

ARGUMENT

Jerry showed them to the lounge. It was decorated with jungle patterns, animal skins and bamboo furniture and was surprisingly small. There was some shuffling of feet amongst the visitors, normally cocky from riding high for so long but on this occasion nervous and almost shy.

Elvis broke the ice.

"I hear you boys like my music," he told the Beatles.

"Yeah, big fans," Paul replied. George and Ringo just nodded, still looking half at their feet and half at Presley.

"What do you think of us then, Elvis?" John asked. Brian winced. Then relaxed as Elvis said:

"I think you boys are pretty good. When I can hear you, anyhow."

The Beatles laughed, even John.

"Sit down, boys," said Elvis. "Let's have a drink. Maybe even –"

There was a sudden jerk of feedback as he pulled a bass guitar from off the couch.

"– play some music?"

Paul found an acoustic, George and Ringo some maracas and a tambourine, but John stepped back. He mumbled something about wanting a break from music but the rest of the band knew he couldn't handle playing with Elvis. It was almost too much for the others, if they were honest: they'd played in Hamburg and England with most of their idols, from Little Richard to Gene Vincent, but this was different. This was the King.

Elvis smiled in his lazy, challenging manner and played something close to the start of Milk Cow Blues. The others joined in, Paul even risking an impression of Elvis in the chorus that made the King double over with choking laughter.

"I've never heard Elvis laugh before," said John, when Presley had finally been able to breathe again.

"Elvis has a great sense of humour," said Jerry. "We're always laughing when he's around."

"Hey, I really like those English guys," Elvis said. "What's their name? The funny British group."

"Herman's Hermits?" John said. "Freddie and the Dreamers?"

"No," said Elvis. "Monty Python."

"Don't know 'em," Ringo said.

George grinned. "I do," he said. He looked Elvis in the eye.

"Spam," he said. "Spam spam spam spam..."

Elvis threw back his head.

"SPAM!" he roared.

He grabbed George by the shoulder.

"Nudge nudge," he said, in a bizarre accent.

"Wink wink," George replied, and Elvis creased up again.

"Monty Python!" he said, and collapsed into giggles.

"I'll have what they're on," said Ringo quietly to John. "Too right," John said. "Here, Elvis," he said, in a louder voice, "All that Oxbridge stuff's OK, but what do you reckon on the Goons?"

"The Goons?" Elvis said. "Man, they're just riffing on old Olsen and Johnson routines and Eddie Kovacs. Monty Python, now that's something new."

"Is it fuck," said Lennon, and this time Brian did step in. John pushed him back. "The Goons were brilliant."

"Operative word, were," said Elvis. "Times move on, man."

"You'd know all about that," John replied.

"Oh yeah, that's right," said Elvis, "I died when I went in the Army. Tell that to everyone who bought In The Ghetto. I'd like to see you do a rock'n'roll album."

"Maybe I will."

"A good one."

Jerry and Elvis high-fived each other.

"Python's OK," said Paul. "But John's right. Spike Milligan's a genius."

"And Cleese isn't?" asked Elvis. "Chapman? Jones? Palin?"

He paused.

"Gilliam?"

Paul shrugged. "They're good, but compared to Spike..."

"It's like comparing Eddie Cochran to you," said Ringo.

"Or Tommy Steele," John said.

Even Elvis laughed at this.

"Every Monty Python skit is the same thing," said John. "Take a normal situation, preferably in a fucking shop, and spin it out until it becomes a cycle of absurdity."

"The Parrot Sketch," said Paul.

"The Cheese Shop," said Ringo.

"Nudge nudge," said George. He nudged Elvis.

"Wink wink," Elvis replied, winking at George. "So what are the Goons, then?" he asked John. "Just topical gags stretched to breaking point. Oh, and the catchphrases."

"He's fallen in the water," said Jerry, in a sneering falsetto.

"My name's Eccles," Elvis said. "I'm the same as Goofy."

"Eccles pisses all over Goofy," said Lennon.

"Peter Sellers is the real talent in that trio," Elvis said.

John and Paul looked at each other.

"At least he didn't say Harry Secombe," said John.

"We did the Palladium with him," Paul said. "Very professional."

"Holy Grail," Elvis said suddenly. "Life of Brian. The Meaning Of Life."

"They're OK," said John. "If you like a load of sketches stuck together."

"Hey," said George.

Elvis said, "Man, the day you write something as good as Always Look On The Bright Side of Life..."

He turned to George. "Who's your favourite?"

George smiled. "My mate," he said. "Eric."

"Nudge nudge," they said in unison. "Wink wink."

"Solo stuff," said Paul. "Not as good."

"Man," said Elvis. "I've seen Q6."

"It's great," John said, balling his fists. "It's original. Not like Ripping Yarns."

"Ripping Yarns is cool," said George.

"Fawlty Towers," said Elvis. "Bert Fegg's Nasty Book For Kids."

A gleam came into his eye.

"The Rutles," he said.

There was a moment's silence. Brian stepped forward.

"We've got to be at the press conference," he said.

"Nice meeting you," Elvis said, shaking hands with each Beatle in turn.

John looked him in the eye.

"You're wrong," he said. "You may be the King, but you don't know everything."

"I know that," said Elvis. "Take care now."

The limousine drove off, its windows black against the Memphis sun.

"Elvis," said Ringo. "We met Elvis."

"No," George corrected him. "Elvis met us."

Paul saw John's morose expression and said:

"It's OK, John. He was wrong, that's all. It happens."

He leaned over and looked into his friend's eyes, the way he'd always done.

"They were the best, John. Everyone owes them. They changed comedy for ever."

"Comedy?" said John. "They changed the world."

He looked out the window. They were approaching the venue now. Another city, another press conference.

"They were bigger than Jesus," he said, with feeling.