

Elvis never really leaves the building

Donna Mede finds a lingering legacy of the Elvis impersonation industry in the most unlikely of places.

JOE BIKIC NEVER thought he would be an Elvis impersonator. Joe and his mate Alberto Pancotti first started playing music together at Croydon High School in the late 1970s. "It all started off very innocently," says Joe. "Me and Alberto were at high school. The hormones were going crazy. Music was a way of letting off steam."

Some of Joe's early musical experiences might not have been the best preparation for his later life in the guise of the King. "I did a long stint with a heavy metal band called Wild Child and another one called Teaze."

These days, his day job is teaching young hopefuls at his singing studio in Grange. But, when show time arrives, out come the blue suede shoes, rhinestones and guitar, and Joe Bikic becomes the dynamic front-man for the *Australian Elvis Show*.

Tonight we are at the Cavern, underneath the casino on North Terrace, a place that has news for anyone who thought they could not get enough of the Beatles. It is a bit disconcerting catching an Elvis show in a room full of Beatles pictures, but nobody here seems to mind.

The *Australian Elvis Show*, going about seven years now, reckons it is a cut above the average in this line of work. "I work hard at it," says Joe. "There are hundreds of Elvis impersonators but I pay tribute.

I'm looking for that bit extra. When you see Elvis on stage, he's pretty loose, he's very loose and you have to try to capture some of that."

Restraint is the key to going the distance. "Most people who do it, overdo it and they lose their appeal after a few songs."

So that's settled. But why have tribute shows got such enduring appeal? Elvis, The Beatles, ABBA, even Rod Stewart. Long ago these shows stopped being the territory of a tragic fan doing it for love. Nowadays, it is professional musos such as Joe and Alberto who dominate the business.

"It's a phenomenon that's hard to explain," says Joe. "The Beatles had it, Elvis had it. People just couldn't get

Fancy dancers, people's grans, backpackers, chicks and dudes out for a night's dancing and perving. Joe says the crowd is never the same twice.

enough of them. But they can't see them anymore. So the next best thing is to go and see a tribute."

Punters are happy to pay for it, too. The lads in the band admit they would like to do more shows, hardly surprising when the pay is between \$2000 and \$5000 a night.

"We don't want the show to look cheap. What some bands earn in a night,

we'd spend on the lights and stuff for the show. We do mainly corporate shows. It's not as good as it used to be. Since the pokies came in, there's less venues."

But there is still a diverse crowd coming to catch the shows. Tonight at the Cavern there are all sorts present – age groups and social types. Fancy dancers, people's grans, backpackers, chicks and dudes out for a night's drinking and perving. Joe says it is never the same twice.

"Each audience is like a different creature. Certain crowds like to watch and other crowds like to dance. Elvis had just one thing; they sat and watched."

Tonight they are dancing and when Joe and the boys turn it on, the appeal of the nostalgia-driven cover band is easy to see. But the frontman is only making it

look easy. Truth is: he suffers for his art.

"There's a lot of me in the show. I feel the pressure. I don't sleep as well as I'd

like to coming up to these things. It's an unusual occupation but I feel privileged that I'm doing it."

It is not surprising to find the nostalgia business going strong in a society increasingly attracted to looking back, not forward. But a night out at the *Australian Elvis Show* will not make much difference to any of that stuff. And it is still more fun than the pokies. o



Joe Bikic gets a whole lotta shakin' goin' on. Photo: Tracy Glazier