

INSPIRED BY ELVIS

The King lives on, in performances by tribute artists

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It's good to be Elvis. Real good.

People scream in excitement. They ask for your autograph. And sometimes, they go a little wild.

"The weirdest thing is when you've got 60-year-old ladies grabbing your butt when you're walking through the crowd," said Bob Rosencrantz, an Elvis Presley impersonator from Point Place.

It can be an exhilarating — if sometimes bewildering — experience.

"When people want my autograph after I do a show, I'm like, what do you want my autograph for? I'm not Elvis," he said.

The real Elvis would have celebrated his birthday tomorrow, but he died 30 years ago. So it's left to tribute artists like Mr. Rosencrantz to keep him alive, and there are thousands who think they're up to the task:

Fat Elvises, kid Elvises, black Elvises, women Elvises.

There's El Vez, the Mexican Elvis, and the Flying Elvi, a group of parachuting impersonators.

"It kind of transcends all types of people, this urge to emulate Elvis," said Patty Carroll, a Chicago photographer who includes more than 70 modern Elvises in her book, *Living the Life: The World of Elvis Tribute Artists* (Verve Editions, 2005).

"I think it's because people feel a real spiritual connection with Elvis. It doesn't matter what the person looks like or any of that kind of stuff," she said.

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Bob Rosencrantz in an emotional moment in his Elvis tribute show. (THE BLADE/MOLLY CORFMAN)

For Mr. Rosencrantz, 43, it dates to his youth when he would hang out with his sisters on rainy days and mimic Elvis's moves. They were all big fans of Presley, enjoying his films and listening to his records.

It's not that he wanted to be Elvis; he just wanted to follow in his footsteps.

"It's a hobby. I never really intended to be a full-time Elvis impersonator, although I wanted to be a full-time singer in Las Vegas," said Mr. Rosencrantz, who is the chef at the Zenobia Shrine but still manages to put on more than 50 Elvis shows a year.

He's spent thousands of dollars on costumes and jewelry, all authentic reproductions. He tries to make his voice sound like Presley's and he works on imitating the King's signature moves. After all, it's what the crowd expects.

"Personally, I'd rather go up there in a pair of blue jeans and do the music, but they want the whole packages with the jumpsuits," he said.

Walt Sanders, of Bellevue, gives his audiences a little of both. During his first set at performances, he comes out

as himself. Only later does he appear in Elvis gear. Even then, he keeps things simple.

"I don't do the 'thank you very much's' and the lip thing and all the gyration and everything else," he said. "I'm from my own heart."

He does wear a wig and for a long time he pasted on sideburns (though he's grown his own now), but he never loses himself in the act.

"None of us are Elvis. If we have to rely on that, then what are we?" said the 41-year-old who installed auto glass for more than 20 years but now is a full-time entertainer.

Some in the business cringe at the term impersonator, saying that the point is to pay tribute to the King, not simply mimic him. Those who get too wrapped up in the persona sometimes don't know when to turn it off.

"If you can bring back memories of the man ... that's one thing, but a lot of guys just can't let it go. They're in character all the time," said Dan Galbincea III, 52.

The owner of a fishing lure manufacturer in Warren, Ohio, he's been performing as Elvis for years, including at New Year's Eve festivities in Port Clinton. It was the similarity of his voice and the King's that got him started.

"I used to sing karaoke at bars big time," he said. "Everything I sang" — from George Strait to Garth Brooks — "everybody said I sounded like Elvis, so I decided to put a band together and do a show and it snowballed."

Elvis would approve.

More accurately, Elvis did approve. There were a number of imitators even before his death in 1977, so he had a chance to see the phenomenon first-hand.

"He was incredibly flattered by them," said Paul Jankowski, chief marketing officer for Elvis Presley Enterprises, which runs Graceland and is sponsoring its first contest for tribute artists in August for the 30th anniversary of the King's death.

There's an urban legend, he said, that Presley actually entered an Elvis impersonator contest — and came in second place.

The 2002 movie *Bubba Ho-tep* takes this a step further, catching up with Presley as an elderly resident in a rest home after he'd switched identities with an Elvis impersonator years before and missed his chance to switch back. (In the movie, Elvis and a black man who thinks he's JFK battle an ancient Egyptian mummy.)

There are thousands of tribute artists out there these days, swinging their hips across the globe at festivals, in bars, and at private parties. The goal of the upcoming competition at Graceland is to find the best of the best.

"There's a lot of professional tribute artists out there who take the responsibility very seriously to represent the legacy," Mr. Jankowski said. "We treat this as a serious contest."

For people like Mr. Rosencrantz, carrying on the magic of Elvis, a man of incredible talent and charisma, is always a serious undertaking.

"It's just a passion," he said. "I just love being up on a stage entertaining people and doing the music. To me, the music will never die."

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Walt Sanders of Bellevue, Ohio, an Elvis impersonator for more than 10 years, entertains in Sandusky. (THE BLADE/MOLLY CORFMAN)

