Elvis Has Left the Building

Elvis Lives!

Elvis lives. At least he does in the hearts of his fans. And they are everywhere.

Twenty-five years after his death, our culture is still fascinated with the raven-haired, swivel-hipped entertainer. His songs fill the airwaves. His face graces postage stamps and velvet paintings in the U.S. and abroad. Thousands of the faithful annually trek to Graceland, his Memphis home, to pay homage to the king of rock and roll.

August 16, 2002, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elvis Presley's death. Memphis will be rocking during "Elvis Week." Pilgrims can enjoy concerts and eat their favorite Elvis food (probably heavy on the grease and sugar).

Meanwhile, impersonators abound. For instance, the "Flying Elvi" jump from 13,000 feet. (You read correctly. That's the "Flying *Elvi*." Scholars and real Elvis fans know that "Elvi" is the plural of "Elvis." We've got culture here at Probe.)

Featured in a hit movie, these Las Vegas daredevils combine skydiving with Elvis nostalgia. They are even available for Las Vegas weddings: "Why settle for just one Elvis look-alike," asks the ad, "when you can have the entire ten-Elvi team in attendance on your special day?"

Internet sites tout Elvis fan clubs and even Elvis baby food. Wine connoisseurs have sighted "Always Elvis Wine." Former NFL coach Jerry Glanville often left two tickets for Elvis at the will-call window on game days.

Even academics are into Elvis. The University of Mississippi has held International Conferences on Elvis Presley. Scholarly

seminars included, “Civil Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Elvis;” “Elvis: The Twinless Twins’ Search for Spiritual Meaning” (Elvis’ twin brother died at birth); and “Elvis ‘n’ Jesus.”

America. What a country!

What is all this about, really? Why the obsession with a long-dead rock and roll star? In this article we will examine some reasons for Elvis mania. You might think that Elvis fans are crazy! But I suspect that you share some of the desires and hopes for life that seem to drive many of his fans. Their devotion borders on the spiritual. There is even a “First *Presley*terian Church.”

What might all this fascination with Elvis tell us about ourselves? Let us look at some clues in the next section.

Inside the Mind of an Elvis Fan

An event manager from Washington, DC, got hooked on Elvis at a 1973 concert. She has a batch of Elvis memorabilia ranging from Elvis lamps – complete with swinging hips – to a Franklin Mint medal.

Her prized possession is a photocopy of Elvis’ final EKG (electrocardiogram), obtained from a nurse who worked in the Memphis hospital where doctors desperately tried to revive his corpse in 1977. The photocopy may be quite valuable. Elvis fans can be weird, she admits.

The child of alcoholics, this self-confessed enabler has fantasies that if only she had encountered Elvis, maybe she could have rescued him from the drugs and despair that brought his demise.

She is sorry that Elvis had no one in his life that would hold him accountable for his actions. Instead, groupies, politicians, and doctors bowed before him, granting him

adoration, access, and prescription medicine. Fame can be a powerful aphrodisiac and willing women were plentiful.

What fascinates her with Elvis after all these years? Could it be romance? Rescue needs or hopes? She is single. Adult children of alcoholics often find themselves rescuing people, just like they tried to help their addicted parents.

Might any chords in your soul resonate with this fan, or with the life and death of this poor southern boy turned rock superstar, whose posthumous career length now has surpassed his live one? Most of us want to be loved. Some might envy Elvis' looks, voice, popularity, or fortune. Some, maybe many, are driven to obtain self-esteem by pleasing people.

Many feel that humans need to believe in something greater than themselves. Some have described this need as a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person. Could worshippers of Elvis – or of sports stars, rock stars, movie stars, or athletic heroes – be seeking to fill such a vacuum?

What do you make of the Elvis phenomenon? Is it a national joke, or could it hold important insights into human nature? Let us examine a variety of reactions.

What's the Elvis Craze All About?

Why does Elvis still fascinate people? What is the enduring Elvis craze about, really? My own informal, nonscientific survey yielded fascinating analyses from many levels of society.

"It's a national joke," claimed a San Diego housepainter.

A Miami office manager said, "Our cat is named Elvis Presley. He's fat with a black coat, white collar, and eyes that glaze over – Elvis in his later years." Her husband quipped, "The other day, we had an Elvis sighting – in a tree."

A Sacramento van driver attributes today's craze to "all the lonely people who sit around and watch TV." "Besides," the driver says, "Elvis' grave wasn't marked right, and there's evidence he's not really buried there. I read it in the tabloids."

A California mayor feels people need to link up with something, to create a sense of belonging. "They could be seeking memories of better times," she reasons. "Some people wish he was still alive. My husband is an Elvis fan," she says. "He knows Elvis is dead, but he likes the music."

A southern California doctor wonders if fans may be bonding with a romanticized part of their youth. He adds, "People who don't have God make a god out of all sorts of things."

Indeed they do. Deep reverence and even worship characterize many pilgrims to Graceland. Some hold candlelight ceremonies, offer flowers, and display icons.

One scholar at the University of Mississippi's International Conference on Elvis noted, "without looking at spirituality, you can't explain the Elvis phenomena. . . . There's a tremendous force that brings people back to Graceland."{1}

Spiritual matters, of course, can be very controversial. More and more psychologists and psychiatrists emphasize the need to develop the total person – physically, emotionally and spiritually – in order to achieve a healthy life. Spiritual questions surface in many areas of society, from talk shows to hospitals.

Oprah Winfrey leads the pack of talk show hosts delving into the spiritual dimension. Respectable medical schools like Duke, Harvard, and Columbia study faith's impact on health.

Perhaps there is a spiritual void that Elvis worshipers and many others seek to fill with the objects of their devotion. Could that explain the Elvis phenomenon? Next we will consider

the spiritual implications of Elvis worship.

Are You Lonesome Tonight?

Tell me now, really: Are You Lonesome Tonight? (Don't worry; I won't quote the whole song . . . at least not in this article!) Read what these Elvis fans have to say.

"I can get so depressed," admitted a Texas woman. "Anytime I've got anything bothering me, I can get in my car and turn the stereo on and listen to Elvis and just go into a world of my own. . . . It's like he's right there singing directly to me. . . . It's like he's always there to solve everything."{2}

"I sit and talk to him," claimed a New Jersey follower. "I feel he hears what I say to him and he gives me the will to go on when things are really bad. . . . Somehow you talk to Elvis. . . . I know if anybody ever saw me, they would probably tell me that I was crazy, but I do . . . I love him, I talk to him and I know he understands and I feel so much better after. I think I always will."{3}

End of quote, I should emphasize. That was me quoting somebody else, folks, in case you began reading in mid-sentence.

Some fringers actually believe Elvis is still alive. My informal survey encountered no actual Elvis spotters, though a few claimed they had seen the Energizer Bunny.

Is the Elvis craze simply a zany fad? Or does it indicate something deeper about human longings? Some seek happiness through success, wealth, or relationships. Probably everyone has at least one "Elvis" in his or her life: a person, idea, team, goal, or possession that inspires the devotion and quest for fulfillment.

But human-based searches for ultimate happiness can be risky.

For most of us, there will always be someone richer, more intelligent or articulate, better looking or more popular than we. Our teams will lose; our heroes will have flaws. Even if you reach the top . . .what then? Latest statistics show the death rate is still 100%. Is there something more?

You may not realize that Elvis' only Grammy Award for a single came for his 1974 recording of "How Great Thou Art," a famous hymn. The lyrics, which likely reflected his own spiritual roots, point to hope beyond human accomplishment. Next, we will look at how the message of this song might help meet the longings common to Elvis fans and to us all.

Someone Greater than Elvis

Merchants continue to cash in on Elvis' popularity. You can buy "Barbie Loves Elvis" doll sets and Elvis mouse pads. Tupelo, Mississippi (Elvis' birthplace) boasts an Elvis McDonalds.

The Elvis craze sometimes borders on worship, with fans seeking spiritual fulfillment in their departed king.

Many people, though, not just Elvis fans, feel a spiritual emptiness, a need to connect with something greater to replace inner loneliness with friendship, fear with love, and desperation with hope.

I will not enter the debate about Elvis' personal spiritual convictions. But again consider the message of his only Grammy- winning single, the famous hymn "How Great Thou Art." The lyrics speak in "awesome wonder" of the universe as a majestic display of God's power.

The biblical God alluded to in this song is described elsewhere as a friend of those in need. "The Lord is my shepherd," wrote an Israeli king. "I have everything I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right

paths."{4}

If we allow Him into our lives, this God promises to be our friend, both when things are going well and when we are painfully lonely.

"How Great Thou Art" tells that this loving God sent His Son to die, to carry the burden of humanity's injustices, selfishness, and wrongs.

God's love is endless, and He offers us hope. When we tell Him our problems, unlike Elvis, He can do something about them. Not only can we rely on Him for our needs today, but the biblical documents promise eternal freedom from death, sorrow, crying, and pain.{5} Jesus Himself promised, "I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned . . . but they have already passed from death into life.{6}

Friendships, love, and hope – from one who cannot fail us. Sounds great. But is it true?

Jesus backed up His claims by rising from the dead. As somewhat of a skeptic, I examined evidences for the resurrection of Jesus and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history.{7}

Elvis Presley is dead. Some therapists encourage their clients to get in touch with their "Inner Elvis." As the world commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of his passing, perhaps it would be more fruitful to look beyond our "Inner Elvis" to Someone greater.

Adapted from an article that first appeared in *Pursuit* magazine, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1997.

Notes

1. Gregory Rumberg, “I Know Your Elvis,” *Contemporary Christian Music,* February 1997, 31.

2. Ralph Burns, “How Great Thou Art: Photographs from Graceland,” California Museum of Photography, University of California Riverside Web site: http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/elvis/burns_intro.html, 1996.

3. Ibid.

4. Psalm 23:1-3, NLT.

5. Revelation 21: 1,4.

6. John 5:24, NLT.

7. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict,* Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.

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