

## From Elvis to Jesus

Early rock dropout Kay Wheeler Kilgore now devotes her life to spreading Christ's message throughout world

BY LOUIS MOORE  
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You might say that Kay Wheeler Kilgore has gone from being the No. 1 fan of the king of rock 'n' roll to being a devoted follower of the King of Kings.

Unless a visitor insists, she would rather talk about Jesus and show off the Christian tracts she distributes than to talk about Elvis and display that picture of him hugging her in a pose for *Modern Screen* magazine. She wrote an article that accompanied that picture headlined "I flipped when Elvis held me in his arms."

She was the president of Presley's first fan club. And yes, she says, she used to swoon to his deep baritone voice and his sensuous gyrating movements.

But those days are gone now, she insists. The king is dead — gone after too many records, too many audiences, too many movies, too many fans and too many drugs turned him into something she didn't recognize. "It was the early, early Elvis I knew," she says, "not the thing that finally evolved."

But as she talks and pulls old pictures out of her albums, one senses that there is still a certain fascination with the boy from Memphis who skyrocketed to international fame with such hits as *Love Me Tender* and *Hound Dog*.

A Dallas newspaper clipping from 1956 sums up how she once felt about Presley. "He's different. The younger generation needed something different. We needed him," she said at the time.

Gone now are the days when Kay Wheeler's name appeared on marquees outside theaters showing the rock 'n' roll movies of the 1950s. Those films have now been relegated to the late, late night reruns.

As she flips through her albums, Kay comes across a picture of herself standing in front of a Houston theater pointing to a sign that read: "Kay Wheeler: Queen of Rock 'n' Roll Doing the Rock 'n' Bop."

And then there's that other claim to fame: "I was Hollywood West Coast editor of *Hep Caps* and *Cool Magazine*."

Memories. Sweet memories. And some not-so-sweet memories.

"I just turned the record player off and got serious," she says. "I feel real fortunate not to have gotten caught up in that Hollywood scene any more than I did. I would have smashed on the rocks."

In one of her religious tracts, she says about those days: "By age 21, Kay Wheeler had taken a good look at the upbeat and so-called glamorous side of the world: its materialism, its conformity, its falseness — and she asked the question: 'Is this all there is?' She realized that the answer was not to be found in the rock 'n' roll beat or seeing herself on the silver screen or achieving financial gain. The vanity and falseness of it all made its impression and left her bored and searching."

One can get an inkling of what life must have been like for her then when, while flipping through her albums, she comes across a picture of her 21-year-old son, born of a short-lived teen-age marriage. "You might say we grew up together," she says of her son, Richard Wheeler, who lives in New York and plays with a band there.

For nearly a decade now, Kay Wheeler Kilgore has been a figure in Houston's religious life. But she's been a low-key figure, dodging the spotlight and preferring to do her "new thing" in the quiet of Houston neighborhoods, first in Montrose and now in the Northline addition.

She's refused until now, she says, to talk publicly about her ministry or her memories of Presley and rock 'n' roll.

"I had so much publicity by the time I was 17 that I never wanted any more," she says.

"Don't you understand, I'm underground. I've had enough of the limelight to last a lifetime. It was phony baloney."

She says she finally decided to call a reporter and ask to talk because her work for "the King of Kings, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" is growing and she thinks it is time she spoke out.

It was her faith in God that drew her away from rock 'n' roll and stardom, she says.

"I'm charismatic," she says. "That means I believe in the full power of God. I believe in all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I believe with faith and God's will you can accomplish miracles."

There's an independent streak in this teeny bopper-turned middle aged woman. "I believe that this thing with Jesus is an individual walk. I'm not saying we don't need assemblies. But some day you'll walk before God at the final judgment as an individual. You're going to die as an individual. Every person needs to realize they can be turned on to God," she says.

It's that concept of independence that has marked Kay

Wheeler Kilgore's religious career in Houston.

In 1970, she founded New Wave Ministries, International, which she describes in her literature as "an interdenominational, worldwide, non-profit organization, working with Christians everywhere in spreading the message of Jesus Christ to the world."

She is not affiliated with any church or denomination. "We visit around," she says. "We go to Braeswood Assembly of God and Lindale Assembly of God. We like Jimmy Swaggart. We attend the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship."

In the beginning, Kay directed her ministry to the rock 'n' roll and later flower children generations. Throughout most of the 1970s, she operated a drug rehabilitation and counseling center in the Montrose area. It was there that she met her second husband, Ron Kilgore, who wandered into Kay's ministry seeking God's help with a severe alcoholism problem. Ron kicked the habit and now refers to alcoholic beverages as "the devil's brew."

"We sold that center after eight years because Montrose was changing and the prices in the area were skyrocketing," Kay says. She and husband, Ron, a printer, bought an acre and a half in the Northline addition and built their own printing plant where New Wave Ministries now produces Christian tracts and brochures distributed around the world.

"New Wave publications are noted for their proven effectiveness in winning souls through the presentation of the simple Gospel message with clarity possible only with the work of the Holy Spirit," says one of Kilgore's brochures. "The Gospel must be published among all nations."

As she breezes through the printing plant displaying her various tracts, there's something about Kay's movements that harken back to her days in the movies. She picks up several tracts as a starlet in a movie would and says, "When I talk about tracts, I'm not just talking about a few tracts. I'm talking about 4 million tracts."

She moves to a wall with pictures of people from different countries. "I'll never know the part I played in the lives of these people," she says. "I don't want to know."

Then her voice softens. "You won't believe what I've got going over in Africa, and I don't know anybody there." She moves to a file cabinet and opens a drawer, displaying hundreds of letters from Africans seeking her tracts.

She looks up from her letters. "I haven't gone over in the U.S. as well as I have in the Third World countries."

Her tracts reflect her feelings about the rock 'n' roll generation. Says one tract, "We rocked and rolled through ridiculous phases of an ideal that has long since been misplaced somewhere between the demonized rock stars and the fag album record jackets. But our 'dream' was more than a record album at the discount center at \$4.98. It wasn't just singing about materialism and greed — only to rip off your own generation with high priced concert tickets and plastic records — and then rush off to a \$250,000 pad to pen some more money-making lyrics. Meanwhile, the street people sleep in the rain, or walk around hungry for days, jaundiced with hep, disillusioned with the idea of love and peace — smashed with acid and junk. On the street now, nobody cares. Now it is survival, and the word is 'never trust anyone.'"

The past is a memory, but the future looms brightly ahead for Kay Wheeler Kilgore, who is thinking big these days. She says God has given her a "vision" of a larger ministry He wants her and Ron to operate in Houston.

Beneath the picturesque pine trees in the open space outside their printing shop, Kay twirls around pointing dramatically to various locations for facets of that new ministry.

"Over there I'd like to build an in-the-round mission and counseling center, which will be a place for missionaries from around the world to gather. My idea is to have an international type center."

"And back there, we hope to build a little house in that corner."

Kay believes she has something to offer those missionaries.

"I'm a real scholar of the Word (the Bible). You don't need a special revelation to know to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. That's what the Bible says. I read through the Bible a couple of times a year. I'm still learning. I haven't arrived yet."

As she looks around the acre and a half in Northline, she suddenly pauses. "It's a miracle we have any of this. I came to Houston nine years ago with \$30. God has done this. It is a marketing miracle what has happened here."



Photos by Carlos Antonio Rios, Chronicle Staff  
Kay Wheeler Kilgore, above, displays a photo taken of her with her one-time idol Elvis Presley. The photo, left, shows the young Kay and the Elvis she says she knew then, "not the thing that finally evolved." Kay, bottom, stands on her land in the Northline addition that functions today as the base for her world evangelism.



REPRINTED FROM THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE NEWSPAPER in Houston, Texas. This outstanding article by the Religion Editor of the CHRONICLE tells the story of the New Wave Ministry and its founder, Kay Wheeler Kilgore. Kay is available to share her testimony and her dynamic vision of tract evangelism. If you would like Kay to share her testimony with your church or Christian group, contact:

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