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### INTERVIEWS

## Jonny Barber putting Velvet Elvis to rest with one last gig and a candlelight vigil next week

By Jon Solomon Mon., Aug. 8 2011 at 8:32 AM  
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Since birthing Velvet on Elvis Presley's birthday in 2004, Jonny Barber has gone on to sing at both Graceland and Sun Studios, he's met members of The King's band, as well as Larry Geller, Elvis's hair stylist and spiritual adviser, and he's had the pleasure of hearing first hand stories about The King from people who knew him well.



Barber, who's been called an Elvis emulator instead of an impersonator, will do [one last gig](#) as the Velvet Elvis at Rock-a-Billies on Saturday, August 13, and then on Tuesday, August 16, the same day Presley died, Barber will put the Velvet Elvis persona to rest at mock funeral and candlelight vigil at Fairmount Cemetery.

Barber, who's 42, the same age Presley was when he died, is letting Velvet Elvis go to concentrate more on his band, Jonny Barber & the Living Deads. We caught up with Barber to talk about The King, life as Velvet Elvis and his work with the Living Deads.

**Westword:** So you're putting the Velvet Elvis to rest to concentrate more on the Living Deads, right?

**Jonny Barber:** Yeah, I've got Jonny Barber and the Living Deads going right now. They're just a great group of people. We've got a great band going right now, and the tour has been spectacular. The response has been really good. There was that and I just turned 42, which, of course, is the age Elvis was when he died. So I thought it was kind of fitting to leave the building if I want to keep it legit, right?

### How long have you been doing Velvet Elvis?

I started doing it in 2004 on Elvis's birthday, January 8. I had a friend of mine -- which is kind of funny that it was the friend got me started doing Velvet -- and I was doing a show in Cleveland, and she took me to Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. There was a picture in the Elvis exhibit of Elvis with Jerry Kennedy, who was Denver's old police chief back in the day, and who Elvis was really good friends with.

I sang at Jerry's eightieth birthday party about a week before we left. Jerry actually gave me the plaque that used to hang in the Denver police gymnasium that Elvis actually put up the money to build. So Jerry gave me this piece of like holy regalia, if you will, the Elvis plaque. Then it was so cool that I'm at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and there's a picture of Elvis and Jerry and Elvis's Denver Police badge. It was just so cool, and I was there with the friend, the one that first saw me and said, "You know, you're profile is a dead ringer for Elvis. Have you ever tried singing Elvis?" I said, "No."

So at Elvis's birthday in 2004, I staged a bunch of random Elvis sightings around Denver. I started at Gunther Toody's because I figured that would be a good starting place. So I just popped in there at lunch time and just surprised everybody. Well, there was this Elvis birthday party already going on in there, and they hired an Elvis impersonator. So I burst

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into this party and here's this guy singing for them, and then everyone turns around and goes, "No, there he is!" So I kind of ruined this guy's gig. I feel bad. I was singing on the 16th Street Mall buses and all over town. I went to Rockmount and sang for Jack Weil for a while. So that's how it started.

So it's been seven years, and in that time I've sung at Graceland and Sun Studios, and I've kissed women who were Elvis's girlfriends back in the day. I hung out with Elvis's band -- Scotty Moore and DJ Fontanna. So it's just been crazy the kind of opportunities. And I even got to sing at Red Rocks for Swallow Hill's world's largest music lesson. So I'm on stage singing Elvis with John Hickenlooper. I mean, it's just been like completely... It was like a joke that got completely out of control.

#### **But you ran with it and it sounds like it was a cool experience.**

Yeah, at some point I'm going to compile all the stories. I'm working a book called *In His Shoes*. Just my life as The King or as the pseudo King. Maybe I'm like Little John compared to... What was his name? Not Richard the Lionheart, but the substitute. But you know, every show I play, without fail, someone would come out of the audience and be like, "You know, I met Elvis this one time and let me tell you this story."

I just collected all of these stories, and they're like... There's one thread. It's just the commonality in there and that was that Elvis was just so incredibly generous and just very polite. You never talk to anybody that said that he was anything but polite to them and said, "Yes, ma'am" and "Excuse me, ma'am." He was just an incredibly generous person.

And then, of course, when I sang for Jerry Kennedy, he said, "Man, Elvis didn't care about money at all. Money was not a motivating factor for him. He just really wanted to look out for people." I've talked with people who knew him all of his life and they're like, "You know him as good as I do." I even got to meet with Larry Geller, who was Elvis's hair stylist and spiritual mentor.

#### **Oh yeah, I remember seeing him in documentary, but I forget what it was called.**

It was called *At the Gates*. I was actually at the premier of that movie in Memphis, and I got to sit down with Larry for about an hour and a half and talk about Elvis's spirituality and the books he read and different things he was into. Larry said he's got a lot of Elvis impersonators who will come talk to him, and it's never about the spirituality or that side of it. It's about the clothes and the music.

So, he was really impressed that I was familiar with the books they were in to. Of course, if you've ever been to a candlelight vigil at Graceland, you know it borders on some kind of religious cult. I have people emailing me pictures from the candlelight vigil saying, "Look, you can see Elvis's spirit it the air." I'm like, "Wow!" I mean, really?

#### **I would imagine meeting all these people you've got a whole other understanding of who Elvis was. Did that seep into your performances as the Velvet Elvis?**

Yeah, that's what I've had people tell me, too. They'd say you're not really an Elvis impersonator; you're an Elvis emulator. You'll do these contests and do this other stuff, and they'll dock you points if your lip doesn't curl just right or your costume isn't authentic. I never really wanted to be like, you know... It's all the trappings and everything so much as it captures the energy of what he was about.

#### **It's been a while since I've seen you live, but you do the costumes and whatnot, right?.**

It's funny, I'd wear a jumpsuit, and I'd get this: "Well, you're too skinny to be Elvis." Everybody wants to remember the late-'70s, right? But if look at the clothes... When I was out in Graceland, we both weighed exactly the same -- 170 pounds. When he first started playing in Vegas, he was trim. He styled the jumpsuits to look like a karate gi because he was just really getting into karate and all that at the time. So he wanted it to look sort of like a karate uniform.

But yeah, he weighed 170 pounds and was trim, and then when I met Jerry Kennedy, he was like, "Man, you're the same shoe size." He said I'm about an inch taller and that was about it. But then you come out in the jumpsuit and people go, "Oh, you're not all huge or sweaty or whatever." For some people, it's hard to lose that later era.

You know, the thing people don't understand, too, is that when I talked with Larry Geller, he told me that Elvis had leukemia. He had bone cancer, and that he was in so much pain near the end of life that before he'd do shows he'd be crying to Larry and wasn't sure he'd go on. And believing in spirituality like they did, they used to step out back and Larry would lay his hands on Elvis and by the laying on of hands he would actually pray over him that he would be strong enough to make it through the gig.

They just wanted to keep that private. Back then, celebrity culture was a lot different than it is now. They wanted to keep that aspect of it private. But when you know, when people

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understand that he was taking all of these pain killers and this different stuff, when look at it through the light of... you know, I'm not saying he wasn't facing addiction problems either, but if you look at through the light of that, the guy was sick and was dealing with a really painful disease, it definitely makes you have a little more empathy for the guy.

One other quick one that's funny is that I grew up Mormon in Salt Lake City. There's actually an Elvis Book of Mormon. These missionaries actually went to Graceland. Anybody who wanted to talk about God, Elvis would just sit down with them and be like, "Okay, lets do it." So he sat down with these Mormons and some guy actually made a movie that was saying that Elvis had plans to get baptized Mormon and all this stuff.

But he actually read the Book of Mormon and highlighted all these parts in it and later gave it to one of the Osmond brothers. Now it actually sits in the church archives in Salt Lake City. It's in the vault under the church office tower or something. Some other guy wrote a book about how Elvis was Jewish. What was that one, *Elvis Shmelvis*? Yeah, I think it was. The legends around him just continue to grow.

### **Has anyone told you about any really far-out things about Elvis that might not be credible?**

There's some stuff that I'd want to keep more personal, just out of respect, that I don't know that it's info that Larry would really want, you know, broadcast to a lot of people. He was kind of sharing some pretty personal stuff with me. I don't know. I think at a certain point in his life, he kind of just looked at himself and just was trying to figure, "Why him? Why did he become who he was and what was it all about?"

Larry told me about this time when Elvis was driving an RV out in the desert with him and he stepped out of the van and he claimed that he had a vision and saw Christ coming out of the clouds. It was like, "Elvis, here's your mission" and that's when he started being really generous.

I even heard that when he was born that his father, Vernon... They were too poor to go to a hospital, obviously, and there was a dirt floor in their house, and so they were having twins, and the other twin was stillborn -- Jesse Garon. But while they were waiting for the other twin to be born, they wrapped Elvis in a blanket and set him in a shoe box. I mean, Jesus was in the swaddling clothes in the manger, and they put Elvis in a shoe box. And they set him by the over to keep him warm, and his dad, Vernon, said there was just this blue light coming off of and surrounding him. I said, "It was probably just the pilot coming off from the stove." But he claims he saw this transcendental light. It's just crazy, man.

### **So how do you feel about letting the Velvet Elvis go?**

Oh, I'm sad. It's crazy, I've had people calling me that are, like, in tears. They call me and they're like, "No, you can't do it." It makes you realize that for what he achieved, you know, I still feel really young at 42. Forty is the new thirty, you know, whatever. And I still feel pretty young, and you think that guy achieved all that in the span of my lifetime, and it's kind of... To have it taken away while it's still relevant, while the act is still in demand and everything, I guess it is sad. But it's also... I don't know. It is a little sad, but at the same time, I really feel that if I was to meet Elvis, I feel like he would be saying, like, you know, "Hey, that's great you sing me really well or you can do me, but what do you have to offer? What are *you* all about?"

Everybody's got a song within him. Everybody has their own song and their own rhythm that they can hear. Especially as a musician, you really want to be known for what you do. So it's been good knowing that Velvet is coming to an end has really put the priority back of really getting back into my own songwriting and focusing on what legacy I want to live and leave behind. So we've got a brand new record out with the Living Deads.

### **When did that come out?**

July 26. So we put out just before the tour. It's called Jonny Barber vs. The Living Deads. We're just really excited about the record and what we're doing. I feel like the new songs are the best we've done as a group. We toured Europe last October, and now we're doing this U.S. tour and we're getting a great response, and I think going through my Elvis period really helped teach me how to be a good singer and how to really entertain people.

And I think more than that it helped me realize that, really, with the most powerful singers and writers, it's not coming from a place of ego. It's like you're more of a channel. You're coming from more of a deep place. It's not about getting up on the stage and saying, "Look at me, I'm so cool. I'm so important." It's more like, "We're all in this together." Elvis has become so big that he's just become part of the ether. He's just become part of the fabric of America. He's so much bigger than just himself as an ego or a personality. So I just want to find that song, you know, they call it the lost chord. In search of the lost chord. I just want to find that and write that song and leave my legacy.

### **I would imagine the spirit of Elvis is still with you and somewhat of inspiration to the Living Deads.**

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Yeah. Absolutely. We'll still sing some Elvis songs in our set. I'll still definitely be doing a few numbers. Especially when I realize that I've sang those songs in front of six year old kids and they know the words and senior citizens. I've sung at parties where nobody spoke any English and people who don't even know how to say, "Hello" they can say, "Don't be cruel." Elvis and Johnny Cash, those two guys... It's like some people look at them like it's Jesus and John the Baptist or something. And their influence that they had on popular music cannot be understated. At some level anyone who picks up a guitar and gets on a stage is an Elvis impersonator. So his spirit, I'm sure, will live on. I'll always be a fan for sure.

### **So what exactly are you doing with Living Deads now?**

It's not quite psychobilly; it's really revved up rockabilly. I think Randee and Symphony are more on the psychobilly side, and I'm a little more on the traditional side. But we love it all. As long as they're good songs and it's got a good rhythm to it and we can really get people dancing and stuff. We're just going to keep writing songs and hopefully tour more and just really get the word out.

I'm hoping that we can do something like what the Stray Cats did where they could cross over a bit and reach some more kind of mainstream audiences. There hasn't been an audience that we've played in front of that isn't dancing on the first couple of songs. It's got such such a universal appeal, but it's been a long time since rockabilly has been in the mainstream.

### **Is rockabilly is still huge in Europe.**

In Europe, I was getting pulled off the stage and crowd-surfed. I mean, I opened for Nirvana when I was back in college. I lived up in Olympia, Washington, and that was that last time I crowd-surfed. My hair was three-foot long, and I was opening for Kurt Cobain. That was a while ago. So now I'm playing this rockabilly show and these crazy Spaniards just grabbed me off the stage. We even had one guy in Spain who was trying to eat Symphony's bass string. He was gnawing on it and stuff.

I don't know what it is, but I've never played in front of audiences that have showed as much appreciation as the Europeans. They were nuts. So I guess a lot of it is that there all these great rockabilly bands in Europe, but then the singer sings with an accent. And then we show up, and we sing, and they're like, "Oh, that's what it's supposed to sound like.

Even the Stray Cats -- they moved to England to get discovered. They were in New York City, and they weren't going anywhere. And they saw that the rockabilly revival was happening in the '80s. So they packed up and moved to London, and they got their record deal and everything there and got some momentum going and came back to the U.S. Once they made in the Europe, that's when the U.S. appreciated them.

### **It's kind of like what happened with Hendrix.**

Hendrix, yeah, same thing. He was starving to death in the Village, and they took him over to England, and the next stop for him in the U.S. was the Monterey Pop Festival. I think it's anything that's familiar. You see it all the time. With American rock and roll, the Eastern Europeans especially, they just completely freak out. Once the Iron Curtain came up and everything and then you got these rockabillies coming over there -- it just really embodies the new freedom that they are experiencing everything. There are a lot of theories about why that is. But all I know is that I saw it first hand for sure.

### **How long have the Living Deads been together?**

A little over a year. With Symphony, her third or fourth gig was in front of 10,000 people at Red Rocks. But we were doing it as the Rhythm Razors then, and then these guys came up with their moniker the Living Deads and wanted to rock it that way. We're still a pretty new band, but it's been a pretty incredible year. We've accomplished so much in a pretty short period of time.

### **Are a lot people coming to see you that know you from Velvet Elvis?**

Oh yeah. It got to the point... I would do singing telegrams and show up at people's work and sing for them. I married the Denver Post to the Rocky Mountain News as Elvis. I mean, I sang in the cathedrals. I sang in the Colorado Supreme Court House for a judge one time for his birthday. They're pulling me up through the security center, and they're just flagging me in, "Oh, it's Elvis. Let's just flag him in. He's got to see the judge.

It got to the point where I'd be sitting and having a bite on Colfax or something and somebody would turn around go, "Hey, you sung at my uncle's wedding" or "You were at that thing for so-and-so." It was like, "Wow. Have I really done that many shows?"

It's been a really bizarre few years. And then I'm like crooning to a woman at an Applebee's one time -- it was her seventieth birthday -- and as I'm leaving, her kids come over and said, "You know, she was Elvis's girlfriend back in '56." And she was crying. If you can make Elvis's ex-girlfriend cry tears of joy when you sing "Can't Help Falling in Love"... Eat them apples, you know what I mean?

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The power of The King's voice, it's just "wow!" Just completely bizarre. I even sang at my daughter's elementary school for career day, and they're like, "What does your dad do for a living?" "Oh, he's the king of rock and roll." So Elvis pretty much bought all the furniture in my house. I owe Elvis quite a bit. He's been good to me.

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