

Whiskey, Strippers and a Man Who Thinks He's Elvis

When The King offers to drive you around Vegas in a pink Cadillac, you say yes.

BY A.J. BAIME NOVEMBER 2, 2015

TRAVEL



n the second floor of Jesse Garon's Las Vegas apartment, there's a closet—Elvis's closet. Inside are four Elvis mannequins, six pairs of Elvis shades encased like rare *objets* inside plexiglass, and dozens of Elvis outfits. Old Elvis, young Elvis, even military Elvis. Jesse slips on a young black Elvis suit with a

O gold belt buckle “big enough to eat a Thanksgiving dinner off of,” as he puts it. When he slides on his shades, he transforms. He is now Vegas Elvis, king of The King impersonators.

Downstairs, he pours vodka and turns on his Elvis pinball machine. Out comes a photo album: Jesse as Elvis on *20/20*, *Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*. He even appeared in *Playgirl* (March 2004), and had injections in a place you don’t wanna know, so that he could offer the camera every inch of his talent. (“It was for charity,” he says.)



TOMO MUSCIONICO

Out back sits a car draped under canvas. When Jesse peels off that canvas, it's like peeling off skin, revealing a beating heart underneath: a topless pink '55 Cadillac 62 Series—our chariot for the night—not so different from the Caddy that Elvis himself bought on July 7, 1955.

We've come to see the Vegas that few ever do: Sin City after midnight, arguably the most morally corrupt town on earth, through the eyes of a man who has given everything he has to embody The King of this town, the pink Caddy included. When Jesse fires up the car, the V-8 rumbles like a dinosaur with a turtle stuck in its throat. No doubt: It's going to be a long night. He puts the car in gear and a song pops up on the updated CD player—Elvis Presley, right on cue: *Bright light city gonna set my soul/Gonna set my soul on fire... Viva Las Vegas!*



Most tourists drive through Las Vegas in a rental. When we slice through the Strip in the Caddy, the crowds go nuts. Jesse takes it in stride, waving and honking the horn. The car makes crunching and lurching noises, especially when he clips a curb with his white walls.

“Don’t worry about the car,” he yells over the music. “This thing weighs 5,000 pounds. You can’t hurt it.”

We pass the Westgate, where the real Elvis once lived in the penthouse, and the Stratosphere, off which tourists [can bungee jump](#), for a fee. Jesse begins to tell the story of himself and his car.

“I was born in Mesquite, Texas,” he says. “My mom’s a sheriff from Dallas. Alice from Dallas. Ever since I was 13, Elvis was the only kind of music I thought there was. When I finished high school, I had to choose between college and Elvis. So I came to Vegas with \$1,800 and a U-Haul.” He got some plastic surgery to make himself look more like The King. Then he chose an alias. Jesse Garon is not his real name, but rather that of Elvis Presley’s stillborn twin brother ([minus an “i”](#) in the spelling).



TOMO MUSCIONICO

All Jesse needed now was the right ride to compete with the other Elvi. “I found this guy with an old warehouse full of cars,” he says. “He agreed to sell me this one for a good price. It was black, and when he found out I was gonna paint it pink, he wasn’t going to sell it to me. I started to panic because I wanted it so *bad!* I promised him I wouldn’t paint it pink.” He makes a *fuck-that-guy* face. “Then I painted it pink.” Elvis’s 1955 pink Caddy wasn’t originally pink either, Jesse points out. “Anyway, this car used to belong to Lucille Ball.”

The Cadillac is now a big part [of his business](#)—tours for tourists, parades with the mayor and Jesse’s bread and butter, weddings. He picks up couples, takes them to a chapel, ushers them around for photos and even performs the ceremony.

“I was one of the first ordained Elvis reverends in Vegas,” he says, cruising through the intersection of Las Vegas Boulevard and Tropicana. “Make that the first. Yeah, the first ordained Elvis in town. I did 650 weddings last year. I love

my job. I deal with people on the happiest day of their lives. All I have to do is not crash the car, and they remember me for the rest of their lives.”



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After 24 years in this town, he has his share of stories: the time he ate two goldfish out of a barroom fish tank after losing a double-or-nothing bet on a pinball game. Or the time he came *this close* to having his own reality show with a male Diana Ross impersonator. Best of all: the ceremony when he was given the key to the city by Oscar Goodman, the Vegas’ mayor at the time (and in a former life, an infamous mob lawyer who represented Frank “Lefty” Rosenthal and Meyer Lansky).

“I’ve been driving around sticking that key into every hole I can find,” Jesse says, “and not one of those holes has worked.”

“This town’s been good to me,” he says as we motor into the parking lot of [Piero’s](#) on Convention Center Drive. “And it’s been bad to me too. Anyone

hungry?” Elvis is. Our night begins.

A short list of clients who’ve savored the classic Italian fare at Piero’s: Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Michael Jordan, Justin Timberlake and all the old-time Vegas stars from Sinatra to Jerry Lewis. Martin Scorsese shot a [dinner scene](#) here for *Casino* with Robert De Niro, Sharon Stone and Joe Pesci. Except for the specials, the menu hasn’t changed since the place opened in ’82; all the usual suspects are here—linguini alla vongole, et al.

When we arrive, it’s late and the kitchen’s closed—unless you’re Elvis. At which point, doors hurl open and a makeshift table is set in the kitchen, tablecloth and all. Out come plates of linguine and chops of steak. “This is the second best piece of meat I’ve had all day,” Jesse says, winking. “Food fit for The King.” Waiters hover, pouring top-shelf red.



Jesse sends me out to the parking lot to get Elvis shades for all the waiters. He's got a bag of novelties in the Caddy's trunk, which has to be opened with a screwdriver since the lock is busted. Later, as we exit Piero's, he mumbles audibly: "Great food. But if Joe Pesci were here, I'd kick his ass right now."

We throttle a few blocks into the parking lot of the [Double Down Saloon](#)—dive-bar mecca. Although this place is known for a cocktail called Ass Juice, we order more civilized whiskeys—light on the booze for Jesse, as he's driving. It's here near the pool tables where we pick up a friend, [Kalani Kokonuts](#)—former stripper, a legend of Vegas burlesque and a stealth gearhead. A sparkling-eyed Hawaiian in heels and a long skintight dress—as a burlesque dancer would be in a Vegas dive bar—Kokonuts has performed on just about every stage in town. In her spare time, she sings in a rock band called [Thee Pussyrammers](#).

She suggests a photo op in the Double Down's bathroom, a particularly storied alcove in Sin City. Off we go: Elvis Presley, Kalani Kokonuts, the tipsy writer, the photographer and a bouncer who's keen on making sure we're not doing anything we shouldn't. The door closes behind us, and Jesse starts channeling The King: *Lord Almighty, I feel my temperature rising...*



Outside in the parking lot, Kokonuts gets a load of the ride. “Nice car!” she squeals. When you’re in a ’55 pink Caddy well after midnight with a large-breasted dancer, nothing bad can happen. We go hunting for some of Jesse’s favorite spots, the ones most people don’t know about. The top down, he insists his Elvis hair is bulletproof up to 75 mph. Kokonuts says her hairdo goes to 100 mph. “I should have a D.O.T. sticker on the back of my head,” she says.

We motor down wedding chapel alley, which is Jesse Garon’s equivalent of Wall Street. Lined up on South Las Vegas Boulevard: the Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel, Graceland Wedding Chapel and Jesse’s go-to spot, [A Little White Wedding Chapel](#), a drive-through experience where Britney Spears got hitched, and Michael Jordan, too. We pull through and have the attendant open the “Just Married” white gates on the way out, for the full experience.

Has Jesse ever been married? “Vegas is a great place *to get* married,” he answers, “not *to be* married.”



TOMO MUSCIONICO

There's no better time than 3 a.m. to look at some art. Jesse shows us his favorite pieces: the Rat Pack mural on the side of [Koolsville Tattoo](#) on Las Vegas Boulevard. There's young Elvis, and middle-aged Sinatra, and the famous "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada" sign. Is it graffiti, or a masterpiece worthy of MoMA? "It's both," says Jesse. "That's the point." Kokonuts agrees. She produces a tequila flask in the shape of a banana, right on target again.

The Caddy still has a few drops of gas left, and any number of destinations to call on. It could be [Mermaid's Casino](#) on Fremont, a cartoon of a joint with slot machines, a bar and a kitchen serving deep-fried Twinkies and Oreos, 99 cents a pop. Or [Dino's Lounge](#), a howling spot unmatched in town for its karaoke bizarreness. ("Sorry folks," says Jesse, "no free show tonight.") The bar's motto: "Getting Vegas Drunk Since 1962." "It's family-operated," Jesse says. "Cheap drinks, and they treat me like The King."



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We ultimately end up at the old White Cross Liquor Store/[Vickie's Diner](#), reputed to be the oldest diner in Vegas and Hunter S. Thompson's favorite spot to finish a night. Kokonuts orders 7-Up and some pie (winking as she pulls out her banana flask), and Jesse orders the Ground Round Steak (\$8.50), which he always orders here, with extra gravy and extra ranch on the salad. The food is straight-up diner fare, like you'd eat in any town in America. Only this place is on South Las Vegas Boulevard and we're on the edge of sunrise, and somehow, that makes the flavors pop in a magical way.

"Hey," Jesse says as we pile into the Caddy on the way out. "This car ain't a hybrid. It gets 7 mpg." We pull around the corner to an all-night fuel station, right at the first hint of sunrise. It's that moment in Vegas when you feel that tug of desperation, like you're on a highwire over an existential pit. This night can't possibly be over. Jesse keeps the Caddy's CD player running, and on comes that voice again—The King telling us what Jesse already knows:

*There's a thousand pretty women waitin' out there/And they're all livin' devil
may care/And I'm just the devil with love to spare... Viva Las Vegas.*



TOMO MUSCIONICO

Piero's

355 Convention Center Drive, 702-369-2305

The Double Down Saloon

4640 Paradise Road, 702-291-5775

A Little White Wedding Chapel

1301 South Las Vegas Boulevard, 702-382-5943

Koolsville Tattoo

1501 South Las Vegas Boulevard, 702-639-1264

Mermaid's Casino

32 Fremont Street, 702-382-5777

Dino’s Lounge

1516 South Las Vegas Boulevard, 702-382-3894

Vickie’s Diner

1700 South Las Vegas Boulevard, 702-444-4459

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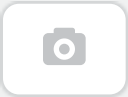
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