

Elvis Sound-Alike Captivates Among the Down and Out

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He's known as 'The King' of Skid Row.

But it's not the baseball cap crowning his head or the karaoke microphone he carries like a scepter that earned Roland Burris the nickname.

It's the voice - the pain of poverty and addiction coming out in the ballads and blues - that spark comparisons to that world-famous singer.

"He sure sounds like The King, doesn't he?" says Billy Blade, a neighbor of Burris at the Lamp Lodge, a transitional housing complex in the heart of Los Angeles' Skid Row.

Close your eyes and it could be Elvis Presley - or, at least, one of the better Elvis impersonators - belting out that melodic mix of baritone and tenor, with a touch of Southern comfort thrown in.

"When no one else can understand me

"When everything I do is wrong ...

"You give me hope and consolation

"You give me strength to carry on ..."

A sampling of three CDs Burris has recorded using karaoke music features renditions of dozens of oldies, from Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons to Paul Anka and B.J. Thomas. But none match his takes on Elvis' "The Wonder of You" and "Can't Help Falling in Love."

Joe Caron was among a handful of Skid Row advocates who saw Burris sing Elvis songs at karaoke night last year at the Acapulco restaurant on Sunset Boulevard.

"We heard Elvis," says Caron, project manager of the Skid Row Collective, a nonprofit that involves several support organizations for the homeless. "If it was something he worked at every day, he'd be very good. He clearly has talent."

Mario Williams, a longtime homeless resident in the neighborhood, is among those inspired by Burris.

"We tell him all the time: 'You need to be doing something with your singing,'" Williams says. "He may not be the spitting image of Elvis, but his voice sure is."

It is late morning, and Burris and other residents are sitting in the shade in front of their building in the 600 block of Stanford Street, sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes as a police car cruises by and other Skid Row lifers pass.

"I didn't set out to be an Elvis impersonator," says Burris, 52, "and I've never charged a cent for impersonating."

It all started in 1986, when he called in to a radio station in Virginia Beach, Va., winning a jar of Vlasic pickles as part of a contest.

During the conversation, the woman from the station told him, "You know, you kind of sound like Elvis."

Burris says he went out and bought an Elvis costume - a knockoff of the famous white jumpsuit emblazoned with a large eagle on the chest.

His then-wife Barbara spruced it up with glitter and rhinestones, and Burris went on stage at an Elvis impersonation contest in Presley's native Mississippi. He was the only one who not only knew all the lyrics but also had the single voice that struck judges as a dead-ringer for the king of rock 'n' roll.

Burris continued the impersonations, entertaining at nursing homes in the South while keeping his full-time job as a maintenance worker.

"I was like a carnival act," he says, "and that was a life I knew real well."

The son of a Hungarian immigrant mother, Burris spent much of his young life as one of nine siblings in a touring minstrel group - The Singing Burris Family of Columbus, Ga. - that later blended into part of the traveling carnival.

Along the way, Burris says, he was sexually abused by a friend of his stepfather. While he kept it secret for decades, the molestation wormed its way into his psyche.

He was discharged from the Army after being diagnosed with bipolar and post-traumatic stress disorders. A string of dead-end jobs followed. His marriage, which produced three children, ended in divorce.

Ten years ago, at his wit's end and looking for answers, he came to Los Angeles in search of his oldest sister.

"After two or three weeks of looking and not being able to find her, I was homeless and I ended up here," says Burris, motioning to the Lamp Lodge, a 49-unit apartment building among the numerous housing projects operated by nonprofits on Skid Row.

He receives disability payments and VA benefits, but still struggles to pay the \$279-a-month rent on his one-bedroom apartment. He rolls his own cigarettes to save money.

He treats the bipolar and post-traumatic stress conditions with medication that has led to insomnia and more medication. He is now light- and sun-sensitive and always has the sensation of being hot.

Still, his neighbors say, Burris is a bright spot - one of the best-adjusted and most productive members of their community. He cares for a resident who is incapacitated, doing her shopping and running her errands. At night, he takes his turn on a four-hour security shift in his building.

On Labor Day, Burris also coordinated entertainment for a holiday celebration and barbecue in the parking lot of the Lamp Lodge. His karaoke machine provided the music, and between getting other residents to sing, he belted out several songs himself, including Elvis classics.

Most recently, Burris has also been in charge of the makeshift garden made up of plant containers dropped off in front of the building by Farmlab, a downtown-based group that this summer is attempting to "green" Skid Row by contributing fruit and flower boxes in several locations.

Jaime Lopez Wolters, an agriculturalist with Farmlab who has worked with Burris this summer, says he has been an ideal fit in the program.

"I'm amazed to see someone so interested and knowledgeable about the plants and taking care of them," he said. "And, of course, it's a plus that he's an Elvis impersonator singing to them."

The gardening has also spread Burris' reputation as an Elvis impersonator beyond Skid Row, with tales of how he has crooned "Don't Be Cruel" and other classics of 'The King' to struggling plants.

"I talk to them, and sometimes I sing Elvis songs to them," he said. "Does it work? You don't see them wilting even in the heat, do you?"