

In Las Vegas, Elvis has never left the building

Elvis impersonator Trent Carlini.

Photo Courtesy Phelston



Matt Lewis has been the Elvis impersonator in Imperial Palace's "Legend in Concert" for the past six years.

Photo Courtesy Matt Lewis

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There are many things that symbolize Las Vegas, from neon lights to showgirls, but possibly none of them do it better than Elvis.

During his seven-year run at the International Hotel, later renamed the Las Vegas Hilton, trips to Vegas became synonymous with seeing Elvis. His legendary status as an entertainer infiltrated every inch of the city, creating a momentum that has continued to grow. Today it is almost impossible to visit Las Vegas without spotting an Elvis impersonator, running into a pair of novelty gold-rimmed glasses at a souvenir shop or hearing "Viva Las Vegas."

"I remember seeing the show a couple of times in the early '70s," said Philip Griffith, former CEO of Fitzgerald's. "It was the big show in town where you almost had to know someone in order to get tickets."

Fitzgerald's employed an Elvis impersonator during the 1990s around the same time that Elvis slot machines were introduced at the casino.

"Everybody had an Elvis. We put him in for entertainment on the floor or sometimes he would drop in to take pictures during a slot tournament," said Griffith. "The fact that Elvis continues to headline today shows what a tremendous name he was in Vegas."

Elvis impersonators have made their mark as part of Sin City's signature offerings. They can be found anywhere from lounge acts to tribute shows and wedding chapels.

"It's not Las Vegas if we don't see an Elvis," said Barbara Lezon, a tourist visiting the Big Elvis Show at Bill's Gamblin' Hall.

Some shows are all Elvis while others incorporate Elvis as an act among tributes to several other iconic entertainers. One of these shows is "Legends in Concert" at Imperial Palace.

"I'd challenge that of all the people that drive to Vegas, none of them come here without thinking of Elvis at some point during their stay," said Matt Lewis, the Elvis impersonator at Imperial Palace for the past six years. His is the last act in the show and he sings a variety of popular Elvis tunes accented with an elaborate set, back-up dancers, and several costume changes.

Lewis, who lived most of his life in Lee's Summit, a suburb of Kansas City, did his first impersonation when he was 12 and his father purchased a karaoke set that included Elvis songs. Later, his father dressed him up as Elvis and put him in a talent competition where he won second place. Afterwards, he started getting hired to do shows.

When he was 16, he started working as an impersonator at a theme park in Kansas City called "Stax of Wax" where he did six shows a day until he was 21. This rigorous performing schedule was good training on "keeping it fresh every day," according to Lewis. He also learned the importance of being self-sufficient as an entertainer.

"Whether it's Vegas or Broadway...it's just a bigger theme park - all the same rules apply," said Lewis, who explained that he does his own make up and helps maintain his wardrobe in his current show, which might be much less glamorous than what his audience might expect.

"I think that people think I show up in a limo," said Lewis of his Elvis persona, "...but I prefer to be just Matt."

Apart from just the karaoke kit, Lewis spent time watching a lot of live footage of the entertainer including "The '68 Special" as a way of learning more about being Elvis, including his personality traits and signature moves.

"Singing came naturally for me," said Lewis, who explained that the hardest Elvis characteristic for him to emulate is his speaking voice. Lewis is currently working on a new 20-minute set for the show that will incorporate the classics like "Shake, Rattle and Roll," along with some of the not so mainstream Elvis songs like, "Polk Salad Annie."

"If I can throw in something that only Elvis fans would know...it's a good way to try to

educate the crowd," said Lewis.

Ultimately, his success in the show is due to the fans.

"Elvis impersonators in Las Vegas are a phenomenon that doesn't die," said Lewis.

Trent Carlini, who portrays Elvis in "The Dream King" at the Sahara, credits part of this phenomenon to an ever-growing fan base for Elvis in Las Vegas.

"There is always a new generation that's falling in love with him," said Carlini, "and this in turn enables impersonators like myself to continue to pursue their passion to perform."

Elvis may have left the building but his legendary status is breathing life into tribute artists devoted to him.

"I thank Elvis for keeping me alive, he's immortal," said Carlini, who is one of the few remaining impersonators on the Strip that has an entire show devoted to the artist. His show at the Sahara, recently renamed "The Dream King," takes the audience on a journey through the different eras of Elvis and his music. He performs with a live band on stage and sings songs from Elvis' entire career.

These songs and the emotions that they inspire are also what make Elvis such a popular attraction, according to Carlini.

"People love to go see a show they know with songs that bring them back to their youth... there is a certain energy that people draw for

"I don't think they will ever do away with Elvis impersonators."

— Big Elvis Pete Vallee

themselves through the music," said Carlini.

His career as a musician and entertainer started in a band where he did Elvis songs as part of his set, but the crowd wanted more - it turned into an entire show where he did only Elvis songs.

"The Elvis portion took over the show," said Carlini.

After realizing his potential as an Elvis impersonator Carlini worked to develop all of Elvis' vocal styles from throughout his career. He also tried to understand what emotions the King was going through during his performances as a way of being able to better emulate him.

"I channel him a lot based on what I believe are his feelings at the time he was singing those songs," said Carlini.

Trying to capture the performance and mannerisms of such a legendary entertainer could be risky business with all of the potential criticism from Elvis fans, but Carlini said that he was so in love with what he did that it did not matter.

"Even if people did bust me, I did not care," said Carlini. His passion and dedication as an Elvis impersonator did not go unnoticed.

In 1988, Carlini was chosen to star in the Annual Birthday Tribute to the King at the Star Plaza Theater in Indiana where he performed with some of the King's original musicians and vocalists including The Jordanaires. He was awarded "Entertainer with the Most King-Like Charisma" in 1990 at the Global Records Star Search Contest in Texas. In 1992 he started performing as the King in "Legends in Concert" at the Imperial Palace, where he stayed for four years.

Carlini is also currently in the process of changing his show into what he explained would be the fruition of a dream he has had since first coming to Vegas from Chicago in 1990. The show's title "Dream King" spawns from Carlini's dream to one day have the best Elvis show in the world.

"I came to Las Vegas with blueprints for a show," said Carlini, "...and here I am years later and this is coming to life now."

Along with these blueprints, Elvis has also made a mark for Carlini as an important part of his life and as a guiding force in the direction of his career.

"Elvis is a man who held my hand in making music ... I am simply sharing a gift that I have received," he said.

Unlike Lewis and Carlini, who emulate every notable aspect of the performer with a flashy show and costume changes, Pete "Big Elvis" Vallee, an Elvis impersonator at Bill's Gamblin'

H a l l , does his own version of the King, conveying the warm Southern hospitality and genuine desire to make fans happy that was embraced by the real performer.

Vallee, known by some as "the Godfather of Elvis impersonators," according to his long time personal manager, Lucille Star, is a genuinely nice guy who really cares about what his audience thinks.

"Elvis was a good person and I love the music...we have a lot of similarities," said Vallee, who has no trouble emulating Elvis' voice or his commitment to his fans.

"Elvis is all about giving...it's easy to play when you have that same character."

His almost entirely audience-request-driven show encompasses a repertoire of more than 900 songs, spanning six decades of music that includes everything Elvis along with popular songs from other music genres. The simple and intimate stage setting for the Big Elvis Show enables Vallee to change his songs at a moment's notice, resulting in every show being a different and personalized experience.

Along with being concerned about his fans, Vallee is always on a quest to keep improving the show. He is currently in the process of adding a live segment to the show where he will sing accompanied by a guitar.

Vallee began his singing career in his local church choir where someone told him that he sounded just like Elvis. From there he learned to play the guitar and put together an act to compete in his school's talent contest when he was 13. The overwhelmingly positive response that he received, along with his natural ability to sound like the King, inspired his career.

Despite the potential criticism that could result from impersonating such an iconic entertainer, Vallee explained that the fans enjoy the fact that someone is keeping the music they love alive.

"The fans appreciate you keeping his memory alive," said Vallee, which becomes especially apparent "when you see someone who's touched by your performance."

Vallee enjoys singing but what he loves most is his interaction with the audience and part of this personal interaction is done through the use of a chair that he performs from during the show. Instead of keeping his distance from the audience on an elevated stage, he sits an arm's length away from audience members seated in the front.

"People really like that," said Star, "because he becomes a part of the audience where they can really relate to him." Some entertainers take from the audience where others are there to perform and give something back.

As far as Elvis impersonators are concerned, Vallee is convinced that they will always have a presence in Vegas.

"I don't think they will ever do away with Elvis impersonators," said Vallee.

It is more than just the impersonators and fans who are keeping Elvis alive and well in Sin City.

"People really came out of the woodwork," said Star when referring to a recent celebration they had for the King's birthday where they announced "A Star for Elvis" campaign for the Las Vegas Walk of Stars.

There is a huge network of people committed to keeping Elvis' memory alive, said Star.

Vegas became a home away from home for Elvis during his years of performing here and Vallee explained that part of this is because the performer had many characteristics that were very well-suited to the city's reputation as a place for indulgence, glitz and glamour.

"Elvis was into bling. Where else but Vegas?"



Photo Courtesy L04 Productions

Pete "Big Elvis" Vallee performs at Bill's Gamblin' Hall.