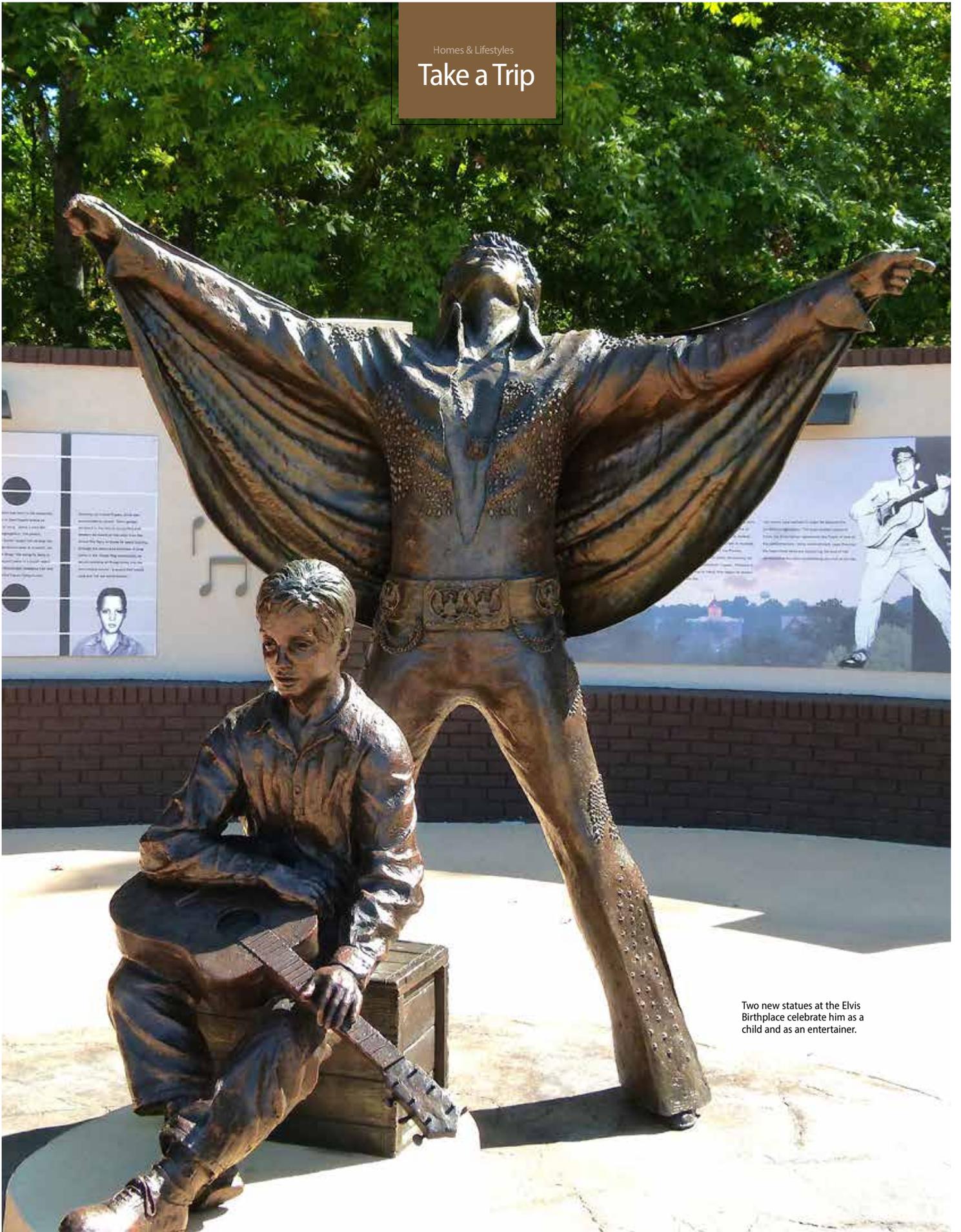


Homes & Lifestyles  
Take a Trip



Two new statues at the Elvis Birthplace celebrate him as a child and as an entertainer.

# A King's Home

Elvis Birthplace adds statues of the boy and the entertainer

Story and photos by Jackie Sheckler Finch

As a child, Elvis Presley would climb a hill behind his two-room birthplace in Tupelo and dream about the future. With his \$7.75 hardware-store guitar on his knees, the Mississippi boy would imagine becoming a singer. “We didn’t know how his life would turn out,” says childhood buddy Guy Harris. “He was just one of us. He was on the same level as me when we grew up here, and he was on the same level as me when he died. Elvis never forgot where he came from.”

Guy grew up to become a policeman. Elvis, of course, became the world’s most famous entertainer.

To honor that childhood dream, two statues titled “Becoming” have been added to the Elvis Birthplace. The two new sculptures were created by Michiel VanderSommen, the same sculptor who did the “Elvis at 13” statue located at the Birthplace.

“The statues symbolize the transformation of Elvis the boy into Elvis the entertainer,” says Dick Guyton, executive director of the Elvis Birthplace. “The statues also symbolize hope. Some people don’t know that there is hope out there if you just look for it.”

Elvis dreamed big but he didn’t know what lay ahead of him. That’s why the two statues showcase the boy sitting on a milk crate dreaming while a larger-than-life Elvis the entertainer stands behind him in his signature eagle jumpsuit, arms outstretched, head tilted back to the sky — the beloved performer’s traditional pose at the end of a concert. But the boy can’t see that yet because he doesn’t know what the future holds.

“We can’t see into the future,” Dick says. “But Elvis is proof that, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, if you have a desire and work hard, you can do anything you want to do.”

## Death of twin brother

Before Elvis was born, his father Vernon Elvis Presley borrowed \$180 and built a house in 1934. The house had no electricity, indoor plumbing or



A statue of Elvis at 13 was created from a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade photo.

bathroom. Married in June 1933, Vernon Presley and his wife, Gladys Love Presley, were preparing for the birth of their first child.

Shortly before dawn in the small shotgun shack, twin boys were born by the light of an oil lamp. The first baby was dead. The second grew up to become one of the most famous men in the world.

Far from the glitz of Graceland, the tiny place in Tupelo where Elvis Presley was born stands in stark contrast to the luxurious mansion where he died 40 years ago in Memphis. Elvis was born Jan. 8, 1935. He died Aug. 16, 1977. He was 42 years old. Each year, Tupelo celebrates its native son with a Fan Appreciation Day. This year it will be Saturday, Aug. 12.

The stillborn identical twin named Jesse Garon Presley was buried about five miles away in Priceville Cemetery in an unmarked grave. “The loss of his brother bothered Elvis for the rest of his life,” Dick says.



(Left) This rare photo of Elvis and his parents is displayed at his Birthplace. (Above) This is the actual two-room shack where Elvis was born.

For the first three years of his life, Elvis grew up in this cramped place — with only a front room where the family slept and a kitchen. About 20 steps is all it takes to walk from the front to the back door.

On Nov. 16, 1937, Vernon was charged with altering and cashing a \$4 check (he added an extra zero) that Orville Bean had made out to pay for a hog. Vernon was sent to prison for eight months, a source of shame for the family.

While Vernon was in prison, Gladys lost the house for failure to make payments. Sometimes living with relatives, the Presleys moved from one house to another on the wrong side of the tracks in Tupelo.

"They were poor, but everybody around us was poor," Guy says. "A lot of times we would eat biscuits and gravy. All us boys' favorite treat back then was hot buttered

biscuits and Brer Rabbit Syrup."

The annual state fair in Tupelo was a big deal that the youngsters looked forward to every year. "Of course, we didn't have much money to go, but we'd sneak over the fence," Guy says. "It wasn't but a few years later that people were paying to see Elvis at the fair. We had a big laugh about that."

## Saving the birthplace

In fact, it was that performance at the state fair when Elvis was a rising star that saved his old birthplace. Elvis signed over the money from a 1956 performance for the city to buy the property for a park for neighborhood children. But it wasn't until the mid 1970s that the birthplace was opened to the public.

"Prior to that, it was in really bad shape," Dick says. "People were shocked when they found out that was where Elvis used to live."

A local women's garden club took over the care of the property, which has grown to include a museum, memorial chapel, story wall, gift shop, theater, conference space, church that Elvis attended as a child and statue of Elvis at 13. Erected in 2001, the bronze likeness shows a young Elvis toting a

guitar. The life-sized statue was created from a sixth-grade class picture.

"Elvis is wearing bibbed overalls and a shirt that was too big for him in the picture because that is what he wore when he was growing up," Dick says. "His mother bought him clothes that were too big for him so that he could wear them longer."

Elvis was the only boy in his class in overalls, which may help account for his stylish clothing interest when he began performing.

Also on display is a 1939 green Plymouth, a replica of the car that the Presleys drove to Memphis seeking a better life when Elvis was 13.

"I don't know what Elvis wanted to do when he grew up," says Guy. "I know he sure didn't want to drive a truck. I spent quite a bit of time with Elvis at Graceland. He didn't think he was any better than the rest of us, even after he made it big. I think it goes back to the way we were raised here."

For more information: Contact the Elvis Presley Birthplace at (662) 841-1245, [www.elvispresleybirthplace.com](http://www.elvispresleybirthplace.com) or the Tupelo Convention & Visitors Bureau at (800) 533-0611, [www.tupelo.net](http://www.tupelo.net).





The church that Elvis attended as a child was restored and moved to the Elvis Birthplace.

Proceeds from a 1956 homecoming performance were donated by Elvis for a Tupelo playground.

