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August 12, 2005

Elvis Slept Here ... and here and here.

Keeping house for the King.

by [ANDRIA LISLE](#)

While it's been nearly 30 years since Elvis Presley left the building for good, his spirit lingers like a beloved houseguest all over town. Elvis' heady essence pervades restaurants like the Arcade, where he occasionally held court in a corner booth, and holds fast to the Midtown theater seats where he'd sit and stare at the silver screen. His shadow looms over Beale Street and Sun Studio alike, insisting *Elvis was here*. An overalls-wearing country boy who metamorphosed into a flashy, golden god, the details of his life form a story that's part Greek myth, part American dream - and all Memphis.

Evidence of Elvis' earthly existence is all over the city - from the Presleys' early home uptown in the Lauderdale Courts housing project to the East Memphis home he bought after signing with RCA in 1955. It extends south, to the Graceland mansion, where Elvis lived until his death - and where he lies buried in the backyard today. *Elvis slept here - and here and here*, the legend goes, but in these homes, it's a tangible tale, chock-full of the documents and detritus of daily life. Let Virginia celebrate Mount Vernon and California claim Hearst Castle. In Memphis, we don't give a damn about former presidents or newspaper magnates. We're keeping house for a King.

Over the years, maintaining Elvis' former residences and all his material possessions has become quite a chore. According to Kevin Kern, media coordinator for Elvis Presley Enterprises, as many as 3,000 fans tour Graceland a day, which means a lot of wear-and-tear. The 18-room limestone house was built by Dr. Thomas Moore in 1939 and purchased by Elvis in 1957 for more than \$100,000. It was officially opened to the public in 1982. At the time, EPE - which was founded by Elvis, his father, Vernon Presley, and his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, in the 1950s - was financially destitute. ("It was open the house, or lose it," says Kern.) But now Graceland is one of the top tourist attractions in the nation.

During Elvis' time, two secretaries, three or four cooks, and his infamous entourage, the Memphis Mafia, had the run of the place, along with his parents, dozens more relatives, and a menagerie that included peacocks, donkeys, horses - and Scatter, the chimpanzee. When Graceland opened for tours, Elvis' clothes still hung in his closet upstairs, and office file cabinets were stuffed with priceless documents. In 1990, EPE established an archives department to focus on conservation and exhibition aspects of both the house and its furnishings. Now approximately 400 employees work for the corporation, taking a proactive approach to the King's legacy as an artist and as a human being.

As the chief collections manager at Graceland, Angie Marchese is responsible for most of Elvis' belongings, the majority of which, she says, are stored in three offsite warehouses. At last count, Marchese totaled 4,000 wardrobe items, including 77 jumpsuits, 60,000 images, and a million paper documents, including contracts, autographs, and general receipts.

"Vernon kept everything," she says, "which I believe came from growing up poor during the Depression when you had to prove that you owned something. We have thousands of

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statements from NBC bank, as well as receipts for car payments, grocery bills, water bills, furniture purchases, you name it."

Although Marchese is careful to explain that EPE isn't in the business of authenticating Elvis items not in the Graceland collection, she will sift through records to research whether or not Elvis made a particular purchase. "I'll give a 'yes' or 'no' answer, but we don't supply official documentation," she notes.

And no, she adds, Graceland isn't looking to acquire much more memorabilia. "There are very few pieces out there we need," she cautions, pointing out that EPE actually auctioned off a few thousand items at a 1999 fund-raiser for the Presley Place housing development. "We sold off a copy of Elvis' RCA contract and an early report card, but it was all for a good cause," she says.

For now, Marchese's main focus is cataloging and documenting all of the items in the EPE archives for a permanent database. It is, she says, a two-year project that continually yields surprises, like a stack of negatives from Elvis' army induction, which were found in a file folder last month. Another chore, preserving odd items such as polyester clothing and fake fruit, has her corresponding with textile and costume museums, as well as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Smithsonian Institution. And whenever EPE loans out a piece of Presleyana, Marchese hand-delivers the item. "The airline can lose my luggage, but they can't lose Elvis' stuff," she quips. "He's like my kid - I buy an extra plane ticket, and whatever I'm traveling with rides right beside me."

While Marchese works hard to retain authenticity at Graceland, EPE has made a few changes over the years, Kern says. Windows are now tinted with a UV-resistant film, which cuts down on fading, and the fieldstone fence surrounding the estate gets cleaned "if the graffiti is too large."

He emphasizes, however, that the house is a living time capsule. "Elvis lived here, walked down these stairs, and ate dinner in that kitchen," he marvels. "And it's still Lisa Marie's home. When she comes to visit, the ropes come down, fresh flowers are put on the dining room table, and Graceland becomes hers again. Once she's gone, we come back in, put the plexiglass back up in the kitchen, put up the ropes, and we're good to go.

"You can watch an episode of MTV *Cribs* or E! *Style*, but you can't tour those celebrities' homes," Kern says. "Here, you're invited to walk through the front door."

Cindy Hazen and Mike Freeman and their seven dogs and three cats have resided at 1034 Audubon Drive since July 1998, but neighbors still call the seven-room ranch house "Elvis' place." The singer was just 21 when he bought the house with money received from his RCA recording contract. Hazen and Freeman - Presley experts and authors of *The Best of Elvis* and *Memphis, Elvis Style* - purchased the home precisely because of its provenance, plopping down \$180,000 for the chance to live with the King.

It's a good investment. The Presleys lived here for less than a year, but during that time - from March 1956 to February 1957 - Elvis ascended to new heights, appearing on the *Steve Allen Show*, the *Milton Berle Show*, and *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and making his first two movies, *Love Me Tender* and *Loving You*.

Hazen and Freeman have restored much of the house, which was built in 1953, to its original glory. "Our goal is to highlight Elvis' history and preserve the way it looked when he lived here," says Freeman, who picks up vintage items at thrift stores and estate sales and occasionally via eBay auctions.

Because they regularly open their home to tourists, they are "almost like curators," Freeman muses, "although in an informal sense.

"It's hard sometimes," he says. "You do surrender a certain amount of privacy. For the first few months, Cindy and I were in a daze. It was like buying Graceland junior. After a while, you kinda get used to it."

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Before she penned her Elvis biography, author Bobbie Ann Mason house-sat for the couple for a few weeks, soaking up the culture onsite.

"Luckily, very few changes were made over the years," Freeman says, noting that Elvis was the first - and last - owner to build an addition to the house, as well as the first to install central heat and air.

In the kitchen, Freeman explains that while he's nearly certain that Elvis installed a double oven for his mother, the cabinetry and countertops date to a later period. A bathroom, meanwhile, sports the original countertop, tile floor, and tub, as well as dressing room lights that Elvis himself installed in 1956.

While a few rooms are kept private, most of the house still looks like it belongs to the Presleys. Their photos hang on the walls, and in the living room, a display case, a 1950s gold record and a 1950s couch dominate the space. Elvis' bedroom is filled with Danish modern furniture, chosen because it closely resembles his furniture, which is now long gone. "Every kid in Memphis knew that if you stood in a certain spot, you could peer right in this bedroom window," Freeman observes, lifting the blinds, "so he switched rooms with Gladys and Vernon soon after moving in."

Elvis made quite a few renovations to the Audubon house, adding a brick fence with musical notes (a precursor to the fence at Graceland), a few trees, a paneled game room, a swimming pool, and Gladys' vegetable garden in the backyard. "The pool always gave people trouble," Freeman says. "The pump never worked right, so Elvis ran a garden hose from the kitchen sink to fill it." Today, he uses the same method, topping off the murky water for an annual pool party/fundraiser for animal charities, to be held on Saturday, August 13th.

Back inside, Freeman confides that the Presleys' neighbors thought that the family was "straight from the hills."

"Sure, they were unsophisticated," he says, pointing to a stunning series of period photographs by Alfred Wertheimer, who captured Elvis mid-metamorphosis. "When the Presleys opened the door, it was open house. They were small-town Mississippi people who didn't know what was coming. And after '56, you don't see these pictures," he notes of candid shots of Gladys handing Elvis a pair of fresh underwear.

Elvis' sudden fame was a source of resentment for neighbors, who resorted to using water sprinklers to keep fans off their property. After clamoring teenage fans threatened to overrun the once-quiet neighborhood and concerned homeowners offered to buy the Presleys out, Elvis retorted that he would purchase the entire block. Instead, he acquired Graceland.

Ironically, Freeman notes, his current neighbors enjoy the house's unofficial landmark status. "When the tour buses come by this month, we'll see a few families setting up lemonade stands," he says, stressing that while he and Hazen enjoy their word-of-mouth business as Elvis experts, they don't intend to turn their home into a three-ring circus.

"But when you hear someone's come from Belgium, it's hard to say no," he confesses. "The fans are part of the story."

Until a few years ago, it was touch and go for Elvis' childhood home. The Lauderdale Courts public housing project - where the boy king grew from naïf to nascent performer - was vacated and nearly demolished before preservations saved the building from the wrecking ball. Today, the complex - and the Presleys' apartment, 185 Winchester, #328 - stands as the crown jewel of a massive renovation project, Uptown Square, which paired the National Historic Trust with the Memphis Housing Authority for an unprecedented social/architectural experiment.

The Presleys were poor when they moved to Memphis from Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1948. Everything the family owned - including the guitar Elvis received for his 11th birthday - fit

in the trunk of their '37 Plymouth. Ten months after their arrival, the Presleys moved into the Lauderdale Courts, which was built under the aegis of the Works Progress Administration a few years earlier. For \$35 a month, the family got a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom in the facility, which consisted of 66 buildings and 449 apartments on a 26-acre campus. Despite notes on the Housing Authority form detailing that "wall around bathtub needs repair," "apartment in need of paint job," and "oven door will not shut tight," the apartment was a real step up from the Presleys' previous quarters at a Poplar Avenue boarding house, where Gladys cooked meals on a hot plate.

At the Courts, Elvis quickly made friends with boys his own age. They would roam downtown Memphis, exploring the Jewish Pinch district to the north and the docks west of Front Street, occasionally venturing south to Beale Street and the black neighborhoods near downtown. Elvis played on a neighborhood football team and rode his bike to the movies and Charlie's record store, quickly adapting to the rough-and-tumble city life.

Sitting in the Presleys' former apartment, Alex Mobley, assets manager of the Uptown Memphis Movement (the \$150 million, 100-block project encompasses Lauderdale Courts and several other properties, currently being developed by Jack Belz and Henry Turley), says, "Yes, they lived here, but Mr. Presley worked, and Elvis had a job. Back then, [Lauderdale Courts] was the beginning of the way up - from public housing to home ownership in one generation."

A team of people, including Mobley, public relations expert Kim Brisco, MHA director Robert Lipscomb, architect of record Jimmie Tucker, architectural firm Looney Ricks Kiss, interior designer Amelia Carkuff, Elvis biographer Peter Guralnick, and preservationist/architectural historian Judith Johnson banded together for the project, which took more than two years to complete.

"Lauderdale Courts was placed on the National Historic Register because it's such a great example of public housing - not because Elvis lived there," Johnson maintains. "But when his fans rose up to protest [the demolition], it gave the project cachet."

"This housing project was well planned from the very beginning, with courtyards creating little communities within the property," Tucker notes. "Because it was built during the WPA, no expense was spared." He studied the original MHA plans before condensing two units into single apartments, with larger bedrooms and living and dining spaces. Now the complex, once composed of 499 apartments, has 347 apartments - including the Presleys' former residence.

Opened last year, Lauderdale Courts - rechristened Uptown Square - currently boasts a 94 percent occupancy rate, which includes fixed-income residents who dwell alongside mixed-income working professionals. The Presleys' apartment, which was restored to the housing project's original specifications, is open to curious tourists who are passing through town or - gasp! - might want to spend the night.

The fee, \$250 a night, is cheap, considering you're buying your way into the teenaged Elvis' psyche. Although the apartment was stripped down to its studs and outfitted with new floors, sheetrock, and a tiled bathroom, walking across the threshold is like stepping back through time. A vintage TV presides over the living room, while chalkware and a framed painting of Jesus - similar to items Elvis might've won at the Mid-South Fair - adorn the walls, along with family photographs and Elvis' ROTC certificate. In Elvis' bedroom, there are pictures of Tony Curtis and Marlon Brando and a can of hair wax. Elvis' entire world is visible from a Third Street window. Step into the kitchen, and you can almost see Gladys standing there, stirring a pot over the MHA-issued stove, washing dishes in the porcelain sink, or checking her Jello molds inside the vintage 1951 Frigidaire. Modern amenities, including wireless Internet service, a CD player, a new TV, and a microwave, are scattered unobtrusively throughout the apartment.

"Our challenge was to make it look authentic, but comfortable," Mobley explains. "We didn't want to start guessing what the Presleys had for decoration, but things like the chalkware were well documented. When tourists come in, we typically hear one of two things - 'This just looks like my grandmother's house,' which means that they can identify with Elvis a little better. Other fans are about to pass out - they simply can't take another step."

Before decorating, Carkuff embarked on a crash course in Presleyana and the history of public housing. Because no pictures of the Presleys inside this apartment were available, she researched black-and-white photographs of what the MHA apartments looked like before tenants moved in, culled the EPE archives, and even brought in original tenants to describe their rooms. Vernon Presley's pack-rat mentality proved a real boon, as Carkuff, Mobley, and Brisco were able to examine receipts to determine what possessions the Presleys owned at the time.

"We wondered, Do we make it 1950s?" Carkuff says. "When the fans made it clear that they wanted a place which felt like it did when he was here, we realized that stuff that was brand-new to the period wasn't right. This apartment was what Gladys - not Elvis - put together, attic items from earlier in the century."

Downstairs in the communal laundry room, where 18-year-old Jessie Lee Denson gave Elvis guitar lessons on weekends, MHA artifacts like project newsletters and photographs now hang on the pristine white walls. Outside, the courtyard looks just as it did in the 1950s, when Denson and his friends, Johnny and Dorsey Burnette, would play music, oftentimes inviting Elvis to harmonize on country numbers. Stand here at dusk, and it's easy to conjure up an image of young Elvis, hurrying home in time for supper.

Lauderdale Courts, Audubon Drive, Graceland: Elvis eclipsed the American dream, vaulting from housing project to home ownership and millionaire status in less than a decade. His former residences give us "a tangible sense of his trajectory for future generations to understand," Johnson says. "Interestingly, these three structures, as well as his birthplace in Tupelo, are so evocative of Southern building types."

Johnson points to the Presleys' working-class ethic at Lauderdale Courts, which shaped Elvis' personality at its most critical juncture, then declares that the Audubon house marks the last time his life was normal.

"In the Presleys' time, this housing project was the first rung on the ladder of success," she says. "In the 1960s, when drugs became prevalent, people began associating poverty with crime and violence. It was a watershed for public housing, which eventually became known as the last stop on the road to hell."

"Elvis' career took a different path after he was drafted into the Army, which happened when he lived on Audubon Drive," Johnson notes, "and when Gladys died, less than 18 months after moving to Graceland, the family was changed forever."

"These homes," she says, "are homages to the King - and through conservation and recreation, they provide concrete evidence of his life."

"It's important to preserve them as cultural artifacts. Elvis is the number-one reason tourists come to Memphis," she adds, explaining that they want to see his way of life, as manifested by physical buildings and material possessions.

"Out of everything I've done as a historic preservationist," she concludes, "Lauderdale Courts gives me the most pride."

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Thank you so much for the wonderful article on the three Memphis homes Elvis lived in. I am a new fan tho 64 and am interested in all aspects of his life. As a teen and young adult I must confess I didn't appreciate his music but now I realize what a wonderful voice he had. Again thank you for your article and hope to read much more. Diane

Posted by [fairladyd](#) on January 22, 2008 at 10:57 AM | [Report this comment](#)



Thank you for this wonderful article on the three homes of the Presleys. Some say Memphis has not given Elvis the acclaim he deserves, but this is a great article. Memphis and Graceland is my favorite vacation spot in the world.

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