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Elvis and Those Who (Still) Love Him

David Wharton

University of Mississippi

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**PHOTOS AND TEXT BY DAVID WHARTON
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Every year, in the middle of August, people travel from throughout the world to gather in Memphis, Tennessee. The focus of their pilgrimage is the long-dead Elvis Presley. The occasion is the anniversary of his death, which occurred on August 16, 1977. In the days leading up to the annual “Death Day,” venues all over Memphis host Elvis-themed events, visitors pack the city’s hotels, restaurants, and bars, and the gathered faithful renew friendships begun during previous Elvis Weeks, some of them decades in the past. The week culminates on the 16th in front of Graceland (Elvis’s Memphis home) at 3764 Elvis Presley Boulevard. At dusk, a candlelight procession ends at the Meditation Garden on the Graceland grounds, where Elvis, his parents, and paternal grandmother are buried.

I attended my first Death Day in 2002. I’ve been back seven times since. I go to photograph. I enjoy making pictures of people interacting with one another at public social events, especially if those events have regional or local significance. Elvis was certainly a son of the South—the working-class white South—who from his Memphis home conjured a unique blend of that culture’s musical heritage with that of the working-class black South to form a powerfully joyous (and sometimes heart-breaking) music that has been recognized ever since as one of America’s major contributions to world culture.

I have never been a big Elvis fan. I was too young in the mid-1950s to take much notice when he took America, and especially America’s teens, by hip-wiggling, pelvis-thrusting storm. (I am old enough, however, to remember a college-aged camp counselor at a North Carolina YMCA camp losing his job for letting us campers listen to Elvis’s “Don’t Be Cruel” on the radio.) As an adult, especially one with a professional interest in the culture of the South, I have come to like and respect his early music—primarily those songs recorded at Sun Studio before Sam Phillips sold Elvis’s contract to RCA—and I certainly appreciate how important Elvis was to a generation of

Americans struggling to escape their parents' past. Still, I don't claim to be much a fan.

I am especially not much of a fan when compared to those who are. But I am a fan of those who participate in over-the-top, truly zealous Elvis fandom—those who dress like him, groom themselves as he did, tattoo themselves with his likeness, declare their love for him at every opportunity, and come to Memphis every August. They possess a level of enthusiasm regarding Elvis that approaches religious fanaticism, although it seems a goofy, harmless brand of fervor that leaves people smiling rather than anxious about the state of their souls. Such zeal is something I don't quite understand, which makes the whole phenomenon all the more fascinating to me.

There have been changes over the thirteen years I've been attending Death Day. Generally speaking, the crowds in recent years seem a bit smaller than the first several times I went in the early 2000s. They also seem to be getting younger. In some ways that makes sense, but in other ways it doesn't, at least to me. People who were the young Elvis's most enthusiastic fans during his mid-1950s breakout years would have been born around 1940, making them close to sixty in 2000. Now, in 2015, those same people would be in their midseventies. Logically, one might expect some of them to have passed away, others to have been slowed by poor health, and still others increasingly less likely to travel far from the comforts of home. So it makes sense to me that the numbers of Elvis's original fans attending Elvis Week have dwindled as time goes on.

What makes less sense is the significant number of younger fans, many of whom were not yet born when Elvis died in 1977. I suppose they get some of their enthusiasm from parents or grandparents. For some of these fans, the annual trip to Memphis is probably a family tradition, something they've been doing since before they can remember. Others seem to enjoy the performative aspects of Elvis Week—acting out, dressing up, leaving their day-to-day selves behind for a little while. For a few of the better-looking young men, Elvis-themed hair, sideburns, and wardrobe no doubt impress some of the women in attendance—a few of them young as well, but many of them quite a bit older. There are always a number of children in Elvis costumes at Death Day. They seem to see the event as a Halloween of sorts, the younger ones reflecting their parents' enthusiasm for Elvis (and the parents' enthusiasm for their child's cuteness). Those past toddler age treat the day as an adventure, and those approaching adolescence put their own sometimes-sly stamp on their Elvis-ness.

In short, it's a fascinating event, even if it doesn't quite make sense (or perhaps because it doesn't quite make sense). Despite occasional claims to the contrary, Elvis won't be coming back. Neither will the narrow little southern world he was born into, nor the same national, even international, culture he helped give birth to. Those times have passed, and they won't be returning. Those who were sixteen years old in 1956 are fading away and will be gone soon as well. Their memories of the electrifying presence that was Elvis Presley will die with them. Their children's memories of Elvis, no matter how much Mom and Dad tried to pass them on, will be tame in comparison. They will remember crowds of people, many of them dressed strangely, sweating profusely on the city's hot asphalt and breathing the thick humid air of a Deep South August; costumed performers singing songs that were popular decades earlier, made so by a

man long dead; young men dressed up as that man when he was young; that man's likeness visible everywhere, in store windows, on items of clothing, tattooed on people's bodies. Yet the reason for all of this—Elvis Presley himself—is not present, except in memory. And that memory is fading, seeming a little more fragmentary and diminished, every year. One has to wonder how much time Elvis Week has left.

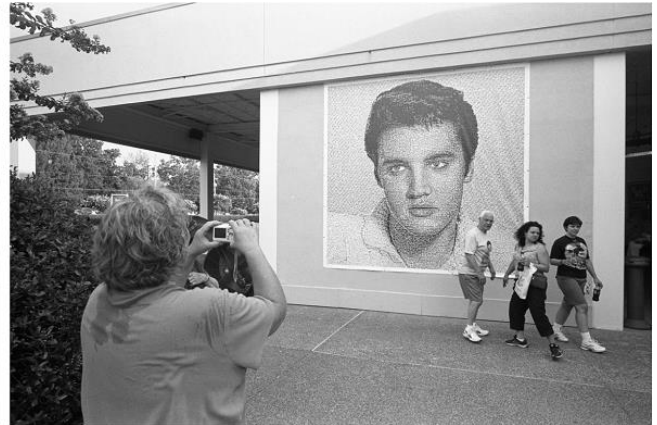


ELVIS, UBIQUITOUS

One sometimes hears it said that Elvis is everywhere. The phrase is usually meant in reference to his enormous cultural influence, stretching back in time and across geographic space—a level of impact that very few popular culture figures have ever approximated. Obviously, Elvis is not everywhere and never was, at least in any literal sense. Nonetheless, he can seem to be everywhere in and around Graceland during Elvis Week every year. His image is ubiquitous—on walls, on articles of clothing, in store windows, on any number of fashion accessories, on people's bodies. One cannot avoid seeing Elvis. He really does seem to be everywhere. But it's almost always the young, handsome Elvis of the mid-1950s, that brilliant, flash-in-the-pan Elvis who electrified America's youth for a few years. One rarely encounters images of the older, heavier, jump-suited Elvis who spent the latter part of his career performing for aging, past-oriented fans from a series of hotel stages in Las Vegas.

Such brief and bright rebellion, so quickly harnessed, then quashed . . .





ELVIS, ALIVE AND YOUNG

Oddly, a significant portion—possibly more than half—of those visiting Memphis during Elvis Week were not yet born at the time of Elvis’s death in 1977. In fact, one sees a lot of people at Death Day whose *parents* had probably not yet been born, or, if not literally that, were surely too young to have any in-the-flesh memory of Elvis. Some of the older males among this third-generation cohort, those who are now teens or in their early twenties, are not shy about trading on their youthful good looks. They dress as the young Elvis, comb their darkened hair just so, and imitate his impeccable mama’s-boy manner to charm some of the ladies in the crowd, many of them old enough to be their mothers. Those who are still small children, though, seem to favor the Las Vegas-era Elvis. They sport white sequined jumpsuits, wear flowing capes, and have penciled-in mutton-chop sideburns on their faces. Surely, their

mothers must have dressed them this way. Some of those moms probably made the costumes and did the child's make up. For this group, Death Day must seem more like Halloween than anything else, an August dress rehearsal for October's tricking and treating.



THOSE WHO ADORE HIM

In addition to their sometimes-extreme age differences, Elvis fans come in a dizzying array of identities, some temporarily donned for the occasion, others perhaps more permanent. In either case, they certainly seem fascinated with one another. Cameras of all types, from decades-old Instamatics to the latest in digital imaging technology, make constant clicking noises, preserving a virtual parade of attire and finery, a catalog of what just about everyone present looks like, for future fans to see.

But Death Day is not just about appearances. Some fans, despite whatever costume they've chosen for the day, seem to exhibit a fundamental sense of solemnity, a hint of the mournful in their manner. Maybe Elvis was a real presence for them, a force that helped them free themselves from a past they no longer wished to inhabit. They may believe that Elvis somehow sacrificed himself for them, and they might wonder who he could have been now had their generation not required that sacrifice. They may even feel a sense of responsibility for Elvis's untimely and degrading end.



ELVIS, FASHION ACCESSORY

Some fans go to extremes in their choice of costume, while others are more understated. Sequined jackets and skin-tight black jeans seem no more (or less) appropriate than cargo shorts and T-shirts. Pointy-toe boots mix with running shoes and Birkenstocks. More men wear their hair longish and swept-back, dyed dark, than usual. Sunglasses are *de rigueur* for some. Even if a person has no “Elvis-ness” to his or her costume, what one looks like matters. Like so much else in post-modernity, the Elvis of today may be reduced to little more than a fashion accessory. One can self-identify as easily as changing clothes—displaying images of Elvis on one outfit, the mascot of a favorite football team on another, a candidate for political office on yet another. (Fans definitely get extra devotion points for tattoos, the more elaborate and difficult to cover up the better, but the possibilities for clothing are endless.) All of which leads to the question of just how devoted many of those in attendance at Death Day are. Does their fandom go any deeper than what they wear? Is their seeming passion for Elvis anything more than a display for others of like mind? Are the Elvis-themed shirts worn anywhere else, at any other time of year? Do people put them on for trips to the grocery store or gas station? Or do the clothes make an appearance just once a year, either as a form of “coming out of the closet” to show one’s true self, or merely as a fashion statement not worth making except at Graceland on August 16? What effect does the conscious, premeditated display of devotion have on the passion that led to emotional commitment—devotion—in the first place?

Obviously, Elvis Week and Death Day are temporary phenomena. They have been Memphis institutions for almost forty years now but seem unlikely to continue for another forty. Given the ages of original Elvis fans and relative disconnect of subsequent generations of fans—who never experienced Elvis Presley in the flesh—it’s difficult to imagine a continuation of the passion necessary to sustain the tradition much longer. Indeed, parts of this essay are about the signs of such attenuation over the last decade or so. In a cultural climate based on the superficial, one has to wonder how much deeper the annual Death Day observances go than mere tradition and habit. Can such events be mined for anything worth knowing about the world we live in today? Was there more to be learned from Death Day ten years ago? Twenty years ago? Thirty? Those might be the most interesting questions of all to ask about what happens in Memphis on August 16. I don’t know the answers to any of them, but I value my interactions with those events for making me think about them.





David Wharton is director of documentary studies and an assistant professor of southern studies at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. His photographs have been exhibited throughout the United States, Latin America, and Europe. His first book, *The Soul of a Small Texas Town: Photographs, Memories, and History from McDade*, was published in 2000 by the University of Oklahoma Press, and his second book, *Small Town South*, was published in 2012 by George F. Thompson Publishing. He regularly teaches classes on documentary photography and oral history fieldwork, among others. His third book, *The Power of Belief: Spiritual Landscapes from the Rural South*, will be published in 2016.



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