

For this rockin' all the time performer, Elvis has always lived

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By Jon Waterhouse, For the AJC

Branson, Mo.-based entertainer Dean Z was born to channel Elvis Presley. Just shake, rattle and roll over to YouTube for evidence. A 1987 video, shot by his mother Jackie Zeligman, shows a 3-year-old Dean performing Presley's "Jailhouse Rock" in full kingly garb, his Elvis-like movements remarkably innate, his sense of rhythm impeccable.

Today Dean Z steps into his blue suede shoes for a living. He currently co-stars in the touring production "Elvis Lives." A trio of Elvi —Dean Z, Jay Dupuis and Bill Cherry — collectively carry the torch.

"I always say it's a musical journey through Elvis' 20-plus year career," Dean said during a recent phone conversation. "It's a celebration of his career, all of these key moments, crammed into two hours with state-of-the-art lighting and multi-media production."

As the performers portray Elvis during different eras, as many as 12 backing musicians provide the soundtrack to 35 songs. Thanks to archival interviews, Elvis enters the building as narrator. Film and video footage come courtesy of Elvis Presley Enterprises. For repeat customers, the latest tour arrives with newly added songs and visual elements. The end result attempts to convey the entertainment icon's impact on pop culture and show why fans still have a burning love for Presley nearly 40 years after his death.

Dean Z swiveled his way into "Elvis Lives" after winning the 2013 Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest, the Super Bowl for Presley doppelgängers sponsored by Elvis Presley Enterprises in Memphis, Tenn. His show-stopping performance of "Jailhouse Rock," the first song he'd ever sung onstage, 26 years earlier, helped seal the deal.

Less than five months after the win, Dean joined "Elvis Lives." Today marks his fourth tour with a tight-knit cast and crew. Co-leads Cherry and Dupuis, who also won the same title in 2009 and 2014, respectively, share the same passion.

"It's sort of like having a built-in brotherhood," he said. "We're all in this together as a group, and we really enjoy feeding off of each other's energy."

The family atmosphere hits another level for Dean with his wife Stephi Z serving as dance captain and background vocalist. Having his partner on tour with him is a blessing, he says, that doesn't go unnoticed.

“She knows the Elvis material better than anyone I know,” Dean said. “She hears it on a different level. I’m listening to Elvis, and she’s listening to the musicians and the vocalists.”

In the meantime, Dean Z strives to capture two very different sides of Elvis. As the late 1950s Presley, he slides into the king’s 19-year-old mindset with fresh, nervous energy. He says he goes into the head space of an anxious and somewhat uncomfortable, young entertainer discovering his movements onstage.

When tackling the black leather clad Elvis from what’s commonly referred to as “The ‘68 Comeback Special,” he morphs into a more seasoned entertainer. After more than a decade in Hollywood, a well-rounded Presley returned to the live stage with newfound vigor.

“I base it off of this smooth, clean element Elvis had at that point,” he said, “but also on his raw power. To me, his movements were very much like a panther. You can feel the excitement he had about getting back in front of an audience. It’s not a nervous excitement, it’s a polished excitement.”

Part of the goal of “Elvis Lives,” he says, is generating excitement to a new generation. He hopes the snapshots he gives of Elvis as a performer cause younger guests to leave the show and dig deeper into Presley’s catalog and career.

“None of us could compare to Elvis, and we know that,” he said. “But I think when an audience sees it, they might really get what was so special about him.”

Dean Z proves to be a special entertainer in his own right. He’s currently workshopping “The Dean Z Show,” a high-energy rave up of pop, rock and R&B history showcasing his versatility. He might hit a Johnny Cash baritone one moment, and moonwalk into a Michael Jackson falsetto the next. Incorporating dance moves and his ability to rock multiple instruments, Dean says he hopes to inject the same kind of contemporary blast into timeless rock as Michael Bublé did with standards.

Yet no matter the stage, Dean Z says he still has that same intoxicating joy as he did at age 3.

“I love performing, and I don’t know how to perform halfway,” he said. “That’s when I feel like I’m most alive.”