

# Rock and Sushi

by Marko Fong

"Mr. Tang, is that you?"

I recognize the voice, but not the person it comes from. Well, that's not exactly true. "Is that you, Elvis?"

He laughs at me, not because I've actually been able to remember the name of one of my high school students from ten years ago- he's one of dozens of Elvis impersonators lining the sidewalk outside the upstairs club known as "Rock and Sushi."

I've never been upstairs. I came downtown to return something for my wife at the Plaza Mall a block away.

"That's a good one, Mr. Tang. You always were the only teacher who made me laugh."

*That's got to narrow it down dramatically,* I tell myself. I didn't last that long as a teacher. It's too hard to have OCD and manage a hundred and fifty kids a day. I suppress the urge to say "Please don't be offended by this, but who the hell are you?"

In the meantime, I survey the landscape of Elvii growing out of the sidewalk like some scene from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. There's the usual run of tight-pantsed-snarling Elvii with jet black hair and two-toned shoes. Half a dozen in white-sequined jumpsuits and sunglasses keep to the other side of the sidewalk. In the midst of the mainstream Elvis tribute artists, there are odd variations. I'd seen Elvez, the Mexican Elvis impersonator on TV once before. My favorite is punk Elvis with nose ring and facial tattoo. I sigh. My former student pops out of line by holding out his hand palm down straight out like in GI Blues and says in his perfect Elvis voice, "Hold my place a couple minutes here, son."

Punk Elvis says "Fuck you, you wannabe!"

"Ahm gonna pretend that ah didn't hear that, son. My mama told me to never fight if I don't have to, bless her soul."

A GI Blues Elvis steps in, "Jesus, Dewey. You got to be such an asshole all the time. It's not like you have a chance in this thing."

My former student Elvis points and nods at his colleague. Maybe it's because Punk Elvis is no taller than five three and *student Elvis* is regulation Elvis sized, but Dewey backs off.

Whoever he is. my ex-student's damned good at this. He doesn't break character for a second. Elvis's handshake is like a vise. He pats me on the back in the same motion.

"Mr. Tang, I wouldn't expect you to remember me. Not like this anyway."

He then quickly whispers in my ear, "Plastic surgery three years ago and I dye my hair."

I look at the face close up for the first time and try to imagine him with lighter hair, less prominent chin, and a different nose. I figure he can't be one of my A students or even one of my B students. I try to remember the names of the guys who sat against the wall, barely listening, drawing pictures of marijuana leaves in their notebooks.

"Sam, is that you?"

"Wow, Mr. Tang. I knew you were smart, but how the heck did you figure that one out?"

I'm more than a little proud. I only taught high school one year and it was more than ten years ago.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," I have to tell him.

I actually don't remember Sam Phillips ever speaking up once in my U.S. Government class. If I remember him at all it's because I decided not to flunk him so he could graduate. I had this theory that teachers should be bound by the same oath as doctors, *First, do no harm*.

Plastic surgery to look like Elvis? Had I done harm anyway? And yes, I did remember making a joke about Sam Phillips being the founder of Sun Records, the record company that signed Elvis, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins. I also remember Sam and the class not understanding the reference at all. It wasn't until well after I stopped teaching that I realized that most of my jokes referred to things with which my students couldn't possibly be familiar.

"If any teacher was going to remember me from Monroe High School, I figured it would be you, Mr. Tang." "Sam, all I remember doing for you was passing you."

Sam turns, snaps his fingers, and points his index finger outwards. He's dressed as a perfect movie period Elvis, but it's not mimicry. I'm pretty sure Elvis never wore this outfit in his movies, though I'm no expert. Back when cousin Sally used to baby-sit me, she would drag me to the Crest Theater in downtown Sacramento to see his movies the weekend they released, but I've never exactly been a fan.

"Guys, I want you to meet my favorite teacher from high school."

"Sam, you can call me Lucky if you want. It makes me feel old to be called Mr. Tang."

He starts to say my first name, then as if doing Stanislavsky he stops right after the "L" sound...."No sir. Ah'd like to stick with Mr. Tang a while longer, it's my way of showing respect."

I shrug as I find myself shaking hands with three mainstream Elvii. Was Sam Phillips this well-mannered? Well, actually no high school boy who didn't carry a Bible to class was this well-mannered.

"Nice to meet you sir," says one of the young Elvis clones. He's in a red jacket and is carrying a guitar. "Sam's talked about you before."

"Did Sam have two teachers named Mr. Tang?"

I'm joking, but young Elvis stays completely serious, "No sir, he says you were the one who inspired him. You really done good there, Sir. Sam's the best there is."

"You mean, he's the best Elvis impersonator?"

A white jump suited Elvis named Bobby breaks into the conversation, "With all due respect Mr. Tang, we prefer "Elvis Tribute Artists." Impersonator is for drag shows. I know you probably didn't realize that."

"Tribute artists it is then."

"But, yeah. Sam's been my role model. I'm not the only one either. Wouldn't have made it nearly this far without him."

I almost ask how it's possible to be someone's role model in a field where you spend all your time impersonating one famous person, but I stop myself. It's turned from almost dark to night. A couple of the Elvii are practicing their singing. Cars honk at them in the passing traffic. Every now and then someone shouts a request through an open car window.

I can tell that this guy doesn't quite have Elvis's speech rhythm or diction down the way Sam does. At points he slips into his regular manner of speaking with a "you know" and a "for sure."

I nod.

"So, if you're the man who taught Sam and he's the one who taught us...."

I look at the line of Elvis Tribute Artists and wince.

"Well guys...." I have my exit line worked out. I'll explain that I have to pick up my daughter. Bobby breaks in again.

"Sam's the one who showed me that there was more to this than just sounding and looking like the King."

I nod but have no idea what I'm nodding to.

"You have to capture his greatness too, his spirit. Elvis had dignity. He was a truly great American singer, because he believed in all the great American virtues. If you want to be Elvis, you have to be true to those things too."

"And those are?"

The three tribute artists say it in unison, "Respect for those who raised you, love of country, honor the people who work to make this country what it is, and understanding that rock and roll has to be felt below the waist."

One of them says, "You know we don't have saints in this country, just celebrities."

I slip my cell phone back into my pants pocket. It's a line I shared with my class once. Sam Phillips was listening some of the time.

"And people in this country have to believe in something, it starts with believing in yourself." the Elvis tribute artist finishes the riff with a flourish that I certainly never used.

I suddenly remember that Sam Phillips was one of those kids who was totally into Nirvana. He used to draw copies of their album covers on his notebook and write out Kurt Cobain lyrics. Now I remember that I asked my students to find a song that expressed the spirit of the Constitution and Sam turned in *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. Only he didn't attempt to write about it in his own words at all. It was pretty much the only thing he ever turned in and there were even spelling and grammar mistakes in his transcription.

"Load up on guns" and "I know I know A Dirty Word" would have been easy enough places to start, but Sam didn't even try. Instead, he just signed his paper "Sam, "The albino mosquito" Phillips, thanks for teaching me Mr. Tang."

Fifteen minutes later I call my wife on my cell phone. She can barely hear me over the transvestite Elvis singing "U.S. Male," an act which gets almost as big a laugh as when it's followed by the black Elvis doing "In the Ghetto."

"Where the hell are you? I know you're not out on a cold and windy Chicago morning."

"I'm at Rock and Sushi. You know the place downtown. It's a long story, but do you want to come down?"

"No, and why didn't you call?"

"I ran into one of my students. He's in an Elvis contest here. If you leave now, you can catch his act."

"I hope you're kidding."

I count roughly twice as many people in the club as there are Elvis Tribute Artists. My guess is that the owners of the Rock and Sushi recoup their thousand dollar prize money just selling beer and peanut-butter-and-banana-sushi rolls to the contestants. The Sushi Chef wears an Elvis mask over a karate gi. The emcee is dressed as Ann Margret and has the breathiness in her voice down just right, "I know you're all waiting to hear Sam Phillips, but he's not the only great act we have."

From Sam's special table, I signal the cocktail waitress for the check. For a few minutes it's blessedly quiet as they reset up the stage for the open division.

"Mr. Tang, it's taken care of....You don't pay here."

"Sam, I'm really sort of surprised. I never imagined that cheeseburger in sushi could taste any good at all."

"Sir, they have the finest chefs at Rock and Sushi. That guy behind the counter with the earring and pink hair was a finalist for a spot on the Food Network."

"I had no idea you were this big of a star."

"Sir, I'm no star. Elvis is the only star worthy of the name."

"So, how many of these do you do?"

"I had a hundred and thirteen dates last year. I got to do the big contest in Memphis and didn't even have to qualify." He says it almost too quickly.

"Aren't you going to have something?"

"No sir, I never eat before I perform."

"Sam, I just need to let you know that I might have to get my daughter a little later."

"It's okay, sir. I understand completely. I have a daughter too, Lisa Marie."

"You named your daughter Lisa Marie?"

"I adore her."

"Your wife was okay with that?"

"I have a rule in life. When in doubt it's *WWED*."

"As in what would Elvis do?"

He nods excitedly as he does a martial arts move for emphasis, "Priscilla was fine with it. It was back when she understood."

He looks down at the plate of sushi in front of me then turns to sign an autograph for a teenaged girl in an Elvis t-shirt.

"You sure you've had enough, sir? You can't imagine what an honor this is for me."

"Sam, I don't want to pry, but you seemed to be saying that your wife doesn't understand now."

"It was the plastic surgery. She started telling me it was time for me to grow up. I'm afraid she left me."

I steeple my hands and make like some master of Texas Hold'em.

"You see, sir, I knew you'd understand. Most people don't."

"Understand what?"

His eyes widen with astonishment. His cheeks would move too, but the cosmetic surgery probably prevents it.

"You told us to find and follow our passions."

*First do no harm, first do no harm*, I whisper to myself.

"I never knew what you meant, until I found mine."

Back then I was thinking about painters, social workers, joining the Peace Corps. While I had had stray thoughts about kids who wanted to work for the NRA or wanted to collect baseball cards the rest of their lives, this possibility had never occurred to me. There was so much I needed to ask, but before I could the orange-hot-pantsed waitress came to our table, "Sam, you're on in fifteen minutes."

He jumps up, "Sir, if you want anything and I mean anything, Linda here will take care of you."

Linda makes eye contact with me and winks. I find myself wondering if some high school teacher in Tennessee ever got a Cadillac from his student who became a singing sensation.

The first acts after the break are pretty good. One guy sounds like Elvis but looks nothing like him. The other guy sounds and looks nothing like him, but he does a believable Love Me Tender. Some of the crowd stands at the end. Then it's "Back in his hometown. Straight here from working in the Nicholas Cage movie "Married in Vegas", winner of seven Elvis tribute contests, Santa Tyrone's own Ssssam Phillips."

Sam's changed his outfit to early Elvis. He's shed his yellow sport shirt and tight checked pants for a red jacket, black boots, and even tighter pants. He approaches the mike, flicks his hair out of the way with his hand and twitches his mouth. It's perfect Elvis. The crowd goes wild.

"Thank you, thank you very much." He does the bashful-young Elvis even better.

"This is a very special night for me. I'm performing for the first time for the man who inspired me...." He pauses and the audience goes silent on his cue.

"Well, second to the King of course," he flicks at his guitar and holds his right arm cocked just above his shoulder while jutting out his left hip. The crowd breaks into laughter.

*He's good, he's really good*, I tell myself as I turn my face away from the stage and the audience.

"Anyway, there he is, Mr. Lucky Tang, the greatest teacher ever at Monroe High School."

Several members of the audience start booing and I'm not sure whether they're booing the school, which did suck, or my name.

I feel a spotlight on my face. I stand, bow quickly in Sam's direction, and sit down again. *He's good. He's really good I tell myself.*

"Well, speaking of high school, I'm going to do a little *Jailhouse Rock*."

Screams fill the club as Sam begins to snap his fingers and the plastic beat of a high quality karaoke machine kicks in. A couple words in and I'm stunned by how much my former student sounds exactly like Elvis, moves exactly like Elvis, and has every facial nuance down. The crowd excitement builds as two middle-aged women come up to the stage and start screaming and dancing.

Eight bars later, I begin to notice the problem. Sam sounds like Elvis, moves like Elvis, and does the whole sneer thing with his mouth maybe even better than Elvis, but.....he can't sing well at all. The notes are right, but there's something very obviously wrong with where they fall. It doesn't match the music. You don't feel like dancing. The women are still screaming and dancing up front, but they're doing less of it. At one back table, I see people start to talk to one another without even looking at the stage. I begin to hear the clink of glasses and the sound of the cash register.

Sam, though is a professional. He keeps performing, like a figure skater who pulls himself up after blowing the triple salchow. The voice stays perfect, the gestures never falter, but I can



see the despair in his face. He still gets a healthy round of applause.

As he walks off the stage, his friends surround him, patting him on the back, assuring Sam that he still has it, that he's the only deserving winner. I do my bit; I applaud as hard as I can. I stand up at my table and yell, "Go Sam, Go Sam, follow your ...."

But I don't finish. I worry that he's caught me faking my Presgasm. He stays backstage until the end of the show and somehow I know I can't leave. Sam finishes third behind a very good Las Vegas Elvis who did *My Way*, and, humiliatingly enough, Dewey Dontwey, the punk Elvis, who did *Heartbreak Hotel* Alvin and the Chipmunks' style.

Sam stands on the stage and holds up a check for fifty dollars. I motion to Linda the waitress. "I really want to pay for this myself. Is there some way to do it without letting Sam know?"

She nods sadly and whispers, "Let me see what I can do. You know, Sam's the greatest guy."

With most of the crowd now gone, Sam comes to my table. One of his friends is still with him. "Man, you were robbed. You were the only one tonight who had the spirit of Elvis down. You were the only one who cared about Elvis. The people who run the big time contests see that, they appreciate the things that matter. Those other two guys were complete posers."

"Bobby, I gotta speak to Mr. Tang alone here. I'll catch you later." Sam reaches his hand out to shake mine.

"I'm sure it was an off night and you were still great," I use the line that I'd been rehearsing for the last half hour.

Sam shakes his head. "Don't bullshit me Mr. Tang. It's not worthy of you."

"Sam, you've got some great friends."

He nods, "The Monroe mafia is the best."

There's an awkward silence as Linda brings Sam a beer.

"You know, Mr. Tang, I tell people it's the plastic surgery that's causing problems with the voice, but I got to be honest -- I really can't sing. Couple of nights I got lucky or someone who knew

how to set the mix just right could help me cover. I spent thousands of dollars on lessons."

"Sam, your voice sounds just like Elvis. You're obviously not tone deaf."

"Yeah, I know. The teacher said it was the weirdest thing she'd ever seen. I can dance good, just like Elvis even. I even play pretty good. I just can't sing in rhythm."

"Wow."

"Lady, told me I was just out of synch. I'm time deaf."

"There's got to be something you can do."

"Afraid not."

"You can still be a lookalike. You could lipsynch. You'd be the best."

Sam shakes his head, "I've thought about it and WWED....The king would never fake or settle for second best. I'd know the difference. Anyway, almost all my bookings are look-alike gigs."

"I'm sorry, Sam."

He clinks his glass to mine.

"You still got to follow your passion though," he whispers.

We drink.

"You know Mr. Tang, after I won my first Elvis contest four years ago, I came by Monroe High School to tell you about it, but you weren't there."

I nod.

"What happened, I thought teaching was your passion?"

This wasn't the first time someone in my life had asked me that question after I went back to law. I shrug, "Well, sometimes life doesn't work the way you plan."

Truth is that I stopped teaching because I knew I'd never be great at it and that I'd never inspire anyone. There's no way I can say that to Sam especially not now.

"Tell me Sam. What's been the best thing about following your passion?"

He doesn't hesitate, "You know one night this gray haired grandmother came up to me after my show, with her two-teenaged granddaughters. She hugs me and says, *Thank you so much. Now, they can know what I felt when I was their age.* Lady has tears in her eyes and gets me all shook up. Tells me that she went to Vegas twenty-three times. That was the moment I told myself *Just keep that kind of memory alive forever.*" Sam finishes his beer, "You know, I might never be the best at it, but Elvis would never have quit if he were me. He was an American Saint."

I get up. "Sam I gotta go."

"You were the best teacher, Mr. Tang, the best teacher I could ever have had. Tell me that you love what you're doing now more."

I think about all the people spending life arguing about timely filings and the differences between shall and may. "Sure," I murmur, but don't look Sam in the eye.

"Mr. Tang, can I tell you something?"

"You don't have to ask."

"Sir, when I first saw your name as my government teacher, I figured you'd be really strict and hard."

"Because I'm Asian?"

Sam nods, "I'm not going to lie. I just figured all Asian teachers were like that."

"Had you ever had another one?"

He shakes his head. "But you weren't anything like that. You were funny. You didn't just like the kids who turned in assignments and raised their hands. You didn't judge us guys in the back row or expect us to be someone we weren't. After a few weeks, I didn't think of you as Chinese at all."

I look at Sam's face as I try to figure out which bones got re-shaped to make him an Elvis tribute artist. Sam must have seen my eyes drop.

"Mr. Tang, I don't mean it that way. It's good to be Chinese. You can even be Elvis and be Chinese. You saw the guy who got fifth...I

think we're all impersonators at some level. It's who and what you choose to impersonate that makes you who you are."

"I'll try to keep that in mind."

"Just remember sir, it's WWED. That's the way I lead my life and you're the one who led me there. I'll never look back."

I start to shake hands, but Sam puts his hand on my shoulder and gives me a hug. "Thanks for staying, Mr. Tang. It meant a lot to me."

I'm on the sidewalk, back where the night started, on a now Elvis-free street. I think about my old friend Way Lan (Rock and Roll couldn't deal with a Chinese accent in 1965) and hum his song "Jing Po Woman". That guy was the Chinese Elvis, only Way Lan had more talent. He was the one who taught me, "Forget all this school stuff. The difference between living and making a living is finding what you love and doing it anyway."

The night sky is filled with stars all light years away.

