

# friday

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## Walking in Memphis

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More than three decades after his death, devoted fans are still grieving for Elvis Presley. From his humble birthplace in the Mississippi Delta, to his Graceland mansion and the bright lights of Nashville, Jeremy Miles dons his blue suede shoes to follow in the footsteps of the King of Rock 'n' Roll

By Jeremy Miles, Friday magazine  
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Friday



Image Credit: Supplied picture

The neon lights of Memphis inspired several of his tracks, many of which were recorded at Sun Studio.

It is 35 years since they carried the bloated body of the King of Rock 'n' Roll from his Graceland mansion in Memphis, USA. Yet still the graffiti outside the lavish, white pillared pile that he called home says it all: "Just pretend Elvis lives". For years desperate devotees hung onto the vain hope that his death had somehow been staged, that Elvis was alive and well, working in a video store or perhaps hiding out somewhere producing new material. Never mind that at the age of 42 he was addicted to junk food and prescription drugs, that he weighed almost 130 kilograms and that his once lean physique was in ruins.

For some his death, on August 16, 1977, was simply too much to comprehend. This year Elvis would have been 77 years old and still tens of thousands of fans make the pilgrimage to Graceland almost every week. They hold vigils, light candles and weep at his graveside, but now only the most delusional among them hang onto the dream that Elvis might actually still be alive. For every truly besotted fan there are dozens who are just curious to know a little more about the man who changed the face of popular music and gave the world extraordinary hits like Hound Dog, Heartbreak Hotel and Jailhouse Rock.

I made the journey to the heart of Elvis's world, joining fans on a hugely popular six-day package that offers a special insight into the astonishing rags to riches story that was Elvis Aaron Presley's life. The tour, simply called Elvis and the Southern Sounds, takes in his humble birthplace in the Mississippi Delta; the city of Memphis where he grew up and found fame; and the hotspots of the Nashville recording industry where so much of his music was created.

The main focus though is Graceland – the 23-room, brown-limestone mansion bought by Presley in 1957 as

a refuge from the screaming fans. Ironically the home he hoped would bring him some privacy is now an officially designated National Historic Landmark and visited by nearly 700,000 people a year. The house had originally been constructed in the classical revival style in 1939. Records show that Elvis paid \$102,500 for it. Today its price is estimated at more than \$100 million dollars.

## **Experience life as Elvis did**

We stayed 200 metres away on the other side of Elvis Presley Boulevard. A few years back this road was known simply as Highway 51 but folks round these parts don't like to miss a trick. Which is why we were staying at the Heartbreak Hotel and guess what? It was at the end of Lonely Street. For fans, stepping across the threshold at Graceland is a chance to experience life as Elvis did. Walking through the bizarrely decorated spaces, including the famed Jungle Room with its indoor waterfall, they can get a glimpse of the singer's exotic tastes in decor, a feel for this place he called home.

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In the grounds they can visit the Meditation Garden where he went for quiet reflection and where he is laid to rest alongside his parents Gladys and Vernon, and grandmother Minnie Mae. There is also a small memorial to his twin brother Jesse who died at birth. Across the highway Heartbreak Hotel does a roaring trade in giant cheeseburgers and – “Elvis' favourite” – fried banana and peanut butter sandwiches. This was the King's midnight snack of choice, brought to his room by staff and eaten by the stack. Frankly just looking at them feels like an artery-clogging venture that could well

end with a one-way ticket to the cardiac ward.

That doesn't stop the queues of fans eager to sample the King's favourite comfort food though. So, a brief chance to live like Elvis and maybe even die like him too? The real Elvis Presley story has long been distorted by myths and misinformation. An entire industry exists that parts people from both their senses and their money. It does so with relentless efficiency, churning out Elvis tat that is astonishing in its tawdry inventiveness. You can buy anything from an ornamental Graceland snow-storm to a replica Vegas-style rhinestone studded bat-wing collared jump-suit.

However, for all the superficiality and artifice there's something genuinely moving about this tour, which combines a fascinating journey through Tennessee with a big slice of social and musical history. The people on our tour – 98 of them in two coach-loads – came from all kinds of backgrounds and ranged in age from early 20s to mid 70s. They were united by a common love of Elvis's music and a fascination for the story of the boy from the hillbilly backwoods who went on to conquer the world.

This tour offered some wonderful experiences, including a night out on Beale Street, spiritual home of the Memphis blues, and a guided tour around Sam Phillips' famed Sun Studios. It was here in 1953 that the 18-year-old Presley paid four dollars to make some test recordings. Phillips – a man who would go on to shape the careers of Johnny Cash, BB King, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Howlin' Wolf – instantly recognised his potential and offered to take the young Elvis under his wing. A year later That's Alright Mama was released by Sun Records as Presley's first single. Things moved fast with fans drawn to his smouldering looks and high-energy performances.

That same year he acquired a new manager in the form of charismatic hard-nosed music promotor Colonel Tom Parker, signed with RCA Records and scored his first chart-topping single with Heartbreak Hotel. It was the beginning of a journey that took Elvis from lean, mean rock 'n' roll star and teen idol to a lost soul destined to end his days as a tragic, bloated, multi-millionaire icon adrift and lonely in the pleasure palaces of Las Vegas, drowning in a sea of excess. But the fans would always love him. In Tupelo, Mississippi – where Elvis was born, dirt-poor, in a two-room shack – they are told how as a boy he had to shoot squirrels for the pot.

Our tour joined the line of hundreds of Elvis fans from all over the world who view his humble first home with tears in their eyes. There was even a stop at the neighbourhood hardware store where, way back in 1945, a salesman called Forrest L Bobo unwittingly wrote himself into rock 'n' roll history. The occasion – immortalised on a plaque on the shop wall – found Bobo persuading the ten-year-old Elvis that he didn't really want a gun for his forthcoming birthday, he'd be much better off with a guitar. It's kept the hardware store in customers ever since, supplying Elvis-related knick-knacks and stories along with the paint and plumbing supplies.

### **The soundtrack to their youth**

The best surprise of all though came when the tour bus rolled into Nashville. A couple of days checking out Music City included a visit to the old RCA Studio B where the tour party got to make its very own recording. There was a chance to see the Country Music Hall of Fame, free time to enjoy the Honky Tonks on Broadway and more, but nothing came close to the thrill of actually laying down a track on Elvis's sound-stage. Standing in the same room where Elvis cut more than 250 tracks,

the fans were invited to lay down a massed-voiced version of his heart-rending ballad Can't Help Falling In Love.

To be honest, it was dreadful, but they left with huge smiles on their faces clutching souvenir CDs. The sense of history in that simple studio was enough to really get to the diehard fans. This, after all, was the studio where Elvis cut It's Now or Never and Devil In Disguise, where the Everly Brothers recorded Til I Kissed You and Cathy's Clown and where Roy Orbison laid down Only The Lonely and Crying. For older fans simply being in the room that gave birth to the soundtrack of their youth brought the memories flooding back.

One first generation Teddy boy, now a mile-mannered 70-year-old, told me how back in the 1950s he had eloped with his 17-year-old girlfriend. Singing Elvis songs had kept their spirits high as they drove through the night with parents and police in hot pursuit. More than half a century later this couple were still together, still very much in love and still jiving... in a room that just happened to contain Elvis Presley's piano.

### **Inside info**

Emirates flies to Memphis via New York or Dallas return from Dh7,070 ([www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)).

Jeremy travelled with Archers Direct, which offers the six-day 'Elvis and the Southern Sounds' itinerary from Dh7,757 per person starting in London. See [www.archersdirect.co.uk](http://www.archersdirect.co.uk).