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Elvis Herselvis

Not a Mumbling, Enigmatic Troubadour from Memphis but an Articulate, Gregarious Dyke from San Francisco

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Leigh Crow does not play Presley but Elvis Herselvis, a lesbian Elvis impersonator.

Standing in the doorway, I have a vision. I find myself in the 1950s in what appears to be an underground bomb shelter. Sitting across from me to a row of sequined suits is Elvis Presley. I blink and realise this is no Cold War bunker but the bleak subterranean dressing rooms of Kinselas Nightclub in Sydney. And this is no mumbling, enigmatic troubadour from Memphis but an articulate, gregarious dyke from San Francisco.

... since Elvis' death, there's been such an increase in Elvis impersonators that by the year 2000, one in every five Americans will be an Elvis impersonator.

Leigh Crow, a.k.a. Elvis Herselvis, has been evoking the King of Rock and Roll for three years now. Her uncanny portrayal has made her a popular entertainer in queer clubs and the alternative cabaret circuit in America. While in Australia

she played exhilarating sets with her band 'Tear it Up', recalling the King with her sensuous vibrato, while wiping the sweat from her brow with the panties of devoted fans.

Crow believes that Presley and the idols of his age occupy an important place among lesbian icons. She explains, "men had a little more glamour then. Elvis was very primped and had a definite feminine side. The 1950s and '60s teen idol works for dykes because they were the sensitive rebels, the little boy lost. It works into a not really butch image but a very dreamy one. Elvis is going to become the dyke icon like Marilyn is for the boys. Like K.D. Lang, the whole image that she's got, I think that's where it came from".

As for Crow, she realised that the Presley posturing that so amused her friends could be interpreted on stage as well. When she took to the boards as Elvis Herselvis, "it was at a dyke rock 'n roll club and they really went crazy for it. It was a chance for them to really get silly which, in the dyke community, is not really a common experience".

A dyke taking to the stage in drag is not a common sight either as cross-dressing is still a contentious issue among some lesbians. Leigh Crow did not devise her Elvis exclusively as a political statement but she has found the experience politically invigorating nonetheless. "Drag is great, it's a great way to express yourself. I don't just mean boys doing girl drag, I mean leather and uniform and stuff. It can really free you. It can be an empowering experience, definitely." And what better way to be a 'drag king' than by impersonating the King himself.

In her willingness to challenge correctness, Elvis Herselvis is not unlike her role model. When Presley wriggled his pelvic muscles in a manner not befitting a white boy, the white picket fences of America trembled as well. This is a fact often obscured by the imposing figure of his later years, the bloated and burnt-out 'whalevis', his sequined suits barely holding the sweating obesity. The original Presley prototype however was more of a cultural terrorist - dangerous boy who was crossing the race barrier, the sex barrier and scaring all the people.

Consequently this is the Elvis that Crow prefers to interpret. However her interpretation has an interesting twist. While other impersonators mimic the man, never letting go of the illusion, Leigh Crow does not play Presley but Elvis Herselvis, a lesbian Elvis impersonator. This allows her to recreate him not only in song but in story as well, sharing anecdotes about the man that not only illustrate his life but also examine the cult of the King.

A favourite story deals with his encounter with Richard Nixon which Crow believes shows Presley "could get away with anything ... he wrote Nixon a letter to say how he was very concerned about the youth of America getting into the drug music and drug culture of the late-1960s. He had Nixon convinced that he needed a drug enforcement badge to promote a different image in rock 'n roll and had Nixon completely bullshitted ... no-one except federal drug agents were allowed to have them. I mean, it gave him the legal right to have drugs and transport them across state lines. The hysterical thing is if you've ever seen the picture, he was so (drug) fucked when he went to get the badge. Just bizarre." Crow claims he already had a huge collection of badges, some given to him by sheriffs making him an honorary deputy, proving "he was practically a uniform queen".

Leigh Crow's irreverence puts Elvis Herselvis out of step with her peers. "I've tried to steer clear of the 'jumpsuit contingent'. I don't know if they'd appreciate the camp values I bring to the act. A lot of them are very serious. Some are completely out of control, like, Elvis comes to them in spirit and chooses them. I've heard this from more than one. They believe that they have been chosen to carry on his words and music; it's a very bizarre phenomenon.

While many of the impersonators claim inspiration from the King himself, Crow has had other callings. In the past she has had the opportunity to add other characters to her camp ensemble and hopes to include even more in the future. "What I'd like to do is do a set of Marilyn drag and something else in between and then come out and do Elvis. I've done a couple of things beside Elvis. I did a Wayne Neuter thing, a cheesy lounge singer, who was a lot of fun. I've done a Lesley Gore drag thing. And I'd love to do a conceptual piece, a story of Connie Francis, which would be just too hysterical. Like 'Where the Boys Are' is my favourite karaoke song. When I go to do karaoke I never do Elvis. Connie's camp because of the over the top sentimentality. It's like Elvis where you can really camp out on the stuff because it's so over the top already."

Crow will be able to 'camp out' in a major way if she realises one particular dream for Elvis. She hopes to undertake an ambitious project that would show the King in his three most famous incarnations - the Young Elvis, the Hollywood Elvis and the White Jumpsuit Elvis.

This would certainly confirm Elvis Herselvis' unique position among the legions of Presley practitioners that inhabit the American landscape. Clearly, no other entertainer in history has been emulated so often and so fanatically. The statistics are certainly scary. According to Crow, "since Elvis' death, there's been such an increase in Elvis impersonators that by the year 2000, one in every five Americans will be an Elvis impersonator".

As I stand at the door of the dressing room and prepare to leave I have another vision. It is the turn of the century and I am watching the inauguration of a new president. In a lame suit and an improbable pompadour, an Elvis impersonator excepts the mandate of the nation, ruffles falling from an upraised hand. The audience of sequins and sideburns eagerly receive their new leader. So, I think, the rumours of the last twenty years were true. Elvis is alive and well. Looking closer, I notice they just left out one detail. Elvis is alive and ... well ... lesbian.

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