

INTRODUCTION (“PIECES OF MY LIFE”)

Elvis Presley

Music.

Music.

Seems obvious, I suppose, but when I think about my life—telling my story—that’s what it’s all about. From the beginning until now.

The music.

Not the fame, or the fun, or the crowds, or the career. Or the sex, drink, drugs, and money.

No.

The music.

In fact, if I look back at my life, and I try to see into my past, everything seems blurry. At least at first. I have to squint and blink away the haze so I can visualize the events that shaped me and the people who meant so much to me. I start to see clearly the people who swept through my life, for better or for worse, most of them giving so much to me, a couple of them taking a part of me. At first I don’t really see them. I can’t make out their faces. Then I lean into my past and I hear something, a sound begins, reverberating in my mind, faintly at first, then louder, and I realize what it is.

Music.

I start to hear it. It comes on. Pours into me.

Songs.

I hear the songs.

Melodies. Chords. Harmonies. Lyrics. Then as all those elements fill in I start to hear something more. I begin to hear the stories that make up the songs, the stories that the songs tell.

Gradually everything starts to clear up. A fog lifts. I look back and through the music I can see.

And when I say I look back, I'm talking *way* back, fifty-plus years, when I was a kid. A little kid. Four years old. I started to hear the music then, that long ago. I heard the music loud and clear. I hear it now. I hear it always.

The music would float around me, then flow into me, zap through my body like an electric charge, and lift me. I would soar. I would fly. I'm four years old, sitting at our kitchen table, my head bent over, leaning into the radio, listening, even as I'm surrounded by other sounds, other voices, my mother, my grandmother, my sisters, my brother, but I wouldn't hear them. I wouldn't even be there. I would be somewhere else. Lost in the music. Devoured by the sound. Transported by the songs.

It's always—*always*—about the music.

Specifically, certain songs, each one having a profound effect on me. To paraphrase the sage and soulful Ronnie Spector, each one of those songs is a little piece of my life.

That's why I need to tell you my story through the songs that meant the most to me—the songs that coursed through my life, the songs that formed me, that took me higher, deeper, farther than any words, visual image, vision, or dream could take me. When a song hit me, my life stopped. I would hear a song—at age five, or ten, or fifteen, or twenty—and I would listen to it. And that's all I would do, for hours. Sometimes for days. I wouldn't just listen to the song. I would *live* in that song. I would hear a song and I would listen to it again, and again, and again. I would lose

track of time, of space. I would become submerged in that song. The song would become my world.

This book is about my life as told through those songs. Songs that took me away, starting at ground level, living in a poor but happy home, never wanting much more, enjoying what I had, even when times got tough, because I had my escape, my refuge. I had my music. My songs. Songs that nobody else in my life could hear, at least not in the way I could. The songs would take me to places I could never dream. I would feel myself rising to heights I could never imagine, daring myself to stay at the height, and then go higher, and higher, and higher, until I arrived at a place I never knew existed. I found myself flying, floating, and then, after a while, I would start teetering, and begin to fall, then I'd plummet, end over end, hurtling back down, somehow—barely—preventing a headfirst crash into earth. More than once. And then, again, I'd envelop myself in music. A song would rise, and again the song would save me.

What songs? What kind of music? Everything. An eclectic and surprising soundtrack. All different—different songs, different melodies, different genres, different styles. I lived inside my own personal playlist. Pop. Country. Rap. Soul. Rock.

The Beatles. Stevie Wonder. Al Green. Frank Sinatra. R.E.M. Nanci Griffith. The Notorious B.I.G. Lou Reed. KISS. Barry Manilow. And more.

I listened to them all.

They all formed me.

Molding me into the singer I became.

Into the person I am.

The music was my pulse, my motor, my passion, my obsession, my religion. The songs were holy. The songs made me *me*.

I've picked out twenty-three songs for you, twenty-three essential songs. They're not in the exact order that I heard them, or remember them, but pretty close. They all took me to

a place I'd never been before. They transported me. They all meant the world to me.

Even more, they all meant my life.

So, please, hear the music.

Stand next to me. Clap your hands. Snap your fingers. Close your eyes. Hear my songs. Hear them with me.

Lose yourself in them.

Let them take you away.

Let them take you home.