

# Elvis, still calling the tune

40 Jahre nach seinem Tod lebt der Mythos Elvis weiter. Von LORRAINE MALLINDER

ADVANCED US AUDIO

**H**e was an American original. Love him or hate him, Elvis Presley had undeniable star power. Forty years after his death, his hold on the popular imagination is remarkable, and he continues to sell truckloads of records — more than a million last year, according to *Forbes*. Elvis may be gone, but he still hasn't "left the building."

You either "get" Elvis or you don't. Maybe that explains why his fans continue to hold festivals in his memory, filling concert halls around the world to grasp a little second-hand stardust from the many tribute artists who are out there "spreading the word."

"Before Elvis, there was nothing," said John Lennon, himself inspired by Elvis's freak rockabilly sound, created magically as if out of nowhere at Sun Studios in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1954, the young Elvis had gone in to record a song for his beloved mother, secretly trying to get a contract. Not long after, he and his two sidekicks would move from rhythm and blues into a revolutionary new sound that became known as rock 'n' roll.

Those early Sun recordings are as fresh as ever. "That's All Right," the breakthrough song that woke America from its postwar sleep, still fizzes with the energy of youth. But it wasn't just about teenage kicks. "Mystery Train" shows the shimmering quality of Elvis's voice, an instrument in its own right. The Sun era

didn't just produce a new sound, though. It created a musical legend.

Everything in Elvis's life seemed to have led to this moment. His twin brother was stillborn, a tragedy that had caused his mother to believe Elvis had the "strength of both." Growing up in Tupelo, Mississippi, in a small house built by his father, times were tough. But the young Elvis listened to the gospel harmonies at the First Assembly of God Church and hung out in the black neighborhood of "Shake Rag," where singing the blues was a way of life.

It's the perfect rags-to-riches story. Three years after recording his first songs, Elvis bought Graceland, the mansion that was to be his home for the rest of his life, and the place where he would be happily married and experience fatherhood. But it was here that he also underwent a long period of professional decline. Managed by the controversial Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis spent the 1960s making one movie after another, the scripts often so bad that he would feel "physically ill." By the late 1960s, it seemed he was just a leftover from the 1950s.

Elvis came out fighting, though. He'd been left behind by the Swinging Sixties, but he desperately missed the music and his fans. So he agreed to appear in a make-or-break NBC Christmas special, going against the Colonel by refusing to sing the kitsch carols. Dressed to kill in black leather, he belted out oldies like "Jailhouse Rock," and he presented new

**belt out** [bɛlt 'aʊt]  
• herausschmettern

**call: ~ the tune** [kɔ:l]  
• die erste Geige spielen

**carol** ['kerəl]  
• Weihnachtslied

**decline** [di'klaɪn]  
• Abstieg

**dressed to kill**  
[ˌdrest tə 'kɪl]  
• aufgedonnert

**fizz** [fɪz] • sprudeln

**freak** [fri:k] *ifml.*  
• hier: außergewöhnlich

**grasp** [græsp]  
• hier: erhaschen

**kick** [kɪk]  
• hier: Schwung, Feuer

**make-or-break**  
[ˌmeɪk ɔ: 'breɪk]  
• alles oder nichts, alles entscheidend

**mansion** ['mænjən]  
• Villa

**rags-to-riches story**  
[ˌrægz tə 'rɪtʃɪz ,stɔ:ri]  
• vom Tellerwäscher zum Millionär Erfolgsstory

**right: in its own ~**  
[raɪt] • eigenständig, für sich

**shimmering** ['ʃɪmərɪŋ]  
• schillernd, schimmernd

**sidekick** ['saɪdkɪk] *ifml.*  
• Kumpel

**stillborn** ['stɪlbɔ:n]  
• totgeboren

**tribute artist**  
['trɪbjət ,ɑ:rtɪst]  
• hier: Elvis-Darsteller

**truckload** ['trʌkləʊd]  
*ifml.* • hier: haufenweise

**undeniable**  
[ˌʌndɪ'neɪəbəl]  
• unbestreitbar



Foto: Getty Images

A danger to all teenage girls: Elvis Presley in 1957



material like “If I Can Dream,” a song that reflected the cultural zeitgeist with its appeal for world peace. The show was known as the ‘68 Comeback Special.

How then, only nine years later, did he come to lose his appeal? Cashing in on ‘68 Comeback, the Colonel sent Elvis to Las Vegas, where he was to play for the following seven years. The move briefly pushed him back to the top, scoring him a number one in 1969 with “Suspicious Minds,” but the beginning of the end was near. By 1972, his marriage had ended, and he was increasingly dependent on prescription drugs. Fat Elvis had arrived, with sideburns like airplane wings and bell-bottom jumpsuits. In 1977, he died on the toilet in Graceland — only 42 years old.

Sadly, that final image of Elvis — a caricature — has stuck in the collective memory. But you need go no further than YouTube to be reminded of his greatness. There’s his first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956, singing “Don’t Be Cruel” with incredible charisma, filmed only from the waist up so that his “snake

hip” routine wouldn’t corrupt viewers. Or the 1958 film *King Creole*, in which Elvis jumps onto a bar to give a red-hot performance of “Trouble” — perhaps his finest cinematic moment. In later years, as his marriage broke down, Elvis opened his heart in performances of “Always on My Mind” and “Separate Ways.” There’s an Elvis out there for everyone, it seems.

The big question is whether the legacy will survive. Certainly, with the Graceland machine running at full speed for the 40th anniversary of his death, there is life in the enterprise yet. But it’s easy to believe that his days as a demigod of popular culture are limited.

Still, his appeal runs deep, attracting younger crowds in search of vintage cred. And with a back catalog of almost 800 songs, there’s certainly no shortage of material to explore. More than all of this, though, Elvis will always be the world’s first rock ‘n’ roll star, whose style and incredible life story set the pattern for generations to come.

For now, at least, his spirit lives on.

**back catalog**

['bæk ,kætəlɒɡ]  
• hier: Musikangebot

**bell-bottom**

['bel ,bɒ:təm]  
• (Hose) ausgestellt

**cash: ~ in on sth.**

[kæʃ] ifml.  
• aus etw. Profit schlagen

**corrupt**

[kə'ɹʌpt]  
• hier: verderben

**cred** [kred] ifml.  
• Glaubwürdigkeit

**demigod**

['demiga:d]  
• Halbgott

**jumpsuit**

['dʒʌmpsu:t]  
• einteiliger Hosenanzug

**legacy**

['legəsi]  
• Vermächtnis

**lose**

[lu:z]  
• hier: vertun, verwirren

**prescription drug**

[pri'skɹɪpʃən drʌɡ]  
• verschreibungspflichtiges Medikament

**sideburns**

['saɪdbɜ:nz]  
• Koteletten, Backenbart

**vintage**

['vɪntɪdʒ]  
• aus einer bestimmten Zeit

**waist**

[weɪst] • Taille

**Elvis as a job — tribute acts**

It may be the ultimate in kitsch, but impersonating Elvis is no joke. Tribute acts are driven by a rare passion: the desire to channel the indefinable charisma and talent of “The King.” Some artists are lucky enough to make a full-time occupation out of keeping the singer’s spirit alive. For others, it’s a weekend hobby motivated by a sense of mission.



**Shawn Klush**  
Pittston, Pennsylvania  
Age: Old enough to know better  
Favorite song: “If I Can Dream”

Shawn Klush has been working as an Elvis tribute act for 27 years. At the age of three, he remembers hearing his father playing Elvis records. “No artist alive has all the talents that man had,” Klush says. “It’s a million different things. It’s the way he held his pinkie finger.”

Klush’s favourite era is the ‘68 Comeback. “Elvis walked back on stage in a black leather suit, scared. He grabbed hold of that mic and really let it rip. He got that energy back. He got that raw sound back,” is how Klush describes it.

Elvis is a way of life for him. “I followed my heart. It’s something inside you. You can’t get rid of it. You trade your days for it,” Shawn Klush says.



**Johnny Lee Memphis**  
Stirling, Scotland  
Age: 42  
Favorite song: “It’s Only Love”

For Johnny Lee Memphis, Elvis brings back childhood memories of sunny afternoons at his Aunt Helen’s house. In primary school, he told a teacher he wanted to be Elvis when he grew up. “She told me I’d have to think of something else. It would be funny to bump into her now,” he says.

For Johnny Lee Memphis, Elvis had the “complete package. He had everyone feeling he was singing to them personally. He could really put his own soul in the songs. He was able to believe every word he was singing.”



**Ciaran Houlihan**  
Dublin, Ireland  
Age: 37  
Favorite song: “The Impossible Dream”

From financial controller to Elvis tribute act, Ciaran Houlihan’s career path has been anything but conventional. His father turned him on to Elvis, but not because he was a fan. “My dad was into old-school country. He thought that Elvis singing Jim Reeves was blasphemous,” Houlihan says.

Unlike his dad, he believes that Elvis was “probably one of the coolest dudes who ever lived.” He witnesses the enthusiasm of fans first-hand. They allow themselves to believe it’s actually Elvis on the stage. “Nobody will ever be Elvis, but it’s the next best thing,” he says.

Now a full-time Elvis, Houlihan never gets tired of researching his favourite topic. He enjoys looking for old outtakes of Elvis recordings. “He’ll be having a laugh and goofing around. You get some insight into the guy,” he says.



**Dave Hurrell**  
Winston, England  
Age: 41  
Favorite song: “Suspicious Minds”

A gardener during the week, Dave Hurrell undergoes a radical transformation on the weekend. It all started at school, when a dinner lady told him he looked like Elvis. Soon, he was out performing with his dad, who impersonated Engelbert Humperdinck.

Elvis’s appeal is simple, he thinks. “He’s the guy next door whom everybody can relate to. There’s always a song you can relate to, whatever’s gone on in your life.”

**affect** [ə'fekt]  
• beeinflussen

**blasphemous**

['blæsfəməs]  
• gotteslästerlich, frevelhaft

**bump into sb.**

['bʌmp ,ɪntə]  
• jmdm. zufällig begegnen

**dinner lady**

['dɪnə ,leɪdi] UK ifml.  
• Mitarbeiterin einer Schulkantine

**dude** [du:d] N. Am. ifml.

• Kerl, Typ

**goof around**

[ɡu:f ə'raʊnd] N. Am. ifml.  
• herumblödeln

**grab: ~ hold of sth.**  
[græb] ifml.  
• etw. packen

**humbleness**

['hʌmbəlˌnəs]  
• Demut, Bescheidenheit

**lavish**

['lævɪʃ]  
• verschwenderisch

**pinkie finger**

['pɪŋki ,fɪŋgə] ifml.  
• kleiner Finger

**rip: let ~**

[rɪp] ifml.  
• richtig loslegen

**trade: ~ one's days for sth.**

[treɪd] ifml.  
• seine Zeit opfern, alles geben

**tribute act**

['trɪbjət ækt]  
• hier: Elvis-Darsteller

Fotos: iStock; Courtesy of Shawn Klush, Ciaran Houlihan, Johnny Lee Memphis, Dave Hurrell

Satisfaction comes from the fans. “At the end of the day, you’re keeping the songs going. After one gig, a lady said: ‘You just took me through my entire marriage. My husband is no longer here. I will be eternally grateful.’ That, to me, is a job well done.”

Being Elvis can take up a lot of time. “You can get kind of wrapped up in it. There are times when I think: ‘You know what? I’m feeling pretty good about all this. I feel it’s like he’s here with me.’”

## Elvis festivals

Yes, there’s the Graceland festival planned for this month, but Elvis also lives on in places that are far off the beaten track. Celebrate The King’s legacy with a touch of humor at these unique events.

### Tweed, Ontario, Canada (August 25–27, 2017)

The Tweed festival’s origins are as strange as they come, inspired by a reporter’s claims that he had seen Elvis in the town after The King’s death. The “Elvis” he had seen was, in fact, Mr. V, a local restaurant owner. But the town’s claim to fame had been established. Today, Tweed attracts around 2,000 visitors every August.

### Porthcawl, Wales, UK (September 22–24, 2017)

It’s surreal that the world’s biggest Elvis festival should be held in the tiny seaside town of Porthcawl. Running since 2004, it attracts 35,000 fans each year. “It’s off the Richter scale of kitsch,” says organizer, Peter Philips. “We take the music very seriously, but we have no problem with a hen party turning up with Elvis wigs.”

### Parkes, New South Wales, Australia (January 10–14, 2018)

Imagine wearing an Elvis jumpsuit in temperatures above 40 °C. Held in January, the Parkes festival draws 25,000 fans. “The love of Elvis is growing, not declining,” says Cathy Treasure, the festival’s director. “These days, we’re attracting the young vintage crew.”

## A life stranger than fiction

Elvis’s father, Vernon, wanted his son to become an electrician. Elvis worked

briefly as a driver for Crown Electric, planning to study the trade at night, but he left only a year later, choosing instead to electrify audiences with his onstage charisma.

Elvis loved cars, especially Cadillacs. According to the 1981 documentary *This Is Elvis*, he bought more than 100 cars for friends, once purchasing seven in one day. In 1975, bank teller Mennie Person stopped to admire Elvis’s Cadillac parked outside a car showroom. With characteristic generosity, he repaid the compliment by buying her a “Caddy” of her own.

Elvis met his wife, Priscilla, in 1959 while doing his military service in Germany. She was only 14. In 1963, her parents allowed her to move to Graceland on condition that she attend the Immaculate Conception High School in Memphis. The couple married in 1967, but the constant presence of the “Memphis mafia” (his bodyguards and friends) at Graceland and Elvis’s affairs while on location put a lot of pressure on the marriage. Priscilla found comfort in her husband’s karate instructor and divorced The King in 1973.

During the 1950s, Elvis was considered so dangerous that police would film his shows. At one 1957 show, the Los Angeles Police Department vice squad recorded his sexy movements for possible legal action. In a review of that show, Dick Williams wrote in the *LA Mirror*: “The madness reached its peak at the finish with ‘Hound Dog.’ Elvis writhed in complete abandon, hair hanging down over his face. He got down on the floor with a huge replica of the RCA singing dog and made love to it as if it were a girl.”

Elvis was politically conservative. In 1970, dressed in a purple velvet suit with a gold belt, he rocked up to the White House with a letter requesting a meeting with President Richard Nixon. Once he’d got in, thanks to the help of a Nixon aide (who happened to be a fan), he offered his services in the war on drugs. He came out with a federal narcotics agent badge. Nixon received a Colt .45 pistol from The King’s personal collection. The meeting ended with an embrace.

Elvis’s trademark jumpsuits are the essence of showmanship. The heavily decorated costumes were inspired by Victorian fashions Elvis had seen in a book. But they were practical, too, helping to hide The King’s constantly changing weight — largely the result of eating too many fried peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches.

Forty years later, conspiracy theories on Elvis’s death continue to flourish. The *National Enquirer* paid one of the singer’s cousins to take photos in the funeral parlour, but fans pointed out that the nose and eyebrows did not look quite right, leading to suspicions that the body was, in fact, a wax dummy. In 1989, the Elvis Sighting Society was formed in Canada, after so many people in Ottawa said they had seen Elvis that the matter became “too great to ignore.” Even the cause of death is in dispute. Elvis allegedly died of drug-related heart problems, but a former doctor claimed that constipation dethroned The King.

**abandon** [əˈbændən]  
• Hingabe, Hemmungslosigkeit

**aide** [eɪd] ▶ Berater(in)

**allegedly** [əˈledʒɪdli]  
• angeblich

**badge** [bædʒ]  
• Abzeichen, Dienstmarke

**bank teller**  
[ˈbæŋk ˌtelə] N. Am.  
• Bankkassierer(in)

**conspiracy** [kənˈspɪrəsi]  
• Verschwörung

**constipation**  
[ˌkɒnstɪˈpeɪʃən]  
• Verstopfung

**decline** [dɪˈklaɪn]  
• abnehmen

**dethrone** [diˈθrəʊn]  
• entthronen

**drug-related**  
[ˈdrʌɡ rɪˌleɪtɪd]  
• durch Medikamente ausgelöst

**embrace** [ɪmˈbreɪs]  
• Umarmung

**eternally** [ɪˈtɜːnəli]  
• ewig

**flourish** [ˈflaʊrɪʃ] ▶ blühen

**funeral parlour**  
[ˈfjuːnərəl ˌpɑːlə]  
• Aufbahrungshalle

**hen party** [ˈhen ˌpɑːti]  
• Damenkränzchen

**legal action**  
[ˈliːgəl ˈækʃən]  
• Klage vor Gericht

**location: on ~**  
[loʊkeɪʃən]  
• bei Dreharbeiten, im Aufnahmestudio

**narcotics agent**  
[nɑːrˈkɑːtɪks ˈeɪdʒənt]  
• Drogenfahnder

**replica** [ˈreplɪkə]  
• Nachbildung

**showmanship**  
[ˈʃəʊmənʃɪp]  
• geschickte Zurschaustellung

**sighting** [ˈsaɪtɪŋ]  
• Sichtung

**track: far off the beaten ~**  
[træk] ▶ weit abseits

**velvet** [ˈvelvɪt] ▶ Samt-

**vice squad** [ˈvaɪs skwɒd]  
• Sittenpolizei

**wax dummy**  
[ˌwæks ˈdʌmi]  
• Wachsimitat

**wig** [wɪɡ] ▶ Perücke

**wrapped: get ~ up in sth.**  
[ræpt]  
• von etw. vollkommen in Anspruch genommen werden

**writhe** [raɪð]  
• sich winden

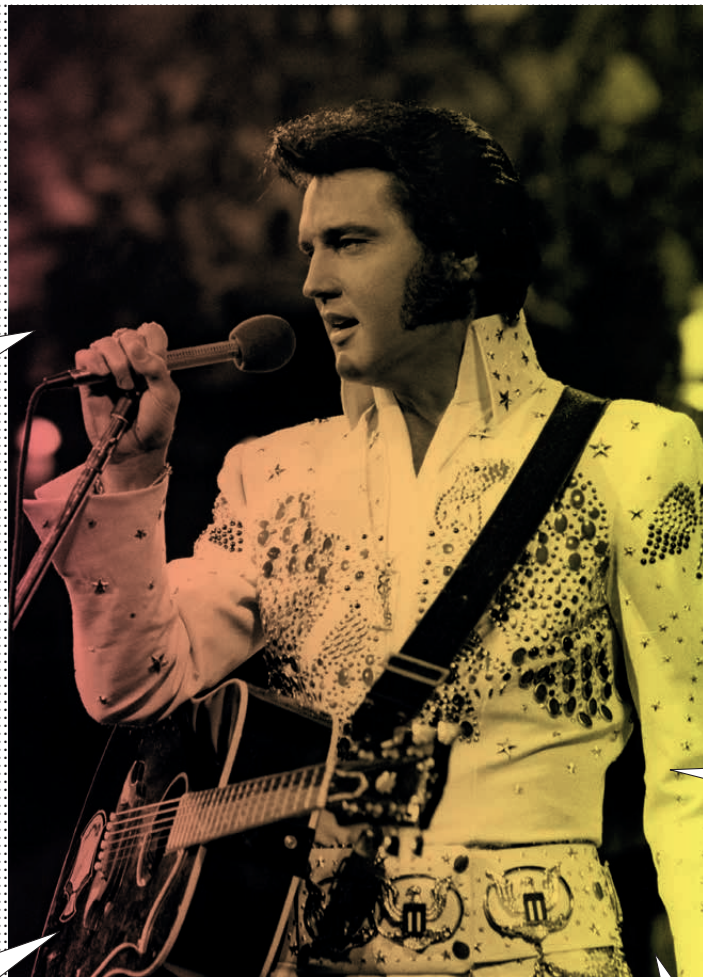


Fotos: Getty Images

Elvis lives on and on: tribute artist Riccardo Vegas

# Elvis in quotes

*The King on love, entertainment, and those sexy moves.*



On his movie career:

“All I do anymore is sing to horses, chimps, and dogs.”

On his gyrating hips:

“I’m not trying to be sexy. It’s just my way of expressing myself when I move around.”

On love:

“Sad thing is, you can still love someone and be wrong for them.”

On his passion:

“I want to entertain people. That’s my whole life — to my last breath.”

**chimp**  
[tʃɪmp] ifml.  
• Schimpanse

**gyrating**  
[dʒaɪˈreɪtɪŋ]  
• kreisend

**hip** [hɪp]  
• Hüfte