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Don't Be Cruel

By Bobbi Murray

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On Tuesday, a compilation of 30 No. 1 Elvis Presley hits will be released, thus marketing him to another generation of listeners, the same way "The Beatles 1" was aimed at people who thought the group was **Paul McCartney's** backup band.

Elvis has plenty of image baggage to overcome with the folks in his new target market. But Lord knows it's not all his fault. The real trouble is those Elvis impersonators. This may infuriate what we'll call here "the Elvis impersonator community," but they make Elvis look like a geek and give the rest of us the creeps. There are an estimated 35,000 Elvis impersonators worldwide and, sad to say, they seem to overwhelmingly skew toward the dumpy. Just because there was once such a thing as a chunky Elvis doesn't mean that any sideburned pudgy guy wedged into a white jumpsuit should feel like he can be the King.

Poor Elvis didn't balloon like that until the very last few years of his life. It caused him such consternation that he once ditched his regular doctor for a quack in Las Vegas who put him under for a week as a weight-loss scheme. Imagine the chagrin of the once visually stunning Elvis if he knew now that 35,000 chubby guys insist on imitating him at his physical nadir.

Now you are thinking: "Uh-oh, another deranged Elvis fan." Elvis fans do creep people out. Those guys who are not full-fledged impersonators but still affect a weird ducktail?—unnerving. And I will admit that recently at Graceland I talked with a guy from Illinois about his plans to stay over in his uncle's double-wide trailer.

I can claim some authority on the issue of Elvis fans after, I'm sorry to report, standing with 35,000 of them in a gusting, driving, hourlong thunderstorm outside Graceland on Aug. 15 for the vigil that marked the 25th anniversary of Elvis' death. So here's the bulletin: Most Elvis fans don't believe that he is still alive and buying Little Debbie cakes at the 7-Eleven in Akron, Ohio. They know and regret that he shuffled off this mortal coil in a sudden and undignified manner.

Fan factoid No. 2: Many, many Elvis fans are not from Westbyjeeminy, Miss. Vigil participants included Swedes for Elvis, Danes for Elvis and, like everywhere else, herds of French with no discernible alliance. I admit it crossed my mind, as I approached my seventh hour in line, that there's no annual vigil of this scale for Martin

Luther King Jr. or Cesar Chavez, or probably even Gandhi. Not to mention that I've never waited in line so long to see a guy who was still alive.

You remember when **Chris Rock** made endless fun of Jennifer Lopez's rear end? Girlfriend ran right out and whittled it to such enviable proportions that women now ask their plastic surgeons for a J.Lo butt.

Elvis happened before all that star self-awareness. As the first huge multimedia star, he didn't know to hide when he looked unseemly. These days, Elvis would know what to do; hell, even "Colonel" Tom Parker would get himself a little lipo.

Why rehab Elvis' image? It's not that I care about Elvis CD sales; it's just annoying when so many writers take cheap shots at him, as creative as making fun of the fat kid in class. I rejected Elvis for years because of the way he made hits covering black artists' music. The story of how black artists were used up and discarded is an old and ugly one; Elvis' early Sun Records recordings certainly owe a debt to Little Junior Parker, Smiley Lewis and Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton. Elvis owes them, but he also owes Bill Monroe and Hank Williams—"Blue Moon of Kentucky," "Good Rockin' Tonight," even "That's All Right, Mama" are all loaded with the sound once snidely called hillbilly.

Peter Guralnick, Elvis' biographer, calls the mix "vernacular music," the music of the scorned, and points out that without Elvis, the American mainstream would never have heard the genius of either Muddy Waters or Hank Williams.

Elvis took American music, made it something different, made us appreciate it. So let him speak for himself and give him a listen. Don't worry, it doesn't mean that you'll suddenly become a ducktailed sucker for Elvis. If you do, book your flight to the next vigil now; it's cheaper that way.

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