

Elvis Is Dead. (Deal With It.)

Elvis Lives

At least in the hearts of his fans.

And they are everywhere.

Twenty 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.

The National Association of Amateur Elvis Impersonators promotes the cause while the “Flying Elvi” (plural of “Elvis,” get it?) jump from 13,000 feet. Featured in a hit movie, these Las Vegas daredevils combine skydiving with Elvis nostalgia. They’re 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?” They “make terrific groomsmen as well as perfect Las Vegas-style witnesses.”

Internet sites tout Elvis fan clubs and even Elvis baby food. A Santa Cruz, CA, mall displays a plaque commemorating an Elvis sighting. Former NFL coach Jerry Glanville often left two tickets for Elvis at the will call window on game days.

“Elvis is Greek” announced a college fraternity newsletter. Three members of Tau Kappa Epsilon at Arkansas State University discovered in a safe deposit box Elvis’s signature on a membership scroll and photos from his honorary induction. “It’s amazing what computers can do with photos,” cracked one cynic.

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, Faulkner, and Feminine Spirituality”; “Elvis: The Twinless Twins’ Search for Spiritual Meaning (Elvis’s twin brother died at birth), and “Elvis ‘n’ Jesus.”

America. What a country!

Hound Dog?

What is all this about, really? My own informal, nonscientific survey yielded fascinating analyses from many levels of society.

“It’s a national joke,” claims a San Diego housepainter.

“I gave my wife an Elvis Valentine’s Day candy box,” admits a Miami interior designer. “Our cat is named Elvis Presley,” explains his wife. “He’s fat with a black coat, white collar, and eyes that glaze over—Elvis in his later years.” The husband quips, “The other day, we had an Elvis sighting—in a tree.” (Was a hound dog responsible?)

A Sacramento van driver attributes today’s craze to “all the lonely people who sit around and watch TV. “Besides,” the driver says, “Elvis’s 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. 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. Deep reverence and even worship characterize many pilgrims to Graceland. Some hold candlelight ceremonies, offer flowers, and display icons.

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

Are You Lonesome Tonight?

Elvis's August 16, 1977 death brought an unusual outpouring of grief—feelings of loneliness and despair. Those feelings, though perhaps not as intense now as when he died, are still very real in many people.

"I get so depressed," admits a Texas woman. "Anytime I've got anything bothering me, I can get in my car and turn on the stereo 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," claims 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 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} 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.

"I'm not a weirdo like that," you might say. "What's this craze got to do with me?"

Years of interacting with people on six continents have convinced me that nearly everyone is looking for happiness and fulfillment in life. Some seek it through fame, success, wealth, or career. Others look to relationships, friends, or family.

Pursuits from sports to sex can be driven by the need to fill a void. Probably everyone has at least one "Elvis" in his or her life, a person or idea or team or goal or possession or practice to which they are devoted and from which they seek happiness.

Many feel a spiritual emptiness, a need to personally connect with something that represents greatness, something that will replace inner loneliness with friendship, fear with love, and desperation with hope.

Loneliness is rampant today. Broken marriages, fragile relationships, and general incivility have raised emotional armor over hurting hearts. Newspaper personal ad sections swell with pleas for companionship. Lonely singles and lonely marrieds search cyberspace for someone to connect with. Humans need belonging and acceptance.

Once I was in a motel room convalescing from surgery. My best friend had just deserted me. Some coworkers had betrayed me. The inner pain felt like the worst argument I'd ever had, multiplied by a trillion—like I was being reamed out by an emotional Roto-Rooter. Loneliness ran deep.

Then a close friend called to ask how I was doing. What a lift! Everyone needs friendship to counter loneliness.

Love Me Tender

We also need love. Los Angeles psychiatrist William Glasser says everyone needs to love and be loved and to feel a sense of worth- both to themselves and to others. He says we each need to become involved with at least one other person who cares for us and for whom we care, someone who will accept us for what we are but tell us when we act irresponsibly. Without "this essential person," he writes, "we will not be able to fulfill our basic needs" {4} It's nice to be accepted based on our looks, personality, or performance, but these criteria can also bring fear and pressure. What if my looks change or I don't perform well? Will I still be loved?

To be loved unconditionally, to be accepted in spite of our faults, can bring peace and contentment and motivation to excel. "You are so special to me," says a spouse "I want to please you," feels the mate.

Human love is great but not perfect. People can disappoint us or give us wrong advice. Those you trust can show their selfish side, use you for their own ends, or discard you. Is there something better?

Besides friendship and love, we also need hope. A study showed that many of the 31,000 Allied soldiers imprisoned in Japan and Korea during the 1940s suffered from lack of hope. Although they were offered sufficient food, more than 8,000 died. Psychiatric researcher and editor Dr. Harold Wolff believed many of them died from despair. He wrote, "Hope, like faith and a purpose in life, is medicinal. This is not merely a statement of belief, but a conclusion proved by meticulously controlled scientific experiment." {5} Ultimately, however, searches for hope based purely on human endeavor lead to emptiness. For most of us, there will always be someone faster, richer, more intelligent or articulate, better looking or more popular than we are. Our favorite teams will lose. Our heroes will show their faults. Even if you reach the top, what then? According to the latest statistics, the death rate in this nation is still 100 percent.

Oddly enough, some clues to solving our struggles with loneliness and our quest for love and hope may lie in one of the songs Elvis recorded. Few may realize that Elvis's only Grammy Award for a single came for his 1967 recording of "How Great Thou Art," a famous hymn. The lyrics, which likely reflected his own spiritual roots, speak in "awesome wonder" of God's creation of the universe as a majestic display of His power.

The God this song alludes to is described elsewhere as a friend of those in need. If we let Him in our lives, He promises to be there in our successes and in our failures, when others praise us and when they desert us, when things are going well and when we're painfully lonely.

"How Great Thou Art" also tells how all this is possible. Because of God's great love for us, He sent His Son here 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 And not only can we rely on Him for our needs today, but the Bible promises a new heaven and earth in the future, free from death, sorrow, crying, and pain. {6} Jesus Himself promised, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" John 5:24).

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

Jesus Is Alive. Live with It!

Jesus said the final test of the truth of His claims would be His resurrection. Historical records indicate that he was executed on a cross and declared dead. His body was wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A huge stone sealed the tomb's entrance where an elite Roman guard kept watch.

On the third day the stone had been rolled away and the body was missing but the grave clothes remained in place. Hundreds of people witnessed him walking around alive again. Cowards became heroes as ten of His previously frightened disciples were martyred for their faith.

Some years ago, as a skeptic myself, I discovered that His resurrection is actually one of the best-attested facts of history. {7} It's all true!

If you're longing to link with someone great, He's the greatest. Since Jesus is alive, you, too, can know Him as a friend.

Elvis Presley is dead. Chances are, you might have hints that some of the "Elvises" in your life really have little or nothing lasting to offer. But Jesus is alive. Care to meet Him?

Notes

1. Gregory Rumberg "I Know Your Elvis," *Contemporary Christian Music*, February 1997, p. 31.
2. Ralph Burns, "How Great Thou Art: Photographs from Graceland," California Museum of Photography, University of California Riverside Website.
3. Ibid.
4. William Glasser, M.D., *Reality Therapy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 7.
5. "A Scientific Report on What Hope Does for Man" (New York State Heart Assembly, n.d.), quoted in S. I. McMillen, M.D., *None of These Diseases*, Old Tappan (NJ): Fleming H Revell, 1968, p. 110.
6. Revelation 21: 1,4.
7. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, San Bernardino (CA): Campus Crusade for Christ. 1972.

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