Creative England presents, in association with Ffilm Cymru Wales, BBC Storyville and Broadway. A Glimmer Films production, in association with Met Film Production and Truth Department

A film by Jeanie Finlay



*Starring Jimmy “Orion” Ellis*

*86 minutes, colour, U.K*

*“A must watch.”* Rolling Stone

*“Catchy and engaging… A vivid whirl.”* Variety

*“Elusive and haunting.”* ★★★★ Little White Lies

*“A pop-cultural parable… Faust gone Nashville.”* Sight and Sound

★★★★ Radio Times

*“A gold-record documentary.”* ★★★★ Movie Buzzers

★★★★ The Upcoming

*“Fascinating… a must see.”* The Wrap

*“A story that's just too good to be true.”* The Moveable Fest

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**SYNOPSIS**

ORION tells the story of Jimmy Ellis - an unknown singer plucked from obscurity, and thrust into the spotlight as part of a crazy scheme that had him masquerade as Elvis back from the grave.

With an outlandish fictional identity torn from the pages of the novel Orion by Gail Brewer Giorgio, the backing of the legendary birthplace of rock 'n' roll Sun Records and a voice that seemed to be the very twin of Presley's himself, the scheme – concocted in the months after Presley’s death exploded into a cult success - and the “Elvis is alive” myth was begun.

“Everyone wants a mask to hide behind if they fail.

But If I succeed … who am I?”

Jim Ellis JR, Orion’s son

Borne by his incredible voice, Jimmy - as the masked and rhinestoned Orion - gained the success he'd always craved, the women he always desired and the adoration of screaming masses, but it wasn’t enough…

Our story revels in the manipulative schemes of the music industry, the truth and lies at the heart of the story, the allure of fantasy and the eternal search for identity.

Orion proves that fact is indeed 'stranger than fiction'. This is the story behind that story. Who was that masked man?

**TIMELINE**

1977

Georgia writer Gail Brewer Giorgio conceives the character of ‘Orion Eckley Darnell’ in the pages of the novel Orion. The book tells the story of the biggest rock star in the world who fakes his own death to escape the pressures of fame. Songs in the book are written by Georgia songwriter of the year – Carol Halupke.

August 16th Elvis Presley dies

1978

Sun Records releases an album “Duets” by Jerry Lee Lewis “and friends” which

features classic songs from the Sun vaults, no longer solos but now a collection of

duets. But who was the mysterious vocalist? – he sounded exactly like Presley and the record was analysed on Good Morning America but no one was saying one way or the other. With such interest in Presley the album sold “like hotcakes”.

*“I was born at Sun Records…. in the studio”*

Orion

1978

Sun Records president Shelby Singleton launches a new artist called Orion. “Where it all began… and will again” with the release of the album “Reborn.”

The album features a masked singer climbing out of an open casket. The controversial album is banned and replaced with a more conventional portrait. The singer on the cover stands proud, hands on hips with high hair, a blue shirt and a blue mask.

The reverse of the album featured the prologue of Gail Brewer Giorgio’s book.

The album appeared to have been recorded in Orion’s (fictional) hometown of Ribbonsville, Tennessee – again a detail taken from the book. Fans could even

write to Orion c/o his grand house ‘Dixieland’.

1979

*“1979, That’s when it all started, it was a phenomenon”*

Nick Scott Petta, Orion’s band

Orion starts touring venues all around the south, playing to packed houses. He quickly draws an ardent following with up to 500 people following the tour bus.

Two very devoted fans took to sleeping in the parking lot of Sun Records so they were sure to know when the bus was leaving.

No one knew exactly who the masked singer was. Bob Greene of the Chicago Tribune ran a series of influential article speculating that Orion was indeed the late king and the story went nationwide, before long The National Enquirer camped out in the bushes, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man under the mask.

1979 to 1984 Orion amasses a fan club of over 400,000 members and releases 9 studio albums. Covering a range of musical styles – from gospel to country, rockabilly to rock n roll he struggles to identify his unique sound.

1981 - 1983

Orion tours Europe performing with fellow masked singers Kiss in Germany. Cracks in the relationship with Shelby Singleton and Sun Records start to show. While on tour in Germany they argue about Orion being asked to lip-sync to a backing track. The pressure of wearing the mask 24/7 is proving incredibly wearing.

New Years Eve 1983 – Orion removes his mask in public, showing his face to the crowds for the very first time. The fantasy destroyed, many upset fans abandon

him and it leads Sun Records to rip up his contract.

Without a record deal Orion, the masked singer fades from public view.

The singer behind the mask, Jimmy Ellis continues to pursue a musical career under many guises – Ellis James, Jimmy Ellis, The Cadillac Man, Mr Excitement & Steven Silver and he even puts the mask back on but he never reaches the same heights as he did as when Reborn was launched by Orion in 1979.

**BIOGRAPHIES**

**Orion Eckley Darnell**

Orion was conceived in the pages of Orion by Georgia writer Gail Brewer Giorgio and born in the studios of Sun Records on 1979. After growing up in Ribbonsville, Tennessee, he now lives at his private home Dixieland. Creating albums under the guidance of Mac Weiman and Shelby Singleton at Sun Records, the masked man was believed by many to be the reincarnation of Elvis Presley, the King himself.

**Jeanie Finlay - Director/Producer**

A British artist and filmmaker who creates intimate, funny and personal documentary films and artworks. Her focus is on creating compelling portraits and is obsessed with telling other people’s stories. Her work includes *Panto!* (72 mins) for BBC Storyville, *The Great Hip Hop Hoax* (92 mins) for BBC Scotland and BBC Storyville, *Sound It Out* (75 mins) a documentary portrait of the very last vinyl record shop in Teesside (official film of Record Store Day), feature documentary *Goth Cruise* for the Independent Film Channel (USA,75 min) which became the most downloaded title ever on IFC, critically acclaimed doc *Teenland* (BBC4 60 min) and award-winning interactive documentary *Home-Maker*.

**Dewi Gregory – Producer**

Dewi heads up Truth Department, a production company based in Caerffili, Wales. Dewi has come to cinema documentaries from television, producing and directing for BBC, S4C & C4.  Truth Department's second cinema documentary will be released later this year and the company has two further films in development. A one-hour documentary for S4C is in the final stages of post-production.

**Al Morrow – Executive Producer**

An award-winning producer and Head of Documentary at Met Film Production. Al’s films have been bought and/or co-produced by a range of international distributors and broadcasters including BBC, Channel 4, Pathe, VPRO (Netherlands), ITVS (US), PBS (US), ARTE (France), Fox (Italy), RAI (Italy), SVT (Sweden), NRK (Norway), Dr (Denmark) and ABC (Australia). Website: [www.metfilmproduction.co.uk](http://www.metfilmproduction.co.uk).

**DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT**

**Jeanie Finlay discusses ORION: THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING:**

Ten years ago I was at a garage sale with my husband Steven in our hometown of Nottingham, England. On a stall filled with cheap ornaments and dog-eared paperbacks, standing proudly at the front of a box of faded vinyl records, we found the above album.

Orion: Reborn. Sun Records. Collector’s gold vinyl. Release date on the back said 1979. No songs we’d ever heard of, but that cover… Who was this mysterious masked man, standing hand on hips, with his perfect raven hair and sta-press trousers? What the hell was his story?

We took the record home, put it on and within seconds the mystery deepened. Whoever this guy was, he sounded exactly–and I mean exactly—like Elvis.

Except these weren’t songs that Elvis ever recorded, and there was no mention of the King on the record. But there was the fact of Sun Records and this odd story on the back sleeve about this guy called Orion Eckley Darnell and something about a coffin, and a book… Most of all, though, there was this guy in the blue rhinestone-studded mask with the voice of Elvis. I had to know more.

The story I uncovered was one of the strangest I’ve ever encountered. As a documentary-maker, I’ve long been fascinated with stories that peek under the surface of popular culture and the machinations of the music industry, or explore just how important music is in our lives. Stories like The Great Hip Hop Hoax–about two Scottish chancers who faked their way to a record deal by pretending to be American rappers; SOUND IT OUT about the very last record shop in my home town in Teesside or Goth Cruise a documentary about 150 goths (along with 2500 “norms”) taking a cruise in the sunshine to Bermuda.

But this story had it all. A roller coaster tale of the Nashville music scene in the wake of Elvis Presley’s death, taking in deception, a quest for success, a search for identity and ending in brutal and tragic murder.

Even if you’ve never heard of Orion, you probably know about the “Elvis is Alive” myth. What I uncovered was that the story of Orion is the story of how that myth got started.

In the marketing offices of Sun Records, maverick producer Shelby Singleton came up with the plan to utilize the incredible pipes of Alabama singer Jimmy Ellis – a voice which was both a blessing and a curse to the singer. Ellis had found it hard to get a solid foothold in the industry because of the similarity of his voice to Elvis’ – a similarity that was wholly un-practiced. Jimmy didn’t try to sound like Elvis, he just did. That made it hard for any record company to use him.

Shelby had already tried one tack, dubbing Jimmy Ellis’ vocals un-credited onto the Jerry Lee Lewis tracks in the Sun catalog, releasing the recording under the name of Jerry Lee Lewis “and friends.” He’d leave it up to the audience to come to the conclusion –if they saw fit—that it might just be a previously unheard recording from the depths of the Sun vaults. After all, it sounded just like Elvis…

But it wasn’t until Shelby came across an unpublished manuscript by Georgia writer Gail Brewer Giorgio that the stars aligned for Jimmy Ellis.  Orion was the story of the world’s greatest rock star and how he fakes his own death. As a character, her “Orion” was not a million miles away from a certain Memphis-dwelling King. It was a fantasy that so easily could be true. A fantasy that could be made true… In a move that Shelby himself later described as “part madman, part genius,” Sun Records put a mask on Jimmy Ellis, rechristened him “Orion” and unleashed him on an unsuspecting world. In Jimmy Ellis, Shelby had “The Voice.” And the book gave him a name, and a backstory.

A copy of the letter announcing the name “ORION” for the first time. The mask was the beginning of the Orion mystery.

In May of 1979, one month after his announcement of the imminent arrival of “ORION,” Shelby Singleton sent the first single to the radio stations. The cuts were “Ebony Eyes” and “Honey,” but there was no label on either side. Shelby wanted to build the mystery. The voice was the thing. He knew that the moment they heard that voice, they would have a million questions. And they’d want to see the mouth it came from…

Orion’s first album was readied – but hit controversy when there were complaints about the depiction of the masked singer appearing to rise from the dead from an open casket. (It was replaced by the blue cover above, which was later to catch my eye.)

Orion was now out in the world. Performing across America, always in the mask, always in character (legend was that Shelby would fine Jimmy if he were caught not wearing the mask at any time). And the crowds came. Hundreds and thousands of them, many coming for that voice–and many simply coming for the fantasy, the fantasy that the thin mask kept precariously in place. But for Jimmy, it was a frustrating ride.

Orion travelled the world while on Sun–including, bizarrely, performing with Kiss in Germany—putting out seven albums on Sun in just five years, but Jimmy hated the mask; the gimmick that provided the all-important mystery was ultimately a trap.  He could never be himself.

When the gimmick wore thin, Ellis discarded the mask. The fragile spell was broken – but Jimmy was free. However, he struggled to step out of the shadow of Presley and the voice he was “blessed and cursed” with. He tried out many different identities – Ellis James, Mister E – he put the mask back on, and then took it off again - but he never really found the same bright spotlight again. In December 1998, back in Orrville Alabama, the town he had left many years before to find success in music, Ellis was brutally murdered in his pawnshop during an armed robbery. A tragic ending for the man with the voice of a legend.

**LEARN MORE**

**#MyOrion**

An online memory box that collates and displays posts from across social media relating to Jimmy ‘Orion’ Ellis. Readers who wish to contribute need to upload a photo, a video or a memory on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and add the hashtag #MyOrion.

#MyOrion automatically collect the memories and displays them on the film’s website at <http://www.orionthemovie.com/myorion/memory-box>. On Facebook readers can post to the [OrionTheMovie Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/OrionTheMovie" \t "_blank) or on their own personal Facebook page, making their post public, not private.

#MyOrion uses the Tint service: <http://www.tintup.com>.

**I Am Orion**

Exploring the themes of fandom, identity and tribute, *I Am Orion* provides the opportunity to create a tribute to Jimmy ‘Orion’ Ellis using digital and analogue masks, taken from the cover of Orion’s iconic albums. Tributes can be in photographic or video form and *I Am Orion* is accessed through the Orion The Movie website: <http://www.orionthemovie.com/iamorion>

**CREDITS**

Creative England presents, in association with Ffilm Cymru Wales, BBC Storyville and Broadway

A Glimmer Films production, in association with Met Film Production and Truth Department

A film by Jeanie Finlay

ORION: The Man Who Would Be King

Produced in Wales with assistance from Ffilm Cymru Wales

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Jeanie Finlay

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# Festival Publicist

Brigade Marketing

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Sun Records

Jim Ellis Jr

**Archive Materials**

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| --- | --- |
| ABC News  Associated Press  Luuk Bonthond  Dennis Carney  Corbis Lynette Clarke  Mark Clark  Nancy Crowson  Dakotalapse  East Cobb Neighbour  Faye Weaver Caldwell  Lynda Charpia Frasier  Carole Halupke  Jack Vogler  We gratefully acknowledge excerpt from This is Elvis, an Andrew Solt / Malcolm Leo film  Music City News  Nick Scott Petta  Debbie Mardis  Orion Discs  Sharon Attaway Nettleton  Stein Ivar Holmo  Sun Records  Bobby Smith  Tennessee Walking Horse Museum  Don S. Vogel, Linda Wall Jones and Mark A. Nodine, producers of Elvis: The Legend of a King  William Roach | Charlie Badenhorst  Chet Bennett Drew Brown Simon Cantlon Thomas Civello Crook & Chase  Nanette Uselton Clark  Kenneth Dokkeberg  Jim Ellis Jr  F.I.L.M Archives  Donna Gryder  Steve Kelly  Larry D.Stidon / Goldmine Magazine  Mary Middlebrooks Callaway  Nashville Public Library  NBC Media Ronald Mehne  Orion Fanclub  Ingvar Oldsberg  Sumter Item  Larry Sellars  T3 Media  Tuscaloosa News  Warner  WKAC Sharon Wellar Xenon Pictures ZDF / Vorsicht Musik |

Thank you to Jimmy “Orion” Ellis fans all over the world who have contributed archive and memories to the production through #MyOrion.

**Music**

“You Can’t Judge A Book By The Cover”

Written By Willie Dixon

Performed by Orion

Licensed courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp, Bug Music Ltd & Jewel Music Publishing Ltd

“Honey”

Written by Bobby Russell

Performed by Orion

Licensed courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp, & Sony ATV Music Publishing (UK) Ltd

"Cold November (Cassette Version) (Instrumental)"

Written & Performed by Shannon Stephens

Licensed courtesy of Domino Publishing Co Ltd (PRS), & Asthmatic Kitty Records

“I Can Love You Better”

Written by Finley Duncan, Reuben Howell & R.J Benninghoff

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed courtesy of Playground Records & Southern Americana Music

“The Games You Been Playing”

Written by Jimmy Ellis & Roy L McCrorie

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp, Boogie Bear Music, Hitkit Music

“My Daydream”

Written by Colin Halliwell

Performed by Two Wounded Birds

Licensed Courtesy of Alpha Music Publishing UK Ltd

“St Malo (Instrumental)”

Written by Rebecca Jones / Bill Ryder-Jones

Performed by Saint Saviour

Licensed courtesy of Kobalt Music Group Ltd, Domino Publishing Co Ltd & Surface Area Records

“Snowbird”

Written by Gene MacLellan

Licensed courtesy of Sony ATV Music Publishing (UK) Ltd

“Don’t Let Go”

Written by Jesse Stone

Licensed courtesy of Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd

“Look Me Up And Lay It On Me”

Written by Horace “Buddy” Harris

Performed by Orion

Licensed courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp, & Shelby Singleton Music Inc

"I Love Map (Instrumental)"

Written & Performed by Martin John Henry

Licensed courtesy of Domino Publishing Co Ltd (PRS), & Gargleblast Records

"Down the Drain & It’s Gone (Instrumental)"

Written & Performed by Shannon Stephens

Licensed courtesy of Domino Publishing Co Ltd (PRS), & Asthmatic Kitty Records

“Because He Lives”

Written by William J. Gaither & Gloria Gaither

Licensed courtesy of Hanna Street Music (BMI) (adm Capitol CMG Publishing), & Wayne Hodge / Wayne Entertainment Group

“I Feel Like Going Home”

Written by Charlie Rich

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed Courtesy of Kobalt Music Group & Sun Entertainment Corp.

“Ebony Eyes”

Written By John D. Loudermilk

Performed by Orion

Licensed courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp, & Sony ATV Music Publishing (UK) Ltd

“Love Is But A Love”

Written by Jimmy Ellis, Jimmy Youmans, Bobby Dillard

Performed by Jimmie Ellis & The Apollos

Used by kind permission

“Kiss The Hurt Away”

Written by Chuck Reed & Finley Duncan

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed courtesy of Playground Records, Chu-Fin Music, & Shelby Singleton Music Inc

“Mister Boogie Man”

Written by Chet Bennett, Richard Ostrow, Irene Petta, Nick Petta

Performed by Avalanche

Used by kind permission, Boblo Records, Boogie Bear Music, Hitkit Music

“I’m Not Trying To Be Like Elvis”

Written by Jimmy Ellis, Noke Davis & Mann Stone

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp, Boogie Bear Music, Hitkit Music

“There Ya Go (Jackie’s Theme)”

Written by Glen Larson / Bruce Belland

Licensed courtesy of Universal Music Publishing

“Anybody Out There”

Written by Horace “Buddy” Harris

Licensed courtesy of Shelby Singleton Music Inc

"Wax and Feathers (Instrumental)"

Written & Performed by Shannon Stephens

Licensed courtesy of Domino Publishing Co Ltd (PRS), & Asthmatic Kitty Records

“Texas Tea”

Written by Ben Peters

Performed by Orion

Licensed courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp, & Shelby Singleton Music Inc

“Still In Love With Billy”

Written By Marvin Morrow & Keith Stegall

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed courtesy of Sony ATV Music Publishing (UK) Ltd

“Lonely Weekends”

Written By Charlie Rich

Used by kind permission of Carlin Music Corp

“I Remember”

Performed by Saint Saviour

Written by Rebecca Jones / Bill Ryder-Jones

Licensed courtesy of Kobalt Music Group Ltd, Domino Publishing Co Ltd & Surface Area Records

“Swing Low Sweet Chariot”

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed Courtesy of Sun Entertainment Corp

“Georgia Pines”

Written by Buddy Buie & John Adkins

Performed by Jimmy Ellis

Licensed Courtesy of Playground Records, Southern Americana Music & Sony ATV Music Publishing (UK) Ltd

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