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AMERICAN STUDIES 361

Paradise Lost

LAS VEGAS AS A SITE OF MUSICAL TOURISM

The laser-lit, post-industrial, ahistorical, unideological world of Las Vegas, devoted to its own eternal and icon-heavy present, a place of massive stylistic consumption, random cultural intersection, a displaced relationship between cause and effect¹ and the culture of collective narcissism is the epitome of our post-modern world. This study will consider the role of music in contemporary Las Vegas and the visitors whom define and indulge in it.

Las Vegas as a venue for entertainment has gained symbolic meaning for the middle class, for whom participating in the city's recreational events asserts their social status as elevated from those below them in the social hierarchy. The city is the antithesis of the pre-capitalist societies (many of which it so exuberantly recreates in hotels such as *Excalibur*, a cartoon of medieval England, the *Luxor*, the magnified Great Pyramid of Cairo, and *Caesar's Palace's* portrayal of classical Rome, for example) in which the legitimacy of the dominant elite was rooted in a centuries-old value system belief in inherent superiority. Part of the appeal that Las Vegas embodies is rooted in the incentives of the affluent in a capitalist society to legitimise their perceived status beyond the purely economic realm, as a patron of the extravagant concerts and performances in the city. Las Vegas is the largest SMSA (American metropolitan

¹ As explored by Malcolm Bradbury

area) in the proportion of artists to its population². In a city in which the chief industry is tourism, the large-scale demand for artistic and cultural products, particularly the popular arts of mass culture, demonstrates the desires of the visitors for such entertainment. (For which the ticket costs are no cheaper than for operas or symphonies, suggesting a shift in the realm traditionally associated with defining status.) A 2001 *New York Times* poll showed that 20% of Americans believe they are in the top 1% of income earners, and another 20% believe that they will be eventually,³ and since the 1950s the affluent have been increasingly keen to demonstrate their wealth through copious luxury expenditure. Las Vegas indeed does attract the more affluent; 63% of visitors have an annual household income exceeding the average, \$43,000, with a median of a 20% greater income.⁴

However, as Michael Lind argues, the problem with the idea of class in America is that it is too completely identified with economic function, and what Lind calls “the real class structure” goes beyond socioeconomic considerations. To demonstrate this, he uses Las Vegas as a referential symbol in which it is positioned in opposition to London, and as a destination in parallel with Disney World as a social class indicator: ““If you are Episcopalian or Jewish, have a graduate or professional degree from an expensive university...watch MacNeil/Lehrer on PBS, and are saving for a vacation in London or Paris, you are a card-carrying member of the white overclass, even if your salary is not very impressive. If you are Methodist, Baptist or Catholic, have a B.A. from a state university, watch the Nashville Network on cable, and are saving for a

² Judith R. Blau; Peter M. Blau; Reid M. Golden, “Social Inequality and the Arts”, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 91, No. 2. (Sep., 1985), pp. 309-331.

³ <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~rgstokes/soc103/STRAT1.htm> Accessed March 16th.

⁴ Richard N. Velotta “*Las Vegas - Is Everybody Happy? Survey Says....*” in *Casino / Gambling News / 2000 / March / Friday / a-23212* (<http://www.casinoworkz.com/gambling-news/2000/3/17/a-23212.php>)

vacation in Las Vegas... or Disney World, you are probably not a member of the white overclass - no matter how much money you make.”⁵ Perhaps though, this dichotomy cannot be sustained in recent history; the stereotypes have been collapsed with the development of Las Vegas as “the last great, mythic city that Western civilization will ever create”⁶, as the epitome of all things American, and venerated in the seminal book on the city, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi, et al, 1972) as the form to which all future city construction will subscribe. Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture critic for the New York Times found in 1978 “aesthetic merit and cultural meaning”⁷ in the vernacular commercial forms on display in the city. Disney World, too, remains a cultural phenomena not consistently rebuked by the so-called overclass as it internalises elements of the American psyche stimulated by fantasy, cultural reference and abundance. Perhaps the historical attraction of Europe as a destination is more recently a symptom of the same compulsions that attract visitors to Las Vegas, yet as a source of culture it is merely artificially more socially valid.

Lowenthal in his 1985 book *The Past is a Foreign Country* argues that over the last two centuries the past has increasingly been made meaningless, and has found a new and central role in post-modernism. “In this new relationship with the past we are not placed in history and we do not learn from it but we are absorbed with the very foreign-ness and disconnected nature of the past”.⁸ This experience is very similar to the appeal of Las Vegas a culturally visible and symbolic site. Although American culture is often thought of in primitivist terms, “a perspective that has made Jerry Lewis a culture hero”, Las Vegas, as Baudrillard declared in *America* (1988), “is the

⁵ Cited in Walter Benn Michaels, “Posthistoricism (in Positions)”, *Transition*, No. 70. (1996), pp. 4-19.

⁶ Michael Venturi, “Las Vegas: The Last Outpost of Western Civilisation”, *Las Vegas Life*, January 1998.

⁷ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Architecture for a Fast Food Culture”, *The New York Times Magazine*, Feb 12 1978, p.23

⁸ Ian Hodder, “Archaeology and the Post-Modern”, *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 6, No. 5. (Oct., 1990), pp. 13-15.

truest symbols of American civilisation and as beacons of a postmodernist, post-industrial, post-rational, "hieroglyphic" world order.”⁹

In locating Las Vegas as a tourist centre, the musical offerings become situated in a process of ‘shopping’ for an event, much like choosing a buffet, Boorstin argues “the tourist was a pleasure-seeker...is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes ‘sight-seeing’. He expects everything to be done to him and for him” (Boorstin, 1961 p.85) Tourists enter tourist areas precisely because their experiences there will not, for them, be routine. This emphasises the role of mystique, magic and glitz, a perfect component in the city functioning as a macro spectacle. The shows are often part of a package tour, amassing all the elements of the tourist experience together as one stimulating, carnival-like, optimistic, brightly coloured intensity of entertainment. Tourism brought on by industrial capitalism becomes in Vegas a process of mass industrial satisfaction, in which tourists are repetitively directed by moving walkways and monorails - conveyer belts, perhaps, are moved to the specific fulfilment of cravings and desires, in vast “urban entertainment resorts” combine retails, entertainment and food designed in order to commodify leisure.¹⁰

Las Vegas visitors lack diversity and correspondingly the musical offerings in contemporary Las Vegas reproduce each other’s styles significantly, an interesting development in a city so intensely focused on entertainment. This contrasts, for example, with cities like Austin, Texas, and New York which sustain a wider variety of musical styles within the mainstream. It is difficult to assess whether the limited form of the mainstream musical entertainment selection is a result of the visitor

⁹ John Gennari, “Jazz Criticism: Its Development and Ideologies”, *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Literature of Jazz Issue. (Autumn, 1991), pp. 449-523.

¹⁰ Michael Dear, *The Post-Modern Urban Condition* (Blackwell, Oxford: 2000).

demographic, or a reverse causal relationship. In 1999, 87% of visitors identified themselves as white, 74% were over forty years of age, and 71% were married, data which allow us to form a solid profile of the city's tourists, 68% of whom attend a show or musical act¹¹. Anthropologists argue that more stratified societies have more extensive and complex art than less stratified ones (Fischer 1961; Lomax 1968).¹² The coherence of the 'Vegas' idiom – to the extent that the name can be used as an adjective for a certain spectacular and lavish style of entertainment - suggests to us a definite pattern, rejecting the notion of stratification among the participants, identifiable primarily as consumers. This potentially serves to inform us further about the role, form and mass cultural significance of performance entertainment for Americans, thirty million of whom visit Las Vegas annually, believing it is “synonymous with entertainment”.

Given the decision-making process involved in Las Vegas regarding musical entertainment, in which the audiences are firstly tourists before audience members, it appears that the musical mode is decided by the visitors, rather than the visitors by the music; in 1999, 89% of tourists decided *after their arrival* which performances to attend.¹³ It is thus the *imagined* spectacle and presumed concept of entertainment in Las Vegas, not a specific artist that draws visitors, six times as many as to the natural grandeur of the Grand Canyon, to the manmade, destructive-recreative city that thrives as the nation's most popular tourist destination.

¹¹ *Las Vegas Visitor Profile Fiscal Year 2003 Annual Report* prepared for Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority prepared by GRS Research, June 2002 to July 2003, at <http://www.lvcva.com/pdf/VPS-2003LasVegas.pdf>

¹² Judith R. Blau; Peter M. Blau; Reid M. Golden, *ibid*, p.311

¹³ *Las Vegas Visitor Profile Fiscal Year 2003 Annual Report* prepared for Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority prepared by GRS Research, June 2002 to July 2003. Figure 17, p.30

In this way the performers must react to and strive to meet the expectations and demands of the visitors. The reliance on tourism diffuses growth of distinct subcultures, despite the city's rapidly growing population, but Las Vegas with its post-modern, ever-renewing energy as the most recent, and perhaps last, city of Western civilisation, has forged its myth with every echo of America; "the infatuation of the Old West, the space age, escapism to the South Seas and the glamour of Hollywood."¹⁴

The city claims one history as its own, one that incidentally garners much profit and potential related activity. It appropriates the myth of the old west and cowboys, who may have inhabited Nevada, but less so the young Las Vegas which grew as a Mormon resting spot, industrial supply base, and concrete-testing lab for the Hoover Dam. In addition to the country western themed casinos, the line-dancing club nights and restaurants, even in the 1996-opening, Worlds' Fair themed *Stratosphere*, which boasts a "cowboy ribs joint with a live country western stage band", there is a profusion of the iconography of this recent and increasingly growing trend, purportedly the essence of the city.

Country music is a niche genre that survives; an interesting anomaly in the spectacle of Las Vegas. Its thematic visions of class struggle and simplicity, its rejection of both modernism and urbanisation, its roots in consciously setting out to oppose the 'city' all ideologically clash with the spirit of Las Vegas and its mystique, commercialism and glitz. Country music in Vegas is also an anomaly in its potent ability to draw specific fans to country concerts, and the pre-eminence of the country stars it attracts, who use the city as a platform for the start of a tour, for instance,

¹⁴ Michael Ventura, "Las Vegas: The Last Outpost of Western Civilisation", *Las Vegas Life*, January 1998.

rather than a final residency. Though rooted in its homeland, perhaps, then country music escapes these contradictions and Las Vegas welcomes it precisely because of the city's values. Garth Brooks has sold more records than Michael Jackson and Madonna combined, and as country's stars have catapulted into superstardom, Las Vegas represents and offers all that they are capable of; the size and glamour to National Rodeo Finals for two weeks every December, and the Academy of Country Music Annual Awards at the Mandalay Bay resort, with an appropriate intensity of experience for a multi-faceted genre. Reports of the sale of Elvis Presley memorabilia at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel in Jun 1994 recognised the most substantial individual purchasers were country music stars. Las Vegas venues appreciate the significance of the country music market, a venue that now witnesses "Alabama", the most awarded band in country music history, starting its final *American Farewell Tour* on New Year's Eve in Las Vegas, an event entirely embodying the contemporary country attraction to spectacle. When Garth Brooks appeared in concert in 1998, a large white baby grand piano rises up out of the stage with a man in a white tuxedo and hat, resembling Garth in his "Red Strokes" video, which delighted the audience until Garth, rose out of the centre of the piano, a grand arrival, exposed by the rising stetson. In another performance he floats over the audience attached to strings, whilst clutching his guitar and wearing a head-mike, before performing a debut duet with Trisha Yearwood. Increasingly using techniques that are in tension with the basic ideals of country music, the performances are oddly drawing on the inspiration of funk music performances which celebrated grand entrances (for example, George Clinton's "Mothership Connection"), and moving further from "the home", and country's egalitarian ideology, and "the country" to literally elevate its stars above the fans.

This transformation is epitomized in the pushing of boundaries to extremities in *The Brooks & Dunn Neon Circus and Wild West Show*, the show of country duo Kix Brooks and Ronnie Dunn who won awards including “Entertainer of the Year” at the ACM Awards, and have had 17 country Billboard No. 1 songs, yet nevertheless their show includes carnival performers, some on stilts, others walking on their hands, whilst others incite concert-goers to ride the mechanical bull. “The Neon Circus is pitched to overstimulate audiences. It comes complete with clowns, contortionists, knife jugglers, and escape artists.”¹⁵ There is also a Hall of Fame exhibit which adds to the excess, with a pair of Elvis Presley’s underwear and wreckage from Patsy Cline’s plane. Musical acts in Las Vegas must continue to remain fresh and sustain the levels of extravagance in which other acts indulge, as explified by Ronnie Dunn’s allusion to Cirque du Soleil, a long-running show in Las Vegas. The recent initiation of country music into acute, visual commercialisation in Las Vegas signifies the difficulties of retaining the original values of the genre in consistency with success throughout the latter half of the century as the forces which it opposed have become the elaborate norms of the capitalist system. Brooks celebrates the opportunity to give the crowd “a new visual stimulation...They don’t lose the excitement of the music, but they still get to see something different”, encapsulating the issues surrounding performance in Las Vegas; the constant demand by audience members for new illusion, image, and brilliance, a central feature of Las Vegas as the ultimate spectacle of production and consumption in a deconstructing world. (Debord, 1967; Best and Kellner, 1997)

¹⁵ April Umminger, “Country Goes Carnival” *USA Today*; 05/30/2002 Section: Life, p. 4d

The Vegas audience, inheritors of a half century's legacy of growing postmodernism and Cold War culture which produced extended leisure time - from improved manufacturing productivity – and greater affluence, intersecting with alienation and a lack of authenticity, have perhaps found in Las Vegas entertainment the comfort of familiarity and community. In the headline names, celebrated ubiquitously and with confidence visually on The Strip, with neon signs declaring their socially established popularity and endurance, audiences since the 1950s have seen simple and undemanding opportunities for leisure that conforms. In the garishness of the mainstream postwar Las Vegas culture we can detect evidence of the anxieties associated with the border blurring and racial tension of the 1950s. Where for working-class families the “superfluous ornamentation on cars and appliances, the mounds of whipped cream on pies in pastry display cases”,¹⁶ served the psychological needs of families anxious to assert social mobility through consumption, perhaps middle-class families turned to abundance and conservative convention in Las Vegas. The radical, threatening moves of Presley were not yet on display, and Sammy Davis Jr and the Rat Pack Rat Pack provided a fantasy of racial peace and integration. It was indeed a fantasy, African-Americans were predominantly excluded from the booming consumerism¹⁷, Davis was barred from staying at *El Rancho* with the other performers instead travelling to a boarding house downtown for the city's black employees, and even in 1970's “*Elvis - That's the Way It Is*”, it is only black women that appear on stage with Presley, no black men in the large band; who may have overpowered his sexuality.

¹⁶ Andrew Hurley, “From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 83, No. 4. (Mar., 1997), pp. 1282-1308.

¹⁷ Tellingly, the city experienced mass racial rebellions in 1967 and 1968.

From Liberace to the Rat Pack to Celine Dion, America has found a comfortable space for encountering live music that is reassuring against all the nuances of marginalised or alternative new music. In the lounge acts of Las Vegas, to which 83% of today's visitors chose to visit¹⁸, middle-class passivity converges with a secure dominant culture. In "*Elvis - That's the Way It Is*"¹⁹, in addition to the girls seeking kisses, the Las Vegas audience of Elvis's comeback tour are high-spirited, seated, restrained and middle-class, interacting with Elvis's informal banter and teasing, and with him as he tours the audience while the large band and the backing singers extend the instrumental break. He exhibits the charisma and celebrated style that created a Vegas benchmark, which led to future acts employing flamboyant effects to match the showmanship of Presley that had secured his place in American popular music a decade earlier.

The philosophical movement from existentialism to structuralism in the era of Las Vegas' growth is visible in the changing surface of its musical performance. From the original performers, who represented a historical legacy and a commitment to entertainment and significance, to the instability in the reign of Elvis impersonators and retiring superstars, the collective agreement was that the meaning and essence of the city's previous stars were destructible; the latter era has represented a move away from the grand narratives of Sinatra and Elvis. Faithful and meaningful recreation of the city's musical history is unnecessary; Las Vegas itself is deconstruction. (Derrida, 1968) Malcolm Bradbury reminds us, "Baudrillard said post-modernism was America itself, Hollywood, Disneyland, the car and casino culture of Las Vegas, the

¹⁸ *Las Vegas Visitor Profile Fiscal Year 2003 Annual Report* prepared for Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority prepared by GRS Research, June 2002 to July 2003, at <http://www.lvcva.com/pdf/VPS-2003LasVegas.pdf>

¹⁹ Dir. Denis Sanders, "*Elvis - That's the Way It Is (Special Edition) (1970)*" Warner Studios, April 10th 2001, DVD.

energetic, the historyless.’’²⁰ Las Vegas is a city that constantly forgets its own history, constantly reinventing and renewing, in a technological, non-hierarchical, consumer-oriented, camp expression of excess. Despite the abundance of performers, often legendary and renowned names, the entertainment sphere belong unobtrusively to everyday life in Las Vegas. The profusion appears as a medium of mass communication, employing rhetorical devices to effect hidden persuasions, to promote the atmosphere of consumption and concentrate events of entertainment into commercial opportunities for willing participants of the spectacle.

The city is impermanent, the neon signs bigger than buildings, and then the buildings as signs, advertise their stars according to excess and abundance. This obsolescence is currently nowhere more evident than in Caesar’s Palace’s construction of the Coliseum in Rome specifically for Celine Dion. Architecturally, visitors to Las Vegas have dictated that the urban function extends far beyond a space for gambling and attending musical performances, and in their masses demanded that it fulfils their American fantasy; excess, consumption, opportunity, colour, accessibility, representation, iconography and image, and accordingly the function becomes what Barbara Rubin calls “urban culture”²¹. The city is a symbolic manifestation of values mediated by forms; the extravagant functions of these constructions palpably mirror their forms. Developers, therefore, readily employ the glitz and showcraft of entertainment - literally “learning from Las Vegas”²² – the idiom embodying the performances. The performances and the structures too utilised the iconography of advertising, (learning from Madison Avenue) and “the imagineering of North

²⁰ Malcolm Bradbury, “What was Post-Modernism? The Arts in and after the Cold War”, *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Vol. 71, No. 4, 75th Anniversary Issue. (Oct., 1995), pp. 763-774.

²¹ Barbara Rubin, “Aesthetic Ideology and Urban Design”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 69, No. 3. (Sep., 1979), pp. 339-361.

²² R. Venturi; D. Scott-Brown; and S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge MIT Press, 1972).

American theme parks”²³ (learning from Disney). The choice of Franco Dragone as the producer of the Dion production reveals the zealous concerns of the Las Vegas commercial owners. Previously responsible for the spectacles of “Quidam”, “Mystery”, “Alegria” and the recent “O”, this production will be a marriage of the commercial superstardom of Dion, with superfluous excess on display: 70 dancers, musicians and acrobats, a 37 metre-wide screen, a 2086 m² stage within a 16000m² coliseum ‘replica’, complete with a 4,000 seat hall. In the ideology of American aesthetics, it is understood that “those who make taste make money, and those who make money make taste”,²⁴ a logic deeply manifested in the urban context of Las Vegas, a city in which it is not clear whether the illusion is replicating a reality, such as Venice, or a fiction, such as Disneyland, in its objectives.

The expectations invested in a Las Vegas performance render them public, highly conventionalised, spectacular, theatrical and often ritualised, repeatable (and reportable) events, using multiple media. Anthropologically, Palmer and Jankowiak argue, “it is through performances, whether individual or collective, that humans project images of themselves and the world to their audiences...we reexperience the imagery that we think they project”²⁵ When a performer such as Presley, Dion or a member of the Rat Pack resides in Las Vegas for an extended schedule, for example Dion is currently contracted for 600 shows, what we may believe is an illusory space of fantasy as a visitor (in which we are the ‘touring’ party, present at their site of stability) may actually reflect a complex web of interaction and experience, all

²³ Jon Goss, “The “Magic of the Mall”: An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 83, No. 1. (Mar., 1993), pp. 18-47.

²⁴ Barbara Rubin, p.360

²⁵ Gary B. Palmer; William R. Jankowiak, “Performance and Imagination: Toward an Anthropology of the Spectacular and the Mundane”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 2. (May, 1996), pp. 225-258.

mediated through imagery, for the performer. The Las Vegas imagery is conventional, culturally patterned and socially situated; indoor, single space, repeated and theatrical, it captures important indigenous social and cultural meanings. It is also highly referential; in the reproduction of Elvis through hundreds of impersonators, environments that are vast simulations, and satisfaction is derived from consuming the spectacle of one's own consumption. Many performances are a symbolic enactment of the imagery of signs themselves. Intended or not, in the experiencing of performances we find commentaries on our cultural values and act accordingly. Audiences respond ritually, innately aware of their own role in representing iconic expressions. In "Elvis - That's the Way it Is", Presley frequently leaves sentences unfinished and proffers weak jokes in his banter, yet the audience understands its role in registering his re-enactment, and through collective memory responds with appropriate enthusiasm. An "inner re-enactment" occurs, a term of Palmer and Jankowiak, in which the "Vegas" constitution of the co-incidence of performance and experience cannot be explained, only demonstrated.

If one compares the role of emotions in Las Vegas performances with others, the city's musical culture appears more as a game. Rollins (1989, cited in Palmer and Jankowiak) has argued that "emotional effects can be systematically suffused", and in the challenge of enduring in Las Vegas unlike elsewhere (other less resilient artists; other tours), they do not constrain the symbolic construction of performances.

Eagleton suggests that we are persuaded by post-modernism to recognise the "ultimate utopia" as nothing less than the present itself.²⁶ That present is not produced as a narrative but rather a synthetic landscape and soundscape: a drive

²⁶ Ian Hodder, *Ibid.* p.13

through Las Vegas with the windows up and the radio on. In the repetition of performances in Las Vegas, meaning is always elsewhere in the chains of signification, and the reality is already commodified. But the past, for instance, can be seized and reconstructed into an incoherent present. “In a Moroccan restaurant in Las Vegas, the sound system plays Julio Iglesias and a man from Bombay does a belly dance to Greek music”.²⁷ Our appetite for images is often relieved often by the past, in which recollections of Engelbert Humperdinck are extolled as kitsch, and Olivia Newton-John performs daily at the *Paris* hotel, retiring her career in Vegas that was once at the centre of American popular culture.

The concerts of performers in Las Vegas are rarely transient. Current trends in the West suggest the growing population will be “fluid, highly mobile in work, impermanent in residence, capable of almost instant dispersal in recreation...Some of the instruments of this transition are notorious: television, the jet plane, and the all-terrain-vehicle; electronic communication and computational systems applied to nationwide management; the economic power of huge corporations and affluent individuals.”²⁸ Paradoxically, this allows a form of permanence in the artists in Las Vegas, who cater to impermanent, changing audiences. The artists remove themselves from the process of personally touring, allowing the audience to “tour” to them. This may be for a variety of reasons including age, a waning career, a desire for stability elicited by a new family, for example (as in the case of Celine Dion), or a need for a secure location that does not require constant modification and innovation dependent upon the audience. As already discussed, the audience has internalised its expectations and are reasonably unified in their demands. The stigma, however, that

²⁷ Hodder, *Ibid.* p. 14

²⁸ D. W. Meinig, “American Wests: Preface to a Geographical Interpretation”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 62, No. 2. (Jun., 1972), pp. 159-184.

this then engenders in the city as a place of performance is evident in the reluctance of some relevant, peaking stars to play there.

One goal that the father of the Jackson 5, Joseph Jackson, had in 1974 was to break his sons out of the teen-idol mould and into a more secure niche. He realised that the careers of most teen idols last about two years before newer stars come along to replace them, and he wanted to change The Jackson 5's image before it was too late. His choice of Vegas exemplifies the stability of the location as an arena of mainstream conformism. "But Vegas is the thing you do when you don't have hits," Jackie said, "when you don't have a choice."²⁹ To the Jacksons, the venue was also problematised by race. Michael explained "The brothers thought hanging out in the hotels with white people would be no fun, but I wanted to play Las Vegas. To me, Las Vegas was part of show-business tradition. At that meeting, our father told us two things: first, he said he was trying to show the world that we were every bit as good as The Osmonds; then he told us about Sammy Davis and what he went through so that guys like us could play Las Vegas". In order to prove their mainstream legitimacy, the Jacksons had to effectively compete with the Osmonds at the site most contrary to niche markets and with a history of solidifying American artists into the legacy of popular music. Michael Jackson enthuses "I wanted more than anything to be part of that great tradition", referring to Sammy Davis's collaboration with the city to desegregate it within the system and for vacationers, by virtue of talent and persistence.

Performing in Las Vegas is invested with a great deal of value and prestige, and must follow careful training to sophistication, as when The Supremes participated in 1966 when they could ensure they were experienced enough to perform to the adult, predominantly white audience. At the MGM Grand when the Jacksons performed,

²⁹ J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* (Birch Lane, 1991).

after recruiting three other family members which illustrate the perception of the importance of excess, the oversized orchestra loomed large behind them and “bright and colourful firework patterns burst across a pale blue backdrop as they appeared on stage, much to the excitement of their audience.” During their period in Vegas, album releases became less frequent and the singles released were unsuccessful.

The concert of a Las Vegas performer such as Gladys Knight (currently in the *Flamingo*) or the Simon & Garfunkel "Old Friends" show at the MGM Grand Garden Arena, for example, is not cohesive in the same way that a concert tour would be, in promoting an album, instead, it is a hyper-condensed microcosm of an artist – a ‘best of’ show that strives to provide the compressed version of their history, art and talent for the rushed and over-stimulated audience.

The vaporizing of historical memory in Jameson's vision of the postmodern is accompanied and intensified withering away of the natural in a world dominated by artifice and technology. “Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”³⁰ A society where fantasy is more real than reality. The fabricated, the inauthentic, and the theatrical were driving out the genuine and the spontaneous until reality had been converted to stagecraft. In keeping with its überPost-Modern nature, Las Vegas has manifested itself in a form of art that intentionally draws on clichés from popular culture. The twentieth century shift in urban planning from a public civic will to a privatised intentionality embodied in Las Vegas, in which the housing of the entertainment venues pre-empted the consumer-oriented production of music and performance. The technical capacity, the predispositions of contemporary consumers (increasingly well understood due to

³⁰ Peter Hughes, “Last Post: Alternatives to Postmodernism. A Review Article” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 38, No. 1. (Jan., 1996), pp. 182-188.

market research), and the economic and political capacity of speculative capital combine to manufacture a total retail built environment simultaneous with a total cultural experience. Sophisticated techniques of illusion and allusion enable artists to create an appropriate and convincing context where the relationship of the individual to mass consumption and of the commodity to its context is mystified.

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