

PARTING SHOT FROM JOSHUA BESSEX

A weekly snapshot from The Daily Astorian and Chinook Observer photographers



A trip to Cannon Beach in February.

ODDITY

Kingdom done?

‘Viva Las Vegas’ for Elvis? Less so lately

By SALLY HO
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — For decades, Las Vegas has loved Elvis Presley tender — and loved him true — but the King’s presence in modern day Sin City has lately been diminishing, one impersonator at a time.

“Vegas really is, ironically, a challenging market for Elvis,” said Jack Soden, CEO of Elvis Presley Enterprises, which runs the Graceland attraction in Memphis, Tennessee, and manages many of the official business deals on behalf of the estate.

The group had loaned hundreds of artifacts to a much-hyped, months-old Elvis attraction at the Westgate Las Vegas Resort and Casino. “Graceland Presents Elvis” closed in February after failing to draw in many visitors to the museum exhibit, wedding chapel and theater.

The off-Strip property is now holding the valuables against the will of the estate, as Westgate battles with the attraction’s third-party operator over a leasing dispute. The estate has since filed a lawsuit to get those items back.

Left the building

The fallout at Westgate is not the first Elvis-related spectacle in Las Vegas to leave the building too soon. Low attendance numbers were also to blame when the Viva Elvis Cirque du Soleil show at the Aria casino-hotel was canceled in 2012 after a two-year

run. That’s a much shorter shelf life than most of its sister shows. The longest-running one, *Myste’re*, started on the Strip more than two decades ago.

It’s left the Strip’s largest casino operator, MGM Resorts International, without any Elvis-themed shows, attractions or weddings. Rival Caesars Entertainment Corporation still hosts tribute acts and weddings, but a spokeswoman said few of those getting hitched ever choose the official Elvis packages.

It’s a stark turn for a city that has for so long thrived in its association with “The King.” The rise of Elvis coincided with the rise of Las Vegas as an entertainment capital, said Cory Cooper, an Elvis historian.

‘Glitzy persona’

Elvis played here more than anywhere else, selling out hundreds of shows, year after year. Cementing his ties to Sin City were his hits, the “Viva Las Vegas” song that gave the town its anthem, and the movie by the same name that showcased its glitzy persona.

There was a time when Elvis fans across the country made the pilgrimage to Las Vegas to see his concerts, and following his death in 1977, to indulge in the many tribute shows, impersonators and nostalgic memories from his heyday.

It also became a staple of Las Vegas kitsch to see Elvis impersonators — though they prefer to be known as “tribute artists” — on the many tourist-friendly corners of town and at the quickie wedding ceremonies Vegas was known for.

Elvis impersonator Ted Payne, 54, said business has slowed dramatically since he started taking photos with



Ted Payne rests as he works for tips dressed as Elvis at the “Welcome to Las Vegas” sign in Las Vegas in March. For decades, Las Vegas has loved Elvis Presley. But the King’s presence in modern day Sin City has lately been diminishing.

tourists for tips just six years ago.

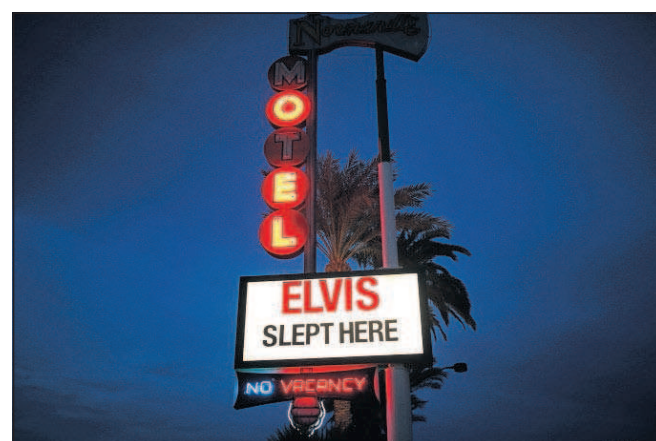
“When I first started out, I wouldn’t get out of a bed unless I (could) make at least \$150,” he said. “Now, these days, \$50 is a great day.”

These days, Elvis registers only briefly in the consciousness of Melanie Casas, 22, of Phoenix. On her first trip to Las Vegas recently, she identified him as the singer of “Hound Dog” who was also featured as a character in the “Forrest Gump” movie.

“I know of him but I don’t know anything about him,” Casas said, shrugging.

Generational divide

This generational divide could be blamed for the apparent lull in interest in the iconic performer. Others say the market was oversaturated by Elvis impersonators for so long that the appeal burned itself out here, even as Elvis’ reach



A restored neon sign from the defunct Normandie Motel glows along Las Vegas Boulevard in Las Vegas.

grows internationally.

The Elvis brand is one of the most active and successful entertainment estates. *Forbes* magazine, in its annual list of earnings by dead entertainers, said Presley’s estate earned \$55 million for the year ending October 2014 — second to Michael Jackson.

Soden said Graceland man-

tion, where Elvis lived, sees a growing number of visitors and is expanding with a new Elvis-themed hotel nearby.

Elvis fans are not aging out, he said, because nearly 40 percent of Graceland visitors were born after Elvis’ death. Soden also said the estate has been successful in many of its business deals, particularly in the

Middle East, U.K., Asia and Australia.

He in large part blamed the Westgate closure on Vegas’ lack of interest in exhibits overall. “Vegas hasn’t seen the last of Elvis. Giving it a rest is not all that bad,” Soden said of a future comeback.

‘Escape from itself’

Meanwhile, Vegas tourism only continues to reinvent itself. Once focused as an entertainment capital, it veered momentarily in an attempt to be a family-friendly destination before settling on its latest persona: the overindulgent playground of the young and wealthy.

“I think the problem with Vegas is Las Vegas is trying to escape from itself, either rewrite history or make new history,” Cooper, the historian, said. “All these properties that started Las Vegas, nothing’s there anymore.”



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