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“THE VELVET SIDE OF ELVIS PRESLEY”

Elvis Presley left the world behind August 16, 1977, but lives on in a way that no one could have predicted. As an icon of pop culture, his followers revere his memory with visits to his Graceland mansion, which is one of the top tourist attractions in the US. They flock to performances by his many impersonators, continue to purchase his recordings and perpetuate his persona with frequent "Elvis Sightings".

The 22 year old rising star that I interviewed and introduced at his Ottawa concert in 1957 hardly seemed destined for a brush with immortality. As I wrote about him in a chapter from my "Showbill!" book, he was "friendly, unpretentious and quite charming in a simple down-to-earth way.

The soft and gentle side of his personality was never more in evidence than when he featured one of his most popular ballads, “Can't Help Falling in Love”. The story behind the song is a fascinating show business tale.

George David Weiss was one of the few composers who successfully bridged the gap from traditional popular music to rock 'n' roll. In the summer of 1982 I met with him at his New York studio. A musician, publisher, producer and author his credits include two great romantic songs from two different eras. His first hit was a collaboration with Frankie Carle in 1945, which he demonstrated personally for Frank Sinatra, “Oh, What It Seemed To Be”. Seventeen years later he wrote “Can't Help Falling in Love” for Presley.

Many Weiss songs were written with a particular artist in mind, including, Louis Armstrong's “What A Wonderful World”, Kay Starr's “Wheel Of Fortune”, Nat Cole's “That Sunday That Summer”, The Ames Brothers “Can Anyone Explain” and Sammy Davis Jr.'s “Too Close For Comfort” which was from Weiss' 1956 Broadway musical, *Mr. Wonderful*.

The familiar ballad that he wrote for Elvis was featured in the 1962 Paramount movie, *Blue Hawaii*. With the exception of the title tune, which was introduced by Bing Crosby in 1937, all the songs on the movie soundtrack were written for musical sequences in the picture. In one of those strange twists of show business fate, the big hit from the score was rejected at first by everyone connected with the picture. It was only at the star's insistence that the song was included on the soundtrack.

"I was approached by Presley's publishing company," Weiss told me, "and asked to write a song for a specific spot in the script. It was a difficult assignment. Elvis was one of

the great entertainers of our time, but his movie scripts were far from being literary works. I certainly wasn't inspired by what I read, and only after searching through the dialogue several times, did I find a moment in the plot that I thought would accommodate the kind of song I had in mind.

"It was a fleeting scene that involved a young soldier who had just returned from Europe and brought a music box to his girlfriend's grandmother. I thought a song would fit nicely into the music box, but could still be in the rock 'n' roll vein. I was also aware that Presley had a tender, romantic side that he revealed in his earlier hit ballads, 'Love Me Tender' and 'Loving You'. So I wrote a song that I thought would fit that mold and played the melody on the piano and sang the lyrics for the publishers. There was a rather embarrassing silence after I finished the last note. Finally, one of them said, 'Well, it's very nice, but where's the beat? It's not rock 'n' roll.' I explained to them that it was a gentle rock ballad with broken chord triplets and a back beat."

Several days went by and Weiss became increasingly frustrated. His collaborators, who were important record producers, Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore, finally got the publishers to agree to listen to a demonstration recording. However, when copies were sent to Presley's people in Memphis and Hollywood they responded negatively saying it was not rock. Fortunately for Weiss, Presley happened to hear someone playing the demo record as he walked through his office complex, and said with enthusiasm, "What is that? I like it."

"My song was recorded on the movie soundtrack," Weiss recalled, "and only after the album had sold over a million copies would RCA Victor consider releasing it as a single." At that point, 'Colonel' Tom Parker, who guided Presley's career, made a statement that he must have regretted later: "If that little ballad is going to be on a single recording, then back it with 'Rock a-Hula Baby' from the same movie, because nobody's going to be interested in a ballad." Within two weeks of its release, "Can't Help Falling in Love" was number one on the hit parade.



Gord & Elvis April 3, 1957

most important songs and one of his own personal favourites."

Elvis Presley was only forty-two at the time of his death at his Graceland estate, August 16, 1977.