

## JN LIFE

# Blue Suede Jew

Priscilla Presley may take centre stage in Sofia Coppola's recently released biopic but **Lorraine Gibson** keeps the focus firmly on Elvis' (supposed) Jewish heritage

**S**ofia Coppola's movie *Priscilla*, about life with Elvis as told through the tarantula-lashed eyes of his titular former wife, has caused fury among his fan base and dismay in his estate, resulting in an awkward absence of any Elvis music in the film.

Their rage is levelled as much at Priscilla as at Coppola, as she enthusiastically endorsed the film (based on her memoir, *Elvis and Me*, co-written with Jewish author Sandra Harmon). It exaggerates his flaws and failings, yet ignores his spirituality and his search for life's meaning through alternative religions, including Judaism, which played a part in his life from a young age.

In the summer of 1954, when 19-year-old Elvis Presley received a freshly-pressed copy of his first record, *That's All Right*, he had nothing to play it on. The \$50-a-month-rent for the family's flat in Alabama Avenue, a lowly Memphis enclave nicknamed 'The Pinch', meant they could barely afford essentials, let alone a record player.

Unfazed, the teen who would be 'King' ran upstairs to Rabbi Alfred Fruchter's apartment and played it on his turntable, the one on which he played his cantorial music.

The Fruchter family, in a similar situation to the Presley family in that their flat was a step towards better things, were fond of Elvis and his mum Gladys, who'd pop up for cake with Alfred's wife, Jeanette. Elvis even acted as their 'Shabbos goy' and when offered payment, would refuse. Sometimes he'd join the family for Friday night dinner wearing the kippah they gave him.

Elvis never forgot their kindness and when the rabbi appeared years later at one of his concerts asking to see him, he was invited

backstage where Elvis bear-hugged him and took him to a press conference, introducing him as 'his' rabbi.

Professor Roselle Chartock, author of *The Jewish World of Elvis Presley*, says that when Gladys told Mrs Fruchter that she was worried about Elvis's future prospects, she prophetically said: "Don't worry, he's a good boy, he'll make you proud someday."

This affinity with his Jewish neighbours and, at around the same time, with Bernard Lansky, a stalwart of Memphis' Jewish merchants community who sold

'cool threads' (hip/trendy clothes) and spoke Yiddish with a southern drawl, has raised the question as to whether there was more than just mutual admiration going on.

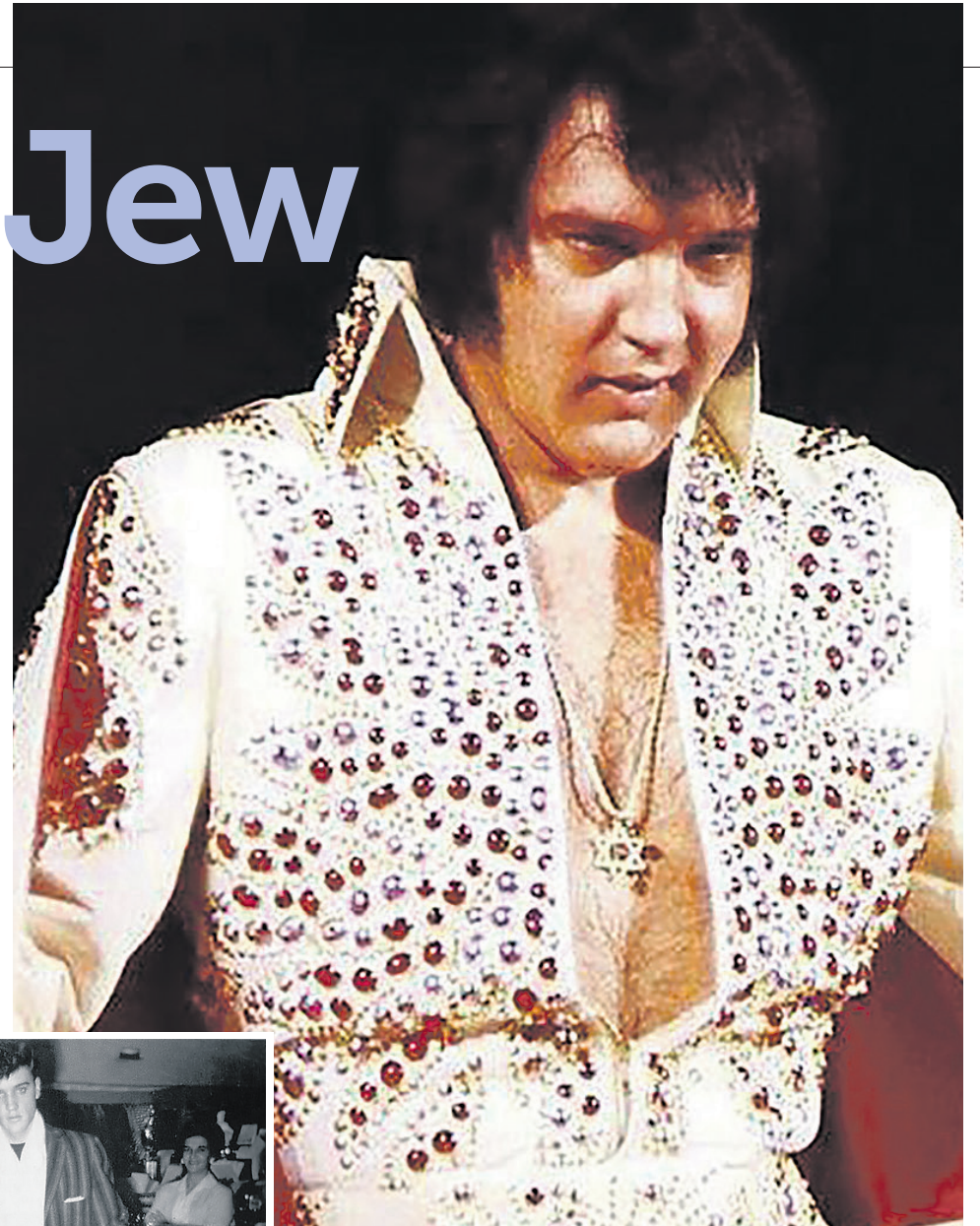
And now, with an exhibition in London stirring up huge interest in Elvis nearly 50 years after his death, the answer is all the more keenly sought. A treasure trove of Elvis' personal possessions, plus costumes worn by Austin Butler in Baz Luhrmann's 2022 *Elvis* movie, are on display at the *Direct From Graceland* exhibition, exquisitely curated by keeper of The King's things, archivist Angie Marchese.

There's much enthusiasm for the theory that Elvis had Jewish heritage, driven by the story told by Chartock that Gladys sat Elvis down while quite young and told him he had Jewish blood, then added: "But I don't want you to tell people, because people don't like Jews."

Bernard Lansky had noticed a shabby kid hanging around the window of his Beale Street shop, not just because he was scruffy, but because he was white. "Beale was a rough, tough street and home to mainly African Americans many of whom were our customers," said Bernard's son, Hal Lansky, when I visited the famous Memphis store last year. "Elvis stood out like a sore thumb."

Still, Bernard ushered him inside as though he were one of his VIP customers, among them BB King and Little Richard. An unlikely friendship was forged and Elvis patronised Lansky's for 30 years. "I put Elvis in his first suit and I put him in his last," said Bernard, referring to the white suit and blue tie his dear friend was buried in.

Elvis struck up many relationships with Jews: songwriters, directors, costume designers, jewellers and Alfred Wertheimer, the photographer who created the now-sanctified series of candid, monochrome photos



Elvis sports a Star of David pendant in 1973 and (inset) c1958 with seven-year-old Hal Lansky and his sisters. Bernard Lansky was a stalwart of Memphis' Jewish merchants community

of Elvis on the brink of megastardom at 21 – an incredible record

of a life-altering three months, forever frozen in time.

In 2018 Angie Marchese, vice president of

archives and exhibitions at Elvis Presley's Graceland, happened upon the gravestone that Elvis designed for his mother in 1964, six years after she died in 1958. It was placed in storage after Elvis died on 16 August, 1977 (many believe by Elvis' father, Vernon, known for his anti-Semitic leanings, which infuriated Elvis) and hadn't seen the light of day since.

"It existed," Angie says, "but I'd never seen it. It was among thousands of items as you can imagine, but suddenly there it was. Elvis had it carved with a cross and with a Star of David to honour Gladys's Jewish heritage. The stone was broken but I had it restored and added it to Graceland's Memorial Garden to mark the 60th anniversary of her death."

Elvis changed the spelling of his middle name from Aron to Aaron and regularly wore his bejewelled Star of David and *chai* pendants on

stage. Memphis Mafia member Marty Lacker, another close Jewish friend, told author Alanna Nash, in her 1995 book *Elvis Aaron Presley: Revelations from the Memphis Mafia*, that Elvis wore the *chai* "to cover all bases" after exploring different religions to his own Baptist-Pentecostal one and that he'd joke



Elvis with Bernard Lansky, whose shop he patronised for years



Baz Luhrmann with Austin Butler and Hal Lansky on a visit to Memphis. *Lansky Bros*