

The Way it Was Biography

Elvis' own musical career lasted scarcely over 20 years. Already, The Way It Was Orchestra has notched up a quarter of that amount. The group in its current form came together five years ago, not so much a band as an experiment: could we play the King's music the way it was supposed to sound? The energy of Elvis' live performances in the Seventies were the benchmark, not some lazy reinterpretation with only a passing resemblance to the tunes. We wanted to do it justice.

It was a big ask: back in 1999 we were an eight-piece soul/blues band, with years behind us of playing Otis Redding or Booker T. Elvis was something very different. We'd reached a crossroads but drummer-turned-singer Kevin Doyle and guitarist Ian Smith spotted a new direction. Kevin did a mean Elvis impersonation – as we already knew – but he had something bigger in mind than a few token cover versions. Expanding the band with the addition of backing vocals and extra brass, Kevin and Ian set about reproducing the sound of Elvis' best live work, when he toured relentlessly during the Seventies backed by the cream of American musicians.

As if a group of Irish twentysomethings playing Elvis' music wasn't unusual enough, what marks our band out as different is the fact that it boasts not one but three sets of siblings; many of us attended school together and were friends long before we started playing a musical instrument; no less than eight of us grew up in the same estate in Lucan. There's a bond that goes back between us all over many years and we've a great rapport. Many people who see the show come away remarking on how much of a good time we seem to be having on stage. How could you not? We're doing something we really enjoy, with our best mates – who wouldn't be happy with that?

The rehearsals alone lasted half a year as the band worked hard to capture the essence of those legendary shows. All agreed that if the music didn't come up to scratch, the project would be stopped. It was a musical education of sorts, as Elvis' repertoire straddled genres from rock and roll to country, via gospel, ballads. Each practice threw up a new set of challenges. Working directly from Elvis' original albums was the best way and the worst way; we had the template for what we wanted to do, but we knew all too well when things weren't sounding like they should. We also became familiar with the names and styles of all the players in Elvis' band, not even daring to think then that we'd get to see them at much closer quarters.

From small acorns and all that: our first gig was in Limerick and our progress for the few months after that was steady. As we gigged and saw how the songs worked live, audiences responded well and we began to set our sights higher. One high-profile show followed another, as we played the Temple Bar Music Centre and began the first of a string of TV appearances on shows as diverse as the Den, Ireland AM and Open House. In 2001, the band made its debut at the Olympia Theatre in Dublin, playing to a packed house for a midnight show. Three more appearances followed within seven months and the year was capped, appropriately, with a New Year's Eve concert there.

In 2002, the band changed its approach. Sensing an end to the traditional 'tribute' scene, Kevin and Ian made ambitious plans. They formulated the idea of a theatre show, with multimedia and video footage incorporated into the live performances – very different from the Vegas-style gigs they had been used to until then.

Appropriately, it was the 25th anniversary of Elvis' death, which meant there was no escaping the King that summer. The Elvis Presley Story debuted in August at Dublin's Tivoli Theatre and sold out for two weeks. It was the biggest commitment yet for a band that still all hold down fulltime jobs, but the sense of togetherness was forged as night after night, the group played to full houses and caught the buzz of the moment as Elvis was back in the spotlight once more. The band closed the year by running the show for five further nights at the Olympia.

Last year we raised the bar again: the show ran for two weeks in the Gaiety Theatre in April and over four weekends in the Ambassador in August. Ask any of the band though, and they would say the highlight of the year came as early as March, when they played two charity gigs with three of Elvis' original backing musicians: drummer Ronnie Tutt, piano player Glen Hardin and bassist Jerry Scheff. Even at a year's distance, it's hard to put into words what it meant to share the stage with the men who had helped Elvis sound so good.



Kevin Doyle and the Way it Was Orchestra with TCB Band members Glen D Hardin, Ronnie Tutt and Jerry Scheff