



FIT FOR A KING

COMMEMORATING THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF ELVIS'S DEATH

By Jill Gleeson | Photography courtesy of Graceland

In the four decades since Elvis Presley died, John Lennon was shot to death. The Berlin Wall came down. Viagra was launched. New York's Twin Towers tumbled. The Internet took over. We elected our first black president. We elected Donald Trump. The world has changed in a trillion ways, both small and significant since 1977.

ETA (Elvis TRIBUTE Artists) on Memphis' Pyramid



Candlelight Vigil 2015



But one thing has remained the same: Elvis Presley is one of the planet's most beloved entertainers. According to Forbes, The King sold more than one million albums last year, and Graceland remains the second-most visited home in the United States, behind the White House.

The mansion where Elvis hung his hat still hosts 600,000 visitors a year, 20 percent of them from outside the U.S. Fans hail from countries including Germany, Australia, the Netherlands, Brazil and Canada. It's a safe bet at least a few citizens from those nations will be making a pilgrimage to this year's Elvis Week in Memphis, which will commemorate the 40th anniversary of his death in a revitalized neighborhood that bears little resemblance to the one Elvis knew.

Thanks to a \$137 million overhaul, the Graceland campus now offers two new showstopping additions. The Guest House at Graceland, a 450-room luxury resort debuted last October.

"That property was designed by asking questions like 'What would Elvis had done in 2016' and 'what is the Elvis aesthetic'," said Gary Hahn, Vice President of Marketing for Elvis Presley Enterprises.

The answer is a stunningly sleek, masculine retreat that pays tribute to The King in subtle ways, like the lobby's mirrored ceiling that is meant to recall Elvis' beloved capes, and the "Burning Love" outdoor fire pit shaped like a heart. The hotel also boasts a bar, two restaurants, an outdoor pool and a theater.

And then there's Elvis Presley's Memphis, which opened its doors in March. According to Hahn, the 200,000-square-foot entertainment complex is "five times as large as the original plaza across from the mansion that it replaced. Now we're able to showcase the Graceland archives and tell his story in the way that we've always wanted."

To that end, there's now a new car museum, Elvis Presley Motors, that's double the size of the original. Smaller exhibits explore artists The King influenced, as well as his army career and the larger story of Memphis music. Elvis the Entertainer is what Hahn calls the complex's centerpiece.

"It's our museum that takes you through Elvis's entire career, using artifacts, gold records and his wardrobe," said Hahn. "The other big anchor is the Graceland Soundstage, a 20,000-square-foot facility



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where we can host live events. That's where the majority of Elvis Week activities will take place."

Those events, which run August 11-19, include the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest, Conversations on Elvis panels, Elvis 101 and more. The Candlelight Vigil, as always, will take place at the mansion on August 15, the night before the anniversary of his death. Hahn expects some as many as 50,000 people at the Vigil, which can last until daybreak. The following night, Elvis: Live in Concert, an extravaganza featuring The King on the big screen, a visit from Priscilla and a full orchestra, will take over FedExForum in downtown Memphis.

Tupelo's Celebrations

Meanwhile, the Elvis Presley Birthplace in Tupelo will be marking the 40th anniversary of Elvis' death in its own way. Friday, August 11, four Elvis Tribute Artists will perform in the theater, followed by Fan Appreciation Day on August 12. Tickets will be reduced from \$17 to \$10, all the attractions will be open, and there will be food vendors on the property.

"People can come, be a part of the program, have lunch and then spend the day with us," said Dick Guyton, executive director of the Elvis Presley Birthplace. "Elvis gave back all the the time – we feel this is a way we can share that and give back to the community and the fans."

Of course it's not only The King's famously generous and humble nature, along with his unparalleled charisma, that so endear him to fans.

"My philosophy is that there are two kinds of people in the world," said Cote Deonath, who won the 2017 Ultimate

Elvis Tribute Artist preliminary contest in Tupelo. "There are Elvis fans, and there are people that don't know they're Elvis fans yet. His music speaks to you – it's true music. There's an Elvis song, I'm convinced, for everybody in this world. I believe that 10 years from now it'll be the 50th anniversary of his death and we'll still be here, celebrating his life."

Paying Tribute to a Legend

Make no mistake, the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest is a very big deal. This year, 20 winners from official preliminary rounds held around the world will converge in Memphis during Elvis Week. They will compete in the semifinals on Thursday, August 17, with 10 competitors advancing to the final round, which will be held on Saturday. The first place winner, among other goodies, will receive \$20,000. In 2017, for the first time ever, all the champs from previous years will play one special night together, Friday, August 18.

"These guys are incredibly talented performers," said Hahn., "I defy anyone to go to a semifinal or final and not be impressed with the level of artistry. And, of course, there's a live eight-to-10-piece band that backs them up and they're wearing recreations of Elvis' wardrobe."

All the eras of Elvis are represented, according to Hahn.

"Somebody will sing 'Suspicious Minds' from the '70s in Vegas, and then someone else will come out who will be more of a '50s Elvis. It's a lot of fun."

Elvis Presley Enterprises kicked off the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest in 2007 as a way to support and sanction the tribute shows and competitions that had been going on for



decades following The King's death. That first contest, featuring 24 competitors, was an enormous success, paving the way for it to return every August during Elvis Week. While previous contests were mostly held at The Orpheum Theater in downtown Memphis, 2017's event will take place in the new Graceland Soundstage.

Among the countries to send contenders to the finals are Malta, Japan, Brazil, Scotland, Canada, Germany and Australia. Tupelo is a fierce competitor, supporting its winners with a "boot camp" to help them prepare. This year Cote Deonath of Dunnellon, Florida, is representing Tupelo in Memphis. A full-time Elvis tribute artist, Deonath, now 20, first stepped on stage at age five to perform as his hero and is a returnee to the competition. Last year, he won a preliminary event in Tampa.

"Going back now is kind of a dream," Deonath said, "because I thought, 'Man, I went to the Ultimate! That was cool, that'll never happen again.' And now I'm going back! It's surreal. I'm not going to lie – it's a great feeling. I'm very proud to represent Tupelo."

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