

HOW SOFT YOU TREAD ABOVE ME

By Michael Ventura

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Two, maybe three years ago, in Lubbock, late on a hot weekend night, driving with Deborah on Broadway toward Texas Tech. They haven't repaved that stretch of Broadway yet. It's a wide brick road, bumpy, antique, as you still find in the older sections of Panhandle towns -- a style of building from before World War II. Deborah wants to see if Elvis is out tonight. Not the Elvis, but one of his fleshy, missionary ghosts -- one of those obsessive, possessed men of indeterminate age whose greatest satisfaction seems to be to look in the mirror and see some trace of Elvis staring back.

He's there all right.

In the empty parking lot of a joint that calls itself a burrito factory ... the sign in the window says "Closed" but the parking lot sure isn't ... he's set up two small banks of lights that flash yellows, blues, and reds, like at a disco ... a karaoke sound system ... there's one white metal chair directly in front of him, and, several feet behind that, three or four rows of white metal chairs, four or five to a row ... of course nobody is sitting in any of those chairs ... he's strung colored plastic pennants overhead, like a used car lot, and Deborah says he performs at used car lots sometimes ... and there's nobody in sight up or down the street, and hardly a car passes ... but this guy's got the karaoke turned all the way up and he's singing his heart out, or what's left of his heart, to a sleeping city and an empty street, and to whoever he imagines is sitting in those chairs, as maybe he imagines Elvis Aron Presley looking down from Heaven in gentle approval. (And does it occur to this guy that Aron was the name of the Bible's first High Priest?)

There's a hand-lettered sign that says you can have your picture taken with Elvis for a dollar. "Come on, Ventura," Deborah dares, "take a picture with Elvis." It's still hard for me to refuse a dare, but I'm not up to this one. We pull into the parking lot but we don't get out. I don't remember him looking directly at us, but maybe he did. Anyway our presence energizes him. He's a pudgy guy, gaudily costumed, his huge head of hair dyed raven black with every wave cemented in place, and with sideburns more exaggerated than Elvis' ever were. He throws himself into his Elvis moves with the enthusiasm of a little boy. I don't remember what he sang, maybe because he couldn't sing a lick and maybe because all I could "hear," in effect, was the audacity of the man. What concoction of gall and madness could drive anyone to give such a performance, in such a place, on such a night? What unspeakable loneliness? What irrepressible need to identify his entire being, at the risk of mockery, with a figure clearly sacred to him and absolutely beyond his abilities? Not that I felt sorry for him. What he lacked in stature he certainly made up in nerve. At what point had he crossed the line and taken a private obsession, performed secretly before his mirror, and bought those white metal chairs, those lights, those pennants, those speakers, to live his fantasy late on a darkened street? And what did he expect from it? What did he imagine might happen, sometime, somehow, on some night, because of his performance? And who under Heaven did he imagine to be sitting in that solitary white metal chair toward which he directed his ungainly energies?

Just a few miles southeast of where he sang, the Cotton Club still stood, a huge warehouse of a joint where a 19- and 20-year-old Elvis had once gigged -- as had Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison before their fame. "I introduced Buddy Holly to Elvis at the

Cotton Club," an aging drunk once told me in a now-defunct Lubbock bar called Fat Dawg's. He said it arrogantly and desperately, as he'd been saying it when juiced for years, and whether or not it had ever happened it had become a true thing for him, a short story repeated precisely over and over to strangers. There were many memories like that floating around this Panhandle town, the city of Peggy Sue -- artifacts of the past burnished through many tellings, impossible either to verify or deny, from a time when nobody dreamed these songs would still be sung in 50 years and nobody realized (as nobody young ever does) that what today seems so vital and hip would seem to later generations a little comical, a little pathetic, and very strange, though the songs would still find a way to be heard. (Elvis, had he lived, would be 67 now. As Jerry Lee Lewis used to say, leering over the piano, "Think about it.")

And about 120 miles straight north up I-25, in Amarillo, in the summer of '74, not long before he got fat, the actual Elvis sang his heart out and Deborah and I were there. The soundtrack of *2001* blared as he strode onstage, and beams of white spotlights played over the audience -- an interesting touch, as though *we* were the show being presented for Elvis' benefit. There he was, embodying the line that Doc Pomus wrote for him in the song "Viva Las Vegas": a devil with love to spare. Or so he seemed in performance. First and greatest of all the Elvis imitators, a 40-year-old man imitating himself as though his life depended on it. Now we know that, as he sang that day he hadn't long to live, but then it seemed he would remain forever just as he was and that the year 2001 would never come as long as he could sing, for his singing seemed to have the power both to invoke the future and keep it at bay. I was 28, Deborah was 23, and the music Elvis had helped create was (and in many ways still is) at the crux of how we defined ourselves. There he was on stage, in a blinding white sparkly jumpsuit: "If you're lookin' for trouble, you came to the right place."

And a line we passed over when we first heard that song: "My middle name is misery."

Now this darkened street was the place -- "the right place" merely by virtue of being the place we two old friends happened to be -- and this strange pudgy man was keeping himself alive by echoing that other life that was no more. He couldn't be more alone if he were playing a computer game. But playing a computer game you risk nothing -- and that is the danger of such games, not their enforcement of solitude but their utter absence of risk, for there is no risk without contact. People who don't learn to risk can't learn to live. This late-night Lubbock Elvis, he was risking a great deal, because there's no telling what can happen on a darkened street anywhere, especially in the West, especially when you're exposing yourself so vulnerably. His middle name is certainly misery, that's there for all to see, but there's no denying the precarious dignity of his effort. Dare to laugh at him and you're laughing at yourself, because, from 1956 on, America became an Elvis imitator; and there isn't a performer around without some reflection of a gesture that Elvis initiated, for no one before him had dared to move so publicly with such blatant sexual defiance. Pity him and you're pitying yourself, at least in so far as the music of then or now has a grip on you. And can you afford to be embarrassed by or for him? There probably isn't an American alive who hasn't jived in front of a mirror, trying to abduct and absorb the quality of some star through the intimate exercise of imitation; the Elvis imitators, and this one in particular, excite our interest and our sympathy precisely because they've transformed our mirror sessions into a way of life. As Eve Babitz once wrote in another context, "it's hard to tell if you're dealing with the real true illusion or the false one." They dance our illusions, these Elvis imitators, and

we are the mirror into which they say, as Robert De Niro's crazy taxi driver says into his mirror, "Are you talkin' to me?"

Mirrors facing mirrors, disappearing into a distance that we might as well call infinity. Elvis, who became for America both the mirror and the person standing in front of it. Love him tender.

"Tender" is the loveliest of words. No, I couldn't bring myself to take my picture with this Elvis for one dollar or a million, that night. Not if he'd paid me. I wish I had. The night I first saw Elvis -- 10 years old, watching *Stage Show* hosted by Tommy & Jimmy Dorsey, Presley's first national exposure -- I was up late in the bathroom, playing to the mirror for the first time in my life, compulsively aping his moves. So this guy was not only a reflection of Elvis; without knowing it (or perhaps he did know, and perhaps that's why he could bring himself to this extreme) he was a reflection of me, and many like me, taking our secret fantasies public. On an empty Lubbock street in the dark.

There was no way to leave gracefully. Just start the engine and back slowly away. He doesn't seem to notice, keeps right on singing. The year he died, Elvis recorded "Danny Boy" live -- that verse sung from within the grave: "And I shall feel how soft you tread above me ... And then my grave will richer, sweeter be ... For you will bend and tell me that you love me ..."

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