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NEWS



Tribute artists pay thousands of dollars for costumes and jewelry to get the right look. Photo by Dan Toulgoet.

The men who would be king

By Michael Kissinger-staff writer

Just over a year ago, Jackson Vanderveen found a huge cyst on the the side of his neck. His doctor told him he needed surgery that might leave him unable to talk again.

Sitting in the dining room of his Abbotsford home, the 46-year-old auctioneer pauses a moment in telling the story, his voice shaky. The swish of traffic from the nearby Trans Canada Highway fills the silence. "Sorry, I get a little emotional about this." He takes a sip of coffee and continues. "I say to the doctor, 'You're really scaring me-I make a living off my voice.' And he said, 'You better start making other plans.'"

When Vanderveen returned home, he walked downstairs, locked himself in his rec room and turned to the man who'd been there for him through an abusive childhood and two divorces_ Elvis.

Vanderveen had played in several country-rock cover bands in the '80s and done a brief stint as a karaoke host, but had always been reluctant to sing the songs of his childhood idol. That day, something kept pushing him on, however. He remembers looking up at a tiny mark on his rec room wall and murmuring, "Get me through this and I'll make you proud." He started recording himself singing Elvis songs.

After the surgery, his voice was stronger than ever. The next thing he knew, he was flying to Calgary to buy an Elvis jumpsuit. "This might sound a little hokey," says Vanderveen of his new vocation as an Elvis Presley tribute artist (like most modern-day Elvises, he doesn't like the term "impersonator"). "But it's almost like I'm being led through this whole thing. I have a good, solid career. I'm not looking to make any money out of this. I guess it's just my way of saying



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thanks."

To date, Vanderveen has invested some \$40,000 in lighting, stage equipment, music tracks, embossed business cards, satin scarves, custom-made jewelry and an array of extensively researched costumes tailor-made to look like those worn by Elvis, from his '68 comeback black leather get-up to his signature sequined jumpsuits from the '70s.

Last summer, Vanderveen made his debut at Penticton's Pacific Northwest Elvis Festival, taking first place in the amateur division. Since donning his white "Aloha from Hawaii" jumpsuit, he's performed at weddings, sold-out shows at the local legion and a handful of fundraising events. Now he has his steely gaze set on Elvis Mania.

The three-day music festival set for Aug. 2 to 4 is the first of its kind for Cloverdale—a city that's retained so much small town charm it's used as a backdrop for the television series *Smallville*.

Modeled after similar events in Memphis and Collingwood, Ont., Elvis Mania offers a buffet of attractions in honour of the King of Rock and Roll, who died 26 years ago Aug. 16—a parade, amusement park rides, a '50s fashion show and a Sunday Gospel show hosted by well known tribute artist Randy "Elvis" Friskie. It also features performances by some of Elvis's peers—including Mitch Ryder, Ronnie McDowell and Elvis's first guitarist Scotty Moore—and appearances by several "friends of Elvis," including tour manager Joe Esposito, drummer DJ Fontana and, of course, local luminary Red Robinson, who has the distinction of having been the M.C. for Elvis's Vancouver concert at Empire Stadium in 1957.

But the event that's sure to attract the most rabid fans and curious onlookers, not to mention men with large sideburns and a propensity for karate-inspired dance moves, is the King of the Northwest Competition. It's an intensive, three-day, deep-fried peanut-butter-and-banana-sandwich-scented showdown of more than two dozen Elvis impersonators from across Canada and the Pacific Northwest vying for \$5,000 in prizes and their own little hunka hunka burning love.

While others might come for the money or the recognition, Vanderveen says he's only entering the Cloverdale competition to honour Elvis, whose music not only provides solace but a reminder of a more wholesome time.

"He put so much emotion into his songs and you don't hear that in music anymore," says Vanderveen. "I can't stand rap music. I wish they'd do away with it and all its vulgarities altogether. Country's not country anymore. I gave up on it when Merle Haggard packed it in. To me now, Elvis is the only music left."

Growing up in Regina and then Langley, Vanderveen says he was an Elvis fan as far back as he can remember, collecting all Elvis's records—until his older sister sold them for a pack of cigarettes. "That was a wound I carried around with me for a very long time," he says. "Every time when I had a chance to see Elvis on TV, whether it was a movie or one of his concerts, I used to just stare at him and say, 'Some day I'm going to be just like you and get away from all this.'

Elvis was my release."

Like most men who sing Elvis songs while trying to look and dress the part, Vanderveen is quick to point out he's a tribute artist rather than an impersonator. "An impersonator is somebody trying to do absolutely everything Elvis did. And there's only one person who would have ever been able to do that, and that's Elvis himself as far as I'm concerned_ I'm not out there trying to be Elvis. I'm just trying to be myself, paying tribute to him."

As for other tribute artists, Vanderveen says those that he's encountered in his polyester-clad travels have been more than encouraging. "You'd think that in a competition everybody would be staying in their own little corner and keeping their own little secrets. But it's not like that at all. These guys are coming back stage saying, 'Hey, let me you show this move_ try this, that should work for you.' The camaraderie is fantastic."

With a two-hour set composed of Elvis songs from the '60s and '70s, Vanderveen says his voice is what sets him apart from the average tribute artist. When learning a song, he doesn't memorize lyrics, but breaks the words into syllables to ensure he gets the precise enunciation and phrasing. According to his jumpsuit maker, he also shares the same dimensions as Elvis: six feet tall with a 44-inch chest.

However, with a receding hairline and two herniated discs in his back limiting his stage moves, Vanderveen, who's already four years older than Elvis was when he died, admits he's playing a young man's game. Still, he can't help but feel he was meant to follow in the King's footsteps. "When I got out of surgery with my voice intact, something the doctors didn't think would happen, I honestly think I was given a second chance_ I'm

not an overly religious person, but there's somebody up there watching out for me."

As a kid growing up in Niagara Falls, N.Y. and singing in a country rock band with his yodeling father, Randy "Elvis" Friskie says he always knew he would be a performer, though it wasn't until he was a teenager that he finally answered the call of Elvis.

"I was a long-haired rock 'n' roller who thought he was too cool for school, and I went to this big outdoor festival and saw this guy who was supposed to be the Elvis guy," recalls Friskie, one of the feature performers at Elvis Mania. He had a pretty good look and he sounded all right, but he had the biggest ego and that got me really mad, because Elvis wasn't like that. He was always very down to earth and personable. So there's this guy walking around like he's something special and I-I don't want to say what I was thinking-but my buddies were like, 'Randy, get up there and sing a few songs.' So I did."

By that time, Friskie was already singing Elvis songs on reel-to-reel tapes and in cover bands and listening to Elvis records whenever he could. "I used to fall asleep with the headphones on. That's why my terminology, my phrasing and stuff, is so good. It's just really natural for me."

To Friskie, Elvis represented the consummate entertainer-passionate,

polite, down-to-earth and fun for the whole family. "In concert, Elvis would take you for a ride. He'd make you happy, but he'd also make you sad. But it always came from the heart and there was this sense of goodwill. And there was a wholesomeness to it. He'd also have fun with it. And that's what's missing in a lot of music."

By the early '80s, Friskie joined a traveling production of Elvis! Elvis! Elvis! and toured the continent as well as doing a stint playing for tourists in Guam. A successful run of shows at Expo 86 led to regular gigs in Las Vegas and Reno. Now based out of Abbotsford, Friskie, who describes his age as "pushing 40," estimates he's on the road performing his Elvis tribute all but two weeks of the year.

"I've been doing Elvis for longer than Elvis had been doing Elvis," he laughs. "But it's all about heart and soul. When you're performing, it's got to come from the heart. I consider each song a story. So if I'm doing a song like 'In the Ghetto,' which is a pretty emotional song, I'll think about sad things, and sometimes I'll be almost crying myself because I want people to see what I'm singing about."

Though he's willing to bring himself to tears for his art-and he's even flown a tailor in from Los Angeles to make him a jumpsuit ("It's not something you can buy at Wal-Mart," he says)-Friskie claims he's just your average guy with carefully cultivated facial hair. "I'm always getting told that I'm the most normal Elvis guy in the world. When I'm not performing, I'm walking around in jeans and a muscle shirt. My hair is combed as normal as possible. I still keep the burns though, because I won't wear fake sideburns-they fall off too easily."

As for why so many people continue to emulate the Tupelo warrior king, Friskie says, unfortunately, it often has a lot to do with ego. "I hate to say this, but I think a lot of times people like to impersonate Elvis as an attention thing. If you're doing this so people will look at you, so people will idolize you, I don't believe in that. But if you're doing it to perform as a tribute, because you really love the guy's music, that's why you should do it. It's got to come from the heart."

In his book *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*, Greil Marcus writes-in his characteristic overwrought style-that the enormity of Elvis's impact didn't become apparent until after his death. "The event was a kind of explosion that went off silently in minds and hearts; out of that explosion came many fragments, edging slowly into the light taking shape, changing shape again and again as the years went on. No one, I think, could have predicted

the ubiquity, the playfulness, the perversity, the terror, and fun of this, of Elvis Presley's second life."

Indeed, from rapper Eminem dressed as Elvis while pulling a submarine sandwich out of a toilet in the video "Without Me" to El Vez, the self-proclaimed "Mexican Elvis" who marries Elvis songs with political messages about the plight of Mexican labourers, Elvis's "second life" has reached surreal proportions, and shows no sign of calming down.

Last year, Nike used the dance-club-friendly remix of Elvis's "A Little Less Conversation" for its World Cup soccer advertising campaign, helping the song reach number one in the U.K. for four weeks in a row. In fact, Forbes magazine listed Elvis Presley as the top-earning

deceased celebrity of 2002, after he raked in a cool \$37 million. Even Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi claims to be a fan.

It's this type of broad-based appeal and the success of Elvis tributes in Memphis, Tenn., and Collingwood, Ont., that drew upward of 70,000 people last year, that has the organizers of Elvis Mania feeling all shook up about Cloverdale's first annual Elvis festival.

Business partners for the past 14 years, self-described "Elvis freak" Wayne Webb and Audrey Stebanuk started looking into the feasibility of putting on such an event almost two years ago. Experienced primarily in automotive shows, Webb and Stebanuk became familiar with Elvis tributes through booking several acts for car events, even managing a few of the performers, including Randy "Elvis" Friskie. Developing a festival centred around Elvis tribute artists seemed like a logical and profitable progression.

"Audrey and I looked into other events that were going on in Collingwood and Memphis, and we kind of put it on the back burner because we're very busy people," explains Webb, who says he hasn't had a holiday in four years. "And then Penticton came on board and did one. We went up there to look at what they were doing, and we felt we could do as good or a much better job of this type of event. And we felt the West Coast needed something, so Audrey and I put our heads together, brought some people on board and away we went."

According to Stebanuk, their event differs from Penticton's Elvis festival in that Elvis Mania is not just about tribute artists. They've worked hard to attract big name acts and personalities to appeal to the non-Elvis fan, if there is such a thing.

"We're trying to build a Merritt Mountain [music festival] in Cloverdale," adds Webb.

Besides securing performers and overseeing a staff of 12, one of the more difficult and important tasks was getting approval for the event from Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc., which controls the Elvis name and image.

"You have to have an itinerary of what you're doing and why you're doing it," says Stebanuk. "You also have to demonstrate that it will be done in a respectful way. In a respectful way is the main thing."

Stebanuk and Webb estimate they'll attract a minimum of 20,000 people to what they hope will be a yearly event. But even that number could be on the conservative side says Webb.

"We're talking about a guy who's probably one of the most powerful entertainers around. In the '50s the teenagers didn't have an identity, and then all of sudden along comes Elvis and they have an identity now. You have someone you can relate to. It changed the way you wore your clothes, the way you combed your hair, the way you danced, the way you sang, the way you listened to music_ He was like a magnet."

Stebanuk agrees. "He had lots of faces. He was kind of a renegade, but he also had the gospel side, and he was normal, because that's

the way most of the kids in our era were. They were brought up to know right from wrong, and that's what Elvis was too. But he also knew how to go out and have a good time without going over the line."

It's a sentiment that's echoed loudly by Jackson Vanderveen, who recently put down new wood laminate flooring in his basement rec room to practice his stage moves. "Basically I think people are really tired of all the negativity in music-it just seems like it's going the wrong way. But Elvis, he's a little more pure than that."

For more information on Elvis Mania go to: www.elvismania.ca

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