

Elvis in St. Paul

REACH BACK TO 1974, October 2. Elvis is in the house at the St. Paul Civic Center for the first of two back-to-back, sold-out concerts.

He's decked out in his signature 1970s white jumpsuit—this one flaunting colorful peacocks embroidered front and back, a massive belt buckle, and widely flared bell-bottoms. The jumpsuit's front is unzipped nearly to his navel. Sideburns flow thickly across his cheeks; a shock of black hair flops across his forehead.

This is not *Jailhouse Rock* Elvis, filmed in 1957 when he was 22. No, in 1974 he's 39, overweight, tired—and already on the decline. His swivel has slowed; the drug use has accelerated. In the midst of a grueling tour, sometimes playing two concerts a day, he's had to cancel shows. He has overdosed twice. In three years, he'll be dead.

But on this October night in 1974, even though he's only able to give 50 minutes to his performance, the ladies in the crowd who have paid \$5 to \$10 a ticket to see him don't seem to mind how he's aged. When he bumps out a hip or pouts over his shoulder, they scream.

The audience is mixed, but it's mostly female, described by the *Pioneer Press* as “teeny-bop bubblegummers, middle-aged women with beehive hairdos and grandparents.” Some hold signs that say, “We ♥ you!” He flirts with them all. Throughout the course of the show, he tosses a dozen silk scarves into the front row. At times letting the backup singers take over, he wanders the stage, occasionally kneeling or lying



Elvis Presley sings to a delighted fan at the St. Paul Civic Center, October 2, 1974. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

prone to get closer to his fans. He kisses two of them. Not a peck on the cheek, but full on—once while he's lying prone on the stage.

In this image, he banter with an unidentified young woman obviously delighted to meet the King. It's not clear if she's one of the lucky to meet his kiss. But another photo shows him on both knees, their faces closer, foreheads nearly touching, his lips beginning to pucker—or relaxing.

Almost 50 years later, we imagine this moment is indelible in her memory, immortalized there as it is here in the photograph. Likely she has relived the memory in countless retellings, perhaps to her children and later to

her grandchildren. Maybe this encounter was the defining moment of her young adulthood, a threshold of sorts in her becoming.

And yet, it will never be to others what it was to her. And for Elvis, to whom she remained anonymous, she was merely a prop in his act.

—John Rosengren

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