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Velvet Elvis buries his tribute act at 42; no comeback tour planned

Obits of the rock 'n' rol kind
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The Velvet Elvis was a fixture in the local music community, bringing equal measures of heartbreak, swagger and tenderness wherever he went. The Elvis tribute act was a favorite with all ages — from senior citizens who had seen the real thing to kids who knew Presley's songs from video games.

But the Velvet Elvis died on Aug. 16, exactly 34 years after the actual King's death. Velvet was 42, the same age Presley was when he passed. An online shrine remains at thevelvetelvis.com.

"I had an official funeral," said Jonny Barber, the Denver musician who was the Velvet Elvis for more than seven years. "My mom and dad came and read a eulogy, and we had a cardboard effigy of Velvet so we could burn it, so he could be cremated. I sang 'Peace in the Valley' to Velvet as he was being cremated, and we spread the ashes at his final resting place at Fairmount Cemetery.

"It was a beautiful day. And it was wild because the letter 'E' appeared in the clouds. I'm not lying. I got a picture.

"Halfway through the funeral service, a rainbow came out overhead. Later on, as we were spreading the ashes, we took some photos, and there are these lights and orbs that are floating around us in the picture that we cannot explain.

"It made me conclude that Elvis is indeed everywhere."

Velvet was born Jan. 8, 2004, — the 79th anniversary of Presley's birth — at a rock show when Barber's friend told him how uncannily similar his profile was to Presley's.

"Do you know any of his songs," she asked Barber, who was playing with his former band Spiv at the time.

Barber kicked into a stirring "Heartbreak Hotel," the crowd went wild, and a new character was born.

"I'd tapped into my inner Elvis," Barber said.

The Velvet Elvis lived quite a life, having met original members of Presley's band and spent time with Larry Gellar, Presley's hairstylist and spiritual mentor.

Velvet's favorite era was "Elvis," often referred to as "The '68 Comeback Special."

"The comeback special was the best thing he ever did," Barber said. "He was in his prime ... Plus it was in 1968, and I was born in 1968."

Barber's most memorable moment as the Velvet Elvis came when he was delivering a singing telegram to



Jonny Barber buried his alter-ego Velvet Elvis exactly 34 years after the actual King's death. (RJ Sangosti, Denver Post file)

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a woman at an Applebee's.

"I looked her in the eye and sang 'Can't Help Falling in Love,' and she started crying," remembered Barber. "I kissed her, too, and she told me, 'That's the best kiss I've had in 50 years,' which is the greatest compliment I've ever been given."

Barber decided earlier this year that the act had run its course, and it was time to focus on other musical endeavors. The character's clothing now resides in a shrine inside his recording studio, the Church of Rock 'n' Roll.

"I just turned 42, and Elvis was 42 when he died, and I thought, 'Why not keep it legit?'," said Barber, whose latest band is Jonny Barber & the Living Deads. "But the real decision was to answer the question: 'Who am I?' I felt like if I met Elvis, he would say, 'That's great that you sing my songs and shake your hips, but who are you and what else to you have to offer?'"

"It's a decision to get back to my own songwriting and performing. Although I'll likely still do a couple Elvis songs in the set."

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