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Stephen Johnson

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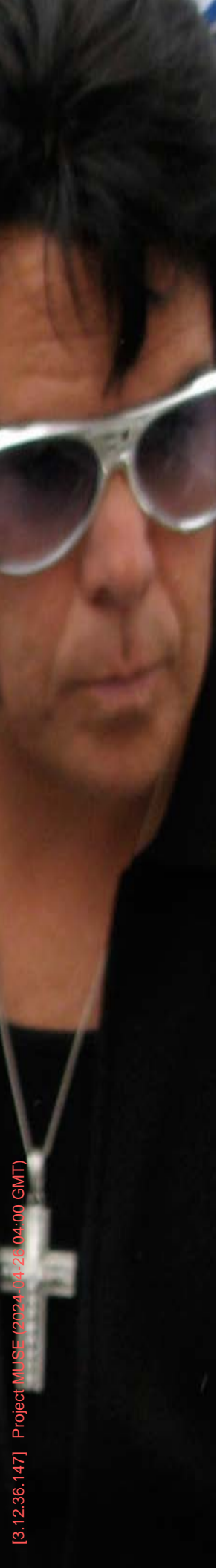
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Everybody's Elvis: Celebrity and the Church Social

by Stephen Johnson

From July 23 to 26, 2009, Collingwood, Ontario, held its annual Elvis Festival, a fifteen-year-old event attracting tens of thousands of visitors and, this year, more than 120 Elvis 'tribute artists' (preferred to the term 'impersonator'). The festival is organized by the town, which turns its streets and parks into venues, along with its restaurants, clubs, and theatres, in an extraordinarily well-run, volunteer-driven, four-day party. At its core, the festival is licensed (by those who control Elvis's image) to hold an 'official' competition of tribute artists, leading to an awards ceremony on Sunday evening, with winners in both amateur and professional categories.¹ But surrounding this, the town has organized something much more diverse, including performances at local restaurants, a children's park, a beer garden, a classic car parade, church services, and the cinema. Free large- and small-scale tribute performances permeate every part of the town, complemented by ticketed multimedia events featuring visiting professionals performing with live bands.²

On July 24, 2009, I attended the first full day of this festival and saw Elvis everywhere. At Millennium Park, in a tent surrounded by children's rides, child Elvises performed throughout the day. On the pedestrianized main street, thousands of spectators settled into their folding camp chairs to watch the first "go down," I was told, as early as 1:30 a.m. Elvises paraded before them, singing one song to recorded music from 1:00 p.m. through the evening. Beginning at 5:00 p.m. in the Gayety Theatre, I watched the elimination round of the competition, with a full house of 360 people and a panel of six judges. Again, one by one, Elvises from the very young to the very old came on stage to engage the audience, sing one song, and leave with the obligatory "thank you—thank you very much." The host apologized for the obvious chaos backstage and invited us to settle back down for a running time of six hours.



Fifteen-year-old Anthony Cabone, performing at the Millennium Park Family venue, welcomes a young tribute artist onto the stage for an impromptu duet, while an audience member takes photographs.
Photo by Stephen Johnson

I wandered the streets past the stalls selling Elvis wigs, glasses (with attached sideburns), lamps, and Christmas ornaments. I wandered among the Elvises who were greeting and embracing each other and audience members. Elvises from six to seventy; from the earliest hip-gyrating incarnation to the Vegas lounging incarnation, clad in black leather, Hawaiian shirts, one-piece polyester suits with



Two young tribute artists (Zach Peddie and Jackson Begley) share a moment between sets at the Millennium Park venue, which highlighted younger performers. The spectator behind may or may not be a tribute artist.
Photo by Stephen Johnson

rhinestones and sequins and— everywhere—wide, ornate belts. Knowing what I know (about performing), and looking for the theatrical in the performative and the past in the



Wayne Miller circulates through the friendly crowd, bantering and signing autographs. Tribute artists and audiences co-mingled throughout the festival in a show of solidarity, in praise of Elvis. Miller competed in the category "Concert Years, Professional."
Photo by Stephen Johnson

present, I arrived with particular expectations—specifically, to find a blend of parody and idolatry directed toward a long-dead celebrity. I was struck by how entirely these expectations were denied to me. I expected parody. After all, not many of these performers could “pass” as Elvis. Dress any small child as Elvis—or anyone in general who does not have a similar girth, height or complexion as Elvis—and the result might be perceived, at least in part, as mockery. I looked in vain; there was no sense of parody in the performances and no sense of audiences reading them with any irony, so far as I could overhear (and I tend to ‘overhear’ rather shamelessly on such occasions). The least likely Elvises presented themselves as respectful attempts to express their appreciation and love for “the King”; as such, they were treated by audiences with respect. The least effective



A scene behind the outdoor stage, showing the range of Elvis costuming. To the left is Frank Cross dressed for the Concert Years category of competition, to the right Daniel Barrella prepared to sing gospel.

Photo by Stephen Johnson

performances—if “effective” is understood as either “likeness to Elvis” or “in tune”—were greeted with encouragement and appreciation. There was apparently an assumption among all participants, on stage and off, that everyone was present out of respect for Elvis and for each other. The audience-performer relationship resembled a homogeneous local community, encouraging its own members in their achievements, as if anyone on the stage, whatever their dress, might be in the

It seemed to me, as I walked the streets of Collingwood, that belief in the greatness and importance of Elvis was assumed, and that we all collaborated in this tribute.

audience, and anyone in the audience might, finally, mount the stage.³

On the other hand, I was not aware of any of the emotional outpouring and fawning that betray the worship of either artist or Elvis. I witnessed no hierarchy among performers, by skill or “professional” status, and no particular distance between performers and spectators. Our Elvises—and they seemed to be ‘ours’—mingled freely, delighted in talking at length with all citizens, smiled and chatted as they autographed. Audience members bantered with ease. Indeed, I haven’t made more eye

contact and greeted more strangers at a public event in a very long time. It was an ambience I did not expect; yet it was nevertheless quite familiar to me.

There is a literature on Elvis impersonation that makes much of its racial, gender, and deeply religious over- and under-tones.⁴ It’s a kind of blackface minstrelsy, so the argument goes. It’s homoerotic and betrays a new age, cult-like idolatry toward a dead (or perhaps not?) “king.” In the larger subculture of Elvis impersonation, there is no doubt that such complexities are visible, as they may very well have been under certain circumstances during the Collingwood Festival. For example, at night in larger venues when the professional artists performed Vegas acts for a paying audience, or when pressure altered performance and reception during the final rounds of competition for awards. But during Friday’s street party, it seemed to me that the citizens of Collingwood had found an effective means to obscure all such readings.



T. J. Jackson of Cornwall, Ontario, embodies the term “tribute” at the festival, not overtly imitating Elvis in appearance, but providing a crowd pleasing performance in his honour. Another performer said before singing an Elvis standard, “I hope I do this just as well as Elvis.” This is not the same as imitation.

Photo by Stephen Johnson



A group of children in daycare head for the free Elvis tribute concert dressed in subtle Elvis costuming—Hawaiian leis. If they didn't know anything about Elvis, they were about to receive an intensive initiation—with over 120 artists.
Photo by Stephen Johnson

Unlike any other Elvis Festivals (to the best of my knowledge), this event created a structure and ambience that imitated other community events, thus normalizing the presence of



Young audience member as Elvis in 'comeback special' leather.
Photo by Stephen Johnson

attention to their needs. If these statements were genuine, and I believe they were, the reasons were not difficult to find. Other Elvis Festivals are held at resorts, clubs, and camps. Collingwood embedded what is, on the face of it, a very strange affair in a completely identifiable setting—therefore making the experience feel all perfectly normal. This was an Elvis Festival by way of a county fair, or a (very large) church social.

all those Elvises. The Town Crier, the Mayor, and the local MP welcomed them. There was a midway for the kids. There were church services. Local citizens spread welcome, advice, and souvenir programs. Visiting artists repeatedly expressed how grateful they were for the warmth of their welcome and the

What is emphasized in this environment, it seems to me, is not what is eccentric, but what is intrinsic—the extent to which “Elvis” is a shared cultural experience. His performance was so widely disseminated and pervasive for so long among so many cultures. He was so extraordinarily shape-shifting in his physique, behaviour, and musical style. He was so readily co-opted by so many people—and his celebrity, thus, so malleable—that it is nearly inconceivable that we would not share in this one small part of our mutual cultural heritage. Perhaps other Elvis Festivals expose other features of this culture in more exclusive and more evangelical ways. In Collingwood, Elvis was the established religion—positively Anglican.



Young audience member as Elvis from his later Vegas Concert years. Note the generic Grease-like costuming on the young girl. There was no sighting of women in costume as Elvis, perhaps because of the particular ambience of the Collingwood festival, though there are many (see article and note). There was one young woman competing as a youth, though not in any discernible costume.
Photo by Stephen Johnson

In the debate between the designation “tribute artist” or “impersonator,” Collingwood comes down on the side of “tribute.” It seemed to me, as I walked the streets of Collingwood, that belief in the greatness and importance of Elvis was assumed, and that we all collaborated in this tribute. As the day wore on, and the numbers of Elvises proliferated, I found myself seeing potential tribute artists, out of uniform, throughout the crowd—betrayed in a sideburn, an article of clothing, a gait, a tone, or a curl of the lip. Elvis really was everywhere.



In the evening, a live band took to the outdoor stage, and the non-competing tribute artists performed for the crowd. Here, professional Donny Edwards, appearing in concert as part of the festival, lets loose. The effect of the live band and the overt skill of impersonation made for a different kind of performance and reception than could be experienced during the daytime performances: a mix of non-professionals and non-performers.

Photo by Stephen Johnson

Stephen Johnson is Director of the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto, where he teaches performance theory and the history of popular performance. His publications include the book *Roof Gardens of Broadway Theatres*, and articles in journals such as *The Drama Review*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Theatre Topics*, *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, as well as *Theatre Research in Canada*, which he co-edited for ten years. His database and website on blackface minstrelsy is available at <http://link.library.utoronto.ca/minstrels/>.

Notes

- 1 The winner travels to Memphis to compete against finalists from as many as twenty other licensed competitions, including three more from Canada (Penticton, British Columbia, Windsor, Ontario, and Mississauga, Ontario). It is generally acknowledged (not just in local advertising) that Collingwood's festival is the largest of these events, both in numbers of participants and spectators. It is billed as the largest in the world, but this refers to the licensees and does not include, for example, comparison with Las Vegas.
- 2 This brief description cannot do justice to the complexity of the event. The Collingwood Elvis Festival has an informative (and elegant) website at <http://www.collingwoodelvisfestival.com>.
- 3 In several cases I had the impression that this is exactly what happened—some singers appeared, with minimal Elvis-like costuming, rather suddenly on the stage.
- 4 Wikipedia (as of this writing) has an unusually trustworthy entry on "Elvis Impersonator," doubtlessly because of the large number of interested parties checking on its accuracy. Its "Bibliography" is useful, including the following works (all corroborated): Gilbert B. Rodman, *Elvis after Elvis: the Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (Routledge, 1996); Eric Lott, "All the King's Men: Elvis Impersonators and White Working-Class Masculinity," in Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, eds., *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* (Duke University Press, 1997): 192–230; Francesca Brittan, "Women Who 'Do Elvis': Authenticity, Masculinity and Masquerade," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18.2 (August 2006): 167–190; and Marjorie Garber, "The Transvestite Continuum: Liberace-Valentino-Elvis," in *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge, 1992): 353–74. See also David McNair and Jayson Whitehead, "Love and Theft," an interview with Eric Lott. <<http://www.gadflyonline.com>>, accessed 30 July 2009.