

## **EP42 (Elvis Has Not Left The Building)** by Luke McGrath

*'Alright, Elvis has left the building. I've told you absolutely straight up to this point, you know that, he has left the building. He left the stage and went out the back with the policeman and he is now gone from the building'*

That is the voice of Frank Page, a disc jockey in Shreveport, Louisiana, on December 15<sup>th</sup> 1956. It was the first time that immortal phrase was spoken.

But, good ladies and gentlemen here tonight, Elvis has not left the building. And I don't mean in a metaphysical sense – as if his spirit is still here, among us, an apparition that manifests on chosen nights at backwoods truck stops and suburban gas stations; or a spectre roaming the estate at Graceland, brushing past tear-stained pilgrims, firing ghost bullets at the television set in the Jungle Room; the face melted into a grilled cheese sandwich, the blood perspiring from a black velvet painting, the phantom hand guiding the Ouija board to spell out 'hunka hunka'; a smiling demi-God casting wide eyes over a world still in thrall to the shake of his hips, the catch in his throat.

Elvis has not left the building. And I obviously don't mean that in a cultural sense – this beautiful man-child from Memphis, this heavy-lidded angel, who acted as translator of a new language named rock'n'roll, who once he mastered it, then taught the entire planet to speak it fluently; whose every inflection, every turn of phrase, every haircut, culinary preference or sartorial whim, became a ground zero to be analyzed, interpreted, recycled, adopted, rejected, recast, imitated or critiqued; whose influence stirs the blood and animates the fingers and minds and mouths of each new generation of performer; whose shadow stands taller, whose star shines brighter, whose voice echoes further than any other, across the gaping chasm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into this one.

Elvis has not left the building. And, being of sound mind and rational disposition, I couldn't possibly mean that in a fiscal sense – where his records still sell in the millions, where his face appears on t-shirts and coffee mugs and alarm clocks, screenprinted onto every conceivable surface and shipped worldwide; where his last number one hit charted only a few short years ago; where he made 55 million dollars in 2014 alone.

Elvis has not left the building. And though I feel I shouldn't have to spell this out, I certainly don't mean that in any macabre albeit scientific sense – that buried six feet deep beneath the Meditation Garden, there lies the decomposing remains of the only son born to Gladys Love and Vernon Presley; the pine box now splinters, its silk lining unspooled, the clothes crumbled to dust save the odd burnished rhinestone. It doesn't pay for one to dwell on such grisly images, the unforgiving, inevitable consequence of life, of living, for any and all of us, even a King, upon this planet.

No ladies and gentlemen, when I say Elvis has not left the building, I mean in the literal sense. I mean, he is here tonight. In this building. The Ralph Wilson Theatre. Waiting to perform for you. However, before that, there's a few things you might like answered...

If I may beg your indulgence and presuppose your first question - perhaps your only question - I would suggest it naturally might be - where has Elvis Presley been all this time? The answer to that lies with how I eventually located him, an obsession that has consumed my life over the past decade, much to the resentment of my family, the chagrin of my friends and the mirth of my professional colleagues.

Before this quixotic quest, I was a young reporter with some promise. I worked my way through various small-town papers, before I broke a story on industrial corruption that made national headlines. I won a minor award for this work and the attention of the majors. I signed on with one of the larger east-coast outlets where I quickly became known for my thoroughness and attention to detail.

On the cusp of the twentieth anniversary of Elvis's death, and knowing me to be something of a music aficionado, my editor suggested I write a piece for their lifestyle section, the content to be of my choosing. Intrigued, I said yes.

My first thought, summarily rejected, was to explore and subsequently refute *all* the conspiracy theories surrounding Elvis's death. A light-hearted article, gently chiding each theory's devotees before putting their suppositions to rest for good. While the idea was not without merit, it was too obvious, absent of a hook compelling enough for an audience of discernment.

Far more appealing would be to enter the mind of the paranoid fantasist, take a theory at random and argue its validity, to systematically prove it possible and thereby show how porous the border between fact and fiction actually is. My goal was for the reader to enter the article with a sense of incredulity, and then over the course of the piece, turn their mind from ire to wonder, from refutation to speculation, before finally, I would admit the entire exercise to be itself an elaborate hoax. Rather than poke fun at the conspiracy theorist, I would punch upwards, dealing blows to the supposed high-browed readership of our paper.

Naturally, my editor loved this angle and emphatically gave me the go-ahead.

My intent necessarily excluded some of the more risible theories circulating - those that required a further leap than pre-supposing Elvis did not die. To prove the existence of aliens, or that Elvis's stillborn twin brother survived and at some point replaced him, was beyond the limits of my coercive powers. No, I needed something that could be found within the elastic boundaries of the feasible.

What I did not intend was to actually uncover the truth.

But first, allow me to reconstruct the facts of that fateful day.

*'Good evening. Elvis Presley died today. He was forty-two. Apparently it was a heart attack. He was found at his home in Memphis. Not breathing. His road manager tried to revive him. He failed. A hospital tried to revive him. It failed. His doctor pronounced him dead at three o'clock this afternoon.'*

August 16<sup>th</sup> was a sleepy Tuesday in 1977. At 2:33pm, a call was received dispatching an ambulance to Graceland. The medics on duty at the time were Charles Crosby and Ulysses Jones.

They arrived at the mansion and followed a bodyguard upstairs. As they reached the bathroom, they saw a man stretched out on the floor. His blue pajama bottoms were curled around his ankles, his yellow nightshirt a stark contrast to the dark pallor of his skin. In this manner, in this configuration, he was unrecognisable as the King of Rock'n'Roll.

The crowd of employees, hangers-on and entourage-makers babbled among themselves, only the occasional phrase breaking above the murmur. Jones heard the ominous acronym 'OD' more than once.

With the aid of three other men, the medics carried the body downstairs. As they were about to embark, a silver Mercedes careened around the corner stopping abruptly. This was Dr. George Nichopoulos, 'Doctor Nick' to those who knew him, Elvis's personal physician. He jumped in the back of the ambulance and they sped away.

Twenty minutes after arriving at Baptist Memorial Hospital, Elvis Presley was pronounced dead. As the emergency team left, Doctor Nick shepherded the remaining concerned parties from the room, then closed the door behind him.

Four years later, it was established in court that in the seven months leading up to that day, Dr Nick had written Elvis Presley prescriptions for 8,805 pills, tablets, vials and injectables, sourced from 153 different pharmacies. These included a prismatic array of opiates, barbiturates, stimulants, narcotics, laxatives, tranquilisers, amphetamines, and hormones. His medical licence was eventually stripped for over-prescribing to his patients.

These are the facts, as succinctly represented as I can. To work my conspiracy in and around them was not hard. At this distance, there is a matter of spacing, room to snake and weave between each certitude, like a spaceship circumnavigating a planet, or a wasp between the raindrops of a storm. Here is the theory my article would posit - that, on August 16th 1977, Elvis Presley didn't die but was in fact abducted by the Committee For State Security, better known as the KGB.

In its defense, I will state that, within the political climate of the time, this is not as unbelievable as it sounds.

Firstly, 1977 was the zenith of the Cold War, the tenor and tempo of which has no precedent. In the name of each country's values and beliefs, no act was too bizarre. This was an era in which the CIA experimented with the weaponisation of hallucinogenic drugs, where the KGB produced and distributed a fictitious extremist pamphlet with the intention of provoking a race war between Jewish and African-Americans. Any tactic was fair game to gain the slightest edge over a populace. If hearts and minds were going to be won, it was imperative to recognize that the battlefield was now the cultural landscape itself.

Secondly, it is a matter of public record that Elvis offered his services to the FBI as an agent.

*Hearing Elvis talk from the heart about what his country meant to him, he sort of paraphrased the letter, 'I've gotten a lot from my country, I want to give it back, I want to help the country out, I could go into any group of people and be accepted by anyone', and he had put in the letter that he would like to be made a Federal Agent at Large.*

It is my contention the Russians knew this and thus sought to turn him for their own purposes. Imagine the psychological blow of America's poster child becoming a card-carrying Communist? As high risk as it is, it would have fully shifted the dynamic between the super-powers, changing the fate of the world. America would be crushed under the weight of magazine cover stories alone.

So, the first step in creating a conspiracy theory is creating conspirators.

Five days prior to his alleged death, Dr Nick performed a full physical examination of Elvis. This concluded, as per their relationship, with the prescribing of several categories of pharmaceuticals. Amid this rainbow of uppers and downers, I posited Dr Nick included a special pill, one that looked like the others, but with a very specific payload. Its intention was to not only render the taker unconscious, but to cause them to present as dead for a period of twenty-four hours. Elvis could then easily be transported out of the hospital morgue, and eventually out of the country.

My research quickly revealed Dr Nick's lavish lifestyle was unsustainable, that he was heavily in debt – so in addition to opportunity, he had motive. Again, I would posit simply that the Russians had made an approach and he had agreed. For his part, Dr Nick died in 1987, rendering him unable to refute any claims I made. I laughed to myself at how easy this was to construct.

However, any good story, any believable story, succeeds through its details. The more I could ground my theory, the more substantive my illusory reality would become. I set about investigating the events of the day and interviewing as many people as possible from that era of Elvis's life. Nonetheless, I was careful to not weave my story too tightly, to ensure I left some dangling, loose threads. While these nagging, untidy details might be a nuisance to, say, a homicide detective, they are the lifeblood of a conspiracy theorist.

For example, I needn't list definitively if Dr Nick was a long-buried sleeper agent of the KGB, or if the real Dr Nick had at some point been replaced by a Soviet operative. It is immaterial, for one thing, for it doesn't change any of the facts prior or subsequent. But better still, by leaving this open, the reader will fill in these blanks in their own mind, and once taken hold, they will become for them as immutable as the facts themselves.

At first, the writing progressed smoothly and to deadline. However, as I spoke to more people connected to the events, as I re-watched footage and re-read accounts, a strange osmosis took hold of me. I began to see clues, symbols, patterns, everywhere. I became convinced that something was hiding beneath the surface of my interviewee's words, that subconsciously or not, they were attempting to convey a message to me. I dreamed nightly of Elvis. No longer was I the objective observer looking from the outside in, but rather I had begun to take the form of the very conspiracy theorist I originally sought to mock. The intended effect I wished on my audience; I wrought upon myself. The rational part of me knew I had made all this up, that I was the one pouring this Kool-Aid, not the one sipping it, and yet...

Somewhere in the countless days of research, interviews and extemporizing, I convinced myself entirely of the validity of my theory. I see that now. I know how foolish that must sound, but I believed - all I had to do was take hold of my truth and follow it to the end.

It's at this juncture my whole story pivots. For weeks, I had attempted to garner an interview with the young ambulance medic on that fated day – Ulysses Jones. Word finally reached me from his family that he was convalescing at a private hospital in Arlington, and had only a short time left to live. I promptly boarded a flight for Memphis. The following is a taped confession of his role in the operation - I apologise for the quality of the recording.

*'The Ruskies, I was working for them, comrades in arms, they wanted to pervert a symbol of the West. Who better? We kidnapped him, kidnapped the King. Me and Dr Nick, under orders. They took him across the Iron Curtain, - imagine it, a double agent singing songs for Mother Russia.*

*'We did it man, put him up into the stars where he belongs, frozen in time and space... don't tell my wife. She'd never forgive me.'*

This was beyond speculation, beyond doubt - this was unequivocal confirmation. Imagine my joy at discovering I was right, that my leaps of inductive reasoning had actually borne fruit! It was the journalistic coup of the century.

Of course, the piece was now overdue, the anniversary been and gone, and my editor had duly told me to abandon it. In fact, he had repeatedly re-assigned me other articles, all of which I had ignored – ultimately, he was forced to fire me. But none of that mattered – this story would catapult me into history. I was kept motivated by glittering visions of the accolades, the book deals, the tv appearances, that were soon to be mine. All I needed was to stay the course, to trust in myself, and my fate was secured. I was now working from my kitchen table, and living off the remainder of my savings. I discussed my work with no one, guarding its details fiercely. I stopped returning calls from concerned colleagues, turned down offers of work with other employers – I had become a man with a singular passion, a sole driving purpose.

Now Mr Jones' last proclamation on the subject, that they, quote, “put him up into the stars where he belongs, frozen in time and space” seems clear enough – a delicate way of saying they sent him to heaven, as it were, securing his place in the pop pantheon, never to grow old, frozen at the age of his disappearance. It was open and shut – Elvis had died in Russia.

However, something about Mr Jones' phrasing never sat right. Whether it was the insomnia that now plagued me, the infection I received from my self-administered TCB tattoo, or the abuse of over-the-counter medication I had been employing to manage both, I was certain Mr Jones' words held a grander meaning. It was around the time my wife left me that I realised what he was trying to tell me – it was so obvious. Elvis Presley had been cryogenically frozen and transported into space via Soviet satellite, where he orbited Earth. Again, the idea, once fixed in my mind, became absolute.

Borrowing heavily against my credit cards, I traveled to Moscow under the pretense of writing a puff piece on the remarkable history of the cosmonauts and their ongoing space efforts. My covert mission, of course, was to locate information on the satellite.

Leaving Moscow airport, I took a cab directly to the hotel. My driver, Uri, was a stout man of about fifty with spotty but passable English. His bushy sideburns and rotund quiff suggested to me he might be sympathetic to my cause – indeed he was, and he became my sole confidante on this trip, chauffeuring me around the city and acting as a makeshift translator when required.

The Russian Federal Space Agency occupies a towering example of brutalist architecture in the Shchepkin district. I was greeted warmly by their media relations team, and after a morning tea in my honour, was surprised to find myself left unmonitored with Uri to explore their archives. The Russians had no electronic database, instead employing a warehouse-sized room of dusty filed boxes and microfiche. My appearance clearly gave no cause to consider ulterior motives for my visit, or that I may be an operative of the military-industrial complex. Certain that surveillance cameras were still tracking my movements, I was equally certain I could find what I needed with haste.

Sputnik is the designation given to a large number of orbiting spacecraft operated by the Soviet Union. Many of these facilitate communication or have scientific applications; those that do not could broadly be described as servicing military goals. As of January last year, two and a half thousand Sputnik satellites had been launched. How to find my needle within this cosmic haystack?

I was able to reduce this number via a process of deductive elimination. One, the satellite must have been of a size that could contain a human body and cryogenic apparatus. Two, it would have been launched within a 10 year window after August 16<sup>th</sup> 1977. Three, given its cargo, it would have insufficient room to house equipment for a communications purpose. 72 satellites remained that met these criteria. And then I saw it, like a flower rising above a tangle of weeds.

It was a satellite, launched in 1984, with the designation 42EP. Four two E-pee. Elvis Presley's initials and age at the time of his disappearance. I had found my Rosetta Stone.

However, my exhilaration was short-lived. Sputnik 42EP was decommissioned and fell out of orbit in 1996, returning to earth off the coast of New Zealand, in the Tasman Sea. The consensus among the astronomical community was that it likely burned up upon reentry. Unconvinced, I travelled to Okarito on the South Island, which according to the co-ordinates of re-entry and using calculations I made from tide tables and oceanic drift for the area and time period, was the likely wash-up point. No trace of it was ever recovered.

I was at a dead end, certain that my ideas were no longer theoretical, that I had proof Elvis had been abducted by the KGB and cryogenically frozen inside a satellite. I could even trace the satellite's decommission and its return to Earth, but from here the trail went cold. And without the satellite, without any physical evidence, what did I really have to show for the last ten years? I was stranded on the other side of the world, without even the means to return home. I became detached from reality, living rough, shunning all contact with people, subsisting on peanut butter and banana sandwiches, my only possession a warped VHS of *Blue Hawaii*.

At the insistence of my family, and with their financial aid, one year ago I entered intensive psychoanalysis at a Danish facility, twenty kilometres outside Flensburg. Under the caring guidance of Dr. Hans Ulrich, these sessions were initially fruitful. He brought me out of my near-catatonia and I was able to function more or less normally for the first time in many years. However, it was clear both to him and I that my mind had built walls up guarding certain areas and precluding access no matter how shrewd the questioning may have been. It was at this impasse that Dr. Ulrich suggested hypnotherapy. My natural scepticism for such pseudo-science was certainly clear to the good doctor, but he persuaded me that nothing would be lost in the trying.

And so I agreed... and this is where I uncovered the most staggering revelation of all. Ladies and gentlemen, through weeks of incursions into the deepest jungles of my psyche, burrowing ever downward, unearthing repressed memory after repressed memory, I discovered that it was in fact myself I was searching for this whole time. Ladies and gentlemen, *I am Elvis Presley*.

My entire life as Luke McGrath, my happy childhood in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, my doting parents and beloved younger brother, my underwhelming career as an investigative journalist, even my previously idyllic marriage to my high school sweetheart, all of it, was a patchwork of fanciful fabrications produced by my mind, a protective coating to shield me from the truth. Upon reflection, this seems obvious, the 'Luke McGrath' my subconscious created can't withstand scant scrutiny before it cracks - it is but a flimsy simulacra of a substantial and rounded life. This alternate, this sham identity, was gestating all the while I floated somnambulant inside Sputnik 42EP, and emerged after my celestial home plummeted back to earth.

I promise you, you are no more shocked now than I was on discovering this. I look nothing like Elvis Presley, save the following; in certain lights, when a passing twinkle may be seen dancing across my eyes; at the denouement of a timely barb, when a slight curling of my lips stops short of my once characteristic sly grin; a comparable walking gait, perceptible to experienced body language experts; and a small freckle on my left cheek above the jawline, currently obscured by the style of my chosen facial hair. This heinous physical dissimilarity to my former self can in part be attributed as a by-product of the cryogenic freezing – still an under-developed and experimental

field – and my subsequent unconventional thawing in the warm waters off the coast of Lord Howe Island, without supervision or attendant medical personnel. I am also eighty years old, though this is something of a misnomer, having been frozen for thirty of those years. I have aged inconsistently and not as one would reasonably expect, further obfuscating my true identity. Now even the most cut-rate impersonator bears a stronger resemblance to myself than me. When I look in the mirror, the face staring back is a distant cousin's, one whose genealogy, life experience, and environmental conditioning markedly diverge from my own.

You will have also noticed I sound nothing like Elvis – in fact, imprisonment robbed me of my natural accent, and imagination gave me this mishmash of an Australian one. The more worldly among you may even detect a Georgian inflection, most pronounced in my vowel sounds, a futile effort to integrate with my captors and foster empathy.

Worse still, the torture I was subjected to - the waterboarding, the sleep deprivation, the cranial drilling – has left me almost completely tone-deaf. The power, range and tonality of my singing voice, that golden instrument beloved by millions, on whose mellifluous wings a new era for mankind was ushered in, that cast a spell entrancing each subsequent generation, has been irrevocably destroyed. At my lowest ebb, I question if this was not perhaps their intention all along, a final ironic twist of the knife, the last flaming arrow fired over the Iron Curtain and aimed at the very heart of the West, to take America's sweetheart, America's chosen son, their Apollo, and strip him of his grandest gift.

Nonetheless, I am he.

Elvis is me, or rather, I am Elvis.

Elvis is in the building.

And though I look and sound nothing like what you expected, I promised you a song.