

## Elvis on the Potomac

On March 23, 1956, Elvis played D.C. for the first and last time. The show, unlike the boat, rocked.

BY PETER GOLKIN

At 8 p.m. on a biting and windy March 23, the first Friday of spring in 1956, it became clear the *S.S. Mount Vernon* wouldn't cruise the Potomac after all.

As the night got colder and darker, a couple hundred people stood waiting on Pier 4, off Maine Avenue SW at the Washington Channel, home of the Wilson Line cruises.

They'd all lined up for an evening aboard the fleet's queen, a 201-foot, four-deck ship rebuilt from the hull up and capped with a glamorous, streamlined wedding-cake motif. Promoters billed it as "America's finest steamliner."

This wasn't supposed to be an ordinary boat ride. First of all, as the kickoff to a season of Country Music Moonlight Cruises, it featured entertainment. And D.C.—very much a Southern city in those days—liked its country and western.

The featured act was Elvis Presley, a 21-year-old just starting to light up the charts. The rest of 1956 would see the whole world catch on to the former truck driver from Memphis, Tenn., who'd walked into Sun Studio three years earlier to lay down a couple of tracks for his mother.



On Pier 4 in D.C., though, what the people wanted was the promised voyage on the Potomac. They wanted their steam-heated cruise on a glass-enclosed boat. They wanted the advertised “refreshments.” But the *Mount Vernon* was in a bad way. It blew a valve on an earlier cruise, and the crew couldn’t repair it. A lot of people wanted their money back, and they got it—all 2 bucks.

Those who stayed for the cruise to nowhere heard a three-hour show from the future king of rock ‘n’ roll. They heard him playing new material: songs like “Heartbreak Hotel” and “Blue Suede Shoes.” And although those backing Presley were on the fast track to becoming no-names, the Blue Moon Boys—Bill Black, Scotty Moore, and D.J. Fontana—were also tight.

The show, unlike the boat, rocked.

Elvis’ D.C. debut came courtesy of a government radio announcer from Lizard Lick, N.C., named Connie B. Gay. He moved to the capital from Appalachia in the 1940s and landed a one-hour radio show on the new 1,000-watt WARL in Arlington. Before long, he started using the program to anchor a rapidly expanding music promotion endeavor. He even trademarked it: *Town and Country Time*.



*Jimmy Dean and Elvis Presley on the set of Town and Country Time. (Photo courtesy of the Dean Family Collection)*

As promoters go, Gay was a legend. He struck a deal with the Grand Ole Opry that gave him a regional monopoly on booking the biggest names in country music. He offered sellout shows for acts like Eddy Arnold, Ernest Tubb, and Lefty Frizzell. Hank Williams, part of a lineup Gay put together for New Year’s Eve 1951, ended up staying at Gay’s place in Arlington off and on during his last months of life.

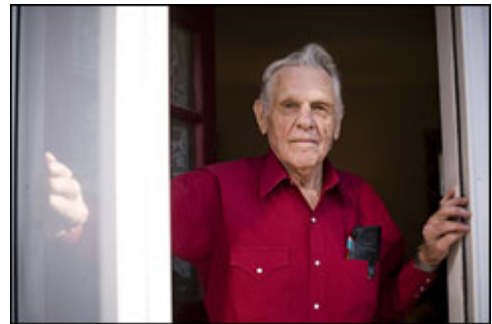
By 1950, Gay had expanded his regional empire to include concert cruises. He started chartering a couple of the evening runs down the Potomac that, during the day, took tourists to Mount Vernon on the Virginia side and Marshall Hall

amusement park over in Maryland. The cruises offered residents and tourists modestly exotic adventures three times a day.

In a 1986 *Washington City Paper* interview, Gay remembered what came to be called his “Hillbilly Cruises” as “an absolute sensation from the start. We were always packed with about 3,000 people. On the first [one]»¿, we had Grandpa Jones. I never missed a show.” Working off a folksy note from the promoter, columnist Paul Herron for the *Washington Post and Times Herald* (the papers merged the year before) encouraged concertgoers to brave the late-winter weather of March '56. Don't forget, he wrote, the boat is heated.

As to the star of the show, Herron acknowledged no personal opinion, saying young Presley was simply “considered by many to be one of the most sensational country music singers in the past decade.” Gay sold Elvis as country; he knew his audience and had too much invested in the cruises to alter his publicity materials for what still might be the short-lived novelty of rockabilly or rock 'n' roll or whatever the hell it was the boy was singing. Besides, Elvis had, a month before, landed his first No. 1 single on *Billboard's* national Country & Western chart, the Sun-recorded, RCA re-released “I Forgot to Remember to Forget.”

What impressed Herron in his “On the Town” column was Elvis' paycheck. The boy had just banked \$12,000 for a run in Norfolk, Va., on top of his recent \$40,000 deal with RCA—an unheard-of sum for a country singer. (Nervous RCA execs were tasting a bit of vindication since “Heartbreak Hotel” had entered the national pop charts on March 3 at No. 68; it went on to spend 22 weeks on the charts, eight of those at No. 1.)



Mel Price, 86, is still kicking around the country music scene in Maryland. (Photograph by Darrow)

Herron did his part to promote the whole bill: He noted Presley would follow the opener, Melvin Price and the Santa Fe Rangers, almost-locals from Easton, Md., who had a few modest recordings of their own.

Price, 86, is still kicking around the Maryland country music scene. On Sunday nights, he spins the old records and tells the old stories on Hurlock, Md.'s WAAI Country 100.9 FM.

"All of those boys are dead," he says about his Santa Fe Rangers. "I was the oldest one, and out of all of us...who made that trip and played with Elvis that night, all of them are gone."

Price, like the rest of those who stayed on the boat, knew by March 23, 1956, that Elvis would probably turn out to be more than a moment. Since late January of that year, Presley had made five appearances on the Dorsey brothers' *Stage Show* on CBS. The variety show, produced by Jackie Gleason, constantly trailed in the ratings behind NBC's *Perry Como*, so its producers rolled the dice and took a chance on the unusual singer with the strange name. After the Washington gig, Elvis and the Blue Moons would be off to New York for their sixth and final appearance. Elvis arrived in Washington after playing Richmond's



*Gay remembered what came to be called his "Hillbilly Cruises" as "an absolute sensation from the start....On the first [one], we had Grandpa Jones." (Courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum)*

Mosque Theater the night before. He had just one pre-concert obligation in D.C.: getting to the Evening Star Television Center at Connecticut Avenue near Van Ness Street NW for a TV interview on WMAL-7's *Town and Country Time*. It aired at 6:30 p.m., hosted by Gay's protégé, Jimmy Dean, a tall, 27-year-old country singer from Texas who would become better known for ground breakfast meats.

Dean, wearing boots and a neckerchief on camera, was fronting his own solid group back then, the Texas Wildcats. He was a local star getting national attention. Young Elvis showed up in a smart sports jacket—he didn't bother with a tie—and flashed some argyle socks. The host and his interviewee should have had some decent chemistry. Their on-air chat went basically like this:

Jimmy: So, you're gonna be on the *S.S. Mount Vernon* tonight, are you Elvis?

Elvis: Yep. Jimmy: Have you ever worked on a boat before? Elvis: Nope. Jimmy: I imagine you're looking forward to this, aren't you? Elvis: Yep.

In his autobiography, *Thirty Years of Sausage, Fifty Years of Ham*, Dean remembered the interview as “possibly the worst I've ever done.”

When both he and Elvis were Las Vegas regulars years later, Dean recalled that Elvis apologized for his brevity in the D.C. studio, saying he was simply scared of the camera.

Back on Pier 4, Connie Gay had bigger concerns than an interview gone bust. Wilson Line operators called the promoter to tell him his ship might not sail. Gay, who'd invested some \$4,500 for the charter and already sold hundreds of advance tickets, decided to keep the box office open and hope for a quick fix. Adding to his woes: A storm started moving toward Washington from the northwest, bringing with it winds, rain, and temperatures down into the 30s.



Pier 4 and the Wilson Line pier house today  
(Photograph by Darrow Montgomery)

Another *Post and Times Herald* columnist, Bill Gold, recorded the moment the crowd turned. Gay told them: “Even if we don't cast off, we'll give you two shows instead of one, and we hope you'll all enjoy yourselves.” A refund was offered;

Connie Gay stood at the gangplank and handed out dollar bills to those who'd rather go home.

Gold wrote in his column: "Then the gangplank was pulled up, and the entertainment began. It was a bitter cold night, so the moonlight that bathed the open decks held little attraction. Most of those aboard crowded into the glass-enclosed main deck to watch the show."

The way Mel Price tells it: The deck was so packed, people couldn't dance; they could hardly move. Elvis came out with a policeman on either side. Maybe it was a touch dramatic, Price says, but maybe he did need the protection, even then. For the most part, the crowd was into it. They knew who Elvis was, and they wanted a show. Price remembers getting trapped in the squeeze of the crowd between a steel guitar and a middle-aged woman. "She pinned me there," he said. "You couldn't move....You simply could not move."

Elvis presented himself with the same economy he employed with Dean. This was his pre-sequins phase. "He had nothing fancy, no jumpsuit," Price says. "I don't think he told any jokes or stories. He just sang one song after the other."



*The former S.S. Mount Vernon, rechristened the Charles S. Zimmerman*

But he showed a regal manner, says Price. After strumming hard above the slap of the drums, the rattle of the stand-up bass, and the stinging lead guitar, Elvis broke three strings. "He just pulled the guitar off his shoulder, and it slid across the stage," Price says. "He just said, 'I'll be back.'...It was that little bit of attitude. The audience loved it."

Both the opener and the featured act played two sets. Today Price laughs about taking the stage after the biggest name in rock history. "Back then, I was a young, rambunctious cat. I kind of thought I was right in there with him....I don't believe I would want to follow him now." Between sets, the musicians shared a dressing

room. Price couldn't do more than say hello, though, since the future king "was pretty well occupied with women hanging on him."

After the show, Elvis was happy to greet Washingtonians who'd seen him on *Stage Show*.

"He didn't go hide. He didn't go back in a corner like some do. He came out to meet 'em," Price says. "I never saw him again after that, except in the movies."

For Connie Gay, the evening would always stand out "as the only time I didn't fill the boat."

Elvis left Washington that night. He was due in Manhattan in a few hours, despite a snow storm somewhere in between. That Sunday, he flew to California for a Hollywood screen test. The rest is a TiVo's worth of docu-dramas: fame, women, and a legendary love of bacon.



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As for Pier 4, home of the steamboat, it managed to survive Southwest's massive urban renewal projects of the '60s and still serves as a home to cruises—on the Potomac Spirit line. Changes in the neighborhood gave it a new address: 6th and Water Streets SW, but passengers are still greeted by the former Wilson Line pier house.

With engines repaired, the *Mount Vernon* also survived Elvis, at least for a few more seasons. It carried roughly half a million people a year, including the crown princess of Japan, through the last run in fall 1962. On Jan. 5, 1963, the *Mount Vernon* sank. A seacock in the bilge line froze and cracked, leaving the Wilson Line president to regret he didn't employ the old timer's trick of packing the fittings with manure.

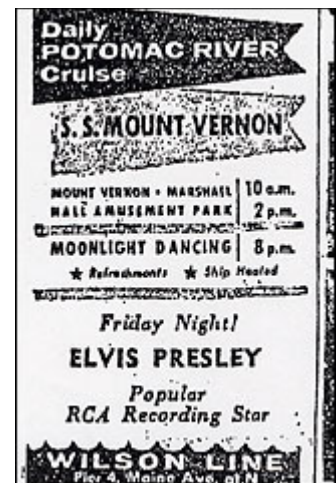
The ship was raised and brought to the protected mud flats north of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge in Maryland, where it sat with its hold full of water to keep from drifting.

The *Mount Vernon* waited by the bridge until its salvage rights were finally sold in 1967 to the Seafarers International Union for use at its training school at Piney Point, Md. The union rechristened the ship the *Charles S. Zimmerman* in honor of a longtime labor leader. But by 1986, the *Zimmerman* was looking rough and the union's school sold it to a pair of aspiring restaurateurs who envisioned a fine-dining boat on the Yonkers, N.Y., waterfront. They renamed the ship again: *The River Princess*.

The venture never worked out. The Yonkers owners declared bankruptcy in 1990, and two years later, the *Westchester County Business Journal* reported that the boat that carried both Elvis and the Japanese princess sat three-quarters submerged at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the subject of impending legal action.

The ultimate fate of the Potomac's last steamship lies somewhere beyond the reach of Google, Lexis-Nexis, and a stream of phone calls to New York. One of the would-be restaurateurs hung up upon hearing mention of the boat. The attorney who handled the ship after bankruptcy died in 2005. But the message board of Steamboats.org supports the rumor that the one-time queen of the Wilson Line was finally scrapped at some point during the Clinton-Gore era.

Elvis' final years, on the other hand, are more than well-documented. He never again played the District, and his few remaining shows in the area required suburban basketball arenas and sometimes generous audience goodwill—standing ovations for crappy, even bizarre stage shows. He probably would have considered his once-unsung visit to the Nixon White House in December 1970 his most successful performance in Washington, charming from the president a



much-elusive Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs badge. In return, Nixon got a gun. There was no mention of the *Mount Vernon* or 2-dollar refunds in their conversations.

*Additional reporting by Jonathan York*

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