

# Viva Patpong!

Amid the go-go bars, strains of 'Go cat, go!' can be heard as Elvis rocks the famed red light district.

BY ROBIN EWING

Elvis lives in Patpong. Tonight, he is sweating on the small stage of Radio City pivoting his red polyester hips with the music, rhinestones flashing. Brandishing an old guitar he doesn't use, he sings "Blue Suede Shoes" in a strong, clear voice, drawing roars of approval from the beery audience.

Manuel Toyjeebee has been Elvis for eight years. After the show, he lounges at an outside table. Still in giant gold sunglasses, his red jumpsuit unzipped to the waist baring a hairy chest shining beneath a gold chain necklace, he watches the Patpong market disassemble for the night.

"Should I pray now?" he says. "I pray at home every day. I'm Muslim. I don't drink or smoke because of my religion. That's why I'm a good boy."

Surrounded by revellers swilling various coloured cocktails, Elvis drinks 7UP. "It keeps me youthful," he grins, touching his cheeks.

Earnest young men stationed in front of the sex bars and Lucifer's dance club blend with the conversations of Western tourists. Spilling out of Radio City's open door, dozens of fans come over to congratulate him, shouting "Elvis!" and shaking his hand. He thanks every one of them.

"People are always coming up to me and telling me I look like Elvis," he says. With long sideburns and dark hair feathered back on top, he does look the part. "But sometimes I just think they are being nice to me. I worry about my English. Did you like my show?"

Offstage, Elvis's mannerisms are shy, humble and respectful. He is the father of two teenage girls living in Florida. "It broke my heart when they wanted to leave Thailand," he says. "But I'm thinking of moving there in a few years."

Outfitted as "Vegas" Elvis, he fingers a loose rhinestone at the bottom of his flared pants. "I get my costumes here in Thailand," he says. "Sometimes, I have to sew them myself. A friend sent me some sunglasses from Graceland, but they got stolen. I've never been to Graceland."

Impersonating Elvis isn't new. Though most Elvis careers started after his death in 1977, the first impersonator goes back to 1956. Even Elvis himself once entered an impersonation contest – and came third. And there are no restrictions on nationality: El Vez, the Mexican Elvis, has hit it big in the United States, and in Thailand, many know of El-Visoot, MTV's 1998 "Elvis Asia".

For Manuel, his love affair with Elvis began as a child in Bangkok.

"The first record I bought was 'Are you Lonesome Tonight'. I wrote down all the words," he says, adding: "I didn't speak English back then."

At 18, he became a professional bass player, working at a Bangkok club. He then moved to Los Angeles, where he lived for 20 years, first stopping in Hawaii. It was here, in 1973, that Manuel saw Elvis' famous *Aloha from Hawaii* satellite broadcast that took Elvis into the homes of more than 1.5

billion people in 40 countries.

"He didn't move that much, not like on his videos or in his movies. But I still liked him because he is the king. My dream was to one day sing his songs," Manuel says.

Earlier, during the 45-minute show, a tall, blonde Irishwoman in tight jeans, clutching a cocktail, was giving Elvis the eye. Suddenly she's on stage, rubbing up against his wide gold sequined belt, pursing her lips, and stroking him. Her friends cheer her on in a parody of teenage girl groupies. Elvis gives an embarrassed smile and continues on

**"Sometimes the girls go wild. They rip their tops off."**



ISLAMIC ELVIS Manuel Toyjeebee, who does his Elvis act at Radio City, is a devout Muslim.

with his show as if she isn't there.

"Sometimes the girls go wild. Sometimes they rip their tops off. But when they get up on stage I don't have room to move all that much."

Everyone is cheering and dancing including two boys from Holland have only been in Thailand for eight hours. "We found this place by accident. We want to see the real Thailand," one shouts over the music, holding up a Thai phrase book.

Manuel performs every night (except Sunday) at 11pm at Radio City, Patpong 1. Three nights a week he also sings at Thai House on Sukhumvit Soi 5 with Art, AKA Tom Jones. They've been working together for six years. On Sundays Manuel does his Elvis show in Pattaya. Along with about a dozen other Elvis impersonators, Manuel is preparing for tonight's Solid Gold Celebration at the Asia Hotel.

Being Elvis takes practice. "I don't sing in the shower, but I do practice in front of a mirror. I have to," says Manuel. "It's my career." ■