

AND THEY WENT ON TOGETHER WITH AUSPICIOUS TIMES: How Elvis and Las Vegas saved each other

by Matthew Crowley/Contributor to Las Vegas Newswire – July 11, 2019

Elvis couldn't help falling in love with Las Vegas, and Las Vegas couldn't help falling in love with Elvis.

In a new book on The King of Rock 'n' Roll and his relationship with Las Vegas, journalist Richard Zoglin argues that a white-hot, two-week series of 1969 Las Vegas concerts by Elvis Presley was a watershed event for both performer and city.

Elvis, eight years offstage and hungry for rock 'n' roll relevancy, got it. Vegas, searching for a way to follow popular music's fast-changing new direction, got it, too.

As we approach the 50th anniversary of that famous run of shows that kicked off July 31, 1969, at the International Hotel (now the Westgate Las Vegas), Zoglin makes his case in *Elvis in Vegas: How the King Reinvented the Las Vegas Show* (\$28, 304 pages, Simon & Schuster), set for release on July 23. (Zoglin will host a book signing and discussion at 7 p.m. Aug. 2 at the Clark County Library, 1401 E. Flamingo Road.)

Zoglin, Time magazine's senior entertainment editor and also the author of books on Bob Hope (*Hope: Entertainer of the Century*) and the power of standup comedy in the 1970s (*Comedy at the Edge*), says that by coming back to Las Vegas after a dud 1956 debut at the New Frontier, Elvis proved he could remain viable as an entertainer and rocker.

With a few powerful hip swivels, he shook Vegas' entertainment scene.

Elvis sold out two shows a night during the four-week run in the 2,000-seat showroom in the recently opened International. In all, a record 101,000 people saw The King hold court in that span. He earned \$125,000 a week, also a record at the time.

The shows, Zoglin writes, brought a new audience – middle-class fans who'd loved Elvis in the 1950s. These were the everyday folks who would flock to Vegas in subsequent decades to see *Cirque du Soleil* extravaganzas or marvel at themed hotel-casinos.

If Las Vegas had an entertainment Mount Rushmore for the three post-World War II decades, Zoglin suggests it would have three heads: Liberace for the '50s, Frank Sinatra for the '60s, and Elvis for the '70s.

Liberace, who made millions of dollars in his career and was far and away Las Vegas' top-earning performer in the 1950s, was kind to Elvis, taking publicity photos with him

and demonstrating the power of over-the-top showmanship and flashy outfits. Elvis' gold lamé outfits were probably inspired by Liberace, Zoglin said.

“Liberace had one piece of advice for Elvis,” Zoglin says in an interview with Las Vegas Newswire. “He told him, ‘Your show needs more glitz.’”

If not approaching Liberace-level glitz, Elvis' 1969 shows did burn with a powerful glow, Zoglin writes. When Elvis took the stage that first night, it took just the opening song, “Blue Suede Shoes,” for him to regain his performance comfort again. By the time Elvis sang “Suspicious Minds,” a Mark James song that became a staple throughout the run, the crowd was enraptured, he was jumping and gyrating, and all was right.

“Here was a song no one heard before,” Zoglin says. “And Elvis comes in and does it for seven minutes with its repeated chorus. He's jumping around the stage and working himself into a frazzle that night, and then, of course, every night.”

Elvis' 1969 shows blended country, rhythm and blues, rock and gospel and offered a big, pulsing experience, unlike the intimate lounge acts that Sinatra and the Rat Pack had dominated. The concerts also showcased Elvis' showbiz savvy. Zoglin points out that Elvis had no producers, choreographers or other professionals to shape his stage, pick his songs or direct his movements.

Aided by his friend and Memphis, Tennessee, guitarist Charlie Hodge, Elvis invented his setlists and show craft. The singer surrounded himself onstage with musicians, backup singers and a huge orchestra, eschewing the showgirls and production numbers his manager, Col. Tom Parker, had suggested.

Elvis had always enjoyed Las Vegas, making it a favorite getaway, Zoglin says, but choosing the city as a comeback site was probably Parker's idea. Las Vegas offered Elvis the safety and malleability other venues and cities couldn't. The room was twice as big as rooms that had hosted lounge acts but not overwhelmingly large, as Houston's Astrodome, for example, would later prove to be.

Parker also insisted that Elvis not open the hotel but appear as its second headliner. Barbra Streisand opened; Elvis came four weeks later. The author theorizes that Parker thought Las Vegas was primed for a maximum splash by his client, though Elvis probably didn't care. He just wanted to (1969) shows, he was incredibly frustrated. It was a career reaffirmation for him. Not just to prove something to Las Vegas, but to prove something to the world.”

Las Vegas became Elvis' town probably because he made it there, coming when other rock acts wouldn't and exuding a freewheeling exuberance the city would embrace. When his show lost steam in the later years, as drugs, weight gain and boredom set in, Elvis, and Vegas, by proxy, became symbols of kitsch. Elvis was all things to all audiences, Zoglin says. Lovers of Vegas and Elvis could claim the shiny 1969 beginning; Vegas and Elvis critics could mock the fading, late-1970s end.

The rise and fall hardly affected Elvis' mien — he remained genuine and gracious.

“Everyone seemed to like him,” Zoglin says. “People who knew him may have lamented the drug use in his later years, but said basically, as a person, he was very likable —

polite, modest, interested in people. He remained an authentic person despite all the craziness people might have heard about him.”

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