

I've played all over the world but Henley Festival's my dream



Lookalike: Ben Portsmouth in full Elvis gear, left, and above with David Letterman before appearing on his show

ELVIS impersonator Ben Portsmouth has performed to adoring crowds all over the world, but the gig he really wants is a slot at the Henley Festival.

The 2012 winner of the Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest, who is performing two sold-out nights at the Kenton Theatre next week, says he relishes the opportunity to play in front of a home crowd.

Ben, who still lives in Waltham St Lawrence just a few miles from Henley when he's not performing around the world, says: "I always think that you can go to all these really nice places all over the world but there's nowhere like Henley."

"I would really like to do the festival because it is in one of the best places in the world. It has a special place in my heart."

Ben has not had much time to relax at home since becoming the first British man to win the coveted title last year, and freely admits that the last 12 months have

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been a bit of a blur. His highlights include being hand-picked by American chat show host David Letterman and Hollywood hardman Al Pacino to perform *American Trilogy* to round off Elvis week on Letterman's CBS show.

"It was really flattering that they had actually themselves wanted me to do it," he says. "As an Englishman, singing *American Trilogy* in America was quite strange."

"It is one of the biggest shows on television so who would have thought that a kid from Waltham St Lawrence would be on it? It is bizarre."

In July, he played a show at the Las Vegas Hotel and casino, formerly known as the Las Vegas Hilton, where Elvis performed a string of sold-out residencies in his heyday. It was a memorable

experience for Ben, 31, who has been a fan of the King since hearing his songs on his father's car cassette deck as a child.

"To be in Vegas and do a whole set on the same stage as Elvis was pretty cool," he says. "Most of the stage has been replaced because it is so old but part of the original stage has been retained because it is a piece of history."

His shows this year have included performances in Canada, Brazil and Moscow.

"Elvis has a following all around the world because he was one of a kind and no one really has topped him," he says. "He had an amazing voice and he had a rags-to-riches story."

"Americans are pretty crazy but I have always liked South Americans because they are full of life and people just let go."

"It's incredible when you do a show and then you go backstage and get changed before an autograph session and you expect to go back

and sign a few photos and there is literally the whole of the theatre waiting for you."

It's a far cry from where he started his career, performing in little pubs and clubs around Berkshire and Oxfordshire — including one memorable night in the Jolly Farmer in Hurst.

"I remember when we were just starting out I was playing in this tiny pub with my band," he recalls. "I have no idea how we fitted in there. We all had to move ourselves and our instruments out of the way every now and then because the women had to walk past us to go to the toilets."

Now that he's made it big, Ben likes to splash out on making his show look as authentic as possible — including spending about £3,500 on a guitar which is identical to his idol's.

Jumpsuits also set him back thousands of pounds as they are ordered from the late Elvis' tailors in Indiana — but Ben says you can't put a price on looking the part.

"If you get a jumpsuit that costs £200 it's going to look like that. You've got to buy the best," he says. "You never stop wanting to improve things — your voice, your look, the actual show — and if you did then people would get bored and you would get bored. I think you

have always got to be interested in doing it."

He hopes to start releasing some of his own music early next year but admits it will be nerve-racking as he is more confident dressed up as Elvis than being just Ben.

"In a way doing the Elvis thing is an act and you end up taking on his persona," he says.

"It's quite easy in a way but to be an artist in your own right is quite hard because I almost have to start again."

"I have spent eight or nine years being someone else and I have got to find myself again."

He describes his music as pop with a "bit of blackness" in it, but whether he becomes famous in his own right or not he says he doesn't plan to give up the Elvis act.

"I think even if I made it as a pop star, I still think I would still want to do the Elvis thing because I love doing it," he says. "I think if it was possible I would still want to do it. Hopefully I will always be Elvis because above all, I am a fan of him."

● Ben Portsmouth plays at the Kenton next Friday and Saturday, December 6 and 7. Both shows are sold out but for returns waiting list call (01491) 575698.

Enchanting of music young

A CHRISTMAS concert performed by Henley Symphony Orchestra will provide a rare chance for young children to experience a symphony — and learn a little about the instruments.

This year's concert will be held at the Christ Church Centre in Henley on Saturday, December 15 and there will be two performances at 4.30pm for young children and another at 6.30pm for families.

The afternoon concert aimed at very young children aged two to six, will feature the musical tale *Peter and the Wolf* by Prokofiev as well as a selection of Christmas classics including *Ride and Jingle Bells*.

The Russian story is narrated by Nick Mead, who tells of how Peter, a young boy, escapes the forest, outwit the wolf and his friends.

The nativity play what I wrote has gone wrong