

PARKES ELVIS FESTIVAL 2009

The King ain't dead – long live the King

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FESTIVAL
ELVIS IN PARKES, NSW





Located 228 miles west of Sydney and about 9500 south-west of Graceland, Elvis is alive and well in Parkes, NSW. Throughout the second week of January, with its tongue firmly planted in a mutton-chopped cheek, the town hosts its Elvis Aaron Presley appreciation festival.

Before this annual spectacular began 16 years ago, there were, admittedly, few of us whose thoughts sprang to Parkes when we contemplated the King. In fact, the home of The Dish was more closely associated with astronauts than entertainers. But that's all changed now.

To celebrate the anniversary of his birthday, the little metropolis of 11,000 souls comes alive with everything Elvis. Men, women and children alike hit the streets adorned in capes, collars, dark glasses and sideburns to shake themselves up some fun. It's a time of mayhem, memorabilia and, most of all, music.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Back in 1993, some fanatical locals decided to commemorate their idol by organising a birthday bash. A few hundred people attended. For the next 10 years, the party gradually grew, with more events added and the festival extending to two days.

About five years ago, the committee voiced their visions and began to really get the word out. In 2008, over 8000 people attended and this year the celebration swelled to nearly 10,000 swingin' souls.

A massive boost for the economy, for five days tourists and locals from near and far flock to the little town to celebrate a common love. Appreciators and impersonators flood the main streets all day and evening. Every heartbreak hotel says

The Elvis celebrant renewed the vows of about a dozen couples



Miss Priscilla



'No Vacancy' and every pub in town is standing room only as the microphones strain with the sounds of sing-a-longs.

WHAT'S-A-HAPPENIN'

The fun gets started early in the week, with lead-up events to shake the blues out of your suede shoes. The cinema shows a collection from his 33 movies, with couples relaxing on the grass under the stars. ClubsNSW put on the Poet's Breakfast and TransTank hosts the Miss Priscilla Dinner and Big Hair competition with the official sashing of Miss Priscilla.

Friday night's highlight is the Keno Feature Concert, with the first of four appearances during the festival of the fabulous Mark Andrew: the looks, the moves, and the voice of the King.

On Saturday is the big street parade. Lead by a troop of Elvi and featuring one of the finest assemblies of vintage cars this side of Detroit, the procession cruises down Clarinda Street between hundreds of delighted spectators for several hours in the heat of a country summer.



MAYHEM, MEMORABILIA AND, MOST OF ALL, MUSIC

Strutting and striding, Elvis is represented as male, female, young (pre-school), old (retired), black, white, Latino and Asiatic. He can be seen portrayed as many film characters, every body shape and at every stage of his career – in the army, flying planes, on-board ships, in jail, Hawaiian, racing cars and, of course, swinging those hips on a Las Vegas stage.

Not to be forgotten, Priscilla is well represented in the parade too. Dozens of young beauties dress ready to walk down the aisle with the King, while others sport mini-skirts and beehive hairdos.

An impressive array of floats, utes, open-top cars and decorated flat-bed trucks idle down the street depicting movie scenes or song lyrics. Local businesses, the fire department, ambulances and police all get into the act with sponsors, mascots and uniformed public servants proudly making appearances.

Two-wheeled rebels rev their engines without cause as dozens of Harleys and other vintage-style bikes walk their way down the street. Occupied by a fresh collection of pop royalty come the Cadillaccs – sleek, audacious, convertible





and often pink, the American monsters simply glide. There are Corvettes, hot rods and funny cars, almost every model of Holden ever made, and a good showing of vintage Fords, including Mustangs, Falcons and Thunderbirds.

After the parade, the crowds climb down from the rooftops and the crowded balconies, join the excited masses on the street, and as the barriers drop they surge around the parked show cars and paraders to celebrate everything Elvis and the fabulous '50s.

In Cooke Park, an amphitheatre provides an almost endless offering of music and entertainment throughout Saturday and Sunday, including Elvis and Priscilla look- and sound-alike competitions. The King had a record-breaking 107 chart records, and there may be an impersonator to perform each one.

By the dulcet tones of an Elvis celebrant, a dozen or so couples renew their vows and promise again to love each other tender. Always faithful, the brides of Elvis also line up en masse to avow themselves a hunk of burning love.



The King in 1960s
automotive royalty



2010 FESTIVAL INFORMATION

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On Sunday, good God-fearin' folk go to Church, and thousands line up for the Elvis Gospel Church Service to revel in the powerful harmonies that helped the King blur the cultural and racial barriers of his time and sell over a billion albums.

By the end of the festival, it would be fair to say Parkes is pretty shook up. Playing host to and almost doubling your population with rock-crazed hound dogs is nearly all a teddy can bear. Even the showground was crammed with caravans, motorhomes, campervans and the tents that weren't able to fit onto one of the 110 spots at 'Gracelands on the Green' tent city.

After the music stops, major sponsor Countrylink helps return to sender the hordes of adoring fans dreamily making their way home to towns and cities without soul, hearts already singing next year's tributes.

The big man supposedly died August 16, 1977, but there are many that will tell you he can be found in rural Australia. Did he really work for the CIA? Is he in witness protection? Is he biding his time, even now orchestrating his big comeback? We can't go on with suspicious minds (sorry, had to get in one more). If the world is to see Mr Elvis Presley again, he could do worse than make his triumphant return in Parkes. ■



SPECIAL THANKS TO

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