

‘Elvis Ain’t Dead!’ An Investigation into Identification, Fandom and Religion

- *An audio-visual documentary with accompanying written defence*

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‘Elvis Ain’t Dead!’ An Investigation into Identification, Fandom and Religion
- A Written Defence

As the title suggests my aim for this documentary was to investigate the potential linkages between the three concepts of identification, fandom and religion by drawing on the phenomenally rich tapestry of Elvis fan culture. Ultimately some of the crucial questions and issues I hoped to address in my documentary included an investigation into the meaning of ‘identification’; the concept of fandom and identificatory fan practices and the reasons why we become fans and how this fandom is enacted during the fan’s life. I also wanted to investigate the Dead Elvis phenomenon, Presley’s untimely demise and the impact this has had on Elvis fandom with regard to possible connections between fan practices and religious behaviours.

Most importantly, however, I wanted to highlight the idea that fandom is a universal concept experienced by both fans and academics and ultimately give real fans the freedom to express their true feelings towards their idol Elvis Presley. My intention was to blur the boundaries between fan and non-fan and between fan and academic during the filming of the documentary. I will go on to discuss this debate on Page 13.

By drawing on the work of Jean Baudrillard (‘The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction...¹’) I hoped to set the tone at the start of my documentary and draw my audience’s attention to one of the crucial themes inherent in my investigation – that of the idea of people imitating or

¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (SAGE 1998), p146

impersonating² musicians or pop stars: i.e. tribute artists – fans who identify with their star idols and imitate them on stage through accurate costuming, projection of voice and mannerisms. In many ways when you attend a tribute band gig (such as the world famous Glaston Budget festival I visited in May 2006) for a split second you may get ‘lost in the music’³ and think you are actually watching the *real* Oasis (not Oasish) or the *real* Red Hot Chili Peppers (not the Ded Hot Chili Peppers) and so on... Indeed some tribute artists and tribute bands have been referred to by fans as being ‘better than the real thing’.

Baudrillard’s assertion also touches upon the idea that is expanded upon in my initial introductory voiceover – that of the current trend in society to want what ‘stars’ have (i.e. celebrity lifestyles with a seemingly great love life, beautiful appearance and financial security) and therefore copy the ‘stars’ (e.g. through adapting their appearance to look more like their idol or adopting similar character traits or career trajectories)⁴. This trend can broadly be described as ‘a seemingly inexhaustible popular craving for celebrity, excess and scandal; the totalising proliferation of surveillance culture’⁵.

² It is worth noting at this point however that the idea of ‘impersonating’ has a different – more derogatory – meaning when applied to ETA’s (Elvis Tribute Artists). When interviewing several ETA’s and referring to them as ‘impersonators’ they resented these remarks and assured the interviewer that they were tribute artists – not ‘dumb’ impersonators who give Elvis a ‘bad name’ with their ridiculous costumes and ‘comical’ accents (e.g. ‘Thankyou...Thankyou very much’ with the famous Elvis lip movement)

³ Similarly see the discussion of ‘losing oneself’ in the film[s] in Stacey, Jackie. *Star Gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship*. (Routledge 1994), p145

⁴ See Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (SAGE 1998), pp 45-46 on ‘the hero of consumption’: ‘In the West, at least, the impassioned biographies of heroes of production are everywhere giving way today to biographies of heroes of consumption. The great exemplary lives of self-made men and founders, pioneers, explorers and colonizers, which succeeded those of saints and historical figures, have today given way to the lives of movie stars, sporting or gambling heroes, of a handful of gilded princes or globe trotting barons... With all these great dinosaurs who fill the magazines and TV programmes, it is always the excessiveness of their lives, the potential for outrageous expenditure that is exalted.’

⁵ Debbie Epstein & Deborah Lynn Steinberg: *The Face of Ruin: Evidentiary Spectacle and the Trial of Michael Jackson* in *Framing Michael Jackson: Celebrity on Trial in Social Semiotics*, Volume 17, Issue 4 December 2007 , p 441 (Routledge 2007). Abstract available at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a786440584~db=all~order=page> Accessed: December 2007

I draw upon several images in the documentary - that of celebrity look-alikes of Camilla Parker Bowles and David Beckham from the work of photographer Alison Jackson in her book *Private* (2003). Jackson's work highlights another key issue in my film – the idea that fans 'know' their idol – i.e. Elvis – only through the fan object's image as Elvis Tribute Artist and key contributor Simon Patrick states reassuringly in answer to my emotive question on the subject of taking Elvis out of a fan's life: 'Elvis will never be out of my life because I will always have memorabilia':

Hardly anyone knew Diana. Yet on her death the world mourned. They did not mourn the woman but her photographic image. We all think we know David Beckham; thousands of fans have seen him in the flesh on the pitch, but millions of us know him only through his image. The same goes for all celebrities, whether it's Madonna, Prince William or Tony Blair [or indeed Elvis Presley – Elvis' former Tour Producer Charles Stone describes the King's death ('the world cried') and notably, like Jackson, draws on the example of Diana's death too]. The result is that the photograph becomes more real than the actual person or event.⁶

June 9, 1972 – New York Hilton Press Conference for Elvis Presley's Madison Square Garden Engagement:

Question to Elvis: Are you satisfied with the image you have established?

⁶ Jackson, Alison. *Private* (Penguin 2003), Foreword

Elvis' answer: Well the image is one thing and the human being is another...It's very hard to live up to an image...⁷

For Jackson what Baudrillard refers to as an 'equivalent reproduction' – in this case a photographic image – is taken to be real...

Certainly the majority of Elvis fans have never seen Elvis in the flesh due in part to his untimely demise in 1977 and so have to make do with his image in recordings, films and of course 'the next best thing' to seeing him perform live – Elvis Tribute Artists. The same can be said of Michael Jackson fans – who, due to the star's tragic death in June 2009, will now never get the opportunity to see the *other* 'King' – the 'King of Pop' and in recent times have instead been duped by Navi – a full time 'Wacko Jacko' impersonator employed by Michael Jackson to act as a decoy in response to the large gatherings of fans who 'camp out' for a glimpse of their hero at his public appearances as seen in the archive footage used which is extracted from VH1's *The Fabulous Life of Michael Jackson* (2003) documentary.

The nature of my investigation called for wide use of interviews in my documentary. In the research stage of developing my argument and with it who I would choose as contributors I was acutely aware of the stereotypical view of fans and fandom in general – that of:

Star-crazed adolescents camping on pavements for a glimpse of their adored figure.

Obsessive fans who kill for their heroes. Housewives immersed in escapist fantasy.

⁷ *Elvis The King of Rock 'N' Roll* DVD (Sony BMG 2007) – Bonus Material

Hysterical teenage girls, soap addicts and rock music 'groupies'. [Inevitably this leads to] Fans get[ting] a bad press. The familiar images of fandom are loaded with negative stereotypes and labels of deviancy. Yet in many ways we are all 'fans' and fans remain the most visible and dedicated of any audience. What is it that defines and motivates this intense admiration? And why is it so maligned and stigmatized?⁸

I was primarily (but not exclusively) concerned with the first of Lewis' questions in relation to the concept of identification and Elvis fandom: why do people intensely admire and identify with stars (and Elvis specifically)? The work of Jackie Stacey on identification in *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (1994) provided an excellent starting point for my investigation. Stacey helpfully breaks her findings on female spectatorship down into:

i. Cinematic identificatory practices:

devotion, adoration, worship, transcendence, aspiration and inspiration

ii. Extra-cinematic identificatory practices:

pretending, resembling, imitating, copying

Stacey's theory of identification can be applied to my investigation. I was also particularly interested in her findings on (ii) – her sub divisions here would prove useful

⁸ Lisa A. Lewis' abstract in 'I'll Be Here With You': *Fans, Fantasy and the Figure of Elvis* in: *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, Volume 1, Part 3 May 1992, pp 107 – 134
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t727465051> Accessed: October 2007

when unpacking my own research on Elvis fan practices. Her work not only provided a crucial framework for my own investigation into identification and fan practices but it also provided me (and hopefully my audience) with a useful contextual point of reference: that of 1950's Hollywood and more broadly American culture – from which Elvis arose from severe poverty in Tupelo, Mississippi and accomplished a 'rags to riches' American Dream of sorts. Of course, Elvis too was a film star - the Hollywood years of Presley's career spanned 1956-69 and he featured in no fewer than 31 movies – and inevitably he attracted many 'star gazers' in the cinema – none other than contributor Diane Presley who I met at Yardley towards the end of my journey. This idea is enforced by several of Stacey's many fans writing to her and mentioning the King in their outlining of their cinematic identificatory fantasies. Veronica Millen's description is one such example:

I wanted to write and tell you of my devotion to my favourite star Doris Day. I thought she was fantastic, and joined her fan club...My sisters...were mad about Elvis, but my devotion was to Doris Day.⁹

I also saw an artistic opportunity arise to bring Stacey's contributors to life on the screen. Hopefully I achieved this by producing a montage of still images of film stars who feature in *Star Gazing* cut together with animated female voiceover descriptions of their experiences.

I wanted to get to the heart of Elvis fans' identificatory practices – not only finding out what practices the fan engages in (e.g. in Simon Patrick and Gordon Barbara's case performing on stage 'as Elvis' and in Ricky Allwood's case going to Memphis 'on a

⁹ Stacey, Jackie. *Star Gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship*. (Routledge 1994), p138

pilgrimage')¹⁰ but also and most crucially what motivates this identification. As I got further along on my journey and closer to my fan subjects it was clear to see that a recurrent theme was emerging – that of the idea that childhood memories and/or experiences played a pivotal role in the forming of an Elvis fans' eventual identification with the King. The stories that fans were outpouring on camera led me to believe that a fan's childhood was incredibly important. But as I explain towards the end of my film this was not the sole factor in shaping a fan's identification with Elvis Presley.

The work of Matt Hills on fandom generally and Elvis fandom more specifically in *Fan Cultures* (2002) particularly in Chapter 8 (*Cult Bodies – Between the 'Self' and the 'Other'*) grabbed my attention and so I sought his expertise on a number of key issues at the heart of *Elvis Ain't Dead!* Both Hills and Jackie Stacey provide excellent analyses of identification, fandom and religion (and their inter-changeability) and thus I am greatly indebted by their contributions.

However Lewis' second question (which surrounds the idea that fandom is negatively portrayed in the media) also raised an important point I would need to bear in mind when making first contact with Elvis fans at the research stage and also when meeting the fan(s) for the first time and interviewing them 'on shoot'. Firstly this point surrounds certain ethical issues concerning the nature of those interviewed for my documentary (both those individuals who would eventually end up on the 'cutting room floor' and also those who would feature in the final cut) and secondly those who were *not*

¹⁰ On the idea of fans' identificatory practices as pilgrimage see Jennifer E. Porter's analysis of Star Trek convention attendance in *To Boldly Go: Star Trek Convention Attendance as Pilgrimage* in Porter, Jennifer E. & Darcee L. McLaren. *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, And American Culture* (State University of New York 1999), pp 245-270

interviewed – either as a conscious choice on the part of my direction *or* as a result of a sequence of unchangeable events. Indeed Bill Nichols points out that:

People [in documentaries] are treated as social actors: they continue to conduct their lives more or less as they would have done without the presence of a camera... Their value to the filmmaker... resides not in the ways in which they disguise or transform their everyday behaviour and personality but in the ways in which their everyday behaviour and personality serves the needs of the filmmaker.¹¹

Ultimately any contributors –either fan or academic – are at the mercy of the editor and so an element of trust must inevitably come into play between the interviewee and interviewer (who in this case was also director, cameraman and editor). This trust must not be abused. An abuse of this trust could ultimately lead to negative stereotyping of fans through contrived interview techniques leading to the loss of meaning and content in ‘the edit’ and eventually in the finished film. During the editing process an editor could purposely leave important scenes, comments or dialogue out to change meanings and possibly therefore shape an audience’s view. This distorting of the truth is, of course, an age old theme recurrent in documentary film making dating right back to *Nanook of the North* and the father of the genre Robert Flaherty.¹²

¹¹ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Indiana 2002), p 5

¹² ‘Nanook was in fact named Allakariallak, for instance, while the "wife" shown in the film was not really his wife, but was actually one of Flaherty's eskimo wives. And although Allakariallak normally used a gun when hunting, Flaherty encouraged him to hunt after the fashion of his ancestors in order to capture what was believed to be the way the Inuit lived before European influence. The ending, where Nanook and his family are supposedly in peril of dying if they can't find shelter quickly enough, was obviously farce, given the reality of nearby French-Canadian and Inuit settlements during filming, though Allakariallak himself died of exposure two years later after being caught in a snowstorm.’ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanook_of_the_North#Criticism)

I will illustrate this idea further with an example from IWC Media's 2005 documentary *Wacko About Jacko* for Channel Four. Originally titled 'Michael Jackson's Biggest Fans' this documentary is described below by IWC's distributor RDF Rights:

With his personal life in tatters and his entire past exposed to public scrutiny, Michael Jackson's colourful life has hit rock bottom.

He has even failed to record a successful album in a decade. Yet Jackson still commands an almost religious devotion from his legions of fans around the world.

This jaw-dropping documentary follows a handful of his most dedicated and obsessive fans in their pursuit of the ultimate Jackson encounter. Car chases, stake-outs and publicity stunts are not beyond these people. Blind to the negative press stories and shame heaped upon the Jackson camp, these groupies continue to impersonate their idol, organise tribute nights and galvanise support for the King of Pop.¹³

Unsurprisingly *Wacko About Jacko* caused somewhat of a stir amongst Jackson fans – and provoked the following reaction from Anika Kotecha – one British 'superfan'¹⁴ who

Accessed: September 2007

¹³ <http://www.rdfrights.com/Programme.aspx?id=2488> Accessed: October 2007

¹⁴ The script for *Wacko About Jacko* refers to the four subjects for the documentary as 'superfans' right from the outset of the film – this has negative connotations by putting across a wholly stereotypical view of the obsessed fan as emotional and irrational. In doing this it tries to sensationalise the subject matter and

featured in the documentary. ‘Indeed, Anika reports on the Michael Jackson Discussion Board that some of her more extended arguments defending the normality of fandom were left out of the documentary’¹⁵:

Overall I was pleased with the doc. There were a few things i wish they had kept in like when i said stuff like it's not weird being an MJ fan - people who support football teams do the same as us. They go all over the world to see their teams play. U see them crying at matches etc. So why differentiate between us and them? And also i said that ppl think that MJ fans are weird cos they have no lives outside MJ but the reality is that MJ is a part of our lives but not our entire lives for example i have my uni, my family, friends, other interests etc. All these things are parts of my life and together make up my life. Stuff like that cld have been kept in i think. Cant think of anything else as they recorded sooo much that i cant remember what i said!! Butwill post when i remember!!¹⁶

Though *Wacko About Jacko* appears ‘neither entirely ‘positive’ nor wholly ‘negative’ about Michael Jackson fandom’¹⁷, it still nonetheless failed to ask any *real* and penetrating questions of the four ‘superfans’ it focuses on. We are presented with examples of their fandom and the lengths they will go to but we never get to find out *why* they identify with Michael Jackson – or at least if there is a hint of explanation it is

focus the audience’s expectations on meeting individuals who engage in ‘extreme’ or socially unconventional fan practices. See Jensen, Joli. *Fandom as pathology* in Lewis, Lisa, A. *The Adoring Audience* (Routledge 1992) p 21

¹⁵ Hills, M. *Michael Jackson Fans on Trial? ‘Documenting’ Emotivism and Fandom in Wacko About Jacko* in *Social Semiotics* Vol 17 Number 4, December 2007(Routledge 2007), p 466

¹⁶ This has been quoted directly from:

<http://www.mjnewsonline.com/board/showthread.php?t=10995&page=17> Accessed: October 2007

¹⁷ Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. (Routledge 2002), p 459

quickly shifted in favour of focusing on their idolization or identificatory practices. This is something I wanted to avoid in *Elvis Ain't Dead!* along with the mindless concept of 'superfans' (see n.20 below).

It goes without saying that '[The documentary's] dedication to a single theme means that there is more time for explanation and interpretation¹⁸'. Bearing this in mind and considering the guidelines on length for the documentary¹⁹ I chose to focus on just a few Elvis fans (five in total – Simon Patrick, Malcolm Watkins, Gordon Barbara, Diane Presley and Ricky Allwood) with the need to develop their story and characterisation of paramount importance. 'Bill Nichols has described documentary as 'a fiction (un)like any other (Nicholls 1991, 113), emphasizing the way in which documentaries draw on narrative structures and characterisations of their subjects.'²⁰ Aligning myself closely with this analysis of the documentary form I developed the narrative structure of *Elvis Ain't Dead!* along a particular trajectory – that of a journey. 'This journey' was two-fold following the journey of the fans *en route* to their Elvis fandom and my journey as investigator and interviewer *en route* meeting the fans.

In following this structure I wanted to include 'raw' fans by allowing them a 'voice' – i.e. 'reflecting fandom's 'reality''²¹ I wanted to show that these were real *and* normal everyday people with families and jobs etc (I tried to show this visually too by featuring, for example, 'cutaway' shots of Malcolm with his son at the 30th anniversary Elvis celebrations in Yardley). I also wanted the narrative to be as natural as possible with the fans driving my argument. I was reluctant to 'over do' my own analysis with

¹⁸ Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. (Routledge 2002), p 461

¹⁹ 'The audio-visual dissertation consists of a 30 minute documentary supported by a 4,000-6,000 word defence' – *Dissertation Guidelines* by LeVille, H. 24/11/2007 (Microsoft Word Document)

²⁰ Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. (Routledge 2002), p 462

²¹ Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. (Routledge 2002), p 466

voiceover commentary segments – instead wanting to provoke the audience into thinking about the issues raised and letting them decide for themselves: e.g. cutting straight from Matt Hills’ analysis of the comparison of Elvis fandom with religion to establishing shots of Yardley followed directly by my meeting with Ricky Allwood describing his Elvis fandom in religious terms.

As previously stated at the beginning of this defence my aim was to blur the boundaries between fan and non-fan (i.e. the audience) and between fan and academic etc. As a ‘non-fan’ investigator I was embarking on a journey of discovery myself. I am not an ‘Elvis fan’; I have never bought an Elvis record before; I have never imitated Elvis through choice of dress or sung Elvis songs as an ETA. In many ways through my documentary ‘*I [was able to] speak about them to you...*’ the most common formulation of the three-way relationship among filmmaker, subject and audience...²² That said it was crucial that the fans whose own personal world I was entering were comfortable with what I was trying to achieve during the production of this documentary.

My insertion of comments from Matt Hills throughout *Elvis Ain’t Dead!* was intended to blur the boundaries between the fan and the academic. Moreover Hills can be considered to be both a fan and an academic as witnessed by the following assertions from him in the documentary:

I’ve been a fan of various media texts and celebrities pretty much...across my entire life...for me part of studying fandom is that it relates to my own experience...There’s a sense that media fans are quite often portrayed negatively – they tend to be negatively stereotyped...Fandom is a very common activity – a

²² Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Indiana 2002), p 17

very common expression of identity in contemporary culture and its something
that we should try to dignify or at least analyse adequately and seriously...

I made a conscious effort to reinforce this point by referring to Hills as a ‘Fan and Author’ in captions throughout the film whenever his comments were utilized to further the investigation. This debate can also act as a useful framing device for the construction of a process surrounding the investigation into the relationship between the fan (‘low’) and academic (‘high’). In *Fan Cultures* (2002) Hills describes the debate around ‘fans versus academics’ and despite highlighting Lisa A Lewis’ claim that a ‘system of bias [exists that] debases fans and elevates academics even though they engage in virtually the same kind of activities²³’, he nonetheless concludes that neither academic nor fan hold the upper hand in the struggle for dominance – rather each individual’s views should be respected equally. In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age* (2006) Henry Jenkins opens his *Introduction – Confessions of an Aca-Fan* with ‘Hello. My name is Henry. I am a fan²⁴’. Jenkins goes on to illustrate the origins of the marginalization of fans and the need now – in a world where fans are critical to the success of films, sports teams, musicians, etc – to formally recognise their intrinsic worth and in so doing even appropriates his own standing as an academic to that of a fan through his identification as the now popularized ‘aca-fan’. Jenkins clearly positions himself as an academic who identifies as a fan and, in keeping with current fan practices, has his own web-blog to prove it. In many ways Hills could be considered to be an ‘aca-fan’ too.

²³ Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. (Routledge 2002), p 18

²⁴ Jenkins, Henry. *Introduction – Confessions of an Aca-Fan* in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age*. (New York 2006), p 1

Moreover it would have been very difficult to take the fans out of their environments and film them in a similar way to that of the academic (Stacey) or fan and author (Hills) who feature in the documentary – i.e. in well-lit spaces. In an ideal world in order to gain a level technical ‘playing field’ between fans and academics/’aca fans’ interviews with both would need to be shot in a ‘neutral’ studio or other such location. However this would be at odds with the aims of the documentary – including the critical position surrounding giving real fans a voice. The interviews I filmed were achieved through a level of trust between the interviewer and interviewee that was formed through my willingness to submerge myself into the private world of the fan.

By selecting only five Elvis fans as the focus of my documentary I hoped to provide a clear analysis of their fandom – i.e. not a superficial reading of many fans. I also chose specifically *not* to focus on ‘superfans’²⁵ or those at the extreme end of the identification spectrum – i.e. those who could be labeled as ‘over-identifying’ with Elvis Presley (the inclusion of Diane Presley towards the end of my film does however provide a brief glimpse of over-identification) e.g. Kjell Bjornestad (‘Kjell Elvis’)²⁶ – one of the world’s most famous Elvis Tribute Artists who has undergone plastic surgery to look more like the King²⁷ and who incidentally was due to perform at the Porthcawl Elvis

²⁵ This phrase has most recently been coined on BBC 1’s *The One and Only* tribute artist talent show with ‘superfan’ judges appointed to nominate their favourite tribute artists to go through to the next stage of the competition.

²⁶ For more information on Kjell Bjornestad see Charlie Connelly’s *Bonus Chapter* from *In Search of Elvis: A Journey To Find The Man Beneath the Jumpsuit* available at <http://www.charlieconnelly.com/in-search-of-elvis.htm> Accessed: November 2007

²⁷ For an investigation into the emulation and replication of the King by Elvis impersonators see *The Transvestite Continuum: Liberace – Valentino – Elvis* in Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. (Routledge 1992), pp 366-374: ‘What one saw after Elvis’s death...was not just emulation but replication: the rite according to St Xerox...there appeared overnight a new class of entertainers who were not so much mimics, impersonators or impressionists as Elvis clones. Some of these human effigies were so fantastically dedicated to their assumed identity that, like transsexuals, they submitted their bodies to plastic surgery so that their natural resemblance might be heightened to virtual indistinguishability.’ See also Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. (Routledge 2002), pp 162-164 on ‘The

Festival 2007 but failed to turn up after the management of the festival refused his request to be accommodated in a five star hotel room away from all the other ETA competitors who were performing during the weekend.

Bjornstad clearly considered himself to be a star in his own right and this identificatory practice was echoed by another ETA– Lee Memphis King who, like Kjell, made it through to the final of the BBC’s World’s Greatest Elvis competition and after agreeing to be interviewed by me at his appearance at the 30th anniversary Elvis celebrations in Yardley pulled out at the last minute claiming he had not heard anything about it. It seemed the pursuit of stardom and the trappings of fame resulting from working in the shadow of Elvis had led both Bjornstad and Memphis King to over-identify with their idol. Though clearly both men are very talented their own individual ‘star’ quality is something that Elvis fans would seek to deconstruct. For Elvis fans an ETA is merely doing a job – recreating an image and sound of Elvis to the best of their abilities. This is a *tribute* to the King and should never be confused with the talent or magic of the *real* Elvis as described in the film by his former Tour Producer Charles Stone:

‘As a man he’s the greatest entertainer that’s ever lived... There will never be anybody to equal him...nothing ever matched an Elvis Presley concert...When the lights go out in the arena when you start the show, the cameras start flashing and he walks on the stage the electricity that is in the room at that point can never be duplicated.’

‘cyborgification’ of the impersonator’ and his citing of the tragic example of Kay Kent – a Marilyn Monroe lookalike who took her own life ‘in a meticulous re-enactment of Monroe’s own suicide’.

I also wanted to avoid any comparisons with the BBC's *The World's Greatest Elvis* (2007) spin-off documentary which had presenter (and Elvis fan) Vernon Kay going on a journey around the world to find some of the weirdest and wackiest 'elvi' – e.g. from Japan and Germany. The documentary's entertaining television advert revealed the sheer scope of the Elvis phenomenon but ultimately the programme *did not* really ask any important questions that could lead to an insight into Elvis identificatory fan practices.

I wanted to capitalize on my audience's infatuation with getting inside the lives of people (everyday Elvis fans) – finding out how the Other²⁸ lives – what motivates their existence, what dreams they have and how they fit in with society. As Nichols' puts it: 'we experience a distinct form of fascination for the opportunity to witness the lives of others when they seem to belong to the same historical world that we do.'²⁹ Moreover the documentary form allows this 'fascination' to be born out as Nichols goes on to outline:

Documentary film and video stimulates epistophilia (a desire to know) in its audience. It conveys an informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric, or a moving poetics that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness.

Documentary proposes to its audience that the gratification of these desires to know will be their common business. He-Who-Knows (the agent has traditionally been masculine) will share knowledge with those who wish to know. We, too, can occupy the position of The-One-Who-Knows.³⁰

²⁸ 'A body of scholarly work beginning in the early 1990's (with Jenkins 1992; Jensen 1992) sought to interrogate pop-cultural representations of fan audiences, arguing that fans were often stereotyped and pathologised as cultural 'Others' – as obsessive, freakish, hysterical, infantile and regressive social subjects.' Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. (Routledge 2002), pp 459-460

²⁹ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Indiana 2002), p xi

³⁰ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Indiana 2002), p 40

In order to fully stimulate this ‘desire to know’ in my audience it would be necessary to adopt a simple narrative structure in the mould of the more traditional documentary form – i.e. a linear journey from (A) finding a subject and question and wanting to investigate it to (B) answering that question over the course of the journey. This seemed best suited to the argument I was trying to put across. In achieving this I utilized a number of formal documentary techniques including ‘the use of a Voice-of-God commentary, interviews, location sound recording, cutaways from a given scene to provide images that illustrate or complicate a point made within the scene, and a reliance on social actors, or people in their everyday roles and activities, as the central characters of the film...’³¹,

Another key question I hoped to address in *Elvis Ain’t Dead!* concerned potential connections between fandom and religion:

Comparisons can provide intriguing starting points because they inspire us to think, but there are serious problems with using them as an analytical tool. Despite highlighting a few striking similarities, the comparison between religion and fan culture promoted by writers like Erika Doss [in *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith and Image* (2004)] offers a weak explanatory framework. Rather than building upon the results of previous field research (like Julia Aparin’s ethnographic study of Elvis fans), it encourages us to meditate on the connotations of a stereotype. It also approaches what we could fruitfully examine— fans’ assumptions about the unstable balance of power between themselves and their hero—through an

³¹ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Indiana 2002), p 26

extremely crude metaphor. Trying to understand Elvis fandom by way of a religious comparison is so reductive that something seems almost laughable about the idea, especially if we compare it to advances elsewhere in fan studies (see, e.g., Jenkins; see also Cavicchi).

I am not denying that Elvis fans express an unusual intensity of interest that must indicate something about their empowerment, or that they indulge their pleasures, in part, through visual images of their hero. Their thrills are better explained, however, as a response to Elvis's performance and popularity than as moments of religious madness. If we settle for the religious understanding, we miss the complexity of the audience—text relationship, the diversity of investments, and the rich array of informal institutions that support fans' interests. Furthermore, the theory is impossible to rescue as a neutral analytical tool from its context in parody. Rather than pursuing a comparison that neglects the music, has derogatory connotations, and actually contradicts what fans have to say, we should aim to analyze, contextualize, and compare their own accounts of their experience.

Writers and artists who define Elvis fandom as a form of religion speak in a forum in which fans can rarely reply. In that respect it seems only fair to leave the last word to a fan called David Neale, who reviewed Doss's *Elvis Culture* in *The Official Elvis Presley Fan Club Magazine*:

Author Erika Doss, a professor of fine arts and director of the American Studies programme at the University of Colorado, Boulder, examines the cultural impact

of Elvis in a number of contexts and delivers a sometimes fatuous, sometimes worrying, sometimes intriguing and always fascinating look at the results. . . . Fatuous I consider Doss' concentration on extreme forms of fandom, with almost no indication that the majority of Elvis people are really quite normal.³²

Duffett raises many key points which hopefully I have tried to address in my documentary – not least the idea that 'we should aim to analyze, contextualize, and compare their own accounts of their experience'. He is very much correct in stating that a direct comparison between Elvis fandom and religion is a reductive process that could even be considered laughable but you cannot escape from the fact that real everyday fans such as Ricky Allwood actually advocate this comparison:

I worship Jesus... I've got the tattoo on my arm... I've also got the Elvis tattoo on the arm [He shows us his tattoos of Jesus and Elvis]. That's how important it is to me...its more spiritual with Jesus because that's my faith but at the end of the day *Elvis is a faith* – that's a *religion* as well – cos every single day I think about Elvis – I think about Jesus – it's the same. I know it sounds weird...unless you are really involved and you come to a night like tonight but that's just the way I feel...

I then tried to delve a little deeper into the reasons why Ricky Allwood turned to Elvis in such a profound and almost spiritual way:

³² Duffett, Mark. *False Faith or False Comparison? A Critique of the Religious Interpretation of Elvis Fan Culture in Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Routledge 2003), pp 520-521

I had depression...the music and Elvis brought me out of it...its kept me going...you come to a room like tonight where all the Elvis fans are there and you feel like a body- there's people you have never met before but you can talk to them because you have something personal in common. I have met people through Elvis – its got to be good because you are meeting new people- people you would see across the street and you wouldn't even think about them but because you've got something in common you can strike up a conversation – you are meeting people – its good...everything I get from Elvis is good...

Ricky's 'confession' that he used to suffer from depression and that Elvis was a way out of this suffering coupled with the language he uses to describe Elvis fan gatherings such as the Yardley 30th anniversary celebrations – 'you feel like a *body*'- provide obvious opportunities for the use of a comparison between Elvis fandom and religion or rather religious worship. What we need to remember, however, in response to Duffett's valid comments is the fact that this view is from one fan on one particular occasion. We cannot take Ricky's comments to be true of every Elvis fan – far from it...More importantly – rather than dismissing the comparison outright as Duffett so vehemently does – we need to carefully consider each Elvis fan individually for each fan has a different and equally viable story to tell. The insertion of Hills' advocacy of the 'religiosity' idea perhaps provides a middle ground or a compromise between the two polarised views. Ultimately I want the viewer to ponder on these arguments and decide for his or herself...

Furthermore my use of highly emotive images of Elvis as Jesus³³ (Bill Barminski's *Elvis Christ*³⁴ and the 'sacred_heart_of_elvis' that permeates a Google image search for 'Elvis as Jesus'³⁵) serve to stimulate thought in my audience's mind about this potential comparison and its validity or lack thereof. Ultimately there is no correct answer – for one fan Elvis is a religion; for another he is merely an idol akin to other pop or sport stars. My argument, however, is centered on the Dead Elvis phenomenon (caused in part by his untimely demise in 1977) as the reason for the extent of Elvis' popularity: 'Dead Elvis is a phenomenon that has no precedent in human history with the possible exception of the social reaction to major religious leaders such as Jesus, Mohammed or the Buddha.'³⁶ Presley's 'untimely demise' on August 16th 1977 'was the date of a seminal event, and the reaction that followed impressed it on the world. Indeed, some have said that Elvis Presley permanently changed the face of popular culture, and his death had a lot to do with that as well.'³⁷

Bearing in mind the importance of Elvis' death I wanted to address it visually in a moving way and so chose to produce a montage of shots from Porthcawl and Yardley outlining how Elvis is still remembered today coupled with photographic stills of the King and testimony from a contemporary of Elvis – actor Billy Bob Thornton – and an Elvis track (the instantly recognizable *Suspicious Minds*) playing to accompany the

³³ For an analysis of the rise in popularity of art work devoted to tracing the idea of Elvis as Jesus see *From joke to concept: the emergence of the religious interpretation* in Duffett, Mark. *False Faith or False Comparison? A Critique of the Religious Interpretation of Elvis Fan Culture in Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Routledge 2003), pp 513-516

³⁴ Marcus, Greil. *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of A Cultural Obsession*. (Havard 1991), p x

³⁵ For an examination of the religious presence of Elvis on the Internet see Reece, Gregory L. *Elvis Religion: Exploring The Cult of the King* (I B Tauris 2006), Ch. 7

³⁶ Gottdiener, Mark. *Dead Elvis as Other Jesus* in Chadwick, Vernon. *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion*. (Westview 1997), p 189

³⁷ Neal & Janice Gregory. *When Elvis Died: Enshrining A Legend* in Chadwick, Vernon. *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion*. (Westview 1997), p 227

images. My inclusion, too, of an interview with Charles Stone (Elvis' former Tour Producer 1972-1977) sought to get an 'insider's' view of the man, his influence and the sad events of that fateful day in August '77. Furthermore Stone's current role as Manager of Elvis Tribute Artist (ETA) Kraig Parker positioned him perfectly to comment on the present day Elvis phenomenon and fan identificatory practices in the shape of Elvis Tribute Artists.

The death of Elvis had a remarkably powerful impact on the life of a major contributor in *Elvis Ain't Dead!* ETA Simon Patrick who, like many Elvis fans including Gregory L. Reece, cites the death of the King as a turning point. For Patrick, though only a young child sitting in the back of his father's car, the headlines on the radio stating that 'the King is dead...he has just died in a hospital in Memphis, Tennessee' and his father's reaction – that of crying his eyes out – struck a chord deeply entrenched within Patrick's being. Similarly Reece's experience of Elvis' death and his subsequent journey recorded lucidly and entertainingly in *Elvis Religion: Exploring the Cult of the King* (2006) recall childhood memories:

And then there is my own story, for I grew up in the deep south, a child of ten when the news of Elvis's death came over the radio. What I remember most...is running...to my cousin Theresa's house...Theresa was in my estimation at the time the biggest Elvis fan in the world. A couple of years older than me and now allowed to decorate her room to her own taste, her bedroom walls were covered with posters of Elvis³⁸...I needed to find Theresa, not so I could comfort her, for

³⁸ Reece reveals in an interview that he saw his older cousin Theresa 'ripping posters of Elvis off the wall and crying uncontrollably' at the 'big news' of Elvis' death in *Birmingham Public Library Presents*:

my ten-year-old self was barely capable of thinking first of how to help someone else, but to have her tell me why this news was so important, why everyone at home was talking about it, and how I myself should respond. I am too young to remember the assassination of JFK or MLK, too young to remember the moon landing or Watergate. My first national memory, my first memory of a world-specific event, is my memory of the death of Elvis.³⁹

In my final voiceover I hoped to explain the proliferation and continuity of the Dead Elvis phenomenon by making reference to Elvis Presley Enterprises who will ensure the longevity of mass mediated rememberings of Elvis' image for years to come. However I wanted to end the documentary with the fans' voice being heard – *not* the narrator or director. This was symptomatic of my desire to give a voice to real-life fans as discussed above. I chose John Lennon's quote, 'Before Elvis there was nothing',⁴⁰ to end my film as I felt it summarized concisely the strength of feeling within Elvis fans towards their idol; the idea that Elvis was the King of Rock 'N' Roll and also the idea that he was the first and greatest pop-cultural icon which gave rise to an unprecedented phenomenon after his death and will continue on universally until the end of time...

Gregory L. Reece – author of *Elvis Religion: The Cult of the King* (interview with B.P. Librarian Sandi Lee). This video is available on You Tube (*Elvis Religion: The Cult of the King*) at <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=1j-0MgroErs> Accessed: December 2007

³⁹ Reece, Gregory L. *Elvis Religion: Exploring The Cult of the King* (I B Tauris 2006), pp 5-6

⁴⁰ Baker, Trevor. *The Little Book of Elvis* (Carlton 2002)

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