



To Sweet ELVIS,

you will forever be in our hearts

Our precious Angels Love, Ann Mack Buffalo, New York 8-16-98

TUPELO

Hero addicts

There's a name for modern-day, idol-worshippers who put their icons on a pedestal and pledge their love to, sometimes departed, souls. They are called fanatics, says **Phillip Langton**, and they live in a world of their own

There are two strands to pop music fan-dom, one quite benign, the other verging on the psychotic. For the vast majority of pop fans, their interest is nothing more than a very enjoyable and perfectly healthy hobby. But there are others on the lunatic fringe for whom the full word – fanatic – is far more appropriate. For these fans, no potential partner could ever live up to their idol, making it all but impossible for them to establish or maintain any normal relationship.

Clinical psychologist, Janice Hiller, recently treated a woman who had become obsessed with a well-known actor. This woman had taken to loitering outside the stage doors of theatres where she knew the actor was appearing, convinced he had once made eye contact with her, and that they were destined to be together.

In fact, the actor involved never even knew his stalker existed. Hiller's treatment in this case revolved around trying to gently talk the obsessed woman back to planet Earth. "It was a case of discussing the difference between his life and her life and getting her to look on this as a fantasy, rather than something that could actually happen. She had to be taught to distinguish between real possibilities and her own imagination.

"There's an absence in the lives of a lot of people, and it's then that they are tempted to turn to some available figure. Icons speak to some emotional need that hasn't been satisfied or fulfilled elsewhere," she says. "This was a very socially-isolated person."

Long live the King

There is no shortage of potential targets for fans to latch on to but only Elvis



Presley has inspired a truly global cult. He even has his own place of pilgrimage in the form of Graceland, where fans are shuffled past the sacred artefacts with ruthless efficiency.

It is worth remembering that Presley's career lasted only from 1954 to 1977, when he died, which means he will soon have been a dead icon for longer than he was a live one. But as former Who guitarist, Pete Townshend, says, "It is quite sobering to realise that someone who writes to you as though you are the most important person in the universe doesn't need you to be alive in order to eulogise you."

Richie Gee, one of London's leading Elvis fans, will have none of this analysis. He says: "Why do we need a psychologist asking why we dress this way, why we love Elvis, or why we love the music? It's the psychiatrists and the psychologists who need the help, because we're all happy."

Gee runs the Tennessee Club, a North London rock 'n' roll venue, which, every Friday night, is a mecca for

fans from all over the world. In Gee's own case, far from damaging his relationship, it was Elvis who got him and girlfriend Dixie together. He says: "We met at a rock 'n' roll dance. It was a band called Crazy Cavan, who we both liked and who I worked for many years ago. She's got a lot of Elvis stuff, and she's really into it – we both are. Also, she's a very attractive girl."

Pride and passion

Elvis fans are often suspicious of the media, suspecting that reporters simply want to make them – and their idol – look foolish. Some of the fans I approached for this piece refused to speak to me for just that reason. But reserved for particular contempt is the 1981 biography of Presley by Albert Goldman, whose warts-and-more-warts approach still angers many fans.

Richie Gee says: "If Elvis were alive today, people wouldn't dream of saying a lot of the things they've said about him to his face. These people are just making a name for themselves by saying bad

“Presley’s final resting place has all the quiet dignity of an explosion in a primary school art-room”



things about Elvis.”

But there is one billboard which belongs to the fans alone, and one where they can express themselves directly, with no fear of distortion.

That billboard is the ‘Love Wall’ which separates the private grounds of Graceland from the public arena of Elvis Presley Boulevard. The Love Wall runs for several hundred yards, but is so covered with fans’ scrawled messages that latecomers must spill over to the pavement too.

It was at the Love Wall that I found a piece of evidence showing how ‘devoted’ a tiny handful of Elvis fans become. The message read: “I wish U were here with me. Life is too empty without U. See U in Heaven soon! Love from Sweden.”

Keeping the memory alive

But to see Presley worship at its most extreme, you must visit Memphis during Elvis Week, the annual festival which marks the anniversary of Presley’s death in August 1977. The highlight of Elvis Week is a candle-lit procession at Graceland, where fans file past Presley’s grave with all the solemnity of a religious sacrament.

The grave itself has not only been copyrighted by Elvis Presley Enterprises

Inc, but is also as tacky a spectacle as you are ever likely to see. The fans’ home-made tributes may be sincere enough, but the finished effect is to give Presley’s final resting place all the quiet dignity of an explosion in a primary school art-room.

But the events of Elvis Week go far beyond Graceland itself. In 1998, other attractions included Presley’s old buddies peddling their memories in a Beale Street bar and Images of Elvis, the 12th Annual World Championship Impersonator Contest.

To English eyes, the most bizarre aspect of this festival is the way fans repeatedly express their devotion in religious terms. They take their Christianity seriously in these parts – but some fans seem not quite sure where Christ ends and Elvis begins. At the corner of Beale Street I spotted “Trust Jesus” written on a lamppost. Underneath this, a second hand had added “& Elvis” and then, evidently feeling that this was the wrong order of billing, the second writer had added: “Trust Elvis & Jesus”. Bob McVay, one of the 14 Images of Elvis finalists, closed his act with the words: “God loves you, Elvis loves you”. Much the same thing, he seemed to imply.

Filling a need

Hiller says: “I don’t want to get too judgmental about people who get obsessed with Elvis, but there has to be some lack in their lives if they need to project an idealised fantasy on to a dead person. I wonder what filled that same space and need in times gone by – I suppose that religious figures, prophets or leaders may well have fulfilled that hero role.”

That said, it is hard to escape biblical language when discussing a child born in poverty who suffered much pain before dying to become “King of Our Hearts”. And even my computer’s spell-check suggests that “Presley” should really read “Priestly”. But, although it was easy to feel smugly superior to Presley’s more rabid fans, my own comeuppance was not far away. I took a break from chuckling away at Images of Elvis for a stroll outside the hotel, where I was promptly stung by some kind of flying insect. This left a painful red lump behind my right ear for several days. A message from above, perhaps? Elvis, like God, will not be mocked.

Off the wall

Some of the messages on Graceland’s Love Wall are straightforward, others simply bizarre. Here’s a few examples from the latter category:

Making monkeys for Elvis.

Elvis lives at my house.

Jealous the Wonder Horse – Elvis Impersonator.

Elvis would love Xena because she’s a hard-headed woman – Allison.

Lisa Marie – Why don’t you rent out your grandparents now? President Clinton would.

And, from one hard-headed realist:

He’s dead.