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WHY, 25 YEARS AFTER ELVIS' DEATH, DO FANS CONTINUE TO VISIT GRACELAND BY THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS? FOR SOME, IT'S A SWEET DAY IN A MAGICAL PLACE. FOR OTHERS, IT'S A CHANCE TO SHOW RESPECT, A SMALL PAYBACK FOR THE HOURS OF EXQUISITE PLEASURE. FOR MANY, THERE'S ALMOST A RELIGIOUS QUALITY TO THE EXPERIENCE. AND FOR ONE LONGTIME FAN MAKING THE PILGRIMAGE FOR THE FIRST TIME, IT WAS A CHANCE TO RELIVE JUST A BIT OF HER PAST. **BY CHARLES HIRSHBERG**

You've probably seen Linda Deutsch on TV, but you've never seen her like this—dressed up in a black Elvis T shirt and a pink blazer and ready to bust with excitement.

For more than 20 years, she has been a star legal correspondent for the Associated Press, covering the high-profile cases of Charles Manson, O.J. Simpson, Robert Blake and many, many others. She is a prized guest on news shows like *Larry King Live* and *Good Morning America*, because she always explains hotly contested legal issues calmly, clearly and, above all, fairly. But today she feels entitled to her biases and her emotions; in fact, today she's letting it all hang out.

For Linda Deutsch is about to visit Graceland.

She's not the only one. The Southern colonial mansion at 3764 Elvis Presley Boulevard in Memphis hosts over 600,000 people a year, making it one of the most frequently visited private homes in America. "I think Elvis would be shocked at how many people still come," Linda says, as her car rolls into the parking lot behind a caravan of vehicles with license plates from far and wide.

Which raises a very good question: Why *do* they still come? Ask a random selection of visitors and you'll get a range of answers. At one end of the spectrum is Rita, 39, a well-nourished gal from Arkansas. "Well, I've been here three times," she says. "I just love the music—we had *Love Me Tender* at our wedding—and Graceland makes me feel romantic. My husband wouldn't come this time, and he may regret it." At the other end of the

spectrum is a handsome German college student named Rolf or Ralph (it's hard to tell from his pronunciation). "You can learn much about the American civilization," he says sagely, "from studying the Elvis."

But people like Linda come to Graceland because Elvis injected energy into their lives when they needed it most—during their teenage years. You could say that Elvis provided the soundtrack to their adolescence. They grew up with him, which was wonderful, but unfortunately weren't allowed to grow old with him, which is a melancholy symbol of life's disappointments. Graceland brings these conflicting emotions to the surface; that's what makes visiting such a unique experience.

The rock 'n' roll revolution arrived in Asbury Park, N.J., early in 1956, when Elvis was 21 and Linda was a red-headed 12-year-old, puttering around her apartment while a little plastic box radio tootled away.

"We were listening to soft swing back then—mostly to Sinatra and the Dorseys," she recalls. "But that day, the deejay came on and said he was going to play something *unusual*." Unusual wasn't the word for it—nothing in life had prepared Linda for *Heartbreak Hotel*.

"It just stopped me dead in my tracks. And then I had a visceral reaction, a feeling I'd never had before." Almost everyone now knows that rock 'n' roll feeling, like a bolt of lightning that makes you feel wild and powerful and free. It was a feeling Linda

Elvis Presley's Graceland



A devoted Elvis fan for more than four decades, Linda Deutsch made her first visit to Graceland earlier this year. Like most visitors, she took time out to have her picture taken in front of a backdrop of the place.

had to have again; so she rushed to her local record store, but no one there had heard of this Elvis Pretzel, or his heartburn hotel. It took some detective work to find out who he was and where his records could be bought, but when she found them and shared them with her best girlfriends, Carol and Florence, they were just as enthusiastic as she was.

Quickly, however, Linda discovered that Elvis' appeal was far from universal. "In school, a lot of people thought we were nuts. And that was just great! We discovered we liked being out of the mainstream, and we considered ourselves experts in a musical revolution." Elvis was more than a singer. He was a cause, and she wanted to serve that cause. But how?

The idea came to her in the basement, where her father had a mimeograph machine which he used to publish a newsletter for the Lions Club. She would publish her own newsletter about Elvis—*The Elvis Times*. She'd report on what his favorite foods were, when his next record was coming out, whom he was dating and all the rest of the Elvis news. Then she'd post it to like-minded fans around the country. She wrote a letter to Tom Diskin, who worked for Elvis' manager, and, in no time at all, Linda became, by acclamation, president of Asbury Park's Official Elvis Presley Fan Club. Carol was vice president, Florence, secretary.

"And that," says Linda Deutsch, "was the beginning of my career in journalism."

Linda buys a \$25 ticket for Graceland's "Platinum Tour,"

which includes admission to the mansion, Elvis' private planes (*Lisa Marie* and *Hound Dog II*), a gallery of Elvis' cars, and a memorabilia museum called "Sincerely Elvis." There's a 45-minute wait to begin the tour, but that gives her time to visit the gift shop and expand her collection of what she calls Elvis *chazarai* (Yiddish for "junk"). She already has an Elvis lamp, a bottle of Elvis wine and Elvis salt-and-pepper shakers. But she buys a new Elvis key chain with her name on it and Elvis paperweights for Carol and Florence, still her close friends after all these years.

At last, her tour group is allowed to file onto a shuttle bus that takes visitors across the boulevard. She gets a little misty-eyed as she passes through Graceland's famous gates, decorated with musical notes and silhouettes of the King of Rock 'n' Roll. Fans used to wait there for hours hoping to get a glimpse of Elvis. Sometimes he'd wander down from the house and spend an evening with them, signing autographs and chatting easily until the crowd would invariably grow too large and unruly.

"Hmm," says Linda, hopping off the bus and gazing up at the house, with its two stories of tan fieldstone. "It's a lot smaller than I thought it would be." But this strikes her as appropriate. "We always thought of him as a regular person who just happened to get rich and buy a beautiful home for his mother." Indeed, Elvis once remarked that he wished Russia's communist leader, Nikita Krushchev, could visit Graceland "to see how in America a fellow can start with nothing and, you know, make good."

Shore Girl's Petition Gets Elvis TV Time

BRADLEY BEACH — Thanks to the efforts of 15-year-old Linda Deutsch, 510 Brinley Ave., the entire two-hour American Bandstand television program Thursday will be devoted to Elvis Presley's recordings.

Miss Deutsch, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Sandor Deutsch, is president of an Elvis Presley fan club which boasts more than 300 members throughout the United States and Canada. There are about 25 members in the Shore area.

Thursday is the 24th birthday of the rock 'n' roll singer, now stationed with the Army in Germany, so Linda decided to do something about it.

She managed to get a petition signed by 3,500 Presley admirers throughout the country. It asks that the entire program on Thursday be devoted to the playing of Elvis' recordings.

Petition Dick Clark

Linda and her secretary, Miss Florence Lacity, of the same address, took the petition to Dick Clark, master of ceremonies of the program, on Wednesday.

Mr. Clark heard Linda's plea, then rolled out the impressive, 16-foot-long petition.

The following day, Mr. Clark announced on his program that he had talked with Col. Thomas Parker, Elvis' manager, and Mr. Parker agreed to the special program.

Linda's project took almost three weeks to complete. The program will emanate from Philadelphia's

television station WFIL at 3:30 p.m., and may be seen from 4 to 5:30 p.m. over Channel 7, New York.

Proud of Elvis

Linda last March 21 wrote a letter to the Asbury Park Press explaining why she is "proud to be an Elvis Presley admirer." She gave several reasons why she and other Elvis Presley fans idolize the Tennessee rock 'n' roll singer.

Linda said Elvis last June sent her a personal letter while on furlough in Memphis, Tenn. He thanked her for keeping interest alive in the fan club.

Linda's fan club is one of 8,000 throughout the country. She has been president for almost three years.

She is a sophomore honor student at Asbury Park High School.



Linda Deutsch casts an admiring glance at her idol, Elvis Presley.

Inside, Linda dons her headphones for the recorded tour. She immediately recognizes the 15-foot white sofa in the living room, where a famous picture of Elvis was taken. She smiles to think of him and his family gathering at the table in the dining room across the hall. But at the stair-

case leading up to the second floor, she pauses reverently. The upstairs portion of the house is roped off, since it was always his private living space. His daughter Lisa Marie is saying over the headphones that "he never came down not fully ready to be seen. He would have on [so] many jewels, he rattled down the steps." Almost everyone on the tour seems to be straining their ears, hoping to hear him rattle. "That's when you start to feel sad," Linda sighs. "You realize he's gone."

But the mood lifts downstairs in the basement, where everything is so 1970s, one can scarcely believe one's eyes—the record player with its automatic changer, the track lighting, the mirrored ceiling and three TV sets built into the wall. Behind Linda, a mother can be heard trying to explain to her son that, once upon a time, there weren't much more than three TV stations to choose from. "Really?!" asks the horrified kid, and everyone smiles. This was a good-times room, a reminder that, if Elvis' life was too short, there was a lot of happiness in it.

As Linda wanders through the rest of the house, memories begin to flood back. The TV sets remind her of watching the *Ed Sullivan Show* with Carol and Florence, and screaming so loud she never heard a note. A display of fan mail reminds her of the time she and her friends made the King of Rock 'n' Roll a papier-mâché crown, decorated it with gold sparkles and sent it to him. Did he ever see it?

Maybe he even tried it on back in his daddy Vernon's office, the modest room where fan mail was opened by a flotilla of secretaries. (One day, when Vernon was in a cranky mood, he asked one of the secretaries to hand-letter a sign which remains in the office to this

day: NO LOAFING IN OFFICE... IF YOU HAVE BUSINESS HERE, PLEASE TAKE CARE OF IT AND LEAVE.)

But Linda's most emotional memory comes as she watches a newsreel on one of the video monitors. It shows Elvis alighting from a plane at McGuire Air Force base on March 3, 1960. After 18 months in Germany, he was getting out of the Army at last. She had begged her father to drive her to McGuire. It wasn't far from Asbury Park and her dad had agreed—until a tremendous snowstorm hit New Jersey. It was much too dangerous to go, but Linda wouldn't listen to reason. She cried and begged and burned with jealousy as she watched other girls on TV, shivering in the snow as they clustered around Elvis. It was so unfair; she had a special right to be there.

In 1958, when Elvis entered the service, Linda was so moved that she wrote a letter to the Asbury Park Press, saying she was "proud to be an Elvis Presley admirer." But what, she wondered, would happen to his career while he was serving his country? He was only 23.

That's when Linda got another idea. She would start a petition and get it signed by thousands of Elvis fans asking Dick Clark, host of *American Bandstand*, to celebrate Elvis' 24th birthday by devoting the entire show to his music. The results of this effort were duly reported in the *Press*.

"Linda's project took almost three weeks to complete.... She managed to get a petition signed by 3,500 Presley admirers throughout the country. Linda and her secretary, Miss Florence Lacity, took the petition to Dick Clark, [who] heard Linda's plea, then rolled out the impressive 16-foot-long petition. The following day, Mr. Clark announced on his program that he had talked with Col. Thomas Parker, Elvis' manager, and Mr. Parker agreed to the special program."

She still treasures a photograph of herself, grinning widely as she presents the petition to Clark. But even now, it seems like a rather cruel twist of fate that she wasn't able to welcome

Elvis home. "But of course, what I had done gave me a great sense of accomplishment," she says 43 years later, as she walks toward the meditation garden, where her hero is buried.

"I was a timid, unsure teenager, and in many ways Elvis gave me confidence."

She stops quietly before his grave and snaps a few pictures. The somber mood is returning. "You know, in the late 1960s, I became an entertainment reporter, and I could have tried to meet him," she says softly. "But I didn't. I guess I was afraid of spoiling the image of him in my mind. He was a very different person by then, and so was I.

"It's so tragic that he died the way he did."

The atmosphere is spiritual and meditative as Linda and the rest of the visitors wait for the shuttle bus to take them across Elvis Presley Boulevard and back to the real world. Once there, she ambles over to the Chrome Grill for a barbecue sandwich and a side of fried okra, and she brightens a little. True, she didn't get to see him come home from the Army. But she'll never forget seeing him, live and hot, in 1957.

"Florence, Carol and I heard that he was coming to the

Philadelphia Sports Arena in April," she begins, cracking a beautiful smile. "And we decided we had to go or we'd just die."

They traveled to Philadelphia by bus, with Carol's mother as a chaperone. "Since we were the Fan Club, we assumed our seats would be super-duper. But it turned out we were way up in nosebleed heaven, in this massive arena filled with kids. Everywhere there were girls in a state of great agitation, near hysteria. They actually had nurses running up and down the aisles, picking up kids who had fainted. They had a lot of opening acts and everyone got so impatient. But finally, Elvis was in the building, and when he came on stage, it was the closest I'd ever felt to an earthquake. The building was literally shaking. From our perch up in heaven, we looked down—way, way down—and there on the stage was this teeny-weeny wiggling speck. It was Elvis! Suddenly, I looked at Carol and there were tears pouring down her face. 'Carol,' I said, 'What's wrong?' And through her tears, she screamed: 'HE LOOKED AT ME!'

"And you know, that was the magic of Elvis. Everyone thought he looked at *them*."

In 1958, Deutsch launched a successful petition drive to convince Dick Clark to devote an entire *American Bandstand* program to Elvis' music on his 24th birthday. Her efforts were reported in the *Asbury Park Press*, a newspaper Deutsch later worked for on her way to becoming a star reporter for the *Associated Press*.

