

CHARLIE ♦ CONNELLY

This bonus chapter from In Search Of Elvis sees me travel to the wilds of Norway to meet Kjell Elvis, Norway's top Elvis tribute artist. And what a very nice chap he was too.



I have a fairly holistic approach to finding my way around new places, one which I put into practice on alighting from the train in Hamar, a little Norwegian town a couple of hours north of Oslo. With characteristic disorganisation I had managed to bring the name of my hotel with me, but not the address. I made my way to the station exit, stood on the street, looked left and right, and headed left with an assertive stride. My theory for finding your way around when you don't really know where you are, you see, is that if you set off in a particular direction confidently enough it's more likely to turn out to be the right direction than if you take a few tentative steps, stop, look around walk back to where you started, shrug, and then retrace your steps with a gait that says, I'm a stranger in town, I have no idea where I'm going. The travel gods will not look kindly upon you.

With a confident stride however, even if you're going the wrong way the chances are that you will end up somewhere that you may not intend to be, but it'll turn out to be a place you'll find you need to be. Hence I set out from Hamar station with a stride that would cause locals to stop, look and say to their companions, "now, he's clearly not from around here but, by the Lord Harry, he knows precisely where he's going"

If my jaw was as lantern as I'd like it to be, it would have jugged confidently ahead of me as I headed off confident, nay, certain to come across the Scandic Hotel before I'd had cause to break sweat. I passed the Quality Astoria hotel. That's handy, I thought, this is clearly the hotel district, the Scandic must be no more than a stone's throw away. Then I reached the lakefront on which Hamar stands and realised I was at a dead end. I set off back the way I came, still with confident stride, passing the Quality Astoria again, confident that the Scandic was but a glance up a side street away. Several glances - not to mention a couple of hard stares - up side streets later, and I was back at the station. My theory was being put severely to the test but I wasn't beaten yet. I set off in a slightly different direction, crossing the road and heading towards what appeared to be the centre of the town. I followed roads this way and that, passed the Quality Astoria again and found myself in what appeared to be the town's main square. Still no sign of the Scandic. I took a different route out of the square, wandered a few more streets, passed the Quality Astoria again somehow, and ended up back at the railway station, where it was now a good hour since I'd alighted from the train. Of course I could have asked someone where the Scandic was but a) that was against the rules of my holistic GPS and b) I am a boy, and hence never ask for directions anywhere, not ever, no how. In this case however, darkness was starting to fall.

I wandered for another twenty minutes or so, passing the Quality Astoria a couple more times, before finally giving in and crossing the portals of Hamar's tiny tourist information office (I mean that the office was tiny incidentally, it didn't just cater for visitors of diminutive stature). It was clearly just closing for the day as the woman inside had just given the floor a thorough mopping. I pushed the door open, broke into a beaming smile, said "hi", put my leading foot on the floor and then felt it slide rapidly from under me. The next thing I knew I could see the lights on the ceiling and then the floor met the back of my head with such a crack that I suddenly remembered the name of an old sitcom I'd spent months trying to think of about a cartoonist called Dudley who wore a glove puppet (it was *Keep It In The Family*).

The woman looked at me with her mouth hanging open as I picked myself up from the soapy floor. "Sorry about that," I said, in that British way of apologising for things that aren't our fault. "I wonder if you could help me, I'm looking for the Scandic Hotel". As I brushed myself down and fingered the back of my skull for blood and dents, I realised from the expression on her face that she hadn't understood a word I'd said. One reason I like travelling in Scandinavia so much is that wherever you go everybody seems to speak English, but here,

for the first time, I'd encountered someone who didn't speak a word. My Norwegian isn't what it should be, so I had to write down the name of the hotel on a piece of paper.

"Ah, Scandic!" she said, as if the scales had fallen from her eyes. "Erm, umm..." she said, smiling with frustration at our mutual lack of communication. Or maybe she was just still trying to stop herself laughing at my ridiculous slapstick entrance to the room. She pointed at a road leading off the small plaza in which the office was situated, one that clearly led out of town, causing me to reject it as a possible location for the Scandic Hotel. "That road?" I asked, pointing in the same direction. She nodded firm agreement, and then repeatedly bent and straightened her pointing arm, while nodding vigorously in a gesture that seemed to suggest the hotel was a considerable distance away.

I thanked her warmly and gestured at the back of my head and the spot on the floor where I'd landed - and from where I had now left a trail of big dirty footprints in the suds - with a smiling roll of the eyes that said, "blimey, what an idiot, eh?". She responded with a smile and a shrug that said, "yes, an absolute twat of the highest order", and I struck out for the road in question as the Quality Astoria loomed away to my right. I really wish I'd just booked in there instead.

The road was indeed a long one. After a while the shops ran out. Then the houses ran out. Then there were a couple of sports fields. A good twenty minutes after I'd set out from the tourist office I finally caught sight of a tall building with Scandic written on it. I pushed my way through the doors and reached reception, where with some relief I gave my name and my booking reference. The receptionist tippety-tapped on her computer.

"Ah, yes, Mr Connelly," she said in a way that didn't sound encouraging. Maybe the woman from the tourist office had phoned ahead with the story of my Looney Tunes encounter with her recently soaped floor and there were two other receptionists crouching behind the desk laughing so hard they were biting on ring binders so as not to give themselves away.

"I am afraid the hotel is overbooked tonight, so we have had to find you a reservation in another hotel. You now have a room reserved at the Quality Astoria."

I am pretty paranoid at the best of times, but this was the first occasion I could recall where I'd had cause to believe that an entire town was taking the piss out of me.

"The Quality Astoria?" I croaked.

"Yes sir," she replied, pulling out a small map of the town, and preparing a pen to point me to the hotel's location. "It's..."

"Yes, actually, I know where it is thanks," I interjected weakly.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience sir, but it's not far, only about five hundred metres."

If that was five hundred metres then I am the Queen of tugboating Sheba, I thought as I exited through the double doors.

Once safely ensconced in my room at the Quality Astoria (where I reflected with satisfaction that my holistic navigation had actually worked after all – it had taken me to somewhere I needed to be; I just didn't know at the time that I needed to be there) I took out the map of Hamar that I had whipped from the hands of the Scandic receptionist and attempted to locate the place where I had arranged to meet the Norwegian Elvis.

In hindsight I've no idea why I found the idea of a Norwegian Elvis impersonator so appealing. Elvis has a huge following in Scandinavia, but then most things have a huge following in Scandinavia. You can barely attend a football match in the lower echelons of the Scottish league, for example, without a clump of cheerful Swedes standing there agape at the excitement of being at Cowdenbeath versus East Stirlingshire before buying up the entire stock of the club's souvenir hut at half-time. Scandinavians, it seems to me, are the world's greatest enthusiasts. They're into anything and everything. The best Elvis museum I've been to, for example, is not in Memphis or Las Vegas, but in Randers, a little town in Denmark not far from Aarhus, a place that always makes me want to add 'in the middle of our street' whenever I hear it. .

The museum started off as the private collection of Elvis memorabilia belonging to a man called Henrik Knudsen, before it got so big he opened it as a museum. One day, when I

noticed that a budget airline were advertising flights to Aarhus for the princely sum of twenty-four pence, I booked up and flew out there with my friend Steve. The museum is outstanding, featuring a number of holy grails for Elvis fans such as clothes worn by Elvis in the fifties, a guitar he owned during his military service years in Germany and another that he played during a 1975 concert in Pontiac attended by a whopping 65,000 people. As well as the museum, Knudsen runs one of the best Elvis websites on the web, and produces one of the most professional fan club magazines you'll ever see. When we told him that we'd flown over from London specifically to see the museum he was amazed, and invited us behind the scenes. In the little office, where his lugubrious assistant Lars pored over some paperwork, he showed us Elvis's actual 1960s driver's licence now encased in resin, and a telephone recently acquired from Graceland. As Steve and I cooed over these relics, he looked at us again and said, "I can't believe you guys came from London just to see the museum. I mean, Lars and me," he waved a hand at Lars, who was still engrossed in a ring binder full of purchase orders and looked like he had been for several days, "Lars and me do crazy things like that sometimes, but it's really great that you guys did this".

So if I've learned one thing about Scandinavians it's that when they do things, they do them properly and they do them well. That's probably why I went off in search of Kjell Bjørnstad, or Kjell Elvis as he's known – I knew that if he was Norway's number one Elvis tribute act, he was bound to be good.

He'd been kind enough to send me a signed copy of his latest CD when I'd e-mailed asking to come and see him. Now, despite my high opinion of Scandinavians in general I was half-expecting and completely hoping that when I put the CD in the player something approximating the Swedish chef from the Muppets would issue forth from the speakers. But no, the CD was startlingly good, a hundred times better than the Elvis imitators I'd seen in Porthcawl. I also knew that Kjell was quite famous in Norway, starring, among other things, in a television advertisement for milk. In the advert he comes off stage after a gig and goes straight to the fridge and pours himself a glass of the old natural goodness. Outside, the real Elvis Presley turns up to meet him but Kjell eschews a chinwag with the King in favour of another glass of the white stuff from Norway's finest cows. He'd also once held the world record for continuous performance of Elvis songs – a little over forty hours.

We'd arranged to meet and have chat before his concert in Hamar. It was a fairly low key gig, he explained, but we'd have a chance to talk. It was a new feeling for me to be walking the streets of Hamar knowing exactly where I was going and before long I found myself outside the Svarre & Berg bar, a place I realised I had passed a number of times on my earlier odyssey, once again proving my theory of navigation.

I walked inside, where Kjell's band were setting up for the soundcheck. It was a decent sized place, with a central bar and a shallow stage at one end, so shallow in fact that there was barely room for the drum kit. There appeared to be no sign of Kjell, so I asked a woman who it turned out owned the place where I might find him. She directed me down a spiral staircase to the dressing room.

I knocked on the door, which was opened by a young Elvis Presley. At least that's how it looked. Kjell Bjornestad is an absolute ringer for Elvis circa the 1968 comeback special. He was even wearing a black silk shirt and a red neckerchief, just as Elvis wore in the opening sequences of the comeback show. I really can't emphasise enough just how much he looked like Elvis. It was extraordinary. He smiled greetings and invited me in, introduced me to his two backing singers, pulled a chair from under the table for me to sit on and organised a cup of coffee for me. The dressing room was standard fare for any medium sized venue in Europe – posters of old gigs papered the walls, trays of sandwiches covered with clingfilm sat on a table in the corner, a half-written setlist was on the table in front of Kjell.

"Music's always been a big part of my life," he said when I asked how he came to be performing Elvis material, "I started singing gospel songs with my family when I was around six years old. My father played in a band, so he helped me to improve. He never played Elvis, or anything like that, but my sister used to listen to Elvis. The first time I heard him I was around six years old and my mother and her friend were watching a film called *Love Me Tender*. I remember the look on my mother's face as she watched Elvis and even at six years old I was overwhelmed by his charisma. Right then I decided to be like him, even back then I had a very strong dream to be like Elvis. At school they teased me, because he was so unfashionable back then, we're talking about the mid-seventies, but I kept believing in my dreams and they came true, because now I'm living out my dreams. I did my first Elvis show when I was nine years old and when I did my national service in the army I'd play Elvis songs with my guitar. The magazines started writing about me and that started the ball rolling.

“When I left the army I started doing Elvis seriously, with a band and everything, and then things started to get really big. About eighteen years ago I made my first television appearance and that’s when things really took off. I’ve now been living entirely from my Elvis stuff without any other job for about ten years now.

“My love for music is the reason I do this. When I sing tonight it’s because I love Elvis, of course, but also because I sing from the heart. I live to be up there on stage. I’m not Elvis on stage, I might look like him up there, but the music and the feeling is coming from my heart. Of course looking and sounding like Elvis is my job and I have to do it, but it’s still me up there on stage.”

Kjell is the only full-time professional Elvis impersonator in Norway.

“Here in Norway it’s a difficult way to make a living as an Elvis impersonator,” he said. “People say oh, you shouldn’t do this, get yourself a new life, you know, but when they see my show they realise that I’m actually very good at what I do, and that I give nothing but respect to Elvis. I always try to do my very best, to always be on top.

“At first I was scared to death of what people would say because I had a little cosmetic surgery on my face. Just a little, because I do look this way, but it made the front pages of some of the magazines. That day changed everything forever. The press exaggerated the extent of the surgery, but I managed to turn it around and use the publicity in a positive way and know how television and magazines think. People will always remember me from those stories, and that’s something I can live with.”

Kjell seems to have a magic touch when it comes to publicity. One of his best coups was to break the record for singing Elvis songs continuously when he clocked up more than forty hours of continuous crooning.

“It was forty hours, eight minutes and one second in fact,” he told me, “which is significant in many ways. *Aloha From Hawaii* was broadcast to forty countries, and Elvis was born on the eighth day of the first month, so that’s why I stopped at exactly that moment. Next year I’m planning a contest with around twenty impersonators singing against each other, a kind of last

man standing thing. It will be great, the world will not have seen this before and television from all over the world will come to see it, so next year I will be on the television all over the world. I know how to use these events for promotion, and they will all come to my little town Lyngdal in south Norway.

“I have very strong Christian beliefs, which is another reason why I have to sing from the heart or not at all. I love to sing Elvis gospel songs. I can’t just go through the motions, I have to sing from the heart. Eventually I want to do my own songs and have my own hits. They’ll still be in an Elvis style, but they’ll be my songs. I think that I could be much, much bigger if I can get famous with one hit, and then I could do one or two of my own songs on stage. Then I would get more serious. As an Elvis tribute artist I can only get so far; I’ve probably risen as high as I can doing this, but if I get a hit for myself I can get even better. I love Elvis, but I also want to show that I can create my own thing. I have a dream to be the best Elvis Tribute Artist in the world, always try to get better and better.”

Indeed, at that point Kjell was required to reach the top of the stairs in order to make the sound at tonight’s show better and better, and I followed him up to watch the soundcheck.

Having been in a few bands in my time, I know how soundchecks can be a necessary nuisance. Each musician bangs, strums, plucks or blows in turn, and then you all come together to plod through a couple of desultory songs before skulking back to the dressing room to drink the rider and moan about the amount of time there is to hang about before the gig.

Kjell Elvis’s soundcheck encapsulated why he is a successful professional musician and I’m not, apart from my lack of any talent whatsoever, of course. The band had been soundchecking when I’d arrived, and now that Kjell had joined them things got really serious. This wasn’t a soundcheck, it was a full workout. Kjell stood out front with the microphone by the mixing desk, putting everything into a shimmering version of *You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling*. It was clearly not just empty rhetoric when Kjell had told me he has to put everything into his singing – he was doing just that, at a soundcheck for a low key gig in a bar in a small town in central Norway. His commitment was such that you’d have thought he was preparing for the *Aloha From Hawaii* global broadcast itself. It was the longest soundcheck I’ve ever seen, a testament to Kjell’s commitment and professionalism. So good was his voice, and so

perfect his enunciation of the song that it sounded strange to hear him talking to the band and sound engineer in Norwegian between songs. After what seemed like an age, he came over to join me at a table to continue our chat. We sat in a dark corner of the bar, facing each other over a table lit only by candlelight, and, looking at Kjell in the shadowy golden light thrown by the flame, it really did seem like I was sitting opposite Elvis himself.

“We only have a limited band here tonight,” he said of his line up of guitar, drums, bass, keyboards and two backing singers, “but this is quite a small show so it didn’t make sense financially or in terms of the size of the stage to bring the full brass section and all my usual backing singers.”

Following on from our conversation in the dressing room about how Kjell’s long term plan was to perform his own songs, I asked him why, when he’s clearly a gifted and ambitious performer, he impersonates Elvis rather than perform his own material.

“I don’t know really. Elvis has been my passion for my whole life, and from a young age I decided to do Elvis. Elvis was the toughest guy I’d ever seen, he had all this sex appeal, and I wanted that too. I always loved to sing and perform, and that’s what I started doing. Back then I wasn’t thinking about doing my own stuff, just Elvis. But I never really thought it would get this big. So now the years have passed and today I want to do my own stuff and just do Elvis now and again, I want to see how far I can go with my own voice and my own songs.

“I think that if I can use some of Elvis’s charisma on stage, using that quality, and develop it my own style, that has to be a good thing. I love the whole sound of the seventies – I think most music today sounds flat. I love having the full band sound and I want to have quality in the backing voices. I want the same level of entertainment that Elvis had in the seventies. I think if you can have that sound and be yourself at the same time you’ll have great success. People would see me on the TV and say wow, he looks like Elvis but he’s doing his own stuff,; if that happened I think that I could be a success. That’s what I’m planning to do. I’m also planning a DVD to send to MTV, all sorts of things. I really think I can make it.

“But I also want to use my life in the Christian way, because that’s in my heart. I like to help other people, not only give them entertainment because that’s empty, it’s just for the night. I want to do things that help them in their lives, give them something to take away with them.

For example, when I sing *How Great Thou Art* tonight, it'll come from my heart. Most concerts I do when I sing that song they are out of their seats – it affects them in their heart because I'm singing from my heart. It's strange, but everyone loves that song. After the shows, that's the song people talk to me about, they say it's like the song came down from heaven, you know. I love that, it gives me a value to what I'm doing. Elvis had a great talent



for gospel, and I know that he was always seeking God, and he had a gift from God. I heard a story that one of his backing singers had cancer of the stomach, and she was very afraid. Elvis told her that she wasn't going to die and he put his hand on her stomach and three days later she went to the doctor, and the cancer was gone. That's another reason why Elvis was so great

on stage because he had this great and genuine faith. Everything he sang, it was real, always real, and he was always seeking happiness. When he was alone he was always crying, like he was in a lonely golden prison.

“In a similar way, I think I could be a light in the dark, if I have a hit with the right kind of song with the right message. That's what I want to aim for. I try to be humble in my life but I know that I have a talent, a gift that I have to use in the right way. I don't think that I'm Elvis at all, don't get me wrong, but I love the music. I don't love his life at all, all the pills, I don't like that. It's easy to say don't take that path but you don't know what it's like until you've walked that mile in his shoes. I have been doing this for a long time now, and after all these

years I don't think I'd choose that path. When I was young I'd have done anything to get to the top, but experience teaches you different things.

“Well, what more can I say. My life is music, and if I can help someone through music, then that would make me very happy. But also in my spare time, I don't listen so much to Elvis so much. Of course on a Friday and Saturday I practically live with Elvis, I do around 120 concerts a year, but at home I only listen to him now and then. I try to live a normal life, working on my house, I like to build things with my hands. I come from a family of carpenters, and I love to create things. That gives me peace in my soul. So I'm not the guy who runs to the nearest party after singing, I like to be alone. I meet the audience after shows, but I'm not a party guy, that's not my style. But that doesn't mean I'm a boring guy at all, I just like to have a quality in my life.

“I think I'm quite unusual in that I can do the real fifties Elvis voice well, you know, the *Jailhouse Rock* voice, but also I can do the later voice. A lot of tribute artists think they can do the seventies crooning type voice, but they overdo it. Elvis's voice changed dramatically through his career, like no-one else I ever heard. You know it's Elvis, but you can tell it's a different voice.

“Nobody had Elvis's talent and charisma. Of course he had a great voice, but it was his charisma, the way he was on stage, that made him totally different to all other artists. The way he looked, combined with his voice. I think it's true that Elvis is bigger now than when he was alive. He still has the power to be number one at any time. I think he did too many great songs on his LPs, there were so many potential hits on every album he did that if you released some of those songs as singles now then they would still be huge hits. He just had it all, the voice, the charisma, the looks of a Greek god, everything. I think that in every man there is a little Elvis. Everybody wants to have something of that quality – maybe the looks or the voice, we all want at least one aspect of Elvis for ourselves. I can't compare him to any other artist, because there's nobody that stands up to comparison. If you like him or not, he will always be the biggest, the king of rock'n'roll.

“People have to remember that without the Elvis tribute artists, Elvis probably wouldn't be as popular today. There are always ETAs on the TV doing their crazy things, but Elvis Presley Enterprises know the effect we have, and use us in a positive way. TV wants the circus of

ETAs fooling around. Of course Elvis would still be huge without us, but I think we've helped to make him bigger. Now, many ETAs are just clowns, but I think Elvis said he likes ETAs because he saw Andy Kaufman imitating him and he said he was honoured to be imitated. I think today he would look to us and say, ok, they love me. OK there are stupid people who look stupid but they're doing it because they love me. I don't mind criticism, as you can't please everyone, but people should see what we've done to keep his memory alive.

"I have very strong and clear ambitions. My next album will be a gospel album and it will be big on television. It will be a mixture of Elvis songs and I will try and do a few of my own. I think that style of song is popular with so many people, so that's my next target. Then I will follow that up with an album of my own style, which will give me a whole new career. I think I could reach a whole new audience and I think I could make it very big. I want to stand for quality. So much music today is just about sex and so on, I think my gospel stuff will really win people over. If I can reach people with my voice, I'll be happy."

It was time for Kjell to go back to his hotel to change and prepare for the concert. I stayed in the bar, where the owner kindly kept me stocked up with beer and cashew nuts as the trickle of punters began. With Norwegian alcohol prices being so huge, locals tend not to go out until later, and it appeared that the lure of Kjell Elvis was not quite enough here to tempt them out earlier than usual. Although most of the tables were occupied, and a few people lolled at the bar, myself included, it didn't seem like a great crowd. It was an older crowd – most Norwegian youngsters go to pre-parties, not emerging into the bars until midnight at the earliest – but their drinking habits were impressively committed. Couples who could have been the Norwegian equivalent of my mum and dad were downing pints of lager with Jägermeister chasers.

Eventually Kjell's band took to the stage, with his backing singers alternating lead vocals on a few songs, and then it was showtime. The familiar opening riff to *See See Rider* summoned the man himself from the dressing room, and he exploded onto the stage in a white tassled jumpsuit. Apart from Elvis himself, Kjell was the first person I'd ever seen who actually looked good in a white jumpsuit. With the stage so small, Kjell had laid a flightcase on its side in front of it on which he would strut his stuff. It was then for the first time that I realised just how little he is. So big is his personality and so huge his engaging charm that I'd failed to register that Kjell is actually quite short, shorter even than me, which is saying a lot.

His show was absolutely outstanding. Once again it brought it home to me what a difference a live band makes to an Elvis impersonator, but that would serve only to detract from what a consummate performer Kjell Elvis is. It wasn't the biggest crowd he'd ever played to by any means, and it wasn't the most salubrious venue either, but Kjell sang his heart out and worked his socks off for every last person in that room, whether they'd come to see him specifically or had just stopped by for a beer or two. His band were outstanding as well. At the soundcheck it was clear that they all liked and respected the Elvis guy, and their performance was as tight as a drum.

While *How Great Thou Art* didn't actually seem to elicit tears on this occasion, I was sure to watch Kjell closely. He lived every note, his body wracked and jerked with every syllable and every nuance. I looked at his eyes and it was clear that at that moment, singing that particular song, Kjell Bjørnstad was somewhere else entirely.