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Elvis Presley is now defined by his jumpsuited look – but it was more of a practical choice than you might think

THE KING OF BLING

In the 1970s, Elvis's stagewear was taken to a totally new level, thanks to designer Bill Belew. A new book, *Elvis: Dressed To Rock*, puts those iconic clothes under the spotlight, with expert analysis from performance-costume historian Karan Feder...

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

It's rare for a new book about Elvis to promise never-before-seen content and not be stretching the truth, and even less common for one to come along that justifies the words "must-buy". There is, however, something exceptional about *Elvis: Dressed To Rock*. The first Graceland-approved history of the King's stagewear, it's a truly handsome tome, flush with new as well as archive imagery and rare sketches by designer Bill Belew, compiled by one of the fashion world's most authoritative voices on performance costume.

It's not hard to work out why Graceland reached out to Karan Feder to mastermind this companion to their much-lauded *Dressed To Rock* exhibition. Opening in 2022, it featured a dramatic 21-foot floor-to-ceiling display of Elvis's stagewear from '69 through to '77, giving fans a chance to see those iconic costumes – including the much-imitated *Aloha From Hawaii* jumpsuit and that striking black and blue *Cisco Kid* number – up-close for the first time.

The exhibit and this book both celebrate not just Elvis as a performer, but how his costuming in those last years was fundamental to his public image. Gone by this time were the loose drape jackets, Cuban-collar shirts,

high-waisted pleated trousers and penny loafers, and in came heavily embroidered jumpsuits, macramé belts, kick-pleat bell bottoms and silk scarves – high-drama costumery befitting those vast Las Vegas stages.

"This book focuses on just the stagewear," Feder tells *Vintage Rock*, via Zoom from – rather aptly – her home in Sin City. "Basically the nearly 100 costumes that are in the exhibition were all designed by a single designer. So the book explores Bill Belew's work, his collaboration with Presley and the significance of that collaboration, as well as bringing in historical context to help us understand why Elvis's iconic look developed."

And that's the difference. While most books on Elvis Presley are written from a music or fan perspective, Feder approached this book from a wider cultural one.

"I've always felt that some of these behind the scenes narratives about Elvis's costumes were a little misleading," she explains. "There was a seed of truth, but I felt like there wasn't enough historical context brought in that asks, why did this visual statement become so relevant? Why did it happen in the first place? What was Bill thinking? What was Elvis thinking? And what was the world thinking during this very specific period of time? What was fascinating to me was to look at a costume that appeared on stage, on Elvis at a certain moment, and then in parallel look at what was going on in the culture, in fashion magazines etc. What was American culture doing at that point in time?"

The jumpsuit, of course, remains the defining symbol of Elvis in the 70s. And though pundits of later generations would come to mock its camp flamboyance, Feder is at pains to point out that those critics overlook quite how vogueish the all-in-one was in the early 70s.

"The jumpsuit was the height of fashion, and you see all sorts of entertainers wearing one on stage,"

she says. “It was so important to Belew and the team to make sure that Elvis really looked modern, that he was representing the height of fashion and rock’n’roll at that point in time, and the jumpsuit was a really easy way to make that statement.

“The other important thing to understand is where Bill Belew was working,” she continues. “He was in Hollywood, and one of the main costume designers in that period, in that genre, was Bob Mackie. Bob would design jumpsuits for his male dancers, because it made it very easy for them to move – it was a stretchy garment and kept everything in place, so there were no wardrobe malfunctions. It was just what dancers wore and what the shops that Bill was working in were used to. So that also plays into this concept and why Bill felt that this could solve a lot of problems.”

It’s clear from the way she talks how much admiration Feder has for Bill Belew. One of the great, if often unsung, figures in the Elvis narrative, he was the King’s go-to costumer from the ’68 *Comeback Special* onwards.

“Bill would come up with concepts and sketches and present them to Elvis and his team,” she explains of the dynamic between the late designer (who died in 2008) and his most famous client. “And it was always Elvis’s prerogative to say, ‘No, I don’t like that.’ But typically, Elvis was game for anything. There were, however, some things that Elvis realised that, after he gave it a shot, weren’t working out. There are moments where the cape becomes a problem – it’s cumbersome, it gets in the way, the audience is grabbing at it. And there are a number of times where you see a lot of the fringing and the



Elvis’s “Arabian jumpsuit”, which debuted in 1974, included circular glass mirrors attached to the garment

macramé details that Belew adds to Elvis’ costumes are a mess and they too get in the way. Elvis has to move them around and again it’s just an opportunity for the audience to grab at something.”

Of course, Baz Luhrmann’s recent documentary *EPiC: Elvis Presley In Concert* has done much to reframe Elvis’s 1970s period in the public mind. Shattering the myth that the 30/40-something Presley was by then a pale shadow of his young, hip-thrusting former self, it reminded us quite how fiery the King was in those later years. Far from being rooted to the spot, Elvis was scissor-kicking and darting about all over the stage, and the costumes he wore needed to accommodate that intense physicality.

“The thing that Belew did, which was smart from the very beginning, in terms of making Elvis comfortable performing,

was that he selected this particular knit fabrication,” Feder says. “It’s very thick, very pliable, and it’s famous for working well for skiers – it lasted a long time and had great stretch and recovery. This was the fabrication that was being used all over Hollywood and had been proven successful for very rigorous performances. So that was incorporated right from the very beginning for Elvis’s costumes through to the very end.”

Given that those jumpsuits and macramé belts were the height of 70s fashion, does Feder ever wonder what kind of stagewear Belew might have designed for Elvis had his career stretched into the 1980s?

“I suspect that by the late 70s, it would be hard to step away from the visual statement that now defines Elvis,” she theorises. “Let’s face it, back in the 70s, I think audiences went to see Elvis and expected him to look a certain way. Who knows, but I suspect it would be hard to pull away from that totally because the jumpsuit served as a canvas. There would be ways that you could incorporate modernity and maybe 80s themes onto the Elvis silhouette jumpsuit, but abandoning it altogether would be a difficult prospect for the fans. I think once Elvis landed on that jumpsuit look and [it] just worked so perfectly, and fans so loved it, that there would have been at least some nod to maintaining that legacy.”

Working on this book has given Feder an even greater love of Elvis, she says. Though she admits she wasn’t exactly a “super-fan” before, the chance to see and touch those costumes has brought the King into greater focus for her. And for someone in her field (Simon & Schuster ➡

THE JUMPSUIT EFFECT

Though Karan Feder never met Bill Belew, she did in fact work in one of the shops that the designer used to frequent...

“Early in my career, I worked at the shop where Belew had all of Elvis’s costumes made,” Feder recalls of her beginnings in the fashion world. “This was entry level for me into the entertainment industry. I was learning how to sew beads and stuff. I remember I went into a

shop one time, I can’t recall which one it was, but I remember all of the costumes on display that had been prepped for not Elvis but the Osmond Brothers, and they all looked exactly like Elvis jumpsuits. I include one of these pictures in the book. It was Elvis that introduced Bill Belew to the

Osmond Brothers early in their career. The Osmonds were very vocal about saying, ‘We want to do what Elvis is doing.’ So Belew just put a different jumpsuit on each one. I remember that and being fascinated with all of those jumpsuits, just standing up waiting for the fitting.”

The famous “Cisco Kid” jumpsuits were thought to be inspired by the popular TV series

Dressed To Rock



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➡ describe her as “a leading expert in the field of performance costume history, preservation, and exhibition”) this was a prestigious gig, one that would allow her to become intimate with some of the most famous stagewear ever designed. So was it an emotional experience?

“I was just as interested in the outside decorative look of the piece as I was on the inside,” she says about seeing those costumes up close. “Once you look at them, you really realise how beautifully they’re made, and why a single jumpsuit could last for so many years and performances and still look fantastic. So yeah, it was really emotional. It’s a cool archive.”

Though Feder says Priscilla Presley wasn’t involved with the book, she did get full co-operation from Graceland, working most closely with their archives department.

“This was a hard project, because, as you know, all of these pieces that are photographed in the book are on permanent display,” she says. “So everything had to come off display to be photographed, and had to then go back on display. They were really great in sharing things with us, and we include some really fascinating pieces in the book that aren’t necessarily on display, but are ancillaries. Like there was a moment in time where Belew was designing chokers for Elvis, and in ’75 there are a few photos and a few concerts where he actually did wear the chokers, but most of the time, they came with the jumpsuits as they were delivered to Elvis, and he never wore them. So there was this box of choker necklaces that had never been worn, that didn’t necessarily match individual costumes, but seemed to have been made for Elvis so he could mix and match depending on what his mood was. So that’s something new in the book, which is fun.”

Elvis fans are, of course, not short for merch. There seems to be some new box set, coffee table book or novelty bobblehead arrive almost weekly, so much so it’s hard for anyone bar the most zealous completist to know what to buy and what to scroll past. But *Dressed To Rock* is definitely in the must-have category.

“I really hope that this book allows folks to approach the costumes from the point of view of artistry,” Feder says, “to understand the significance of Bill Belew in establishing this iconic look of Elvis. As I said, a single designer doing this is quite rare, and it is a look that has

stood the test of time in a really interesting way. I really just wanted to talk about fashion, the costumes and the stage, where and why it happened, and the hands behind the scenes.”

Feder’s previous publication before *Dressed To Rock* was another lavishly-illustrated book devoted to an American icon. *Barbie Takes The Catwalk: A Style Icon’s History In Fashion* won its author a Coffee Table Book of the Year award, while her 2017 book *The Folies Bergere In Las Vegas* earned her rave reviews. So who’s next in Karan Feder’s sights?

“Top of my list,” she confides, “would be Celine Dion’s archive. She, of course, is a very famous clothes horse, and she’s spent a lot of time archiving her stagewear and

her personal fashion collection, and has it stored in her house here in Las Vegas in a really high-tech way, so it’s all in really good condition. I would love to be able to document that part of Celine’s legacy. I’m trying to reach her, but I haven’t yet!”

But back to this book. What does she hope Elvis-heads take away from *Elvis: Dressed To Rock*?

“I do think that this publication offers something new,” she says, “that fans may not have thought about before. So I’m hoping I can add to the canon, the Elvis fandom canon, with this book.”

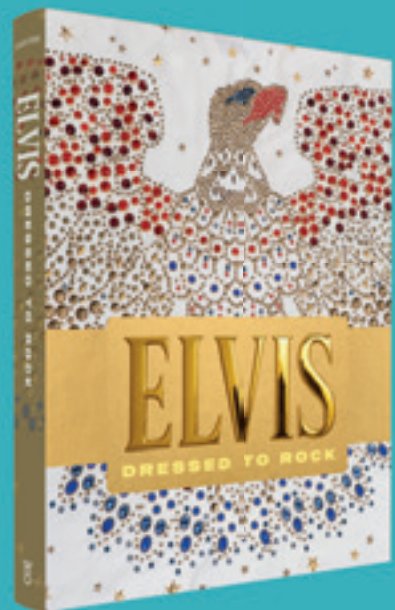
And that, we can confidently say, she has, with a book as meticulously crafted as the costumes and artistry it so joyously celebrates. ★

DETECTIVE WORK

For the book, Feder spent months studying Bill Belew’s costumes, and part of her job was playing investigative reporter, finding out exactly where the designer’s inspirations came from...

“There’s one that’s called the rope collar jumpsuit, that’s the white jumpsuit that just has a bunch of macramé at the neckline,” she says. “It’s the oddest looking design. And I kept thinking, how did this happen? Belew was really into macramé and he would often incorporate into Elvis’ costumes the sort of things he and his friends were wearing at the time and macramé was super big. I thought, well, I don’t even remember ever seeing macramé at the neck, and so what could possibly be the inspiration behind that? The more I looked into this, I found two sources that maybe served as his inspiration. One was a necklace that Keith Richards wore, a picture of him taken on vacation where he’s wearing this macramé necklace piece, like a choker. It was weird and loud enough that it would catch your eye and was right about the same time that Belew would have been designing. And then I also ran into a catalogue ad that advertised a jacket that

had built into it as its collar, these macramé cording things, just like that jumpsuit did. So that one, for me, is super-interesting. I’d love to know more about that. If I could go back in time and ask folks, that would be the one I would ask about.”



The stunning treasury *Elvis: Dressed To Rock* by Karan Feder is out 6 August from Weldon Owen



**“I REALLY HOPE THAT
THIS BOOK ALLOWS FOLKS
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SIGNIFICANCE OF BILL BELEW
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ICONIC LOOK OF ELVIS”**

The light blue cobweb suit, which debuted in 1971, featured striking studwork across the vest and trousers, particularly on the kick pleats