
Guralnick undoubtedly raised the bar in Elvis scholarship, and Nash’s work is, with one important exception, well-documented and thorough. The quality and success of *Last Train* appears, however, to have led the Elvis Presley Estate to embrace Guralnick. In return, Guralnick seems to have compromised some of his objectivity for access. nowhere is this clearer than in his portrayal of the Colonel as a relatively benign or uncontroversial figure, and there is a definite sense that much is left unsaid. Nash’s book, lacking even the semi-official seal of the Estate—her collaboration with the non-Estate-approved Memphis Mafia members Billy Smith, Lamar Fike, and Marty Lacker on *Elvis Aaron Presley* ensures that—is able to avoid Guralnick’s problem altogether. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of her book is Nash’s account of the ways in which the Colonel exercised influence over his client’s career even after both were dead. Nash recounts how, for example, after the journalist Chet Flippo came down hard on the Colonel in his introduction to the book *Graceland: The Living Legacy of Elvis Presley* (HarperCollins, 1993), Priscilla Presley put pressure on the publisher to order a recall (331–32). Nash suggests that much of this influence stems from an agreement that the Estate reached with the Colonel in 1981, an agreement in which Parker surrendered his excessive share of certain deals he had made for Elvis (his take was often more than 50%, with the singer receiving considerably less) and the Estate wrested some degree of control back from his manager. The success was, however, only partial and the Estate has been careful to portray the Colonel in a benign light ever since. Indeed, Nash details how the Estate ended up paying the Colonel several million dollars for what was effectively its own property: not a bad achievement for an elderly and infirm (the victim of several heart attacks) illegal immigrant who sometimes struggled with the English language.
The revelation that the man who became Colonel Tom Parker was born Andreas Cornelis van Kuijik in Holland is not new—Albert Goldman’s *Elvis* (McGraw-Hill, 1981) broke the story—nor indeed is the telling of the Colonel’s life story: two previous biographies, Dirk Vellenga’s *Elvis and the Colonel* (Bantam Doubleday, 1988) and James L. Dickerson’s *Colonel Tom Parker* (1st Cooper, 2001), have already taken care of much of the narrative. What is new is the meticulousness with which Nash traces the Colonel’s early history—his fleeing of Holland, his shadowy military service, his years as a circus carnie, and his entry into show business managing Hank Snow and Eddy Arnold—and his financial dealings. This good work is, however, somewhat undermined by the sensationalist claim at the heart of the book: that the Colonel was a murderer. Leaning more towards the demands of the traditional celebrity biography than careful scholarship, Nash bases her allegation that Andreas Cornelis van Kuijik murdered a housewife and then fled his native Holland on the flimsiest of evidence, and returns to this claim throughout the book whenever she is short of a motive for the Colonel’s often puzzling behavior. While there is always a chance that Nash’s suspicions are correct, she relies too heavily on this slim possibility for explanatory leverage. Without it she might have been forced to delve more deeply into the Colonel’s contradictions—his immense generosity to his former carnie friends and his need to humiliate a series of would-be adopted sons (Elvis included); his hard-nosed business dealings and his sentimentality towards animals—and a more complete picture of her subject might have emerged.

The real interest for scholars in Nash’s study lies in her vivid accounts of the early days of rock and roll music and the growth of the music industry from the 1950s onwards. Nash credits the Colonel with inventing modern rock promotion—it was he who pioneered the first worldwide television concert via satellite, organizing Elvis’s “Aloha from Hawaii” concert broadcast live around the globe—and with creating the rock and roll merchandising industry. In this, it seems, the Colonel was a visionary, even if, as Nash portrays it, his motives were often less than pure, or serendipitous: the “Aloha” TV special was a direct result of the Colonel’s unwillingness to tour Europe or Asia due to his immigration problems. The methods that Parker used were undeniably successful from a commercial viewpoint, and the two men at the center of the book made millions. That both men also appeared to be near bankruptcy at the time of their equally lonely deaths—Elvis on the verge of mortgaging Graceland and the Colonel struggling to pay off a rumored $30 million in gambling debts—shows, perhaps, that commercial concerns alone are not enough to sustain a meaningful life and career. In this we also see the toll that American success stories—be they of the poor boy made good or of the immigrant who toiled his way to success—may take on their central characters. In this there might be evidence for extending the claim that a great book about Elvis is a great book about America to incorporate a (mostly) great book about his manager too.

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