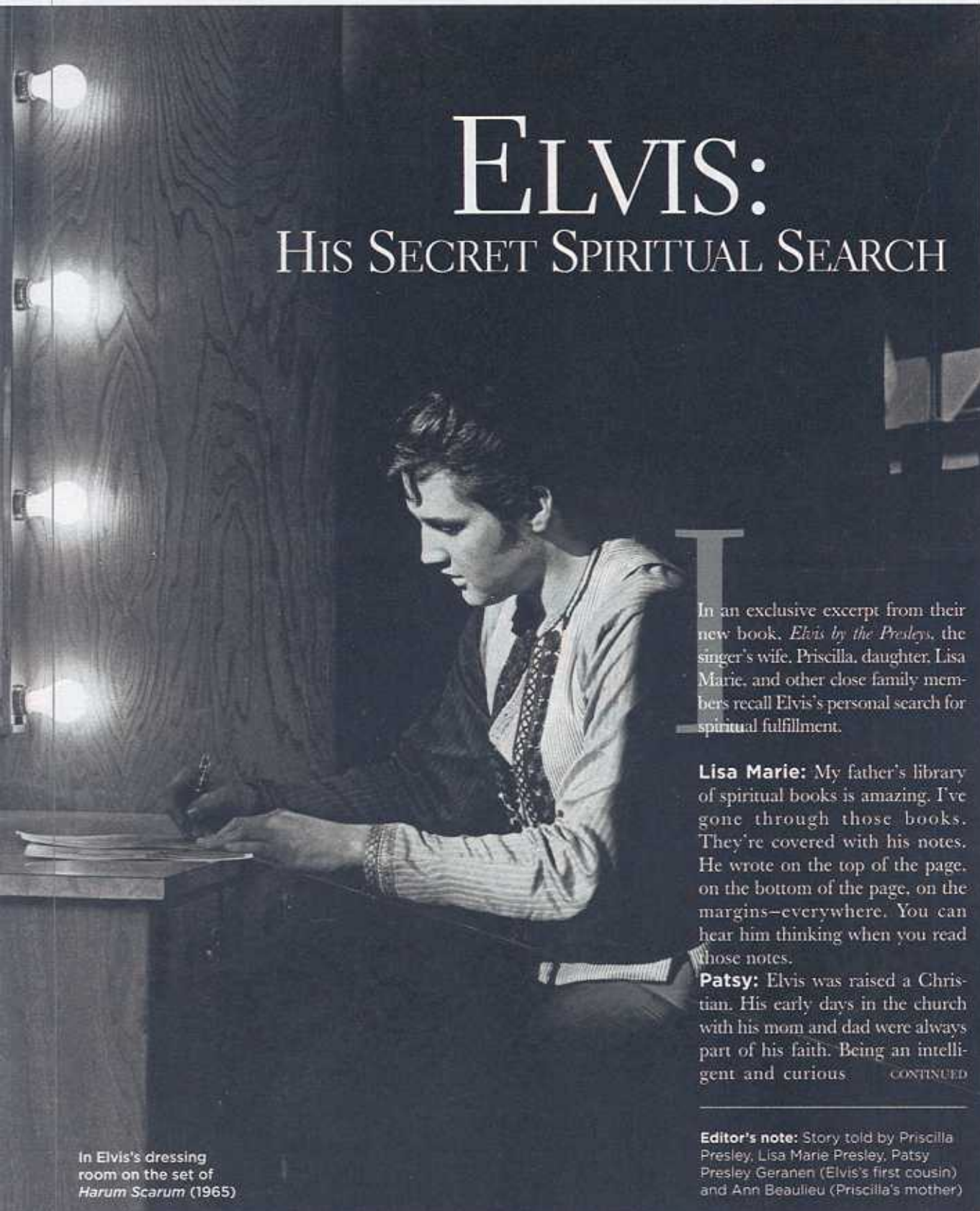


ELVIS: HIS SECRET SPIRITUAL SEARCH



In an exclusive excerpt from their new book, *Elvis by the Presleys*, the singer's wife, Priscilla, daughter, Lisa Marie, and other close family members recall Elvis's personal search for spiritual fulfillment.

Lisa Marie: My father's library of spiritual books is amazing. I've gone through those books. They're covered with his notes. He wrote on the top of the page, on the bottom of the page, on the margins—everywhere. You can hear him thinking when you read those notes.

Patsy: Elvis was raised a Christian. His early days in the church with his mom and dad were always part of his faith. Being an intelligent and curious. CONTINUED

In Elvis's dressing room on the set of *Harum Scarum* (1965)

Editor's note: Story told by Priscilla Presley, Lisa Marie Presley, Patsy Presley Geranen (Elvis's first cousin) and Ann Beaulieu (Priscilla's mother)

individual, Elvis explored other beliefs. He had a thirst to know. And he had a gift for understanding different ways of looking at God. But I don't think for a minute that Elvis ever doubted God. He knew God was responsible for his talent. I think Elvis was looking for ways to pay back the world for all that had been given him. He was filled with gratitude and, even at times when he may have been confused, he always knew he was a blessed man living a blessed life.

Priscilla: You probably remember seeing pictures of Elvis wearing a cross as well as a Star of David.

Patsy: He told me that Star of David was for extra protection.

Priscilla: Once someone asked Elvis, "Why both? Why a cross and a Jewish star?" He answered, "To make you think."

Ann: Elvis always struck me as a man who understood devotion. I know his life took many twists and turns, but when I meet someone with his sense of consideration to others and his beautiful treatment of family and friends, I have to believe that his sweetness is coming from a spiritual source.

Priscilla: Elvis was vulnerable and also needy. Given his wild lifestyle, he needed guidance. That the guidance came from his hairdresser—a man named Larry Geller who popped onto the scene in 1964—is strange but true. As he cut Elvis's hair while we were staying in Bel Air, Larry began discussing various books and philosophies of life. That coincided with Elvis's own discontent over his career. Elvis was looking for meaning and Larry seemed to have some answers. Or at least he understood Elvis's questions.

Elvis had been searching long before Larry arrived. In many ways,

Elvis had been searching his entire life. He had the kind of mind and soul that required constant stimulation and nourishment. Most entertainers with his talent simply accept the talent. Elvis wanted to know why it was given to him; why he was the object of such adulation; why blessing fell upon him; and—perhaps most crucially—why he still couldn't define his ultimate purpose. He was convinced his purpose went well beyond music and movies.

Patsy: Elvis loved to talk about the Bible and discuss it.

Priscilla: He'd stand before the roaring fireplace and preach. He'd get up on the table and preach. He'd gather us all around—at Graceland or in Bel Air, in Hawaii or even Las Vegas—and he was Moses with a cane coming down the mountain or John the Baptist greeting the Savior. He was absolutely mesmerizing when he read Scripture and acted out the stories. Of course he'd give them his own twist, but that made it even better. It was the gospel according to Elvis, and you couldn't help but hang on to every word.

Lisa Marie: I loved when he sang "How Great Thou Art." That was my favorite.

It's lonely at the top, and my father reached new heights for artists of his era. He was one of the first to get to this place of total isolation. . . . He was on his own, trying to find his own way. But there was so much crap surrounding him—so many people who didn't get it or just didn't want to get it. . . .

Priscilla: Elvis worried that he had become a money-making machine. He worried that all his commercial work had injured his spirit. So when Larry started talking about ways to transcend the material world, Elvis was enraptured. Elvis CONTINUED

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would emerge from a room with an armful of books. Soon he had us reading those books—*The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran; *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse; *The Impersonal Life*, by Joseph Benner; *Autobiography of a Yogi*, by Paramahansa Yogananda; and *The Initiation of the World*, by Vera Stanley Adler.

Looking back, I now see that the criticism of Elvis's spiritual interest was based on fear. We were scared we would lose him. Or we were scared he would lose himself. We failed to see that this religious search had been with Elvis since the beginning, way back in Tupelo, Mississippi, when he found comfort in his folks' Assembly of God church. That comfort, of course, took on musical form.

I have this picture in my mind: It's

a clear sunny afternoon in Los Angeles. Elvis and I are on our motorcycles, roaring through Bel Air, down Sunset Boulevard, over the freeway, past Brentwood into Pacific Palisades. We stop at an idyllic retreat called the Self-Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine. Elvis takes my hand and leads me through the grounds. For a long time, we sit in the meditation garden and focus our attention on our breath. I've never seen Elvis this calm. "It's what we all need," he says. "A break from the craziness."

Some time later we were summoned to another retreat, the one that quartered Sri Daya Mata, the woman who assumed leadership [of the Self-Realization Fellowship] after the passing of Yogananda. She was soft-spoken

and natural, a person obviously at peace with herself. Elvis took to her immediately. Thus began an ongoing dialogue between Elvis and Sri Daya Mata that profoundly influenced his life.

At the beginning of this spiritual enterprise, Elvis was wildly enthusiastic. Beyond talking of joining a monastery, he wanted to form a commune. He wanted to devote his life to helping others fulfill themselves through devotional discipline. In fact, he wanted to be a leader of the Self-Realization Fellowship. In this regard, Daya Mata was especially wise.

"This higher level of spirituality," he'd tell her, "is what I've been seeking my whole life. Now that I know where it is and how to achieve it, I want to teach it. I want to teach it to

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all my fans—to the whole world.”

“You say that now, and I know you mean it. But tomorrow you will wake up and remember that you’re an entertainer. That’s wonderful work. Important work. And in your case, it’s doubly important because of the bond between you and your fans. But the work of the entertainer is different than the work of the spiritual teacher. It’s neither worse nor better. Simply different. The inner peace you seek can be yours no matter what your work.”

Elvis listened. He had enormous respect for this woman. Part of him understood what she was saying. But part of him—the impatient part—wanted another answer. He did want instant evolution. Accustomed to having everything he wanted when he wanted

it, it was emotionally difficult for him to see why this would be any different. At the same time, he was able to be completely honest with Daya Mata. She was perhaps the only one who understood the enormity of Elvis’s fears. She understood because he told her. The pressure of staying in the limelight, retaining his popularity and pleasing his fans—not to mention placating the manager who helped establish his fame—was gut wrenching.

“Why me?” was the question I heard Elvis continually asking himself. “Why was I chosen?” The wise woman’s answer was simple—to entertain. She saw great worth in such work. I’m not sure Elvis did. He wanted more. He wanted a way out of his fears, a life of peace and tran-

quility that would deliver him from the stress of performance. Ironically, he loved performing. The world saw him as a born performer. But if the wisdom of the ages says that individual ego must die before spiritual evolution is possible, performance does the opposite. Performing before millions of fans—which was Elvis’s fate and the story of his remaining years on earth—would excite anyone’s ego. How could it not? The world is at your feet; the world is clamoring for more; the world is declaring you king. Who can resist? The more you hear such accolades, the further the mon-astery fades from sight. Finally, I believe, Elvis sought what could never be his—freedom from a world that worshiped him like a god. ♣

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