

# John Wilkinson

## I told ELVIS he “couldn’t play guitar worth a damn!”

**John Wilkinson** was born in Washington DC in 1945. He was raised in Springfield Missouri where John's father was a Professor of Psychology. When John first saw Elvis on TV, he did not like the way he played and treated his Martin D18 guitar and swore that one day he would tell him. John had started playing the guitar himself at the age of five and by the age of six, he was also playing the banjo.

Elvis came to John's hometown and was second bill to Hank Snow. John decided to make his way there to try and get to see and to speak to Elvis. He eventually found him. After knocking first before entering, he extended his hand to Elvis introducing himself. Elvis being the polite guy he was, invited him to sit down and asked him what he was doing there. John replied, 'Elvis, you can't play guitar worth a damn'. Elvis laughed and challenged John to play guitar for him. Against the wall was an old Gibson J45. He played and sang for Elvis and he was impressed with this kid. John was always into folk music and listened to and copied the likes of The Kingston Trio (who John became a member of and left in 1975), Peter, Paul and Mary and Gordon Lightfoot.

Forming his own band at school, 'The Coachmen' he started performing professionally at 13 years of age, earning himself \$25. Around 1964 John moved to California and attended college. It was also to be his second meeting with Elvis. John received a phone call one weekend from the manager asking him if he and his band would stand in on the opening act for 'Jefferson Airplane'. One of Elvis' body guards, a Native American known as 'Chief' informed John that someone wanted to see him right away in the club. He was led to a table roped off in the corner and Elvis was there. He remembered John from the meeting they had in Springfield when he was nine years old and his guitar lesson. John was invited back to the house to sing some country and gospel songs and to just hang out there. On leaving the house in the wee hours of the next morning, Elvis told John that one day he was going to quit movies and return to performing. 'I really hope that you do Elvis,' John replied.

In the middle of 1968, John received another phone call. It was Elvis himself. It was common knowledge to John's friends that he listened to Elvis, and he thought it was one of them playing a trick on him and hung up! The phone rang again and the voice on the other end told him not to hang up, that it really was Elvis. Elvis reminded him of the conversation he had with him about returning to live performances and that he had a bunch of the best musicians ready for his band. **Red** and **Sonny West** were sent to pick John up and take him to Elvis' home. At the house, the mics and sound systems were already in place. Elvis was delighted with the sound and sent everyone home, except John.

There was still a position for a rhythm guitarist and Elvis wanted John to fill it. He accepted the offer and the deal was sealed with a hand shake. At this time, not only did he join The TCB Band but John also went into the recording studios at RCA and released his first single, *July, You're A Woman*. After Elvis died, John returned to L.A. and formed a band called 'Justice'. After a time, John realized that he needed a change and joined a company called Radio Shack, later moving on to an aircraft company. Unfortunately John suffered a stroke in 1989 but it didn't stop him returning to music. After a period of rehabilitation, he appeared at an Elvis tribute show in Germany and was once again reunited with **Kathy Westmoreland**, **J.D. Sumner** and The Stamps, **The Jordanares** and Sean Neilson. John Wilkinson was Elvis Presley's rhythm guitarist from July 1969 until June 26th 1977 and played in over 1,100 shows including Elvis's famous *Aloha from Hawaii* special.

