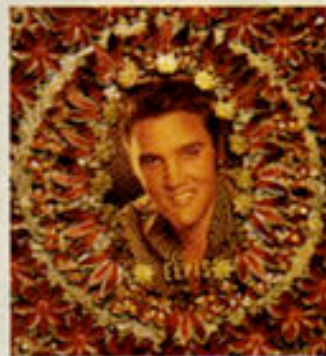




Elvis artists at the Delta Axis Contemporary Arts Center in Memphis truly mean it when they claim use of a "variety of media" to depict objet d'Elvis.



ELVISIAN STUDIES

University of Mississippi Elvis Conference: The Center for Public Service and Continuing Studies, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677; (601) 232-7282. **Dates:** August 4-9. **Cost:** \$350 (\$70 single-day registration). **Featured:** A Tupelo trip and a free afternoon to visit other sites. Humorist Jerry Clower will host Elvis's gospel quartet, J. D. Sumner and The Stamps. Also appearing is female impersonator Elvis Herselvis and Elvis Presley, Jr., claiming to be the son of, um, Elvis, Sr.

In Search of Elvis

Lights flashing and sirens blaring, the police escort leads us on a motorized ballet, weaving in and out of the streets of Tupelo, Mississippi. Everyone from hair-netted grandmothers to the hip-hop "hairdoed" gawk. Bewildered drivers pull over, as if our two University of Mississippi buses are a strange funeral procession. In a way, they are.

Tupelo, birthplace of Elvis Aaron Presley, and Memphis were two of the pilgrimages during last year's conference on the singer. Sponsored by the University's Center for the Study of Southern Culture, the Elvis Conference will be in Oxford this year.

Some in this tweed-wearing college town are—dare we say it—"all shook up" that the truck driver-turned-performer is undergoing the same academic scrutiny as native son William Faulkner. Suspicious minds aside, "sound and fury" aptly describe the conference kickoff, a soul-wrenching gospel-and-blues revival climaxed with hip-swiveling

acts from Elvis impersonators. Elvi (the plural of "Elvis," experts inform us) include a young Elvis, an apprentice Elvis, an African American Elvis, and a Mexican Elvis who goes by "El Vez."

Other activities keep our bluesuede shoes a tapping. Howard Finster delivers a sermon, in which the Georgia folk artist reveals a visit from the singer beyond the grave. Self-proclaimed "world's number one Elvis fans" Paul MacLeod and his son, Elvis Aaron Presley MacLeod, describe Graceland Too, their 24-hour museum in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Mary Jenkins Langston, Elvis's cook, talks about her attempts to perfect the fried peanut butter-and-'nanner sandwiches the singer loved too well.

Southern commentator John Shelton Reed gives a historical rundown of the boy who would be king. He concludes we still love Elvis because he "never got above his raising." Another scholar argues Elvis's gyrations came from imitating spirit-

filled Holy Ghost congregations.

We also learn those silly-as-putty Elvis movies are actually fraught with meaning. Why, one straight-faced professor enlightens us, even "Hound Dog" really represents anticolonialism. To this, we seem to hear a familiar sneering voice sing, "Mm, mm, oh, oh, yeah, yeah!"

Janice Gregory must hear the same ghostly sneer. Says the co-author of *When Elvis Died*, among Elvis's greatest contributions was showing us how to have a good time. Her strongest proof? "The Post Office, of all places. They had fun running the contest for the [Elvis] stamp design," she chortles.

If he can make government bureaucrats snicker, maybe fun is the best lead when you're in search of Elvis. *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*