

# Elvis was Jewish!

You have got to be kidding?



Publicity photo Jailhouse Rock -1957

My wife and I are Elvis Presley fans. She says, there is something about his voice that is timeless. I just liked the music and the clean all American feel.

Elvis died 33 years ago but we still enjoy watching his movies. We play his CD's in the car. On the net, his version of Amazing Grace has had almost 11,000,000 views about double anyone else. One year we made the "Haj". We made the pilgrimage to Memphis to see his home, "Graceland", and drop a flower at his gravesite there. We have been to Vegas to see the great impersonator, *Fat Elvis*. He is a really *big* guy. If you close your eyes you believe Elvis is with you. While vacationing in Florida, a fun evening was with Elvis at Elwood's Dixie Bar B' Q on Atlantic Avenue in Delray Beach. Thursday evenings, Scott Ringersen squeezes himself into an Elvis outfit and sings the night way. During the day, Scott is a cop.

We are not Elvis fanatics. We do not have a velvet painting of him on our living room wall but last weekend's Elvis experience was momentous. We might have to reconsider the painting.

Having lived in Washington, DC all my life, there is an unwritten law, *Avoid the Downtown during Tourist Season*. The wife announced. "We are going to break the law. We are going

downtown to the National Portrait Gallery.” She read there was a special exhibit on Elvis Presley.

Braving our way through the streets, struggling to find a parking spot, elbowing into the museum, we asked directions to the Elvis exhibit. “Down the hall and turn right” was the reply. We did as told and came to a small room. What a disappointment. The room was the size of three summer closets. It had a few artifacts, a few pictures, a large golden Roman size statue of Elvis and a glass display case under a window. After having been to “Graceland”, we felt we had broken the dreaded Tourist law for naught.

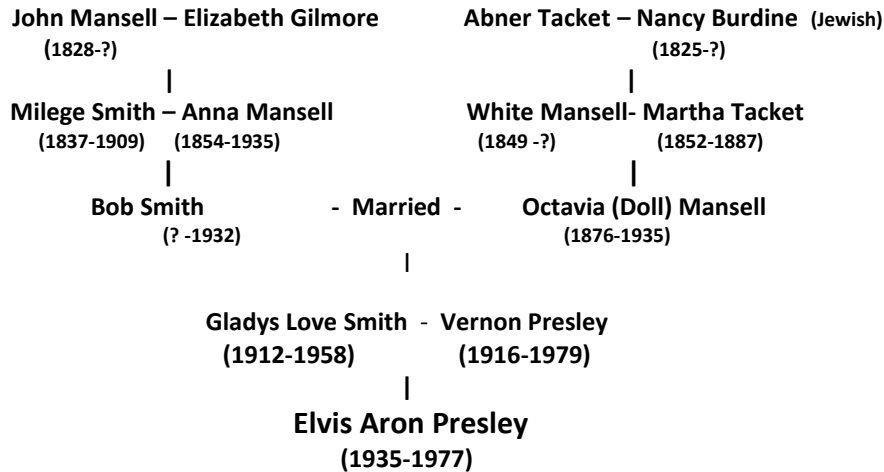
But... we had not. It was in the display case. A series of publicity shots, a magazine or two and there it was, a book, “*Schmelvis – In Search of Elvis Presley’s Jewish Roots.*” Transfixed, we looked at each other – you have got to be kidding!

The book went on – under Jewish Law – Elvis was Jewish!

To understand the bizarre claim, you have to understand something about Jewish Law and whom Jews consider to be Jewish. If your mother was Jewish, even if you were raised without any faith, or even another faith, technically, you are Jewish by matrilineal descent. So, if your great grandmother was Jewish, on your mother’s side, and she had a daughter who had a daughter, who had a daughter and then had you, you are Jewish. There can’t be a male in the middle or the line of transmission is broken. Your mother and her mother and her mother’s mother had to be Jewish to be Jewish. Supposedly, there is no limit to the identity transmission through the mother’s side. In reality, Jews acknowledge and accept an individual’s free choice of a different path to God. But, if you want to be technical, if your momma was Jewish you are Jewish.

Six years ago, historian and Elvis biographer, Elaine Dundy, researched the Presley family tree. She made a shocking discovery. True, he and his family were Christians for many generations. Elvis had a Native American (Indian) blood line but... he also had an antecedent named Nancy Burdine. She married Abner Tacket, about 1850, in Mississippi. Nancy and Abner had a daughter – Martha Tacket who married White Mansell (that is where the Indian part comes in). They had a daughter named Octavia. Everyone called her Doll. Doll was Elvis’ maternal grandmother. Doll had a large family of nine children. Her fifth child was a daughter, Gladys. Gladys married Vernon Presley. Gladys Love Smith Presley gave birth to Elvis Aaron Presley January 8, 1935 in a two room shack in Tupelo, Mississippi. (We have been there as well). Now you know Elvis’ maternal family line. I wouldn’t study the tree too closely you might see things got a tad close.

## Elvis' Maternal Family Tree



Elvis was a child of the depression. His father was unable to maintain a home for him and his mother. By the 40's, they moved to Memphis. His father worked odd jobs. His mother got a job in the "schmattah" –clothing business. Elvis admired the hip and stylish clothing he saw along Beale Street in Memphis. The place to buy them was from Lansky's. At first all Elvis could do was look in the window of Bernard and Guy Lansky's clothing store. Very quickly, as Elvis' career meteorically soared across the musical airways, he became their most famous customer.

Nobody knows for sure, most likely an urban myth, but a great story none the less is frequently told. The Presley's lived in a small apartment below a Jewish Rabbi in Memphis; Rabbi Fruchter. Elvis would visit with the Rabbi and his family. He shared meals with them. He developed a taste for chicken soup and matzah balls. The Rabbi's home introduced Elvis to Jewish music. On Saturday, the Rabbi asked Elvis to be their "Shabbas Goy." A Shabbas Goy was a non-Jew who could come into the apartment and do things that were forbidden to Jews such as lighting a stove or turning on the lights on the Sabbath. Rabbi Fruchter tried to pay Elvis for his service but the polite young man always turned him down. Elvis' mother never made a secret about her family tree to Elvis. He knew he was part Cherokee Indian and he knew he was part Jewish. His mother never hid from him his Jewish ancestry. She was proud of her heritage. Elvis was warned by others not to make his Jewish background too well know. Anti-Semitism was very real in Memphis in the 40's. Just the same, Elvis felt his service for Rabbi Fruchter was an honorable thing to do.

Gladys Love Smith Presley was very close with her only child, Elvis. He was extremely close to his mother. She savored the incredible musical success her son was achieving.

Elvis was drafted by the U.S. Army in 1958. His career, tightly managed by Colonel Parker, never faltered even while in the service. Shortly after being drafted, his mother died. Elvis was devastated. She was the most important thing to him in this world. Elvis arranged for her to be buried in Memphis' Forest Hill Cemetery. He carefully picked out her funerary memorials. He buried her devotionally with a large carving of Jesus before the Cross flanked by angels. A large footstone was at her feet. It read, "Gladys Love Presley, April 25, 1912 – August 14, 1958". On the side of the footstone he had carved, "Not Mine But, Thy Will Be Done" Above his mother's name on the footstone, Elvis wrote "Sunshine of our Home." On the right of the footstone he had a Cross placed and to the left he had a Star of David, both carved deeply into the stone.



Elvis' generosity and charity were legendary. When the Jewish Community of Memphis was trying to raise money for its community center, Elvis stepped forward and donated \$150,000, a huge sum in those days.

Elvis' was a music icon, a pioneer, a symbol of the youth and baby boomer age. He also suffered from all the negatives that his incredible success brought him. Years of heavy living, touring and drugs, ruined his marriage and his health. He died prematurely young in 1977, his body severely compromised. The last year of his life, he turned to find spiritual meaning and values. He studied his personal Christian faith more closely. He also studied Buddhism and learned more about Judaism. Every concert he gave in late 1976 until his death in 1977, he wore a large Chai about his neck. The two Hebrew letters, the Chet and Yud, combined make up the make the word Chai. It means *life* in Hebrew. It had a special meaning for him. He was asked why he wore the Chai. "I don't want to miss out on going to heaven on a technicality."

Elvis was buried near his mother in Forest Hills Cemetery. Unknown vandals attempted to steal his body. The Presley family decided it would be best to bring Elvis and his mother home to *Graceland*. Elvis and his family are all buried on the property in a place of reverence for the millions of visitors that come to *Graceland* to pay their respects annually. Gladys Love Smith Presley's footstone, with the Star of David that Elvis had specifically designed, was replaced with a full brass plated grave cover. A modest, tasteful Cross is at the top, a single long stemmed rose at the bottom, in brass. The Star of David was lost to history.



Jerry Klinger is President of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation

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