

Mario Kombou

Endorsed by the King's cousin, Donna Presley, Mario Kombou is one of the UK's leading Elvis tribute acts. He tells *Vintage Rock* about his critically-acclaimed show, *The Elvis Years*.

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

It's not many Elvis impersonators who get a thumbs up from one of the King's close relatives. But Mario Kombou, who's been playing Presley for nearly 30 years, notching up well over 6,000 performances, is no ordinary tribute act. So when Donna Presley – Elvis' first cousin – first caught Mario in the late 90s, she wasted little time in endorsing him, putting Kombou in the front line of Elvis impersonators and leading to appearances on such shows as *Top Of The Pops* and *GMTV*. He's currently touring in *The Elvis Years*, an ambitious theatrical experience that tells the story of the King from his days at Sun to his final years in Vegas.

Do you remember the first time you saw Elvis? Was it love at first sight, or did it take a while for you to become a fan?

It wasn't really until he died that I really got into him. I was about 12 and TV channels began showing the movies in the morning and it was those films that got me into Elvis. There was this good-looking guy, always got the girl, always won a fight. This guy was cool.

How did *The Elvis Years* come about?

We'd done the musical *Jailhouse Rock*, and when we finished that I said to some of the guys, "Look, do you fancy coming out on the road?" So we got together with the musical director from *Jailhouse Rock*, David Mackay, and put the show together. That was 15 years ago.

How would you sell the show to someone who was maybe agnostic about Elvis?

We often get people saying, "I'm not really much of an Elvis fan, my wife dragged me



Double take: Mario Kombou cuts a fine dash as the King

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along, but I thoroughly enjoyed it." I think it's because it's not like other sorts of shows. It's a production first and foremost, it's not just your typical Vegas-type show. We tell his story from the very beginning and take the audience all the way through, via visuals and different costumes – I change costumes about 15 times. Basically, we take them on a musical journey through Elvis' life.

What are your favourite Elvis numbers to perform on stage?

As I'm getting a little bit older, I prefer the

Vegas stuff because, you know, to play Elvis as an 18, 19-year-old is difficult, but we do it anyway. I suppose my comfort zone is more the late-60s and late-70s songs.

It must be pretty tiring being on the road and performing on that stage for the entire show?

It is tiring, because there's a lot of travelling first of all. We might drive for five hours to get to a gig. I drive the bus as well, because I don't trust anyone else! So you've got to get there, you've got to set up, you've got to iron all those costumes and soundcheck etc... it's a long day. But you know, it's adrenaline, because you appreciate that people have paid money to see you, and that's the biggest buzz. It's not like you're in a pub somewhere, with someone in front of you saying, "Who's that guy singing?" People have turned up because they want to be entertained. And we're confident in our product, and what we can do. So, yeah, it's sheer adrenaline, the minute you're standing on that stage and you're seeing the audience going in – that always drives you.

What's the future of the production?

We're taking bookings into 2023, 2024, so long may it continue. As long as I can keep doing it, we'll carry on. We're revamping the show at the moment, so we're constantly making changes. When we kick off again in the autumn it's going to be like a new show, which is really exciting for us. ★

For tour dates and further information about *The Elvis Years* – plus an excellent show trailer, visit the official website at theelvisyears.com