

ELVIS IMMORTAL

Playful, innocent, lonely? Is this the way we are meant to remember Elvis?

Yet this is what you sense about the Elvis Presley fans in *Elvis Immortal*. Here are images of people who responded to Polixeni Papapetrou's invitation to photograph them. They have posed themselves for her, Elvis impersonators, Elvis interpreters, Elvis archivists, Elvis followers, mourners at the Elvis memorial, enjoying Graceland in Melbourne. For her part, Papapetrou invites us to see how she transmits her subjects into the idealized dream worlds of their fantasy. And this is the magical element of Papapetrou's photographs. Looking into their immaculately graded toning, we leave the snobbish and judgmental world of mainstream opinion on Elvis.

Like Marilyn Monroe and Diana, Princess of Wales, Elvis is an industry and not just a subject of adulation. Books and magazines, videos and photographs and films, on and on, explore the notion of Elvisness while they patronize Elvis for failing to rise above the lower middle class, for never abandoning his origins, for staying with his family, for squandering his talent, for failing to use his wealth to gain social and political status and power within the Hollywood and United States establishments, for failing to be Frank Sinatra.

Biography reveals that Elvis' personal taste was always noticeable. He had a talent for combining the theatrical, sensual and flamboyant. His uninhibited public display, particularly his later Las Vegas Jump Suit period, is as significant for his current manifestations and memorials as is his musical talent. Such talents were revolutionary for young people of the 1950s and Elvis is remembered and celebrated for it. Looking at the classical profile, the sneering Pretty Boy face in the posters, it's hard to imagine now that Elvis was frightening middle Australia.

Papapetrou's photographs of the immortalisation of Elvis are radiant with the fervour of the people photographed, his earthly fans. Such radiance comes through because Papapetrou shares with the fans an appreciation of Presley's sensual flamboyance. At the same time Papapetrou is the detached observer of the permission Elvis gives to depart from the ordinary. "Nancy Nunez love story" is a series of photographs taken over a number of years at Elvis' memorial where every year Nancy is accompanied by a different young man, each an Elvis look-alike.

Biography shows that Elvis resisted change because of the emotional pain he suffered from his family's early poverty. The sameness of his life lends itself to a view of Elvis pursuing his goals - whatever they may have been - despite the tests and obstacles, that life threw in his path.

Innocence, sweetness, are far from Elvis and his sad sordid death in his lavatory

from years of over-indulgence: on deep fried banana and peanut butter sandwiches, a mixture of prescription drugs, alcohol and purposelessness. Yet the photographs show fans with innocence, sweetness, a proud self consciousness and a humour which comes from Elvis himself.

"You could do worse than good St. Elvis...Elvis Presley's sins were blessedly ordinary ones magnified by money. Fooling around. Lying to yourself. Popping a pill. Sitting on the sofa when there are better things to be done, our sins. Elvis died of our sins, if not for them, and so will we" (Marling, 1997).¹

Graceland, Elvis' white-columned home in the suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee, is named after the aunt of the previous owner, but what could be more auspicious, with hindsight, for a place of pilgrimage? Paul Simon sings of Graceland, redesigned by Elvis' heirs as a money-spinner, as a place of redemption and reconciliation (Marling, 1997).² These photographs of the gatherings in Melbourne General Cemetery on the anniversary of Elvis' death could be photographs of a ritual pilgrimage. The solemn and elaborately dressed mourners are cultural nomads seeking the consolations of Graceland where Elvis and his parents are buried. This Melbourne shrine is the only officially approved Memorial to Elvis Presley outside Graceland in Memphis.

Example, fellowship and aid are the three qualities common to saints of all religions and eras. Such qualities found in an extraordinary individual allow the ordinary mortal to communicate, through this outstanding person, with an exalted world whether an earthly one or one of a higher order of being. The qualities special to saints become available to their devotees by cults of multiple acts of devotion (Dunn-Mascetti, 1994).³ The visits to Graceland to experience the life of Elvis, of his gang of Good ol' Boys, his ordinary working southern family - by creating your own Graceland - is to learn from his example; listening to Elvis recordings, impersonating him, becoming part of his mass audience and, de facto result, believing that Elvis can, mysteriously, somehow change your life - this is how the Elvis cult joins in the fellowship. This is how it matches the qualities of secular sainthood and seeks aid from on high.

Diana, Princess of Wales, in her media manipulated public image, in her physical beauty, and cultivated glamour, her charity work, and in her death also matches these basic saintly qualities.

Australia has 16,000 Elvis Presley fan club members. At RCA in New York, Elvis is one of their three topselling singers, and RCA has a Vice-President for Presley Affairs. Each year, tens of thousands gather at Graceland to remember Elvis on the anniversary of his death.

This year in Westminster Abbey, Elton John performed his Marilyn Monroe song, re-worded from Norma Jean to English Rose, for the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. There was much media discussion of the emotional pain within Princess Diana which gave her charisma and empathy with the sick and here is media and academic discussion of the emotional pain within Elvis, a pain which dominates the last reclusive 10 years of his life. The mainstream as well as the fans are starting to treat Elvis as a saint.

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1 Marling, Karla Ann, *Graceland: Going Home with Elvis* (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1997) pp 1, 154

2 *ibid*

3 Dunn-Mascetti, M., *Saints. The Chosen Few* (New York, Ballantine, 1994) p15

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