

upfront



pic: GARY GREEN



All Shook Up In Porthcawl

Hang on to your blue suede shoes; it's time for the annual Porthcawl Elvis Festival. **Michael Brown** investigates.

If you happen to be exploring the delights of a certain quaint seaside town during the latter days of September, you'd best prepare yourself for some of the wildest hip shaking this side of Bridgend. Once again, Porthcawl will be overrun with King aficionados as its annual Elvis Festival takes South Wales by storm. Those with (wait for it) suspicious minds who question whether Elvis ever actually visited Porthcawl, or was even aware of its existence, can't stop the rock (and roll): this is the largest festival of its kind in the world and, as such, attracts a wide range of Kings and Queens, from the lonesome to the hound dogs and everything in between.

As with previous years, the Elvies, held at Porthcawl's Grand Pavilion, provide the festival's biggest draw. Far from being a talent competition for diminutive Elvis fans (as I had, rather embarrassingly, first assumed), it's the world's leading awards show for ETAs (a snappy acronym for Elvis Tribute Artists) with categories including Best Movie Elvis, Best Gospel Elvis, and the much-lauded Gold Lamé Jacket. The competition is only open to professionals and semi-professionals so attendees can expect a high standard of Elvis impersonations, although open-mic showcases are also held at the Pavilion, so there's still the potential for some entertaining-for-all-the-wrong-reasons antics.

Once again, this year's festival also features the search to find the best ETA, where there can only be one winner. However, the road to be crowned ultimate Elvis impersonator is by no means easy: both Friday and Saturday's proceedings include some fiercely competitive heats, with 2011's finest battling it out in the grand final on Saturday afternoon, ahead of the aforementioned Elvies award ceremony that evening. The winner of the ETA contest then goes on to headline the self-explanatory *Three Kings* show at next year's festival, which this year features last year's winner, if you follow.

Even with all these awards and competitions, the Porthcawl Elvis Festival still has much to offer, with Sunday's events offering a particularly thorough look at the King and his musical legacy. *Elvis At The Movies* features some especially invited ETAs performing many of Elvis' best-loved songs from his movie years, all backed by Porthcawl's "legendary" house band, Red Alert. Also wowing the crowds, and appropriately scheduled for the Sabbath, is the *Elvis Gospel Show*, taking festivities right back to its namesake's roots. Here you can see the self-proclaimed Rockin' Reverend, Steve Caprice, along with a few special guests, perform classic gospel tunes in celebration of Elvis' musical origins.

Rounding off the Elvis Festival is the mysterious-sounding *Trilogy*: three unique sets which capture Elvis' ascension from small-town singer to pelvic-thrusting Vegas performer. The show begins with a recreation of 1950s Sun Studios, where Big E made his first recordings, followed by Paul Molloy, one of the world's leading Elvis tributes, recreating the 1968 Comeback Special. The show then ends in spectacular fashion with Germany's Oliver Steinhoff performing a full Vegas-era Elvis show in all its glittery, wide-flared glory.

Throughout the festival, Porthcawl will bridge the gap between Wales and the USA, with a number of, you guessed it, Elvis-themed attractions appearing across the weekend. The Grand Pavilion, and host to the festival's major events, will be transformed into a Las Vegas-style lounge, while local accommodation will form the sites of several Heartbreak Hotels. In particular, the Hi-Tide Inn is set to host over 100 shows across the weekend, many of which feature free admission, so even if you're unable to get tickets for some of the more popular performances, there's bound to be enough Elvis action to go around. Add that to the Elvis Fringe (no, not that kind) held in 20 venues across the town and the Porthcawl Elvis Festival is certain to get the all-important "uh huh" from fans and won't leave anyone (last one, I promise) crying in the chapel.

The Porthcawl Elvis Festival rocks Porthcawl from Fri 23-Sun 25 Sept. Main events are held at the Porthcawl Grand Pavilion, with many others in various venues around the town. Tickets: events individually priced. Info: 07716 283772 / www.elvies.co.uk