

The Army: 1958-60

"Elvis the Pelvis" became Private Presley, U.S. Army, in March of 1958. For the following two years he was out of circulation, serving first at Ft. Hood, Texas, and then in Friedberg, West Germany. From today's perspective, it seems almost unbelievable that Elvis would go into the army at the peak of his powers and popularity. He *was* drafted, of course, but it was a peacetime draft and it would have been fairly easy for Elvis to either avoid it altogether or to arrange to serve in the Special Services, singing for the troops, promoting the army and otherwise going on as if nothing had happened. Instead, Elvis chose to serve his time like any other inductee, cutting his salary from over \$100,000 to \$78 a month and completely abandoning his recording and performing career.

Or perhaps more to the point, Col. Parker recognized the public relations value of G.I. Elvis. There would certainly have been howls of indignant outrage from rock-hating parents if it seemed that Elvis had received any sort of "preferential treatment." In addition, the army provided an escape from the intense pressures of superstardom. By exiting at the peak of his popularity, Elvis could sidestep the possible embarrassment of watching that popularity decline. Since no one had ever been in his position before, it was impossible to know how long his luck could last or what kind of future an "aging" rock star could expect. In any case, and contrary to the glowing press releases, Elvis was fairly miserable during his army stay. He worried about his career and missed home terribly; most of all, he missed his beloved mother, who died shortly after Elvis was inducted, casting a gloom over his stay in Germany and the rest of his life.

For better or worse, serving in the army had a sanitizing effect on Elvis' image that all the money and publicity in the world couldn't have bought. Photographs of Elvis getting his hair shorn, riding tanks and peeling potatoes were flashed across the country, and suddenly this once threatening symbol of juvenile delinquency became a shining example of patriotism and decency, willing to give up his riches and fame for the honor of serving his country. Even the kids who were mourning the loss of their idol watched it all with admiration (the army was still a popular destination in 1958) and listened in astonishment as their parents began chiding them with "Why can't you be more like Elvis?!"