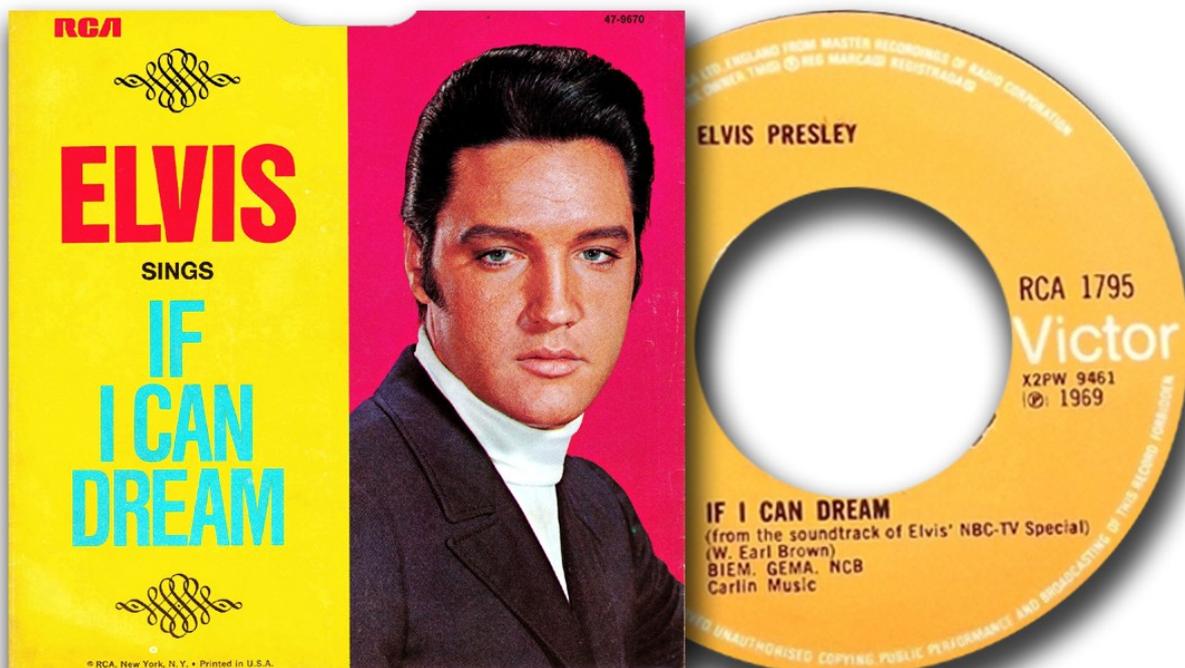
**9 PM EST/PST
8 PM CST/MST**

NA 5630

It was during the taping of the 'sit down' shows, that Elvis gave his thoughts on how popular music had evolved since his '50's heyday, and acknowledged the influence of gospel music on the modern, contemporary sounds:

"I'd like to talk a little bit about music... a very little. There's been a big change in the music field in the last ten or 12 years... and I think everything's improved, the sound has improved, the musicians have improved and the engineers have certainly improved... I like a lot of the new groups you know, The Beatles and The Byrds and whoever, but I really like a lot of the new music, but a lot of it is basically... rock 'n' roll music is basically gospel or rhythm and blues, or it sprang from that and people have been adding to it... adding instruments to it, experimenting with it..."

The above comments were used by the Special's producer, Steve Binder, as the segue into a memorable gospel production sequence which featured a medley of "Where Could I Go But To The Lord", "Up Above My Head" and "Saved", with vocal accompaniment from The Blossoms. The gospel influence was also present in the Special's closing number, "If I Can Dream", a call for tolerance and equality following the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis during the same year, which produced one of Elvis' truly great vocal performances.



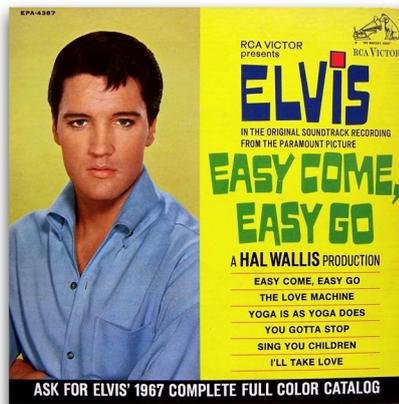
The Special aired on December 4th 1968, and received rave reviews. Elvis' Hollywood career was now drawing to a close, and a new era was about to begin for the revitalised performer, when in January of 1969, Elvis would record in Memphis again for the first time since his last session for Sun records during 1955.

The sessions at American Studios began on January 13th 1969, with the aim of producing enough contemporary, new material to produce an album, and a number of singles which would build on the momentum of the TV Special, and re-establish Elvis both artistically and commercially. The Chips Moman produced sessions were a resounding success, producing the albums "From Elvis In Memphis" and "Back In Memphis", along with smash hit singles such as

“In The Ghetto”, Suspicious Minds”, “Don’t Cry Daddy” and “Kentucky Rain”. The final song to be recorded at the sessions was the gospel, “Who Am I”, and whilst it didn’t feature on either of the Memphis albums, it was another great performance in the genre from Elvis, which provided a fitting end to his most successful studio sessions since the “Elvis Is Back!” album was recorded in Nashville during 1960.

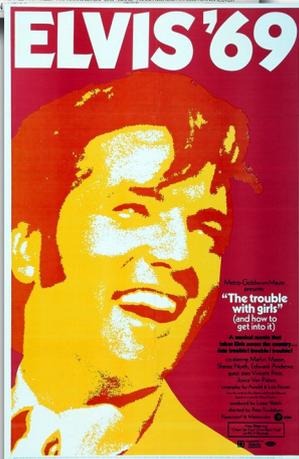
Following the Memphis sessions, Elvis would cut his final soundtrack recordings at Decca Universal Studios in Hollywood for what would be his last scripted movie, “Change Of Habit”. Like several of his later movies, the film explored more mature themes, and cast Elvis as a doctor working out of a New York ghetto, who is offered assistance in cleaning up the area from three nuns.

The film only featured four songs, and one of these was the modern gospel “Let Us Pray”, which also featured vocal accompaniment from The Blossoms. Elvis also met one of his favourite gospel singers, Mahalia Jackson, whilst shooting the movie.



“Let Us Pray” was one of three gospel performances that had featured in Elvis’ movie soundtracks since, 1967.

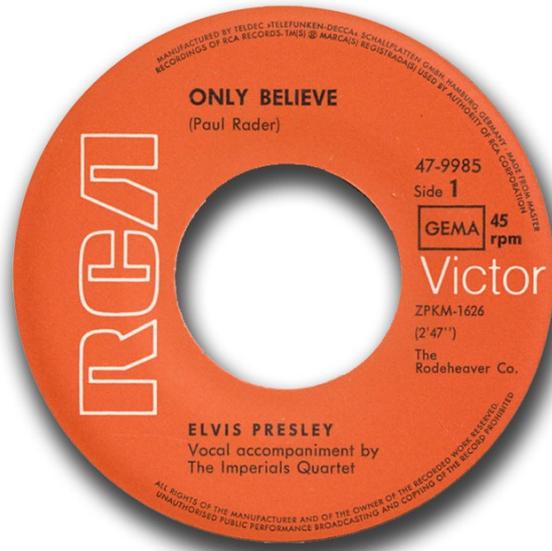
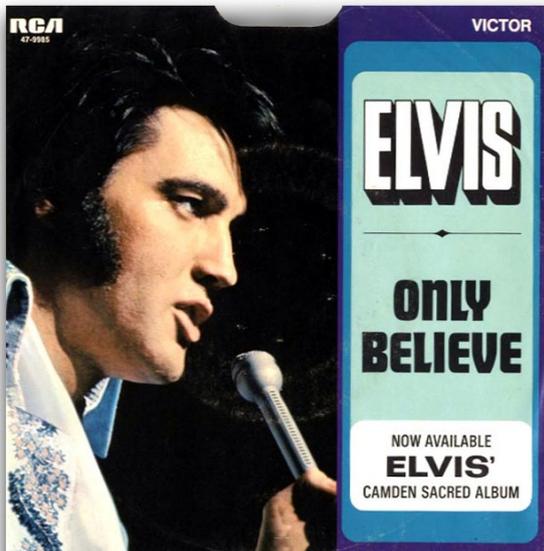
In 1966, Elvis cut “Sing You Children” for the movie “Easy Come, Easy Go”, whilst a 1968 recording session for the soundtrack of the movie “The Trouble With Girls” saw Elvis cut a remake of the song “Swing Down Sweet Chariot”. The song had originally featured on the “His Hand In Mine” album back in 1960, and the performance footage featured in the film was one of the highlights of the movie.



The majority of these performances were compiled on the 1971 budget album “You’ll Never Walk Alone”, which featured both sides of Elvis’ 1968 ‘Easter Special’ single of the same name, along with the

forgotten Memphis cut, “Who Am I”, “Let Us Pray”, and “Sing You Children”. The nine track album was filled out by the four songs from the 1957 E.P. “Peace In The Valley”, which had been deleted by this time, and whilst it wasn’t comparable to the two bona fide gospel albums Elvis had issued up to this point, it did a good job in rounding up a number of loose ends for the serious Presley collector, whilst also serving as an affordable introduction to his work in the gospel field for the casual buyer.

also feature prominently on Elvis' 1971 recording sessions as RCA had requested that their artist record a new gospel album, along with his first new Christmas collection since 1957. Not surprisingly Elvis showed more enthusiasm for the gospel title when the sessions began at RCA's Nashville studios in May of 1971.



The Imperials had undergone personnel changes since the “How Great Thou Art” sessions, and were now without Jake Hess. The sessions were completed in June of 1971, and the resulting album, “He Touched Me”, was issued in April of 1972.

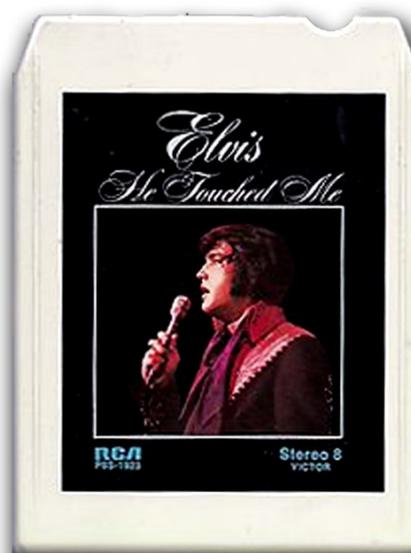
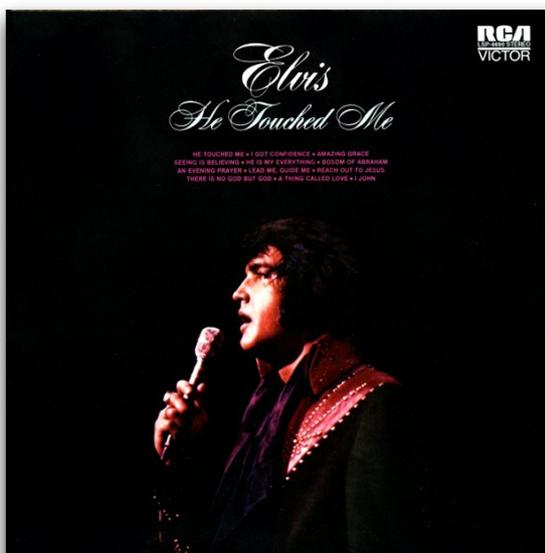
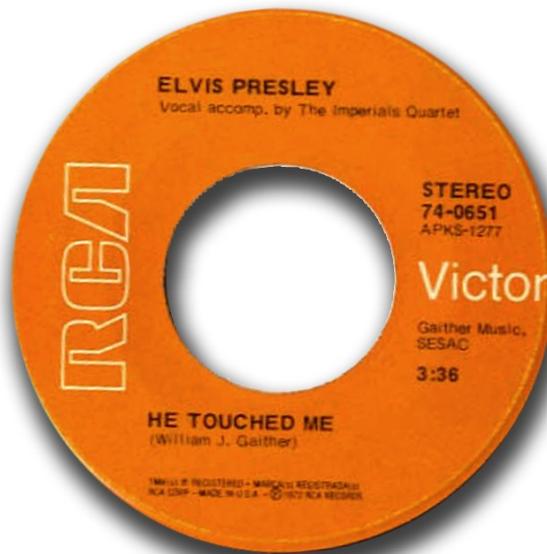
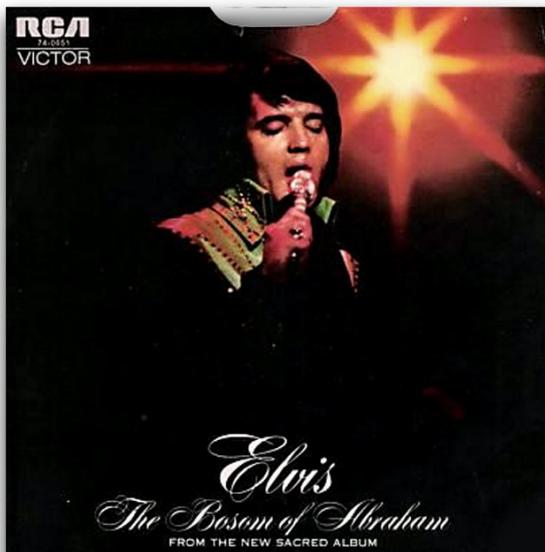
The album represented something of a departure from Elvis' previous gospel work, as it had a more contemporary, modern gospel sound. However, it didn't do quite as well on the pop charts as Elvis' previous gospel efforts, reaching number 79 on the Billboard chart, but it did win Elvis a second Grammy Award for Best Inspirational Performance, and has certainly proved popular with the fans over the years.

In what was becoming an RCA tradition, the “He Touched Me” album was preceded by an Easter 1972 single coupling of the album's title track and the up-tempo gospel, “Bosom Of Abraham”. A song that Elvis would occasionally include in his concert performances right up until 1977.

Additional gospel performances recorded at the same sessions but not included on the “He Touched Me” album, were “Miracle Of The Rosary” and “Put Your Hand In The Hand”. Both of these recordings were actually issued before the “He Touched Me” album on the rather inappropriately titled “Elvis Now” album, which was issued in February of 1972.

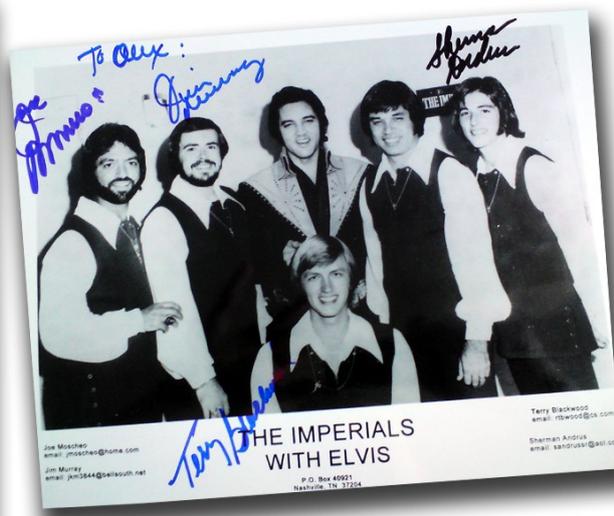
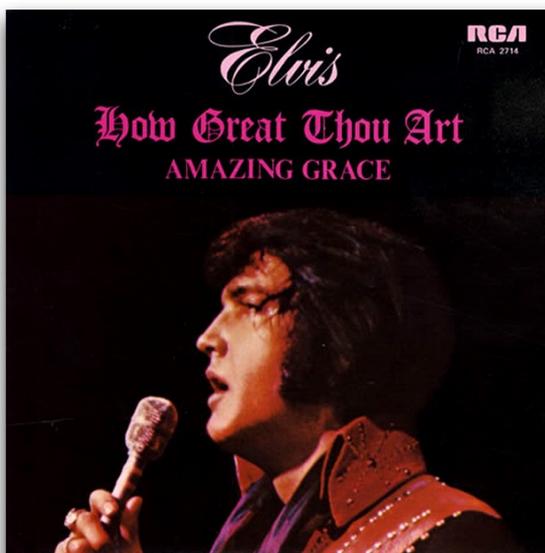
The album was haphazardly compiled from selections recorded at the May - June 1971 sessions, and session leftovers dating back as far as 1969.

J.D. Sumner and Stamps Quartet, a vocal group J.D. had formed after leaving The Blackwood Brothers in the mid sixties, replaced The Imperials on Elvis' November 1971 tour, and would continue to tour with Elvis until his final show in 1977. They also provided vocal accompaniment during his studio sessions from this point onwards.



Elvis had always admired J.D. and had once held ambitions to be a bass singer in a gospel quartet himself when he was first starting out. Elvis can be seen singing the bass parts, and sharing a joke with J.D. during a rehearsal performance of "Bosom Of Abraham" from the 1972 MGM documentary "Elvis On Tour". The film also featured rehearsal versions of "Lead Me, Guide Me", and "I John" from the "He Touched Me" album, along with "You Better Run", which was also an occasional feature of Elvis' stage act.

Tony brown of Voice commented on these informal singing sessions during the documentary "He Touched Me – The Gospel Music Of Elvis Presley": "I would watch him sing with The Stamps, and in his mind that was his worship service. He wasn't singing to hear himself sing lead, he was singing because he was worshipping with those guys". Watching Elvis' facial expressions as The Stamps Quartet perform "Sweet, Sweet Spirit" during the same documentary, probably says more about Elvis' love of gospel music than words ever could.

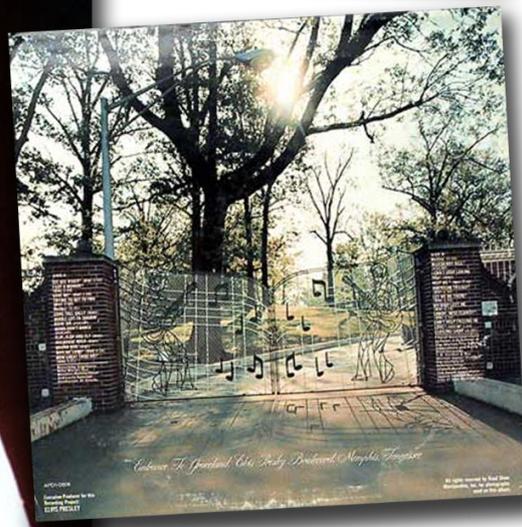
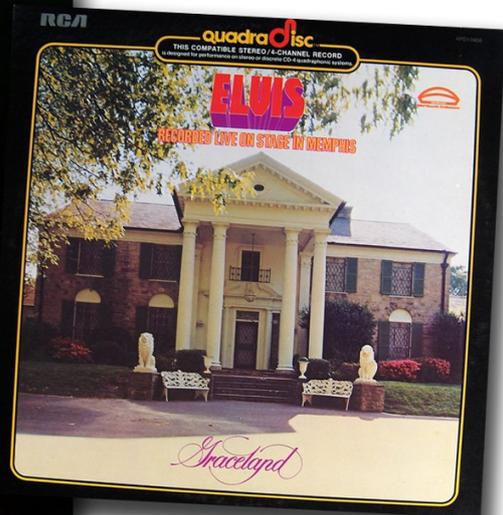
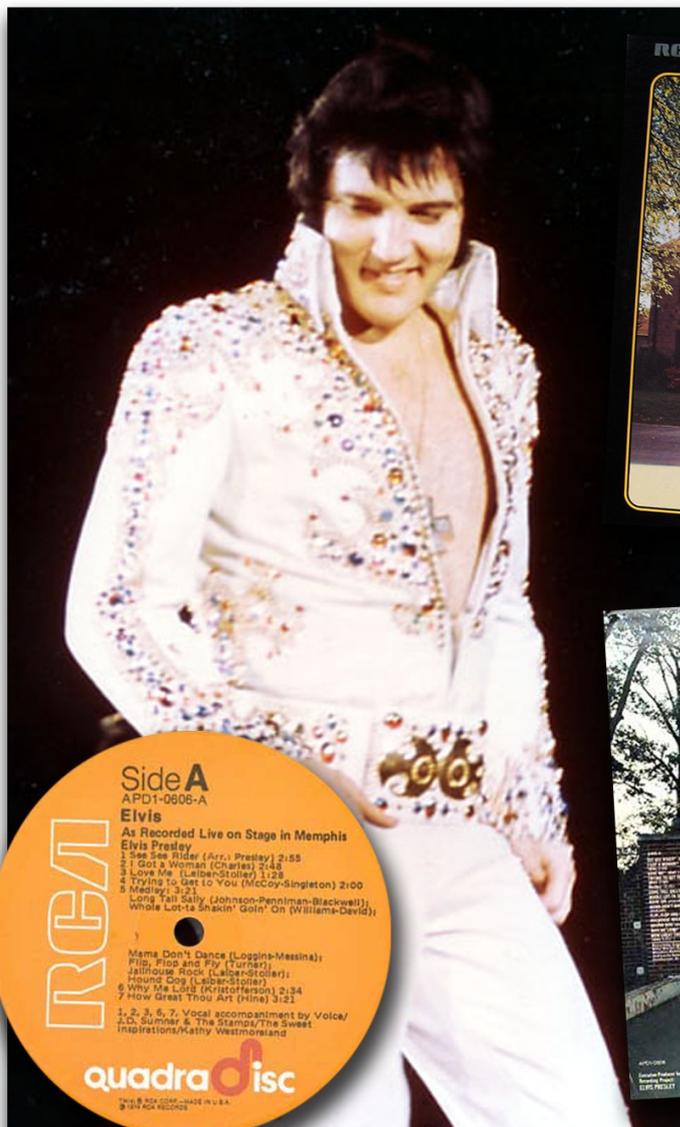


Whilst no gospel performances had featured in Elvis' previous MGM documentary feature, "That's The Way It Is", a number of performances were captured during filming, and these included rehearsal versions of "Farther Along" and the Edwin Hawkins Singers' hit "Oh Happy Day". Elvis also performed "Oh Happy Day" live during his August 1970, Las Vegas season, and whilst this wasn't captured by the MGM cameras, footage of the rehearsal performances from both of the MGM documentaries is now circulating amongst collectors via imported DVD releases.

An excellent live performance of "How Great Thou Art", which was filmed at the Hampton Coliseum on April 9th 1972, during the making of "Elvis On Tour", but not included in the final print of the film, was also given an official home video release on the title, "The Lost Performances" back in 1992. Unfortunately this title has still not seen an official DVD release.



During his live performances Elvis liked to showcase J.D.'s bass singing whenever possible, and when the Kris Kristofferson song "Why Me Lord" was added to his stage act in 1974, J.D. would sing the verses, whilst Elvis would join in on the chorus. A version of this song was issued on the album "Elvis As Recorded Live On Stage In Memphis", which also included live performances of "Help Me" and "How Great Thou Art". The live version of "How Great Thou Art" from this album won Elvis his third Grammy Award for Best Inspirational Performance.



Whilst Elvis didn't cut another gospel album during his lifetime some of his later studio albums did include gospel performances, along with the secular material, and along with the aforementioned "Elvis Now", the 1974 album "Good Times" featured a performance of "It That Isn't Love", whilst the studio version of "Help Me" was included on the "Promised Land" album in 1975.

"Help Me" was also issued as a single in May of 1974, c/w "If You Talk In Your Sleep".



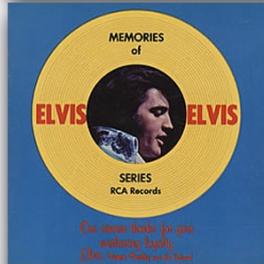
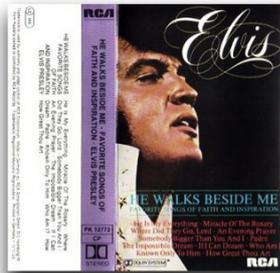
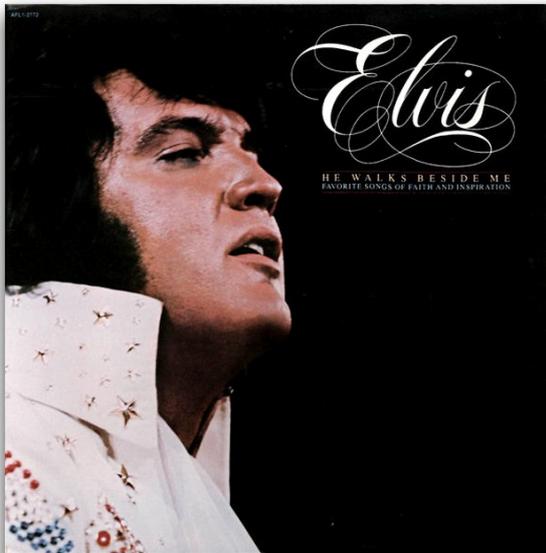
Despite failing health Elvis performed a powerful version of "How Great Thou Art" during a concert in Omaha, Nebraska on June 19, 1977 that was taped for the CBS TV Special "Elvis In Concert". The CBS cameras also taped Elvis' performance in Rapid City, South Dakota on June 21, and during this show Elvis paid tribute to J.D. Sumner during the introductions, telling the audience, "when I was a kid I used to go to all the gospel concerts, and I was with J.D. when he first started working for The Blackwood Brothers Quartet. I saw him one night try twenty five times to hit a note on the piano, and I was sixteen years old, and I never thought that he'd be on the same stage...so it's really a pleasure J.D."



J.D. himself also had fond memories of the young Elvis at the gospel meetings recalling, “There was a (gospel) sing at the Ellis auditorium, which was two blocks from where he lived in the housing projects, and he was always at the sings, and then one month he missed, and the next month he came back and I said, son where were you last month, why didn’t you come, (and Elvis) said, I didn’t have enough money to buy a ticket. I said, well you won’t need any money from now on, you just come to the stage door, I’ll let you in for nothing, and that’s the way it remained until the next thing I knew he was letting me in his stage door, cause I didn’t have the money”.

The CBS TV Special, “Elvis In Concert” was screened in October of 1977 following Elvis’ passing, and the album of same name which included Elvis’ final live performance of “How Great Thou Art” was released at the same time.

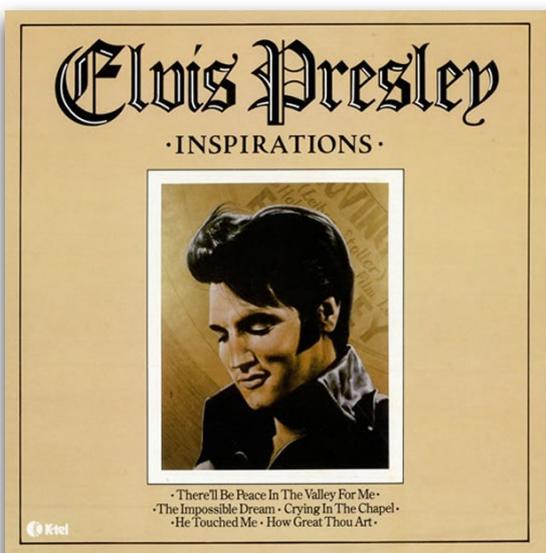
Elvis’ gospel albums returned to the charts in the months following his death, and this no doubt influenced RCA’s decision to release a gospel themed compilation for their first album release of 1978. The album titled “He Walks Beside Me: Favourite Songs of Faith and Inspiration” was a strange collection, as some of the selections included didn’t really fit into either category.



The 11 track album included two love songs, "Where Did They Go Lord" and "Padre", but it was made worthwhile to collectors by the inclusion of the previously unreleased take 4 of "If I Can Dream", and the February 1972 master recording of "The Impossible Dream", which had remained in the vaults after Elvis had also included the song in his June 10, 1972 Evening Performance at Madison Square Garden in New York which was issued in it's entirety during the same year.

U.K. Fans were given a far better overview of Elvis' gospel recordings on the K-Tel album "Inspirations" which was issued in 1980 and included 20 tracks recorded between 1957 and 1972.

Since then numerous compilations of Elvis' gospel recordings have been released, and they



continue to appeal to both serious Presley fans and the casual buyer. It is therefore fitting, that all three of Elvis' original gospel albums are now available in deluxe editions from the FTD label, and the standard versions of these titles, along with the budget priced "You'll Never Walk Alone", are still part of the mainstream Sony CD catalogue.

From the music he heard in church as a child, the all night gospel sings he attended in his youth, and the songs he performed during his career, gospel music was always an important part of Elvis Presley's life, and the recordings he made in the genre remain an essential part of his musical legacy.



