



Elvis had a massive workload in 1972, performing a staggering 165 shows

A Hunk of Burning Love

With a new boxset celebrating Elvis' 1972 concert run about to be released, *Vintage Rock* remembers those electrifying performances and the film that captured the King in his thirtysomething glory

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

There's a lazy myth built up around Elvis Presley that the once fiery and hip-thrusting rock'n'roller was all washed up by the 70s. Yet watch the 1972 documentary *Elvis On Tour*, and though he's clearly packing more paunch than he was in his fresh-faced heyday, there's an energy and passion there – just witness those wild scissor kicks – that simply doesn't square with the cliché that he was out of shape and out of love with music by his late thirties.

1972 was a monumental – and often poignant – 12 months for Elvis. Just before New Year, his wife Priscilla had told him she was leaving and taking daughter Lisa-Marie with her. She held off telling him the reason why, however. When, a few months later, she confessed to an affair with her karate teacher Mike Stone and wanted a divorce, Elvis was floored.

Presley had two choices: he could wallow at home in Graceland and lick his wounds or throw himself into work. Of course, he was already

contracted for a series of shows that year, but it's the absolute commitment that the King displayed in those concerts that's truly breathtaking.

This was a man who was emotionally shattered, but the red-hot spirit that was there in his earliest recordings and on those nascent TV appearances was still present.

Elvis had started 1972 with a run of shows in his spiritual home of Las Vegas, introducing

Elvis could either wallow at Graceland or throw himself into work

into his setlist various songs that spoke of lost love. Not that the audience would have clocked them. The Presleys had held off announcing their split to the press, and Priscilla was even present at the opening concert on 26 January. A few weeks later, Elvis' new contract would take effect, handing his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, a third of the singer's concert earnings for the next two years. Even if Elvis

had been in a depressive slump, the Colonel had dollars to earn.

Elvis performed a total of 165 concerts in 1972, yet it's the 15-city jaunt around the United States in the April of that year that most people zero in on. It was those shows that formed the basis for the *Elvis On Tour* concert film and that RCA/Legacy Recordings are celebrating with a bountiful seven-disc set, including previously unreleased live and

studio material that is set to be released early next year.

The *Elvis On Tour* doc also features in the new boxset as a freshly minted Blu-ray. The movie was Presley's second and last concert film after 1970's Denis Sanders-directed *Elvis: That's The Way It Is*, which followed the King on his Summer Festival in Las Vegas in August of that year.

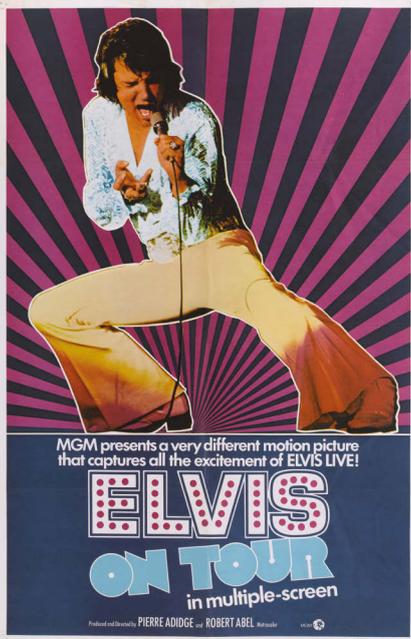
The Colonel had begun the

negotiation process for a follow-up to *That's The Way It Is* in early '72, with MGM paying Parker and Elvis £250,000. Jack Haley Jr, then the studio's Vice-President, approached filmmakers Robert Abel and Pierre Adidge to helm the movie. The pair had worked on the 1971 documentary of Joe Cocker's 1970 US tour, *Mad Dogs & Englishmen* (a film which critic Roger Ebert wrote included "the best rock coverage since Woodstock") and seemed a natural fit, in that they could bring some of their counter-culture cool to an artist who had lost some of his musical cred by sitting out most of the 60s.

However, the filmmakers weren't keen initially, having clashed with Cocker on their last film. Reluctantly, they travelled to Vegas to see one of Elvis' shows, meeting with him afterwards, and telling the singer in no uncertain terms what they thought was wrong with *That's The Way It Is*. They believed he was acting for the cameras, that it all appeared somewhat staged and that, if

Elvis was “at his best, if not better than ever in his entertainment career”

“MGM presents a very different motion picture...” – the 1972 promo poster for the *Elvis On Tour* documentary



Elvis sports one of three dazzling ‘pinwheel’ jumpsuits worn during his 1972 stint

to be lensed by the pair was in Virginia, where Presley was performing at the

Hampton Coliseum to a sold-out crowd of 22,000. The gig was so feverishly anticipated that there were traffic jams on Interstate 64 before the show. State newspaper the *Daily Press* described the audience welcoming Elvis with “deafening applause and screams”, while also noting that the singer was “a little chubbier than he used to be.”

The cameras were also

present for the next evening’s concert in Richmond, Virginia, and then for the show in Greensboro, North Carolina, on the 14th. They then followed Presley’s entourage to Jacksonville, Florida, and San Antonio in Texas, with the directors filming Elvis in front of an estimated 10,500 fans. The *San Antonio Express* wrote of the show that Presley’s “sound hadn’t changed” and that the singer “was at his best, if not better than ever in his entertainment career”.

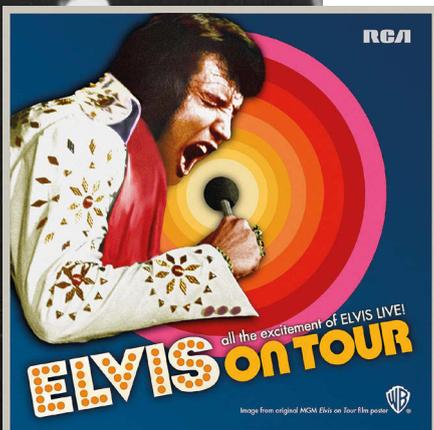
With two weeks and

60 hours’ worth of footage in the can, Abel and Adidge began to work on an edit. Unlike *That’s The Way It Is*, *Elvis On Tour* included archive footage, with the directors incorporating clips of Presley singing *Ready Teddy* on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956. Also punctuating the concert footage was an interview conducted at Graceland with Elvis’ father Vernon and – during a performance of *Love Me Tender* – clips from the King’s 60s movies showing him smooching his leading ladies.

In an interview in July 1972,

they were to do this film, he would have to act more naturally. Elvis agreed.

Elvis’ tour kicked off on 5 April with a concert at the Buffalo Memorial Auditorium in New York, with over 17,000 shrieking fans in attendance. Though Abel was present, he was merely there to study the singer’s performance, ready for the first proper filming session four days later. The first concert



Look out for the new boxset, due out in January 2023

Elvis admitted that he was still a nervous performer. “I’ve never gotten over what they call stage fright,” he said. “I go through it every show... My daddy had seen a lot of people who played guitars and stuff and didn’t work. So

he told me, ‘You should make up your mind about either playing guitar or being an electrician. I never saw a guitar player that was worth a damn.’”

Not that this insecurity was

evident on stage, let alone in the run of concert appearances in 1972. The film, therefore, is a cherishable memento of Elvis at his onstage best, whether it’s sweating his way through a bombastic *American Trilogy*, flirting with fans (“Are these yours, honey?” he asks, picking up a pair of pink panties) or delivering an invigorating *Burning Love*.

At one point the filmmakers interview a clearly overcome fan in her early 20s, who exclaims through floods of tears, “I can’t believe I saw him – I thought I was going to faint.

He’ll always be number one. He’s still so handsome!”

Jettisoning the planned title of ‘Standing Room Only’, the newly-monikered *Elvis On Tour* was released on 1 November 1972 to generally positive reviews, with the *Los Angeles Times* calling it “highly enjoyable” and *The Guardian* writing that there was a “good use of the split screen”.

Meanwhile, in *The Observer*, critic George Melly called Presley “a survivor of the early days of rock’n’roll” and “the silent majority’s superstud”.

Even at the age of 37, ➔

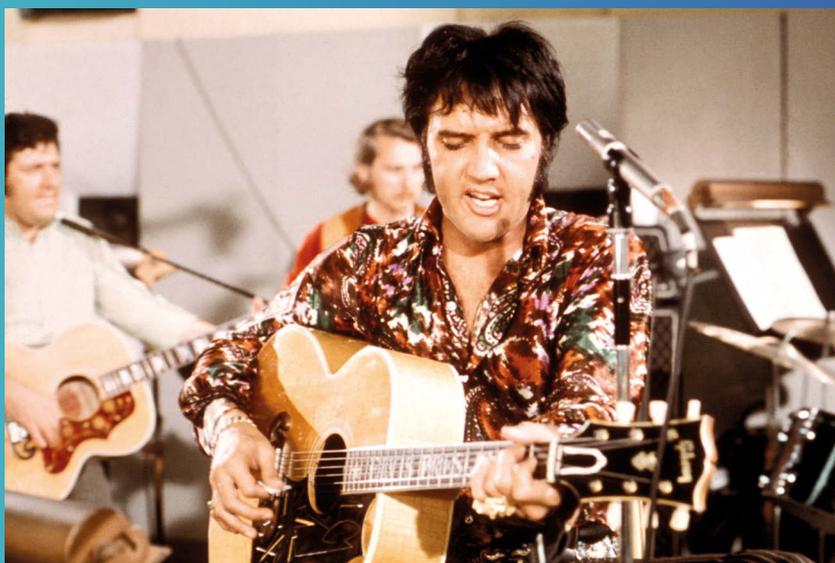
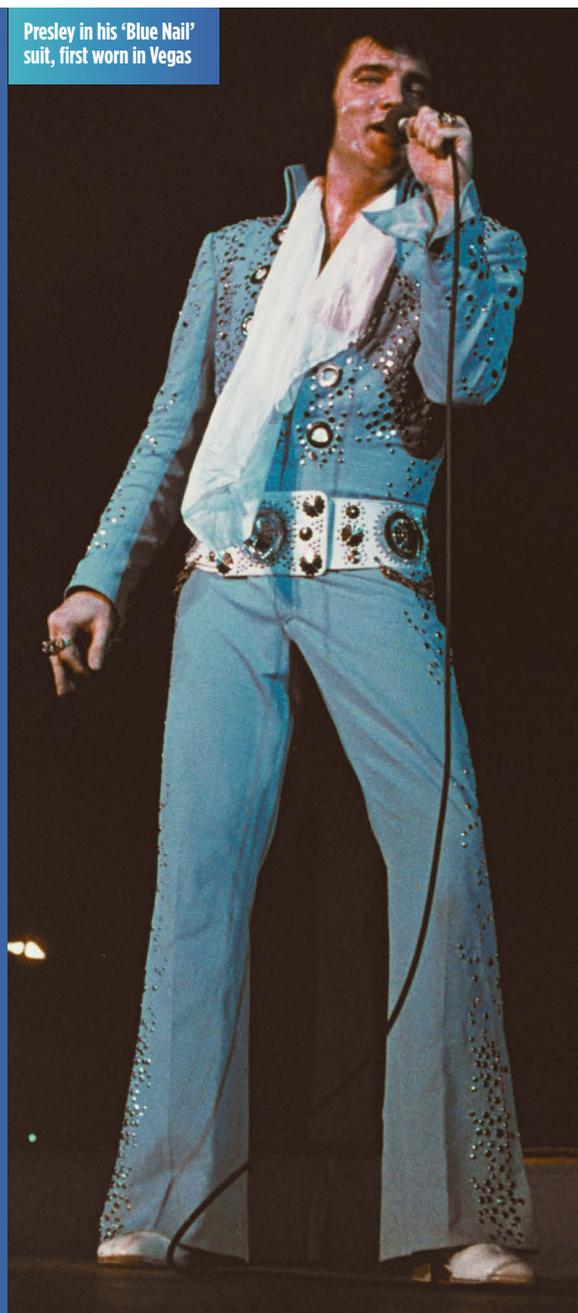
Getting up close and personal with The King

Two years before *Elvis On Tour* hit cinemas, fans had their first chance to see the real-life Elvis up there on the big screen with *That’s The Way It Is*. Unlike its more geographically varied follow-up, this film mostly takes place at Las Vegas’ International Hotel, where Elvis had taken up residency. Directed by the Oscar-winning Denis Sanders (*A Time Out Of War*), the film was the brainchild of Elvis’ manager Colonel Tom Parker. As Parker didn’t own a passport, he was reluctant to allow Elvis to tour outside of the United States. With this film, he reasoned, overseas fans could get to see Elvis do his thing on stage. Like *Elvis On Tour*, the feature mixes rehearsal footage and behind-the-scenes glimpses of Presley and his inner circle alongside clips of the singer belting out both classics and new material.

“This documentary,” explained MGM’s John Douglas Eames, “revealed the full force of his stage personality coming through the camera for the first time.”

After 31 increasingly formulaic feature films, *That’s The Way It Is* was the first time Elvis had been seen on the big screen as himself. And while those movies had been fairly conservative in their form and content, Sanders’ documentary took many of its stylistic cues from the counterculture features of Jean-Luc Godard and DA Pennebaker. Its reportage-style scenes of Presley larking about and joking with his band gave fans a peek behind the stage persona, while the split-screen technique, inspired by Michael Wadleigh’s *Woodstock* film from the same year, gave the concert footage a thrilling, cutting-edge quality.

Presley in his ‘Blue Nail’ suit, first worn in Vegas



Elvis Presley was far from being thought of as a has-been in the live arena. *Elvis On Tour* and that series of shows had only confirmed to North America and the world what an extraordinary performer the King still was.

“The setlists and the performances of the *Elvis On Tour* period bring a rare thing: a 50s legend working in the early 70s who was still taking his audiences to new places,” says rock historian Warren Zanes. “While the ‘68 Comeback Special marked the significant point at which Presley returned to live performance, 1972 was the year in which the artist revealed most completely what he wanted to do with the creative energy such a return kicked off.”

As great as *Elvis On Tour* is, however, it’s more about the experience of touring than it is Presley’s music. RCA/Legacy’s new boxset returns the focus to the songs themselves, offering up four discs covering the shows in Hampton, Richmond, Greensboro and San Antonio, plus two CDs of rehearsals.



Looking for Linda

In July 1972, some months after Priscilla had left him, Elvis hooked up with the then-current Miss Tennessee, Linda Thompson. The pair were introduced by Elvis’ former school friend DJ George Klein at Memphis’ Memphian Movie Theater during one of the King’s regular film nights (he’d often rent the venue out to watch the latest releases). “It was the middle of July in Memphis and very humid, just sweltering,” Thompson, then just 22, remembered of their first meeting. “He had on this black cape with a high collar and a red satin lining and I said, ‘Dressed a little like Dracula, aren’t we?’ So you see, we both shared a sense of humour that was very much like the other.

“We just hit it off immediately because we grew up in Memphis and had the same religious beliefs, love for our

family, and devotion to our mother and father as well as the same sense of loyalty.”

Elvis was so smitten by Thompson that he moved her into Graceland after just a few months of dating and they remained together for four-and-a-half years.

Despite being Presley’s main companion for the last years of the singer’s life, Thompson doesn’t feature in Baz Luhrmann’s recent biopic of the King, with the former beauty pageant winner accusing the director of ‘erasing’ her from history.

A few years after her relationship with Elvis, Thompson would go on to marry Olympic gold medal decathlete Bruce (now Caitlyn) Jenner, the future husband of reality TV star Kris Kardashian.

Presley onstage with guitarist James Burton



June 1972: Elvis’ press conference at the New York Hilton prior to the first of four shows at Madison Square Garden

It was on 15 August of 1972 that Priscilla Ann Presley officially filed for divorce in a Santa Monica court, asking \$100,000 plus \$1,500 monthly for spousal and child support. The split had devastated Elvis

yet 1972 was also a year that saw him perform some of his most exhilarating shows. When Presley died in 1977, NBC aired a 60-minute version of *Elvis On Tour*. They didn’t have to look back two decades for footage that showed Presley at his onstage peak, just five years. And now, half a century on, we can soak ourselves in that 1972 concert trek, a series of shows that proved that Elvis, even in his late 30s, could rock as hard and as passionately as any performer half his age. ★

The *Elvis On Tour* boxset is due for release early next year via RCA/Legacy Recordings