

For the Love of Elvis

There are thousands of Elvis Presley impersonators worldwide. Some of these rhinestone-studded performers are Christians who use the musician's legendary appeal to preach the gospel.

Get an Elvis and you could find an evangelist. More than just an anagram, it's part of the package when you book the likes of Art Kistler for a tribute show honoring the singer widely known as the "King of Rock 'n' Roll."

Whether he's performing in a club or a church, the University of Minnesota maintenance manager weaves a little ministry into his set, as he sings some of Elvis Presley's best-known gospel numbers.

"I believe in the biblical tenet that we are all ministers, whenever and wherever given the chance," says the rhinestoned impersonator. "People perceive a depth beyond the apparent entertainment value in my shows."

Kistler is just one of an estimated 50,000 Elvis Tribute Artists (ETAs) worldwide. Their growing ranks point to the enduring appeal of the singer whose glory years were followed by personal problems, battles with his weight and prescription drugs, and an ignominious end in the bathroom of his Memphis, Tennessee, mansion.

The unlikely variety of ETAs also attests to Elvis' all-encompassing allure. Depending on your particular affinity, you can find a black Elvis, a gay Elvis, a Jewish Elvis, a Hindu Elvis, El Vez for the Latinos and a female Ellavis.

And of course there are the Flying Elvi—parachutists who drop from the sky wearing star-spangled jumpsuits.

Though many find financial gain and some sort of reflected glory among those who continue to revere the singer—the anniversary of whose death this month is expected to draw thousands to his Memphis hometown to mourn and celebrate—Kistler and others see an unlikely mission field.

Continuing sales of his music and memorabilia, and the ongoing wild rumors that he faked his death to start a secret new life, underscore that the man with the curled lip and gyrating hips has a following unlike any other artist living or dead. His appeal uniquely crosses all social lines, generating a near-religious devotion that has prompted the founding of the tongue-in-cheek First Presleyterian Church in Dumont, New Jersey.

Numerous Web sites poke fun at the supposed similarities between Jesus and Elvis, such as observing how the former wore a crown of thorns, was known as the Lord's Shepherd and said, "'Love thy neighbor,'" while the latter wore Royal Crown hair styler, once dated actress Cybil Shepherd and sang, "Don't be cruel."

Others take the spiritual dimension more seriously, noting that Elvis' distinctive white jumpsuit was a sort of disco version of the Levites' priestly robes. In *The Elvis/Jesus Mystery*, author Cinda Godfrey lists what she calls "the mind-boggling synchronicities" between the two—such as Jesus is the Son, while Elvis recorded on the Sun label. And when the Bible refers to the "voice" of God, who else could it mean, she asks?

Louie Ludwig penned *The Gospel of Elvis*, though in *The Tao of Elvis*, psychiatrist and Jungian analyst David Rosen suggests that Elvis “represents a modern archetypal king figure” who “embodied the essential elements of Tao.” While researching *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith & Image*, Erika Doss came across many fans with personal shrines in their homes. “I was alone, and Elvis was there for me,” one devotee told her.

Preach It, Elvis?

The kind of reverence displayed for Presley concerns communications researchers William Brown and Ben Fraser—professor and associate professor respectively at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The two men interviewed fans and tribute artists who attended conventions near the Christian school, writing a paper last year for the academic journal *Mass Communication & Society*.

They concluded that for some fans who idealize and idolize Elvis “the fabric of their self-identity is intricately interwoven with their image of Elvis, not only as an entertainer, but also a friend, lover, husband, father, patriot and citizen.”

“They may not call it that, but it’s worship, if you look at it,” Brown told *Charisma*.

“People have a great need to worship, and if they don’t believe in God or their belief isn’t really strong, they can tend to worship a person,” Fraser adds. “There’s no doubt in my mind that’s what is going on.”

One reason for Elvis’ universal appeal is that his life

offered reference points to people from widely different backgrounds, the pair observes. In addition to his unique voice, there's his rags-to-riches success story, the patriotism of his military service and—the wild living exposés of his last years notwithstanding—the gentlemanly manner and generosity for which he was known.

Elvis' church background as a youngster and lifelong love of gospel music resonate with Christians, too. Two Baptist fans at one convention told Brown: "It's Jesus first, Elvis second and our husbands third."

That worries Brown.

"Although there was a lot of good in Elvis' life, we need to be careful not to carry that too far," he comments. "Oftentimes when we become so attached to somebody we become blind to the reality of who they were really. We need to be very clear that there shouldn't be any competition between Jesus Christ and anyone else. That's when it gets a little scary—it can begin to shift our beliefs and values."

Indeed, Elvis' image is so strong, Brown and Fraser say, that they wonder if it's possible to use his life and music to share the gospel. "The problem with using Elvis is, because he's such a powerful figure, that could mix with the real message you are trying to get across, sending competing messages," Brown reasons.

Kistler and other Christian ETAs, as well as others who use Elvis as a platform for evangelism, would disagree. They say they can share the faith they avow Elvis held to deeply despite his personal struggles, and draw fans from the man

they call the “King” to the King of kings.

More than 25 people committed their lives to Christ when Canadian Jim Anderson performed at a secular Elvis festival in Brantford, Ontario, last summer. “Many have said they have felt the touch of God [at my concerts],” says the long time Elvis fan and former carpenter who now travels full time as Gospel Elvis from his home in Orillia, Ontario.

Anderson describes Elvis as “a type of Samson; a man anointed of God for ministry, but subject to the weaknesses of the flesh, which became his downfall.” He suggests: “Just as Samson’s biggest victory for God was in his death with the Philistines, so Elvis has reached more souls for God with his gospel music since his death, through his recordings and tribute artists spreading his music.”

Gary “Evangelistic Elvis” Stone dons the famous white jumpsuit when the demands of his job as national sales manager for a large corporation allow. He started his tribute ministry after someone remarked how much like Elvis he sounded, and he thought, Maybe I can reach people by becoming “the one and only”?

The Baptist deacon and Sunday school teacher says some conservative Christians don’t approve of his outreach but that his aim is “to plant seeds, and hopefully they will grow.” His biggest reward is handing out scarves during performances at nursing homes and assisted-living facilities and making some people smile “for the first time in years.”

Robert “Teddy” Bair, a radio presenter in Greenwood, South Carolina, bills himself as The Good Samaritan Elvis and

performs at various fund-raising and charity events. "I always witness at the end," he says. "It's like God has allowed me to gather a captured audience."

Steve Waldrop, an Assemblies of God International Fellowship evangelist based in Canyon Country, California, gives Elvis Gospel concerts in churches, jails and senior centers and has recorded an Elvis-style CD. He says he felt like "a mantle" was passing to him when he toured the singer's Memphis estate, Graceland.

Touched by an Elvis?

For some Christian ETAs, ministry opportunities are a fringe benefit in what is a secular career. Reggie Randolph from Hueytown, Alabama, joined the ranks of the Las Vegas-based Professional Elvis Impersonators Association after a winning appearance on NBC's Your Big Break. He traded his construction business for the tribute circuit and includes some of Elvis' gospel songs in his sets. Sometimes he has the chance to talk about his faith one-on-one.

"Some of the places I go to, I'm the only Jesus some people will ever see," he says.

Having at one time dreamed of becoming a Christian recording artist, Kraig Parker from the Dallas-Fort Worth area started his Elvis life rather reluctantly when he was asked to impersonate the singer at an office party. He hasn't looked back.

Now a rising star on the tribute circuit, he challenges people to look beyond Elvis' personal frailty and put their faith in

Christ. "People always approach me on a personal level, so it's easy to share a scripture for motivation or even share a prayer," he told Charisma.

"I'm totally convinced God has put me on this platform for His glory. I did not start this as a ministry, but I can see how it could turn into that. Perhaps He's leading me to the top to give Him glory."

The Christian ETA with the widest media exposure to date is Dorian Baxter, who, when not crooning reworked Elvis hits with a spiritual message for his Canadian congregation, reverts to his natural plummy tones that betray a British upbringing. He has an ELVIS sermon, in which the singer's name becomes an acronym for Everlasting Life, Virtue, Inspiration, Salvation.

Also known as Elvis Priestley, Baxter made headlines around the world earlier this year after being sidelined from recognized ministry by Anglican leaders upset by his Elvis impersonations and deciding to form his own congregation—

Christ the King, Grace-Land, Independent Anglican Church in Newmarket, Ontario.

He estimates he's prayed with thousands to receive Christ since entering an impersonators contest at the country's biggest Elvis festival in 1996 wearing a cheap jumpsuit he admits made him look "more like the Easter bunny" than the Las Vegas showman—and surprising himself by coming in first.

"If anybody had ever told me that at the age of 52 I would be doing this I would never have believed them, but the ends justify the means," he says. "We have to take the

opportunities put before us and be willing to be fools for Christ.”

There are Christian ETAs overseas, too, including in England and the Netherlands. In Malaysia, longtime secular Elvis impersonator H.T. Long retooled his act after becoming a Christian. Now an evangelist, he’s seen gangsters, Buddhist monks and nuns alike saved at his From Elvis to Jesus concerts. “Most Asians love Elvis and his kind of music,” he says, “so he is an excellent bait.”

Madeleine Wilson agrees. The British founder of the Elvis Gospel Fan Club, with members in almost 30 countries, says: “If you go out into the street representing the church, it doesn’t seem to draw people, whereas if you get somebody singing Elvis songs you will get a crowd in no time.

“You fish with a hook as well as a net, and Elvis is the bait. God will use anyone, anyhow, anywhere to get the message out and bring the people in.”

The Grace in ‘Graceland’

In addition to producing a regular newsletter, Wilson travels to Elvis events to meet fans and minister. “So many of them know the gospel music but need help to take the step further into the promised land,” says Wilson, who worships at an Assemblies of God church.

She has collected remarkable testimonies of people whose lives have been touched by Elvis.

A German woman planning to commit suicide heard an Elvis song on the radio, and although she did not understand the words she was moved to find out what it meant and later gave her life to Christ. A young man became a Christian after hearing God speak to him while he was standing by Elvis' grave at Graceland.

Gospel singer Donnie Sumner spent six years as an Elvis backup singer before his addiction drove him to consider suicide in 1976. But he cried out to God for help and now recounts his delivered-from-drugs testimony and story of life with Elvis in his concerts around the country.

Nancy Walters' briefer association with Elvis still provides her opportunities for ministry after 40 years. The former actress and model once named among the world's most beautiful women is invited to Elvis conventions in recognition of her part in the hit movie Blue Hawaii (1961).

She dyed her hair red to play teacher-chaperone Miss Prentice. "I was tickled to death to do the movie because I was a great fan," she recalls. "I've heard all those bad stories, but I always found him to be a polite Southern gentleman. He was just wonderful. ... We were friends for a good while afterwards."

Walters' blossoming career ended when her husband was killed in Vietnam in 1968. "I cried for two years," she says. "I found my way to my knees and prayed to receive Christ."

She began to study the Bible, becoming a licensed Pentecostal minister and traveling widely to teach. "I dropped my career. ... It wasn't in my heart any more. It was more important to

tell others and teach them the gospel.”

Picking up her acting career again recently, after the death of her second husband, she says God has given her an opportunity to blend the two parts of her life “in a wonderful way.”

Standing before congregations and corporations, preacher and motivational speaker Rick Stanley captures the audience’s attention with his insider remembrances of Graceland, the place he called home.

Elvis may have left the building permanently in 1977, but his home has since become a place of pilgrimage, drawing more visitors each year—about 700,000—than any other private residence in the country besides the White House.

Presley’s stepbrother and tour aide and one of the last people to see the singer alive, Stanley became a Christian and an evangelist the year after Elvis’ death—set free from a drug habit that had engulfed him.

He asserts that Elvis was a believer who just lost his way. “There is an unction, an anointing on his gospel”—the only genre for which Elvis won a Grammy—says Stanley, now 49. “You are hearing what he believed, his worldview. He wasn’t a modern-day King David, but he had a heart for God.”

Having recounted his testimony in his book *The Touch of Two Kings: Growing Up at Graceland* and at countless meetings, Stanley admits there was a time when he didn’t want to hear the name Elvis again. But as he worked through his pride, he sensed God telling him, “If you want to be like Paul, stick to

the story—don't be critical of the very thing that sets you apart."

Now he considers himself "a steward of the story" and believes that in some ways he is fulfilling one of Presley's own dreams. After Elvis' death, Stanley's stepfather told him the singer had wanted to become a minister. "He didn't think he could preach, so he tried to get the message out through music."

Stanley is a little bemused by the deification of his stepbrother. "Elvis was a good man and an entertainer who made people happy, but leave it at that," he says. "He was very uncomfortable with it. ... He didn't like being called 'The King.' Whenever he would hear that comment he would always stop and say, 'No, there is only one king: Christ.'"

Andy Butcher is Charisma's senior writer and news director. A native of England, he has never impersonated Elvis.