

“I don’t think there was a better time and place to be a teenager than in Florida in the 1950s. It was such a magical place. Elvis is part of what contributed to that excitement.”

—Bob Graham, former Florida governor and United States senator

“Kealing tells us the story of what happened when Elvis arrived in Florida and what role the Sunshine State played in his life and musical career. This is a critical era in the Elvis Saga.”

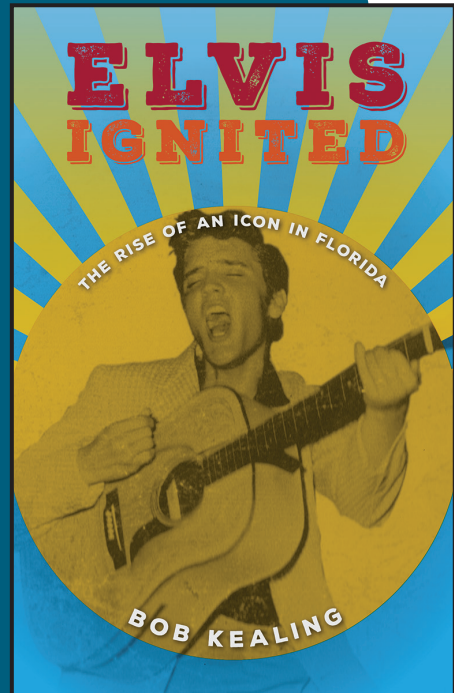
—William McKeen, editor of *Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay: An Anthology*

“A Florida-centric look at his 1956 breakout state for people who thought they knew everything about Elvis.”

—Joel Selvin, author of *Altamont: The Rolling Stones, the Hells Angels, and the Inside Story of Rock’s Darkest Days*

“Presents a great picture of what it was like to be a touring musician in the 1950s and also of Florida at the time and how the culture was changed by the shock of Elvis.”

—Joy Wallace Dickinson, *Remembering Orlando: Tales from Elvis to Disney*



ELVIS IGNITED

The Rise of an Icon in Florida

BOB KEALING

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Credit: Marc Rice



BOB KEALING is an Edward R. Murrow and five-time Emmy award-winning broadcast journalist who has appeared on *Dateline NBC*, C-Span, the *Today* show, CNN, MSNBC, and CBS *This Morning*. Kealing is the author of four books, including *Life of the Party* from Crown Archetype, in development as a major motion picture. Kealing's research has led to the establishment of the Jack Kerouac House in Orlando and Gram Parsons Derry Down in Winter Haven, both historic landmarks. Kealing lives north of Orlando with his wife and two children.

Bob Kealing

is available for interviews and appearances



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Q&A

with

BOB KEALING

author of

Elvis Ignited

When did you know that you wanted to write about Elvis in Florida?

I'd heard the threads of information: Mae Axton writing "Heartbreak Hotel" in Jacksonville (turns out it was also recorded for the first time in her house the same day), Tom Parker's military desertion and renaissance in Tampa, Presley's multiple barnstorming tours here. Florida and Floridians played a key role in Presley's rapid rise to stardom.

How does Florida's history of other famous musicians relate to the book?

Presley was the Johnny Appleseed of nascent rock and roll in Florida. Gram Parsons, who I wrote about in *Calling Me Home*, was so profoundly moved by seeing Elvis live in concert as a child. Tom Petty met Elvis on a Florida movie set when he was eleven. It's no accident the peninsula soon exploded with garage bands in the '60s, and so many major stars emerged from them.

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What distinct challenges did you face in writing *Elvis Ignited* that you had not faced in writing your other books?

My other subjects—Jack Kerouac and Brownie Wise in particular—left a trove of letters and memos to research. Presley was not a prolific writer. Thank goodness some of his important interviews and press coverage of his Florida tours remain. They were invaluable.

Did anything surprise you while researching for the book?

One unexpected surprise was finding compelling reportage again and again by early female Florida journalists. They took Presley seriously while their male counterparts were dismissive and superficial. This book is far better because of the work and insights by Jean Yothers in Orlando, Ann Rowe in Tampa Bay, Elvalee Donaldson in Lakeland, and Elvis's promoter, songwriter, confidante, and champion, Mae Boren Axton.

Why do you think people ought to know about Elvis's time in Florida in particular?

As we approach the 40th anniversary of his death, young people in particular need to be aware of the overwhelming impact Elvis had as an emerging, sexy, controversial performer. There are also little-known and unrecognized historic sites tied to Presley's rise in Florida I would like to see recognized and preserved. My hope is this book provides the provenance to move forward with the preservation and recognition of Presley historic sites in Florida.

What do you believe is one primary misconception people have about Elvis?

People don't realize what a short time fans had access to Presley as a dynamic live performer. From late 1954 to 1956 Presley toured the South primarily. It wasn't until mid-way through '56 when Presley had his breakout hits and became a huge star. By the time he appeared on Ed Sullivan, he was already moving into acting—away from touring, and away from Scotty and Bill.

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What else may the average person not know about Elvis?

Presley played more live concerts in Florida during his most crucial and transformative year, 1956, than any other state; more than Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee combined. In a 15 month span, Presley played the entire width and breadth of Florida. He was, quite literally, everywhere. During his final Florida performance in the 1950s, a judge was waiting to take him to jail.

How have concerts changed since Elvis toured?

In Presley's day, concerts were short and unadorned by expansive lighting and sound systems; there was more emphasis on the live performer because the set-up, the stage, the band, the sound, and even the time spent performing was so limited. Today fans are saturated with live streams and a variety of other ways to hear music and concerts. Rarely today is a performer so impactful on the culture so quickly.

If you were only able to listen to one of Elvis's songs for the rest of your life, which would it be?

"If I Can Dream." This is arguably his most compelling live performance of a brand new song commissioned to provide a substantive ending to his comeback special; a hopeful statement about all the turmoil in 1968.

What do you hope readers will enjoy most about your book?

Readers will be imbued with the spirit of Elvis touring Florida backroads and working hard to make a name for himself. I include sources who actually met and worked with Elvis: the director of Elvis Presley's '68 Comeback Special, Steve Binder; Elvis's *Follow That Dream* co-star, Anne Helm; the late Jim Kirk, former mayor of Ocala, FL; the late Country Music Hall of Famer, Charlie Louvin. I also spoke with many fans who retain and share the magic of seeing young Elvis live generations ago.

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1

In Waves

On a warm central Florida day, perched on a beachside motel balcony, twenty-year-old Elvis Presley gazed upon the churning Atlantic Ocean. As the sticky-cool, salted sea air whistled through Presley's dark brown pompadour, only the Atlantic's vastness and the din of crashing waves could begin to compare with the tumult that awaited rock's soon-to-be king. The darkened horizon off Daytona Beach loomed like his limitless potential; mysterious and awe-inspiring.

At this snapshot in time, Elvis was not yet *Elvis*. On May 7, 1955, Presley was just ten months removed from the historic Sun recording sessions back home in Memphis, when visionary recording engineer Sam Phillips brought in Scotty Moore on guitar and his buddy Bill Black on bass to see what kind of talent this raw young singer had. This was his first professional recording session—if you want to call it that. Elvis Presley had never performed in concert.

Nothing much happened in the audition until late that evening, when the trio started messing around with an up tempo number. Phillips recognized, at the very least, that the sound of it was *different*. Then, as his biographer Peter Guralnick wrote, “The rest of the session went as if suddenly they all were caught up in the same fever dream.” The recording they made that night, the rockabilly version of Arthur Crudup's *That's All Right* with an up tempo version of Bill



Elvis with Mae Axton, hired by Tom Parker to promote Presley's 1955 tours.
Courtesy of Heather Axton.

Monroe's *Blue Moon of Kentucky* recorded soon after as the flipside, was to modern music what splitting the atom was to warfare. Presley had his first regional hit and staunch backer in Phillips, who employed an evangelist's zeal to prove that his gut instinct about this kid was right.

In May 1955 Presley had yet to record the string of breakout national number one smashes with RCA Records that ushered in the rock and roll era for good, had a profound impact on American popular culture, and secured Presley's status as a singer and entertainer for the ages.

Nothing more than a working performer with less than a year of experience in a ragtag trio of journeymen musicians, not yet dying his hair jet black, Presley toured under the moniker the "Hillbilly Cat," a hip-swiveling oddity stuck at the bottom of Opry acts on a country package tour. Neither success nor his career path was certain as Presley made his first tour through Florida. Just the thought of him pursuing a career in music was pure audacity. What dirt-poor kid from rural Mississippi via the inner-city projects of working-class Memphis *dared* to aspire to a life of fame and riches as a recording artist or actor?

Most broad-shouldered young southern men of Presley's time and social standing wouldn't have been caught dead singing, dancing, or obsessing about garish pastel-colored clothes and cars. To most boys, stardom only went as far as high school careers lettering in football or basketball, then maybe college. During the staid, adult-dominated era permeated by the wholesome sounds of Mitch Miller and the McGuire Sisters, childhood dreams faded into reality's far recesses; expectations moved on to marriage, children, and a workaday job like Presley had just a year previously; driving a pickup truck for Crown Electric.

Sometimes great artists emerge from the most unlikely circumstances. Presley once said, "Ambition is a dream with a V8 engine." That engine stoked his desire to escape the life he'd known in the projects; often doing without; not getting much notice from girls at

Crooms High School in Memphis, getting teased for daring to dress in original ways and look different. Ambition pushed Presley to pursue his dreams because, truth be told, there was no plan B. His natural talent and ambition, like a souped-up hot rod burning deep in his soul, were his only ticket out of poverty.

Presley's genre-bending voice heralded the dawning of rock and roll and America's youth culture, borrowing from the African American strains of Beale Street in Memphis and church hymns echoing over the cotton fields of Mississippi. Via air waves and hand-held transistor radios, a developing teenage consumer culture devoured a new kind of music aimed only at teens.

Sam Phillips, the non-musician most crucial to developing the soundtrack of this new era, did so with a conscious, colorblind motive; a determination to root out and record talent, black or white, from the poor sides of town and far out in the country. The voices of the ignored that stuck with him growing up on a farm in rural Alabama. He made it his mission to find perfection in the imperfect voices of unknowns like Presley, Howlin' Wolf, and Johnny Cash; he dared them to discover their own essence no matter how long it took. In his efforts to excavate the soul of these hardscrabble but ambitious people, to give them a voice, Phillips was crowned "the man who invented Rock and Roll" by his biographer Peter Guralnick.

In early live shows Presley writhed with a primal, sexual energy soon to draw an avalanche of contempt, criticism, and concern from the civic, religious, and law enforcement establishment. Columnists, reporters, even fellow musicians minimized and mocked Presley and his fans. The kids tuned it out, but adults already concerned about Presley's impact on their kids denounced him. Pastors prayed for him. Presley wasn't just a new teen obsession; to many adults he was downright dangerous. When he burst onto the airwaves with a voice belying his identity as a young Caucasian male, neither the segregated South nor its music could ever again be painted in black or white. Presley became America's first rock and roll star; a teen idol and avatar of cool rebellion whose profound influence on young people is impossible to quantify.

“To say that Elvis Presley has been mythologized into an iconic state of quasi-religious significance is not an exaggeration,” wrote British scholar Richard Parfitt. “Elvis belongs to an elite group of one.” What person in a developed country anywhere in the world with even a minimal knowledge of history and popular culture has not heard and been moved by Presley’s voice? Growing up on the Mesabi Iron Range west of Lake Superior, Bob Dylan reminisced about the soul-stirring experience of hearing Presley for the first time: “I wanted to see the powerful, mystical Elvis that had crash-landed from a burning star onto American soil. The Elvis that was burning with life. That’s the Elvis that inspired us to all the possibilities of life.”

John Lennon was more succinct: “Before Elvis, there was nothing.”

The day of Presley’s first-ever Florida performance, a woman leaving her motel room noticed him at the railing. Forty-year-old Mae Axton was promoting the package tour in which Presley, Scotty, and Bill were playing a bit part. To supplement her income, the married Jacksonville schoolteacher and mother of two boys did public relations and writing on the side.

Axton wore a dark bouffant typical of the time, had a warm southern way about her, and showed plenty of gumption to stand up for herself in the male-dominated music promotion business. Like the young showman she was promoting, Mae Axton had big dreams. The fact wasn’t lost on Axton that instead of thinking about the bevy of young beauties on the World’s Most Famous Beach, Presley was missing his mom and dad.

“Miz Axton, look at the ocean,” Presley marveled. “I can’t believe that it’s so big. I’d give anything in the world to have enough money to bring my mother and daddy down here to see it.” Soon enough Presley did just that and far more, moving Vernon and Gladys Presley out of the Memphis projects forever, buying them a big ranch house that even had a swimming pool; an unimaginable luxury in the days before their son embarked on a singing career. Presley’s sentiment struck a deep chord. “That just went through my heart,” Axton recalled. “All the guys looking for cute little girls, but his priority was doing something for his mother and daddy.”

That vignette captures the character of young Presley. Though burning with his own desire to be a star, with a newfound freedom to pursue all the trappings road rules allowed a handsome young and unmarried performer, Presley remained a devoted, religious son; intent on lifting his parents from the poverty to which they had long become accustomed. His respect for adults was never an affectation; as is tradition in the Deep South, he often addressed older people as *sir* or *ma'am*, *Miz* or *Mister*.

The Sunshine State hot-fueled Presley's rise from hillbilly novelty act in 1955 to headlining megastar the following year. Appropriately, his moonshot began just north of the region soon to be known as Florida's Space Coast, where so many daring dreams and seemingly impossible missions would soon take flight. Presley logged thousands of miles, grinding and glad-handing his way through one Florida town after another. Influential and astute disc jockeys like Wade Goodrich in Ocala, who went by the radio name "Nervous Ned Needham," and Brad Lacey in Fort Myers, championed the unknown, talented young singer.

As in Axton's interaction with the young would-be king, to this day an aging legion of fans up and down the peninsula cherish the time they shared with Presley during his rise to stardom. Presley burst into their predictable lives like a Technicolor Romeo and left an indelible impression; they hold onto those memories with fierce devotion. Before Presley became a prisoner of fame he performed for them; talked, danced, and played with them; took them in his arms and kissed them. Those teens of long ago keep close the photographs and memories, in purses and wallets, and even on tee shirts; Presley's autograph is framed alongside family keepsakes. It's as if they need a constant reminder; proof to themselves and others, that the time they shared with pre-iconic Elvis was indeed *real*. He was *real*.

In fifteen months from May 7, 1955, to August 11, 1956, Presley played fifty-nine Florida shows in a dozen cities; sometimes three or four concerts *a day*. In 1956, his most crucial and transformative year, Presley and his underappreciated and underpaid bandmates played

forty-one Florida concerts, more than in any other state; more than in Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee combined. Before any of his historic appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, where most Americans first became aware of him, Presley's barnstorming days in Florida were already over.

While most young people his age matriculated in colleges and universities, Presley honed his talents by way of Florida back roads; his home away from home. From Pensacola to Jacksonville up north, Daytona Beach and West Palm Beach to the east, Fort Myers, Sarasota, St. Pete, Tampa and Ocala to the west, and Orlando and Lakeland in the center south to Miami's beaches, in 1955 and '56 Elvis, Scotty, and Bill were *everywhere*.

"I don't think there was a better time and place to be a teenager than in Florida in the 1950s," said former Florida governor and United States senator Bob Graham. "It was such a magical place. Elvis is part of what contributed to that excitement."

By 1961 the most controversial figure in Presley's career, his Sven-gali-esque manager Tom Parker, transformed the shy kid from Memphis into the biggest star in the world; rich beyond his wildest dreams. But that mountain of cash came at a steep price; Parker maintained a vicelike grip on Presley, controlling his personal life, limiting his career choices, squelching again and again his ambition to tour outside North America and tackle more challenging acting roles. Thanks to his star-maker turned puppeteer, Presley never performed live shows east of the Atlantic Ocean or west of Hawaii; he never played Europe's grand halls, never had a chance to perform before record crowds in Japan and the Far East, to thrill throngs of devoted Aussies. Other than performing just a few shows over the border in Canada, Presley was trapped stateside. The waves he found so awe-inspiring might as well have been prison walls.

Parker, the former Tampa dog catcher and carnival confidence man kept a deep secret from Presley and the world. To allow Presley access to his fans outside North America would have brought with it the risk of exposing that secret. Ever the chameleon, Parker had the wit,