The Parkes Elvis Revival Festival: Economic Development and Contested Place Identities in Rural Australia

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NOTE: This is a pre-publication final version of the accepted manuscript. The full article was published as:
doi: 10.1111/j.1745-5871.2007.00429.x

Abstract:
This paper discusses the annual Elvis Revival Festival in the small town of Parkes, 350km to the west of Sydney, in rural Australia. It explores the way in which a remote place with few economic prospects has created a tourism product, and subsequently captured national publicity, through a festival based around commemoration of the birthday of Elvis Presley, a performer who had never visited Australia, and certainly not Parkes. The Festival began in the early 1990s, when a keen Elvis fan rallied promoters (and other fans) around the idea of bringing Elvis impersonators to the town for an annual celebration. Since then, the Festival has grown in size, with notable economic impact. The town now partly trades on its association with Elvis, constituting an ‘invented’ tradition and place identity. Yet the festival is not without tensions. The images of Elvis and the traditions generated by the festival challenge those who wish to promote Parkes through more austere, staid notions of place and identity. For some, Elvis is a means for the town to generate income and national notoriety, while others prefer less ‘kitsch’ tourism attractions such as a nearby (and nationally famous) radio telescope. Results from interviews with key players and surveys of visitors demonstrate how ‘tradition’ is constructed in places (rather than being innate), and how small places, even in remote areas, can develop economic activities through festivals, and create new identities – albeit contested ones.

KEY WORDS festivals, Elvis Presley; Parkes; tourism; economic development; place identity
Introduction

Economic decline in rural Australia has become an issue of national importance (Cocklin and Alston, 2003; Rogers and Collins, 2001). Much evidence supports the argument that ‘the infrastructure and community life of many rural and remote towns has been slowly pared away’ (Sidoti, 2000, viii), through bank branch closures, restricted access to telecommunications competition and infrastructure, and declining populations in some areas (Argent and Rolley, 2000; Gibson, 2003). Restructuring of traditional agricultural industries has also created ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ – certain regions, such as parts of Far North Queensland and Victoria, with better soils, more space, and high capital-intensive forms of production, have improved their economies of scale, gained export markets and retained or even boosted their populations. In other regions where farms and exports are smaller, and where capital is scarce, local economies have stagnated. Patterns of growth and decline and resultant social problems have not been distributed evenly between, or within, regions. While some centres continue to grow, many smaller towns have become caught in a vicious cycle of decline, losing residents, industries and confidence about prospects for a sustainable future.

Against this backdrop of uneven fortunes, numerous places in inland Australia have sought to reinvent themselves through staging festivals. A recent estimate noted over 600 music festivals in rural Australia (Gibson and Connell, 2005). Many more rural festivals have focused on food and wine, literature, film, multiculturalism, gardens and sporting competitions. Small, struggling towns in rural Australia have promoted festivals of all sorts, both as a community-building exercise, and because they can attract wealthy, usually urban, visitors. In Australia, as in many other parts of the world (Xie, 2003), the tourism spin offs deriving from the promotion of festivals are
seen as one means of redressing rural decline (Walmsley, 2003). For example, in 2003 an annual international music festival was argued to be the only viable means of rescuing the host Shoalhaven River Estate from bankruptcy and mounting debts (Sydney Morning Herald, 26 April 2003, 5). Later that year the tiny former gold mining township of Hill End, with just 120 people, launched the inaugural Hill End Jazz Festival, which was expected to bring 1500 visitors and raise enough money to buy a defibrillator for the community (Sydney Morning Herald, 24 October 2003, 3). In the small town of Queenscliff, Victoria, tourism income from its modest annual music festival totalled over $A2 million. For the festival’s manager, Barbara Moss,

That economic impact is tied to the social fabric of the community. It’s directly linked to the social health of the town and confidence is always a big factor in economic growth. A lot of local people become involved in the festival – up to 400 people volunteer to help out each year – and we’ve found that to be a big long-term stimulant to the economy. Some of those people might otherwise be lying in bed watching Oprah. Now they’re out getting involved. That connectivity, the bringing together of diverse elements, is what social wealth is all about (quoted in Gibson and Connell, 2005, 223).

Festivals thus also contribute to notions of community, while the income generated enables community goals to be met. Some Australian country towns, such as Tamworth (NSW) and Port Fairy (Victoria), have been so successful that their festivals have substantially improved economic and social capital, and the success has resulted in those places largely being known through their festivals (Gibson and Davidson, 2004). In this manner, festivals become a long-term place-marketing
strategy as much as a short-term event (Hall, 1989). In selected cases, festivals have become integral elements of local and regional economic revitalisation strategies. Festivals are anticipated to bring multiple benefits to rural communities: to stimulate short-term employment; to improve the skills and capacity of residents to find future work; to enhance social cohesion; and to re-invent places and their images. In short they can place or keep towns on the map.

This paper discusses one such festival, in a small town suffering from the symptoms of decline discussed above. It highlights how a remote place with few economic prospects has created a tourism resource, and subsequently captured national publicity, through a festival based around commemoration of the birthday of Elvis Presley, a performer who had never visited Australia, and certainly not Parkes, nor had any other links to the town. Indeed, Elvis rarely left America. This case study demonstrates how ‘tradition’ can be constructed in places (rather than being innate), how small places, even in remote areas, can develop economic activities through festivals, and create new identities – albeit contested ones. This paper communicates results of fieldwork conducted at two Elvis Revival festivals in 2003 and 2004. This fieldwork included surveys of businesses and visitors (see below for further explanation) and interviews with local tourism promoters, business people and local government representatives.

**Parkes, New South Wales: Australia’s Elvis-town**

Parkes is a small country town of 10,000 residents 350 kilometres from Sydney (see Figure 1). Like many other inland country towns, it has lost population (4 percent between 1996 and 2001), has higher than average unemployment rates and low levels
of participation in the labour force (43 percent of the total population), and its population has become dominated by those of retirement age (ABS 2001). It is essentially a service centre for a rural agricultural region located in Australia’s wheat-sheep belt. It has been plagued by drought in recent years. Farmers have sought to diversify into other crops such as canola, but the precarious nature of wheat exports still troubles the town. Other than its historic radio telescope (‘The Dish’), a vital link in the 1969 Apollo moon landing (which became, in 2000, the subject of a popular Australian feature film of the same name), Parkes has little in the way of visitor attractions. It was once a major transport hub; however ongoing rationalisation of the NSW rail network (which could mean further job losses for the town) reduced visitor through-traffic.

The emergence of the Elvis Presley Revival Festival in Parkes was entirely the result of a chance local whim, when local business owners, devoted to the memory of Elvis, proposed the idea to local council members, as recalled by committee member, Neville ‘Elvis’ Lennox:

It was Bob and Anne Steel up at Gracelands restaurant. They’re big Elvis fans and they own the restaurant. They were just having a bit of a talk to the right people at the right time, at one of their functions. They were councillors and they said, “Well there’s nothing going on, nothing celebrated that time of year. Elvis’s birthday’s the eighth. Come along to the next council meeting, we’ll put it to the board.” It just evolved from there. (pers. comm. 2004)

Parkes happened to have a restaurant called Gracelands, and a small group of committed fans willing to organise an event. This suited the pragmatic aim of the
local council of the time, namely to improve summer tourism. Parkes Shire tourism manager Kelly Atkinson noted:

The tourism board and council together recognised that January was a very quiet time of year. They were trying to introduce more events onto the calendar having identified tourism as a key market to target. In consultation with local businesses such as Gracelands they came up with the idea to have a birthday party for Elvis. It started as an idea to try and turn that low season around and invent a festival that would curb that. (pers. comm. 2004)

An Elvis Revival committee was subsequently formed and, in 1992, what was essentially a very small group of local fans decided to stage Australia’s first Elvis festival. The first Festival was held in January 1993 (see Figure 2), coinciding with Elvis’ birthday. It attracted 500 people from as far as Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, and set the theme for those that followed, with Elvis and Priscilla look-alike competitions, a street parade with vintage cars, shop window displays of memorabilia, Elvis movies at the cinema (since closed), and concerts, one of which is at the Gracelands Club. Indeed the previous existence of a Gracelands Club had been one factor convincing organisers that Parkes was the appropriate place for the festival.

The first festivals were largely ignored by the local media as inappropriate or trivial (despite the dearth of news in midsummer), and that exclusion has only partially diminished. By contrast, the national media have regularly covered the Festival, invariably because of its curiosity value, and as a result of claims by the organising committee that it was keen for Parkes to become the ‘Elvis capital’ of Australia.
Bob Steel, then chair of the organising committee, the lead-up to the first festival hinted at such national publicity:

We have been overwhelmed with the attention this festival is receiving. For example, even the *Melbourne Truth* ran an article on the festival, suggesting that we could become the Elvis capital of Australia. Newspapers, television and radio stations have all been giving the festival plenty of coverage and if nothing else, it has certainly given Parkes publicity... (quoted in the *Parkes Champion Post*, 8 Jan 1993, 5)

Ironically this kind of national coverage, and its celebration of tackiness and kitsch, has probably drawn most visitors (as typified by one picture in the prominent *Sydney Morning Herald*; see Figure 3).

The festival begins on the Friday night of the weekend closest to Elvis’ birthday (8 January 1935) usually with dinner and various forms of Elvis entertainment at Gracelands (with all participants encouraged to dress in appropriate annual themes: cowboy, speedway, Hawaiiana - usually linked to Elvis movies). Saturday sees the street parade of vintage cars and motorbikes (and vintage Elvis impersonators), with market stalls (ranging from memorabilia – rarely ‘real’ – to country handicrafts) in the main park area. The park is the venue for the main sound and look-alike competitions – Elvis, Priscilla, Lisa-Maree and Junior Elvis – and the day concludes with a feature performance by a touring ‘professional’ Elvis impersonator. The highlights of the Sunday are the highly-attended Gospel Church Service and the unveiling of a new plaque on the Elvis Wall (at the park) to commemorate another ‘legend’ of Australian rock ‘n’ roll music (often the previous night’s top-billing performer). The wall itself
surrounds gates that are a replica of the gates of Presley’s Graceland mansion in
Memphis. A talent contest with more diverse themes brings the festival to an end as
most visitors return over considerable distances. A special train (the Elvis Express)
runs from Sydney (see Figure 4), with the support of NSW Railways and the state
tourism promotional authority. Over a third of the festival-goers usually come from
Sydney with some being from further afield.

On some occasions Elvis movies have been shown and the local lawn bowling club
has urged visitors to ‘kick off your blue suede shoes’ and have a game. An Elvis
celebrant can be made available for couples to marry or renew marriage vows during
the weekend, a handful of buskers occupy street corners and the Private Collection of
memorabilia of Elvis Lennox – with a pink Cadillac parked in the driveway – is open
to all visitors. The emergence of Parkes as Australia’s Elvis capital played a pivotal
role in influencing Neville to take on the icon’s name:

I prefer Elvis to Neville, me original first name. After the first two years of
competition here in the look-alikes – I won that in 93, 94 – and walking up the
street or down the street, whichever the case is and you hear people yell out
across the street at ya “g’day Elvis” and that. And I said, ‘ya know, that would
be an idea’. So I put it to me mother, asked her permission to do so and she said
“you go ahead and do with it what you want.” And I said, “thankyou very
much”. Paid 75 dollars and had it legally changed. (pers. comm. 2004)

An avid collector, Neville has amassed a formidable amount of Elvis paraphernalia,
some of which comes from a personal trip to the real Graceland in Memphis in 1997,
the same year as his name change:
I spent four and a half thousand dollars when we were there and had to send half ahead of myself to get back home here. I went over with two suitcases and came home with nine… had to buy an extra set of luggage while I was there. I bought books, pens, watches, bottles of Coca Cola that had Elvis’s twentieth anniversary on them. Whatever I could get. (pers. comm. 2004)

The Festival is strongly supported by the local rugby club and during the entire period of the Festival the town, and especially the venues, is seemingly awash with Elvis impersonators (Figure 5) which for many creates a colour and atmosphere that is the highlight of the Festival.

In its second year, the festival brought visitors from further afield, including Western Australia and Queensland, and added a clambake at Gracelands, with sand and surfboards brought in to transform the car park. The Parkes Tourism Promotions Officer heralded it a success, and conceded that it had become an integral part of the annual events calendar:

The event will provide substantial tourism value for Parkes, in terms of publicity and in cold, hard revenue. The revival could well become a role model for other interest groups keen to promote their festival. A hard core of Elvis stalwarts researched and marketed the concept and banded together to form an effective working team. (Parkes Champion Post, 5 January 1994, 1)

Although interest grew steadily, the organisation of early festivals was a struggle. It is typical for festivals in small places to lack leadership and appropriate skills and this
hampered professional event management, as explained by Parkes Tourism manager, Kelly Atkinson:

It started off small and started to grow. The word started to get out there and the media coverage started to get out there about the festival but I guess the lack of resources and lack of skills among the committee and just a few different things, and lack of support from the community saw numbers start to dwindle and the festival nearly fell over a couple of years ago. That’s when the tourism board got back on board again. (pers. comm. 2004)

Kelly also noted how the recent upswing in visitor numbers had influenced other local groups to bring tourist events to Parkes:

They’ve seen what can happen with Elvis. The Country music festival is really looking to expand and to develop using the Elvis festival as a catalyst. The country music festival has to realise that we’re never going to be another Tamworth but Elvis can be. Its got that uniqueness and no one else is doing it. (pers. comm. 2004)

Over the years the two-day Festival has continued to attract growing crowds, with 2500 at the street parade, and one or two hundred at most of the commercial events, with more than 500 estimated to have come from outside the town. In 2006, organisers estimated that over 5,000 people participated in the festival. Media coverage went international in 2002:
That particular year (2002) we had Buckwheat noodles, which is a local company that exports its noodles directly to Japan. We had a Japanese TV program come and do filming at the festival, set up a noodle tent down in the park, feeding the Elvises noodles throughout the festival and interviewing them, and given Japan’s affiliation with Elvis and love for Elvis and crazy things…

The next year 2003 we really hammed it up as far as trying to add more to the program throughout the weekend and also just hamming up the whole media effort. Just trying to get more publicity. (Kelly Atkinson, pers. comm. 2004)

The Parkes Tourism Office continues to capitalise on national and sometimes international media exposure, with journalists from the major Australian news networks returning to the festival each year. The Festival is supported financially by the Parkes Shire Council through its Music Development Project, but it is run largely voluntarily by a committee of locals, tourism promoters and Elvis fans, with all profits going to local charities. In recent years, further financial support has come from the New South Wales state government and major sponsors.

Visitors – who, where from, and why

The tourist numbers are not insignificant given the size of the town, the fact that most stayed for a couple of nights, usually in hotels and motels, and the relatively small tourist market – especially in mid-summer when it can be extremely hot - for inland Australia. As part of this research, visitors to the Elvis Revival Festival were surveyed in two consecutive years, 2003 (125 respondents) and 2004 (120 respondents),
providing data on their demography, expenditure patterns, transport arrangements, accommodation type, motivations to visit and experiences while in Parkes.

Surveys were distributed to accommodation facilities in Parkes, and via the Parkes regional visitors centre, located in the main festival parklands. Surveys were available for visitors to pick up and complete, rather than being distributed formally to a sample of a target population (hence it is not possible to calculate the extent to which results are statistically representative). Indeed, it is possible that the surveys were completed by more ‘committed’ and ‘out-of town’ than ‘casual’ or ‘local’ visitors.

Unlike other forms of tourism, festivals attract very specific audiences, depending on the nature of the event. In this case, that specificity is even narrower given the focus of the festival on tribute artists and impersonators of one (dead) performer, rather than on a whole genre or a range of live performing acts.

The age of visitors to the festival is somewhat older than that at other rock music festivals. It is dominated by people from the 45-65 year old cohort, who made up over 60 percent of all visitors in 2003 and 2004. This was to be expected, reflecting the considerable popularity of Elvis with people who experienced their youth when Elvis was alive and active as a performer. Representatives from younger age groups were fewer in number, but were still present, reflecting the increasing popularity of the event as a ‘kitsch’ or ‘retro’ event for urban tourists keen to participate for the fun and humour, rather than for nostalgia or reminiscence.

Festival visitors came from a range of occupational backgrounds (see Figure 6). The largest group were professionals, a group well known for their propensity to travel and for their high levels of attendance at festivals (Gibson and Connell, 2005), followed by tradespersons, retirees, and managers and administrators. Most (80 percent) had not attended an Elvis Revival Festival before, but in both years
respondents enthusiastically said that they were likely to return to the festival. Of those who had attended previously, most had visited in several consecutive years – a measure of the presence of ‘devotees’ at the festival, for whom the Elvis festival is much more than mere entertainment. Word-of-mouth and newspaper advertisements appeared to be the most common ways that visitors found out about the festival, with a modest rise in visits to the festival website in 2004, perhaps a reflection of increases in the numbers of younger people attending. There were virtually no international visitors to the festival. Most instead arrived either from other parts of the central west region in which Parkes is located, from Sydney, the nearest major metropolitan area, and from interstate – the latter being visitors drawn in response to national media coverage each year, or because of their own close involvement in Australian Elvis fan clubs. Almost all came by car. This pattern appeared to remain the same across the two survey years despite increasing national and even international media coverage.

Most people attending the festival simply stated that they visited for the fun and relaxation. When prompted on their experiences, well over 90 percent enjoyed the entertainment, country hospitality and music. Very few (only two respondents) were negative about the festival. Some qualitative responses hinted at the presence of ‘postmodern’ tourists (or post-tourists), visiting Parkes for the humorous and kitsch (‘everything was sensational, baby! uhh huh huh!’; ‘eating at Gracelands – wow – I’ve been to Gracelands!’). For particularly committed fans of Elvis, there is essentially no other means of expressing such devotion, without lengthy and expensive travel to America. Indeed at the very first festival,

One elderly lady from Cowra contacted us to thank the committee for doing something she said is long overdue. She is in a wheelchair... she is a dedicated
Elvis fan and tells us she has a poster above her bed which is one of only 10 in the world (quoted in the *Parkes Champion Post*, 1993, 5)

For a 2003 survey respondent:

I wanted to come for years but my Dad, whose birthday was the same day as Elvis’s, was ill for a number of years, so I did not come. But my dad has passed on and is up with Elvis in heaven singing along. This is my first year and it’s been fabulous. (survey results, 2003)

Such testimonies indicate the manner in which festivals – even the most seemingly esoteric or incidental – transcend daily life and bring a range of meanings to individual lives. For a handful of fans the visit to Parkes is akin to pilgrimage (cf. King, 1994) albeit a pale reflection of the trip to Graceland in Memphis.

**Economic impacts of the 2004 Elvis Revival Festival**

The economic impact of the festival on Parkes has been considerable, and visitor surveys in 2004 indicated the extent of the direct economic effects on Parkes. In 2004, visitors spent an average of $A440 per person over the festival weekend, translating to an injection of over $A1.1 million into the local economy. Accommodation (averaging $A142 per person), food and drink ($A134) and entertainment ($A51) were the most common forms of expenditure, with smaller amounts spent on souvenirs ($A43) and other services such as fuel ($A28). For a town of its size, such injections are not insignificant, particularly taking into account the further multipliers throughout the local economy resulting from this initial expenditure.
During the 2004 festival, local businesses were also surveyed on their attitudes towards the Elvis Revival Festival, and the social and economic impacts that it had on the town. All businesses with shopfronts were approached to participate. Of the 62 respondents (representing about 80 percent of those approached), most were very small retail businesses, typical of country towns. Questions concerned the direct financial and employment impacts of the town, their perceptions of Parkes, its tourism potential, and the suitability of the festival as a marketing strategy for the region.

The majority of businesses responded that there was an increase in trade due to the Elvis Festival. Some 34 percent noted an up to 20 percent increase in trade, 21 percent noted a 20-50 percent increase, 6 percent noted a 50–100 percent increase and 5 percent noticed an increase of 100 percent or more. Restaurants and cafes on average doubled their business (with the extra trade largely attributable to visitors), hotels and motels - for one of the only times of the year - illuminated ‘no vacancy’ signs, and other retail businesses (bookshops, record stores, clothes shops, newsagents) reported substantial increases on normal trading levels (Table 2).

A quarter of businesses put on extra staff over the weekend, adding a total of 30 jobs to the town. Predictably, restaurants (43 percent), cafes (33 percent) and accommodation facilities (14 percent) accounted for the bulk of temporary positions created. Retail positions filled the remaining 10 percent. In survey responses, these business types were also those with the highest dependency on local suppliers and labour. The festival improved employment multiplier impacts by generating extra work in those activities that, in turn, are most closely embedded in the local economy rather than others that rely on goods and services (such as books and clothes) imported from Australian capital cities.
Contesting rural place identity: is kitsch kosher?

Until very recently, Parkes rarely mentioned the Festival in any of its standard tourist publications, preferring to advertise itself as the town with ‘The Dish’, and as a prominent regional commercial centre (see Figure 7). Amongst the local businesses that responded to the 2004 survey, opinions about the appropriateness of the festival as a marker of place identity, as opposed to other options such as ‘The Dish’, were divided. Only a small percentage did not support the festival in an overall sense (5 percent) compared with the general support for it (62 percent strongly support; 25 percent mildly support), and more than 70 percent agreed that the festival contributed to the town by fostering a greater sense of community (Table 1). Over 80 percent of businesses strongly agreed that the festival had a positive impact on publicising Parkes as a tourist destination, yet over 65 percent either mildly or strongly favoured ‘The Dish’ as a source of more appropriate imagery. A further 15 percent did not agree that ‘The Dish’ provided more appropriate imagery and some 16 percent were not sure of their feelings on this question, indicating that sentiments in favour of the festival are far from universal in Parkes. Similarly, respondents were also divided about whether Parkes ‘needed a change of image’: slightly more (43 percent) agreed with this than did not (36 percent), but opinions were fairly evenly divided. Kelly Atkinson conveyed how community perceptions were influenced by images displayed by media and popular culture, as was the case following the cinema release of ‘The Dish’:

Especially since 2000 when ‘The Dish’ was released, people were a little hesitant about the movie because in some respects it made Parkes look a little
backward in coming forward. Once they came to understand that that wasn’t
the message that people were getting, and that the movie was doing positive
things for the town, I think especially that was an education process for

In the same way, seeing the growing success of the Elvis Revival Festival has helped
to change local perceptions of the event and help to garner further support and interest
from local businesses and the wider community:

2003 was the biggest festival in its 11-year history and I guess the community
having seen the success of 2003 and having not really had much to do with it
decided in 2004, it was time for them to get on board. We really saw lots of
local businesses become involved. In 2003 they had given more sponsorship,
but in 2004 we saw more of their support by introducing new products, by
actually becoming directly involved with the festival, and I think that has
really helped to make 2004 the best that its been. (pers. com. 2004)

The previous two quotes illustrate how community identities can not only be
contested, but also that they remain fluid, especially when they are influenced by the
economic benefits that tourism provides.

Though some locals and outsiders might see the Festival as a celebration of kitsch,
most visitors did not. Their average age in 2003, of almost 50 years, and their
comments – many were disappointed with some aspects of local support and in favour
of a much greater visible presence of Elvis memorabilia – indicate that a substantial
proportion were ‘true believers’ and over 20 percent were repeat visitors (Brennan-
Horley et al., 2003). Those who enjoyed it most were those who felt that locals from Parkes had entered into the spirit of the event, especially through the Elvis impersonators: ‘the town’s a friendly place’; ‘the whole atmosphere was abuzz with Elvis memorabilia’ etc. By contrast, those who expressed any disappointment commented on the need for more local involvement, and longer store opening times (into Saturday afternoon etc) – though, since most visitors come from larger towns, their expectations of local services cannot always be met. While most residents, including business owners welcomed and supported the event, some simply ignored or turned their back on it. One service station went to the length of voicing their opposition by prominently displaying “Elvis is dead” on a billboard outside their store. However public displays of hostility towards the event were rare.

In an effort to combine the success of Parkes’ two major attractions, the Tourism Office has attempted to marry the two somewhat opposing figures of Elvis Presley and the Parkes Radio Telescope (Figure 8), and in doing so reconcile competing (if not contradictory) images of place:

I think in the last couple of years Elvis really had nothing to do with the telescope. But we are really trying to tie those together because they have started to become the two best things that Parkes is known for by a general audience. This year for the first time we developed a new image that was used for merchandise that had Elvis singing with the telescope in his hand as a microphone. We’re just trying to tie those two together. And so making the Elvis unique to Parkes. He’s not just any Elvis that could be found anywhere – he’s the Parkes Elvis. (Kelly Atkinson, pers. comm. 2004)
Parkes has ultimately sought to provide Elvis with a connection to place.

Conclusion

The Parkes Elvis Revival Festival demonstrates how a small place can stage a festival in a relatively remote location, and succeed in generating substantial economic benefits, in fostering a sense of community, and in gaining nationwide notoriety and/or publicity. It has done so without any legitimate local claim to musical heritage, cultural diversity or a remarkably attractive setting. Most other festivals linked to individual musical performers try to generate a link to that performer – whether birthplace, death-place, or place of famous recordings. This is not so in Parkes. Although it has now become known throughout Australia as a location associated with Elvis, Parkes has wholly invented this association. Indeed, the festival represents about as narrow a rationale for an event as can be imagined – the legendary performer is long dead, and festival visitors arrive to see mere impersonations of the original. Where tourism is concerned, myth and tradition are not always linked to authenticity and credibility.

In a sense Parkes has become the site of an ‘invented tradition’, where a particular image has been grafted onto a place, linked to a particular imagined historic past, but assumed to have been ever present (Hobsbawm, 1983). However, unlike ‘traditions’ now widely if incorrectly accepted as innate (such as tartan kilts in Scotland), it is quite clear to all that there is no Elvis tradition in Parkes. The town has succeeded in spite of itself and created a celebration of kitsch and fantasy that is nonetheless as ‘real’ as any celebration of Elvis in Australia might ever be. Its many supporters derive a variety of sensory experiences and pleasures from the Festival and, in so doing, the town has gradually deployed a form of ‘strategic inauthenticity’ (Taylor,
1997) that has placed the town on the tourist map, thus creating a form of ‘invented geography’.

Indeed Parkes is now so well known for Elvis in Australia that the festival organiser Monique Kronk is consulted in the national news media on all Elvis-related matters. In April 2006 following the announcement of an American crackdown on unauthorised Elvis impersonators, the *Sydney Morning Herald* sought a response from the organising committee on what affect this may have on the Parkes festival (SMH 24 April 2006, 11). Parkes’ identity is no longer just as a sheep or wheat town, nor is it the “crossroads of a nation”. It is *the* place to be consulted about all things Elvis.

Parkes thus mirrors somewhat similar, though larger, tourist destinations in the United States, notably Roswell (New Mexico) and Metropolis (Illinois), the former having become the ‘UFO capital of the world’ where aliens are supposed to have crash-landed and where a UFO museum has been constructed, and the latter where an annual four-day Superman Celebration takes place. At Roswell there has been considerable antipathy to the UFO link as something unworthy of local heritage and place identity (Paradis, 2002), and at Metropolis what was initially a publicity stunt by a lone resident has become the town’s most important economic event (Netburn, 2005). In particular circumstances towns have been able to gain significant economic and social benefits by developing and trading on unlikely, improbable, even wholly fictitious and sometimes ‘unworthy’ events and associations.

Parkes has also succeeded despite the scepticism and downright opposition of some of the townsfolk, concerned about the image and status of the town. Some prefer the link to an Australian icon – ‘The Dish’ – as the appropriate image for a town named after the founder of Australian Federation, while others object to what they see as a tawdry celebration of popular culture (‘Hungover and drunk Elvisses in the parade on
Saturday morning isn’t exactly a great image for the town’). Nonetheless enough are well aware of the economic benefits and most stores on the main street have increasingly decorated their windows and entered into the Festival spirit. Even a divided community has benefited substantially.

Both locals and tourists have questioned the longevity and sustainability of the Elvis Revival Festival – is it a gimmick with a use-by date, a one-joke wonder? So far, it has grown year by year and appears to attract a significant number of repeat visitors, mainly older Elvis fans who are not there for the kitsch value. In 2004 it was officially supported for the first time by The New South Wales State government, under the Regional Flagship Events Programme, with the Minister for Tourism observing

What the Parkes Elvis Revival Festival does for regional New South Wales is act as a flagship by attracting more tourists. The Festival is always the highlight of the New Year in central New South Wales. (quoted in Parkes Champion Post, 17 January 2005, 3)

Although tourist expenditure on food, accommodation and other goods has helped to offset the impacts of drought and rural decline, it has prompted some competition from other regional towns as they seek to develop comparable festivals and sources of income. Nearby Forbes now hosts its annual jazz festival in a bid to acquire part of the festival market. In 2001 the small South Australian seaside town of Victor Harbour launched the Festival of the King, this time marking the date of Presley’s death; for the first time, Parkes had a form of direct competition for the ‘Elvis market’, though it proved to be short-lived. Both Burra (South Australia) and Maitland (NSW) have also recently staged Elvis festivals.
Parkes has succeeded so well from the Festival that, in 2006, it effectively reached the limits of local accommodation. Inevitable uncertainties about the future of the Festival discourage any expansion of accommodation capacity but, more importantly, the present accommodation is only ever completely full during this event. Parkes has subsequently sought to stimulate other festival activities at other times. Alongside the Elvis Presley Revival Festival, Parkes also organises a Country Music Spectacular, the Australian Marbles Championships, a Motorcycle Rally and a Kennel Club Show.

The task of translating short-term festival success into long term tourism is a challenging one. The recent announcement by billionaire US media entrepreneur Robert Sillerman, the new owner of Elvis Presley Enterprises, that Elvis impersonators would have to abide by more stringent licensing regulations, will potentially add a new kind of challenge for the Parkes festival (SMH 2006), Yet at least in the short term this unusual festival has become a major source of local revenue and publicity for a declining town.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Kelly Atkinson and Monique Kronk for their support and assistance, as well as the two anonymous referees who kindly provided helpful comments on the final draft.

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