

# On The Road With Elvis

Donnie Sumner, USA

## Three Thousand Concerts with Elvis Presley

Uncle J. D. Sumner was one of the world's deepest bass singers. In those days he was in a group called the "Sunshine Boys" and made cowboy movies. He had a brand new Cadillac and a lot of fine jewelry. I liked the way he did his hair and the way he dressed. When I saw him and my daddy, who was a poor preacher, side-by-side, I decided that when I grew up I was going to be like my uncle.

After college in 1960 I entered the world of show business and gave it my very best until 1976. During that 16-year period I was lead

singer with the "Stamps Quartet" for 8 years, then spent a couple of years as part of the Grand Ole Opry with a group I called "The Tennessee Rangers". We were the first back-up group that worked the Opry.

During the last six years of my professional career I was a part of the Elvis Presley entourage. I lived in his home. My group, called



On Stage with Elvis

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"Voice", was the opening act at all of his concerts. I served as his vocal arranger and had group of 12 that backed him on stage and on records. Being part of what they referred to as the 'Memphis Mafia', there are a lot of memories. Some stories would make you laugh; others would make you cry.

My blood father had been shot and killed while he and another man were trying to hold up a bar in Lakeland, Florida, when I was only ten months old. I had a six-year-old brother and a three-year-old sister. Because our mother was considered to be a woman of loose morals, we were put up for adoption. My grandfather adopted my brother, J. D. Sumner adopted my sister, and Russell Sumner, adopted me.

I believe that if anybody does wrong, he must stand on his own two feet and say, "I messed up." I don't have anything negative to say about anybody I've ever worked with. They were my friends. I created my life-style and now must live with the memory of it. However, in 1976 everything changed for me. God did something that only He can do - He gave me a chance to begin again.

On Saturday morning of the Labour Day weekend in September 1976, we were in Las Vegas, Nevada, with the

Presley show at the Hilton. While lying in bed, I did a quick review of my life. These are some of the realizations that came to me that morning:

First of all, I realized that I was a hopeless drug addict. What had begun as a social high,



## *A Different Kind of Background*

**Donnie Sumner:** By profession, I'm a musician. By forgiveness, I'm a member of God's family, and I thank Him for everything I am or ever will be. My heritage is that of a son of an old-fashioned Pentecostal preacher. Well, my daddy was Pentecostal when Pentecostal wasn't cool. His first church was in the little town of Bradley Junction, Florida. It had a population of approximately 50-60 people. There wasn't anything there but a little one-pump filling station, about five houses, a little building we called the church, and an 18-foot house-trailer parsonage. My mother, father, sister, and I lived there. We had a hand pump in front where we got our water, and a little bathroom out back. In those days everybody was poor. People used to bring things to church and pay tithes with bacon, chicken, eggs, and things like that. God did supply our needs, but it often came in a cardboard box. After church we would go back and see what was in the box. If we had a good box night, we had a good week.



**Donnie Sumner**

## Religion Did Not Help

**Donnie Sumner:** The devil had robbed me of everything valuable in my life and I was just a hopeless, helpless piece of humanity. People say that I gave up everything to follow Jesus. Well, that's not so. I didn't have anything left to give up. I had lost it all! It had all been stripped away! No matter how hard I tried to change my life-style, my habit was so deeply ingrained that it was impossible for me to change myself. In vain, I had tried different religions. I had been a Mormon, a Buddhist, and had been involved with the Krishna movement. For two years I had practised transcendental meditation.



or youthful experiment, many, many years earlier when I would smoke a joint occasionally, or take an upper to stay up all night or just for the fun of it, had now brought me to the point of being a hopeless drug addict. I wasn't worth anything to myself or anybody else. I was doing over \$200 worth of cocaine every day. On the average, I took 10 qualudes during the course of a 24-hour period. Along with that I was smoking over half an ounce of angel dust every week. It had cost me my health. At 6'4", I weighed only 138 pounds.

My home had been irretrievably broken. My kids weren't sure who or what I was; they were no longer under my roof. I had already made two attempts to take my own life with an overdose of cocaine. If I told you that working for Elvis Presley and being around the upper echelon of the entertainment

field is not fun, I'd be telling you a lie. There *are* pleasures in this world, but they last only for a season.

Jesus said, "I'll never leave you nor forsake you," however, if you want to be left alone, He will let you do your own thing. That's pretty much where I was at. I was disillusioned and could see no way out. I said to myself, "Okay, if you can't change anything, this will be the last thing you'll have to worry about." I got out of bed and went by Elvis' bedroom. After thanking him for his kindness, I went through the living room and out a sliding glass door onto the top of the Las Vegas Hilton. Walking over to the railing, I climbed up and looked down the 28 floors. I had come there to end the problem which I had created.

Standing there on that little ledge in an agnostic frame of mind and in a drug-induced stupor, I took a "shot in



## A New Job

**Donnie Sumner:** After leaving Elvis, I went back to Nashville and got a job. This "first legitimate job of my entire adulthood" was driving a school bus for a Christian Academy in Nashville. About a year later I finally started my own business called 'Spirit and Associates' in Nashville. It was a success. In 1980, I became a licensed minister and moved to Florida where I started evangelistic work. I then went to West Virginia and became a state evangelist for my denomination. In 1981, I was appointed as pastor of a church in Baird, West Virginia, and had 23 peace-filled months there. In 1983, I moved to Carmi and began a ministry called, 'Concerts of Praise'. I give completely Christian music concerts. Between songs I interweave a message of encouragement, and close with an evangelistic outreach.

the dark." Not really expecting anything to happen, I cried out in desperation, "I don't know who You are, or what You are, or even if You exist. I've tried to find You, but You've eluded me. Whatever You are to my daddy - all the things that you've done for him - I could use that kind of help. Would You please help me, whatever You are?"

As soon as I got those words out of my mouth, for some reason I began to cry. It was almost uncontrollable. I hadn't cried in years, and actually prided myself on being extremely hardhearted. Now I found that I couldn't quit. Then a song came to mind that I had sung as a little boy in children's church. It went, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong." The next line hit me like a freight train: "They are weak, but He is strong." I don't think I've ever had any two lines stand out quite as powerfully as these: "The Bible tells me so" and "He is strong." I have never been able to explain how emphatic those two phrases hit me. Just imagine that

you're going over Niagara Falls and all of a sudden you catch a piece of rope. You don't know where it came from, but at that point you'll grab hold of anything.

The God of heaven had been there, waiting for me for many years. I had tried to outrun Him and to elude Him. I'd even made fun of Him. I'd done everything I could possibly do not to have anything to do with Him, but He saw me coming. He heard my cry and said, "I don't care who you are, where you're at, or what your need is, if you call on Me, I'll answer you." I called out in desperation that morning and the God of heaven stepped down on the ledge beside me. Instead of jumping into the

nothingness as I had planned, I fell back into the arms of Jesus, and He gave me a brand new beginning. He said simply that if I'd confess Him, He'd forgive me.

Many things from my childhood came back to my mind. I was so involved in trying to quit crying that I got down off that rail and looked back through the suite, hoping nobody had seen me. Back in

*This life with Jesus  
is the best I have  
ever lived.*

my room, I laid on my bed and cried myself to sleep.

I woke up that afternoon and my mind was a little bit clearer. Realizing what had happened and where I had been, I lay there thinking about my childhood. I then got down beside my bed, folded my hands like a little child and said, "God, I'm in a mess and don't know what to do, but I need some help. I sure would like You to help me. If You can do anything with me, I'll give You the credit for it."

God heard that confession of my sins and forgave me. Neither the devil nor anyone

else can hang that mess around my neck again. As the Bible says, "He whom the Son sets free is free indeed." He reached down into a horrible pit that morning, picked me up and turned me into a new creature.

I left Elvis Presley's entourage the following Thursday. When I told him that I was resigning, he said, "I'm proud of you. I wish I could do that. I'd love to start all over, and do and be what I like, but I can't... I've just got to keep on being Elvis."

Since 1983, my wife, Marty, and I have not spent one night apart. We travel upwards of 70,000 miles and work up to 200 appointments a year. God has been very, very gracious. This life with Jesus is the best I have ever lived. When I left Elvis Presley, I had a little Volkswagen and a modest home in a part of Nashville that now is a less than desirable location. I had blue jeans, tank top shirts and Indian moccasins. I didn't have any dress up clothes. Worst of all, I had no family.

Now I've got the nicest car I've ever driven. It was a gift to me. I live in a beautiful home in a good part of town. I've got a family that thinks I'm the greatest dad - and grandpa - that ever stood in a pair of shoes. My beautiful wife is a tremendous support to me. The best part of the story, though, is that one of these days, whether it's tonight when I lay my head down, or some day that is yet come, I know that I'm going to pass from this life and inherit the gift that can only come to the body of Christ, and that's the gift of eternal life in a place called heaven. I've only got one story and I've only got one song, and that's Jesus. In Him you can have a new life. In Him you can have an abundant life. In Him you can have eternal life. ●