

What Price on Elvis' Head? : Odyssey: A huge, peeling likeness of the King came to rest in Holyland. Now its owners want to chop it up and auction off the pieces.

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Elvis isn't looking too hot these days. He's kind of shredded and peeling, all bloated 1,400 pounds of him. There's a gaping space between his glazed eyes. The King's nose is so chewed up you'd think he belonged in the original Memphis, a churning urn from the Valley of those other Kings.

It's not easy being an Elvis head--and never more so than now--because it's curtains for the giant Elvis head that had ostensibly found its final resting place at Holyland, a bizarre artists' shrine and sculpture garden in Mt. Washington. Elvis, the patron saint of Holyland, has been at his new home barely three months. And he has been kindly asked to leave.

Nothing personal, you understand. The house at 500 Museum Drive has been sold out from under him.

The Elvis head might do the conventional thing and go Hollywood--a producer says he wants to spirit away the head for a TV pilot. But if he doesn't move fast, Holyland's keepers will feel obliged to chop up the head into little pieces. Then they'll auction off the Elvis bits on Easter, also known in Holyland as The End of Holyland As We Know It Show.

"We need the dough, and Elvis won't mind because we're devoted to him," says Brett Waller, a Holyland acolyte. "You know anybody who wants Elvis' nose? Or his eyes or his lips? His pomp is worth the most, I think. Can you imagine being the proud owner of Elvis' pomp, sticking it on the front of your car and driving down the 110?"

What a long, strange trip it's been.

The Elvis head began life as a normal float in the 1990 Tournament of Roses parade, representing Mississippi. But it quickly made a cross-country pilgrimage to its spiritual place of origin, courtesy of KLOS-FM disc jockeys Mark and Brian. The morning disc duo escorted the Elvis head on a flatbed truck to Graceland for the publicity, much to the irritation of the real Elvis' estate keepers, who did not look kindly on merriment made at the King's expense.

The head moved on to a shopping mall and restaurant in Jackson, Miss. Then

it got dumped at a nearby dump called Cash for Cans, which held its acquisition in greater esteem. Cans paid \$13.10 for the pleasure of lending shelter to the Elvis head. For eight months, dump workers happily ate lunch with the King.

But it was not to be. Holyland's artists, who double as float builders, learned on the float-building grapevine that Elvis was in Jackson. They offered the dump owner \$75, which inspired all hell to break loose. Graceland wanted the head. KLOS wanted the head. Magic Matt Alan of KIIS-FM upped the ante to \$500 and 100 pounds of extra crispy Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Ultimately, the dump owner stuck to the deal he'd made with Holyland. The head was quietly trucked back to Los Angeles, where Holyland hosted a blowout 56th birthday party for the King.

Of course, Holyland being Holyland, parties generally follow the lines of, well, church services. Waller, whose Holyland alter ego goes by the name of Dr. Brett, gave a sermon and his partner, Ralph Eaton, a.k.a. the Rev. Ralph, distributed bits of bacon--billed as Elvis' favorite food--doused with Elvis-inspired barbecue sauce.

And then, as the service wound down, Waller summed up the Elvis head saga thusly: "The head went 2,000 miles that way, it came 2,000 miles back, and we won and we just let the head decide for itself."

It all seems like a lot of trouble for the hulking and tattered remains of Elvis-like steel, wire, fiberglass, flowers and birdseed. But then context is everything, and this was one Los Angeles back yard that really needed a giant Elvis head, a place whose keepers were preparing for its arrival those many months earlier, yea, before they even knew the head existed.

Eaton, 33, and Waller, 27, created Holyland sometime in 1989 in a back yard up the road apiece from the Southwest Museum.

Amid an evolving thicket of irreverent sculptures, Holyland's ersatz clergy came to host weekly "church services." Clumps of artists and others began to troop in Sundays at dusk for barbecue, fellowship, quirky performances and all-around art-world nose-thumbing.

On one such Sunday not long ago, Waller was preparing for a service. Margaret Fair, a dark-haired young woman in a glittery bustier, was strapping Waller into a large box. Somewhere off in the darkness, Holyland's resident pig, Lula, was grunting.

Three blondes began to twitch flaming batons, their hips hopping like their counterparts in Robert Palmer videos. The women will be introduced as the Holyland cheerleaders. And soon Waller will be suited up in a straitjacket and crutches and nailed into the box. His mission will be to emerge from his cocoon Houdini-like, while the Rev. Ralph chants "the power of Elvis compels us." Finally, Waller will dismantle a "Scud missile" in honor of the Gulf War.

But first Waller is wondering how all these complicated logistics are going to work out in the tight space of the next few minutes, before an audience of 30 people.

"Elvis is going to have to get me through this," Waller says over Lula's oinks, "because I've never done this before."

There are those who might wonder why he would bother in the first place. For Waller, the answer is partly explained by a trace of bad boy past. While his psychiatrist mother and marine biologist father eschewed church-going, Waller appreciated its social advantages as a child.

"St. John's Episcopal Church in Maryland was an ancient place," Waller recalls, "and I would sit in the balcony with my bad friends and we would pull little pieces of mortar out of the wall and chuck them at the choir."

Eaton had his own curious brush with religion somewhat later in life. As an idle teen in Richmond, Va., he was briefly recruited into a born-again Christian group called the Forever Family.

"It was after 'Godspell' and 'Jesus Christ Superstar,' " Eaton says. "It was cool to be into Jesus."

In a sense the pair have come full circle, turning religion back into pop culture. And Elvis seemed to be the perfect point man for Holyland.

"Elvis had this huge following of underprivileged masses, and he became a folk hero. And he's slowly becoming a religion," says Waller.

The funny thing is, Waller and Eaton--who joined forces at art school in Virginia--are actually fascinated by religion. They collect *santeria* candles and talk heatedly about Voodoo Village, a Mason sculpture garden across town from Graceland. They talk about the curiousness of good and bad, of concepts of polarity and power. Then there is the greater good of going to church at Holyland--networking.

Says Eaton: "It never has been my intention to offend anybody."

Says Waller: "The best test for anything is doubt."

And so the end of Holyland will come at the hands of man, a landlord to be precise. And on Sunday, Holyland will open to the public for the last time. At noon, there will be an Easter egg hunt. The afternoon will feature the Holyland auction of general art stuff, with performances by the Holyland band, TCB, named for Elvis' motto "Taking Care of Business," which he emblazoned on his plane, the Lisa Marie. At dusk, there will be bring-your-own barbecue and special Elvis Kool-Aid.

"We're going to say our farewells," says Waller.

On April Fool's Day, Holyland will move to a house in another place Eaton and Waller won't disclose, but they won't hold church services there. After all, watching hordes of people troop through your house every week would test the patience of a saint.

Still, Holyland will likely leave its mark on Museum Drive, even if only in spirit.

Says Waller: "I can't wait to see the look on the new occupant's face when people show up on Sunday for years to come wondering where the big Elvis head is."