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# Only Fools Rush In

## A Defense of Elvis, Hookers, Vegas and Research

BY CATHERINE ELCIK

**B**EFORE I LAUNCH into a defense of the years (yes, years) I spent researching Elvis, impersonators and prostitution in Vegas, I should come clean about a few things:

**1) The book**—I'm writing a novel about three unlikely Elvis impersonators—an aging southern Baptist, a Chinese American musical prodigy and a Las Vegas teenager with a seriously confused sexual history. The working title is *Misfit Kings*.

**2) My (lack of) qualifications**—I'm not, and likely never will be, a shaking pelvis kind of gal—though the raw energy of most Elvis songs has always made me smile, I started this project with little working knowledge about Elvis or impersonating.

**3) The madness**—I started my research four years before I seriously started writing a first draft.

**4) Balls-out honesty**—I haven't finished a first draft.



Elvis legend Matt Lewis with intrepid researcher Cathy Elcik

### I CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU

It started innocently. Summer 2002, 25 years after his death, Elvis had a hit song on the radio—a remix of “A Little Less Conversation.” It was catchy as hell and everyone I knew could sing at least a snatch of it, but what really fascinated me was the phenomenon of a dead singer taking the airwaves by storm. I bought the album, but I didn't start to listen obsessively until a female voice whispered into the part of my brain where writing connections get made: *My father's having a mid-life crisis and it's all Elvis' fault.*

I had a clear picture of this woman's father—an aging southern Baptist staging a belated teen rebellion with the help of a little rhinestone-studded white polyester. The idea amused me: tackling the theme of identity through Elvis. As merely a casual Elvis fan, however, I didn't know enough about Elvis to

fake a character obsessed. Time for research. I read, I listened, I talked about Elvis. At some point I started bidding for Elvis records on eBay. By Christmas, my southern Baptist Elvis had been joined by a Chinese-American from Florida and a gay teen from Las Vegas.

I wouldn't admit my story had graduated to a novel, but I was reading Peter Guralnick's two-volume Elvis biography and Rick Marino's *Be Elvis! A Guide to Impersonating the King!* Who knew you could touch up black hair dye with a little mascara?

### ALL SHOOK UP

Because I learned that Matt Lewis was the Elvis in Vegas Legends, I dragged my sister to his tribute show at Canobie Lake Park.

The woman in the seat next to mine told me about watching the funeral on television and sinking to the floor with her



daughter in her arms. I watched Matt's show to learn how a professional does it, and then sought out a show closer to Boston to see how an amateur does it (so off-key "Can't Help Falling In Love With You" sounds punk). As I laughed about the spotlight operator who seemed to be getting paid to avoid Elvis, my boyfriend reminded me I wasn't *actually* writing a novel yet and expressed concerns about what he called "the method writing" approach to research.

"I mean, An Elvis obsession is one thing, but what happens when you want to write about an addict?" he asked. "Are you gonna smoke crack?"

Now, sure, I can see how my research might have looked like creative procrastination, but that's like saying a gardener's not doing anything until he can pick tomatoes. By the time I stopped being scared to admit I was writing about Elvis impersonators, I was shocked to find that my characters had sprouted three dimensions and rooted rich back stories. My research might have looked like procrastination, but I'd been filtering information based on three characters and making a hundred choices about what information was relevant and what wasn't.

## VIVA LAS VEGAS!

Once I understood that research acted like Miracle-Gro for the seeds of my ideas, I threw myself into the process. I may not use the image of the 50-something woman who jumped up behind a black leather Elvis to take a shot of his shiny ass, but I'll be thinking of her pushiness as I invent the racist fans who dog my Asian Elvis. And my tour of tiny southern towns gave me confidence to imagine the fictional town where Barry grew up.

But although I knew that Rick was a sexually confused teen from Las Vegas whose mother hooked to survive, Rick's character never really sprouted the way Kevin and Barry's had. While it was easy to trawl Elvis haunts with Barry's frame of reference in mind and pump Elvis impersonators for business ideas to make Kevin a successful tribute artist, I didn't exactly want to turn a few tricks just to take notes. I told a friend who teaches at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas about Rick and his mom and asked her where they would live. She didn't hesitate.

"Pahrump," she said. "It's legal there."

Googling like a sex-crazed frat boy, I gave myself a crash course in brothel etiquette and convinced myself that Rick's mother worked at a slightly less famous version of the "Chicken Ranch." But Rick and his mother didn't just end up in Pahrump—they had to have started in Vegas.

The Elvis-a-Rama museum off the strip was closing in a few months and I had an old college friend from Los Angeles who might be willing to meet me for an Elvis weekend. I'd arrive

early and stay late, rent a car to cruise Vegas, interview a cop, and boldly drive out to Pahrump and convince a madam to let me interview a few of her girls. I was even prepared to pay for the time to do the interview.

My first day in Vegas, I got cold feet and convinced myself the brothel could wait a bit. I gathered my maps and accosted a bellhop for a quick tutorial about the neighborhoods in Vegas—specifically where a down-on-her-luck single mom would crash. He pointed out an area north of what he called Five Points and told me to keep my doors locked. I was off.

## I FORGOT TO REMEMBER TO FORGET HER

My aura more librarian than woman-of-the-night, driving a rented car, tape recorder and digital camera at the ready, I took verbal notes and wove a drunken path through the impoverished neighborhoods of North Las Vegas, where the playground equipment is plastic, the houses are all one story, and where people seem to compete for the gaudiest fence. But then I saw an elderly black woman guiding an ancient black woman up the walk in 120-plus degree heat. I don't pretend

to know what the relationship was between those two women, but what I saw was a woman helping her mother with the kind of tolerant annoyance on her face usually reserved for your closest family members.

I started to see this neighborhood of rusting wrought iron through Rick's eyes—his mother's eyes. Darla might turn tricks when she was a little short on rent, but it was something that haunted her—there was no way she'd join a brothel.

I headed toward the mountains in the east, making notes about what I saw: names of stores, the ubiquity of desert churches with water in their names (Living Water Baptist Church), how the haze cloaking the brown and yellow mountains made it seem possible they weren't there at all. Maybe that was the real tragedy of a town built on neon. Anything other than a glowing sign could only pale in comparison. It was great material, but I hadn't come nearly three thousand miles just to add to my pile of information; I wanted my character to sprout.

The road I was on routed me through a trailer park close to the base of the mountains, then dumped me onto East Lake Meade Boulevard. There didn't seem to be any real city planning—a trailer park, a Walgreen's and luxury condos could all be different corners at the same intersection. Before me the mountains, deep red now, stood clear and present, but in the rearview, the thumb-size silhouette of the Stratosphere (the casino on the Las Vegas strip shaped something like the Seattle space needle) was nestled in a thick haze. On my recording for that moment, the air conditioning is humming as Elvis sings an old Sun tune called, *I Forgot to Remember to Forget Her*; I say "wow" then start vamping dialogue for Ricky's mother: "Look at that, Ricky. Everything's behind us. Nothing's big when it's behind us."

This leads to a riff—strictly notes—from Rick's point of view. Rick knows his mother drives out here when she's done something she isn't proud of, and while he's excited about being able to swap horizons in less than thirty minutes, it also means that even when you reach out to bring a mirage close, whatever you're running from is just a half-hour away.

I could have talked to a hundred Vegas residents and consulted a thousand travel books without learning there was a sweet spot along East Lake Meade Boulevard where the rearview mirror shows the strip in the distance framed by ruddy mountains. This is the image I'll build Rick's childhood around, an image that graduated Rick from an outline of a character to a real person. ☺

## trying to get to you

If I was going to bring three Elvis impersonators to life in a non-satirical novel, I had a lot of research to do to gather the kind of specific details that would help readers transcend the idea that Elvis impersonating is more humorous punch line than challenging profession. Here's a highlight reel:

- **Tour Graceland**—Walked through the mansion at a snail's pace in an effort to memorize the details my characters would have noticed.
- **Tour "Graceland Too"**—Twenty-four hours a day (he means it—knock anytime), Paul MacLeod gives tours of his collection of Elvis memorabilia that takes up every inch (floor, walls, and ceiling) of the first floor of his modest house in Holly Springs, Missouri.
- **Study Kings**—I've been to more Elvis tribute shows than I can count. In Memphis, I spent time in a grungy bar fascinated by an Elvis who was painfully shy when he addressed the crowd, only to command a facsimile of Elvis' raw power when he sang.
- **Take Backstage Dance Lessons**—At a tribute concert at Foxwoods I hung out back stage taking notes about lights and stage management. Shawn Klush tried to teach me to dance like the King: imagine your legs were two drums set to separate but syncopated beats—one leg quarter notes, the other eights.
- **Shadow Elvis**—Vegas Legend Matt Lewis let me shadow him for nine hours; I soaked up information about protecting costumes from stage make-up, negotiating techniques and all the business annoyances that drain an Elvis when he isn't on stage. Fun facts: washing the intricate suits involves Woolite and a bath tub; and most Elvis' get some cosmetic surgery.
- **Capture Unguarded Moments**—Had dinner with Bozo the clown and Elvis—Bozo is an excellent cook. Stayed very, very quiet as Bozo and Elvis commiserated about how the performer's life slices up their personal lives.
- **Exploring the Vegas Underbelly**—A brothel, an ex-sex workers hotline and Tim Bedwell, a public information officer in North Las Vegas, who talked about everything I needed to know: how my characters would tango with the law, where I'd go to buy papers if I was on the run and needed a new identity, and the truck stop I'd hit on a bad night if I needed to turn a trick fast.