

ARTS

Kabakos ready to get all shook up at Mohawk

Elvis tribute artist keeps busy with events across Canada and the U.S.

By **Stephanie Hounsell**
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

When Stephen Kabakos answers the door, he's wearing a tan-coloured t-shirt and khaki shorts, not a rhinestone-studded jumpsuit.

His upper lip isn't curled, and when he begins to talk, there isn't a single "thank you very much."

In fact, if it weren't for Kabakos's hair, you might never guess he's an incredibly successful Elvis Presley tribute artist.

But the hair's a dead ringer. It's black and shiny, thick and layered. His bangs are casually brushed to the side.

And the sideburns, which come mid-way down his cheeks, seal the deal.

There's only one woman allowed to touch his hair — and it isn't his wife but his hair-stylist who's been entrusted with his most precious asset for the past decade.

Coif fit for a King

"Elvis was all about his hair," Kabakos chuckled.

"Besides the sideburns, I'm pretty normal," the 36-year-old Miltonian added with a twinkle in his disarmingly pale green eyes. "The persona stays on stage and it's Stephen Kabakos off stage."

He smiles to reveal a perfect row of pearly whites, and it doesn't take much to see why his largely female audience swoons like schoolgirls.

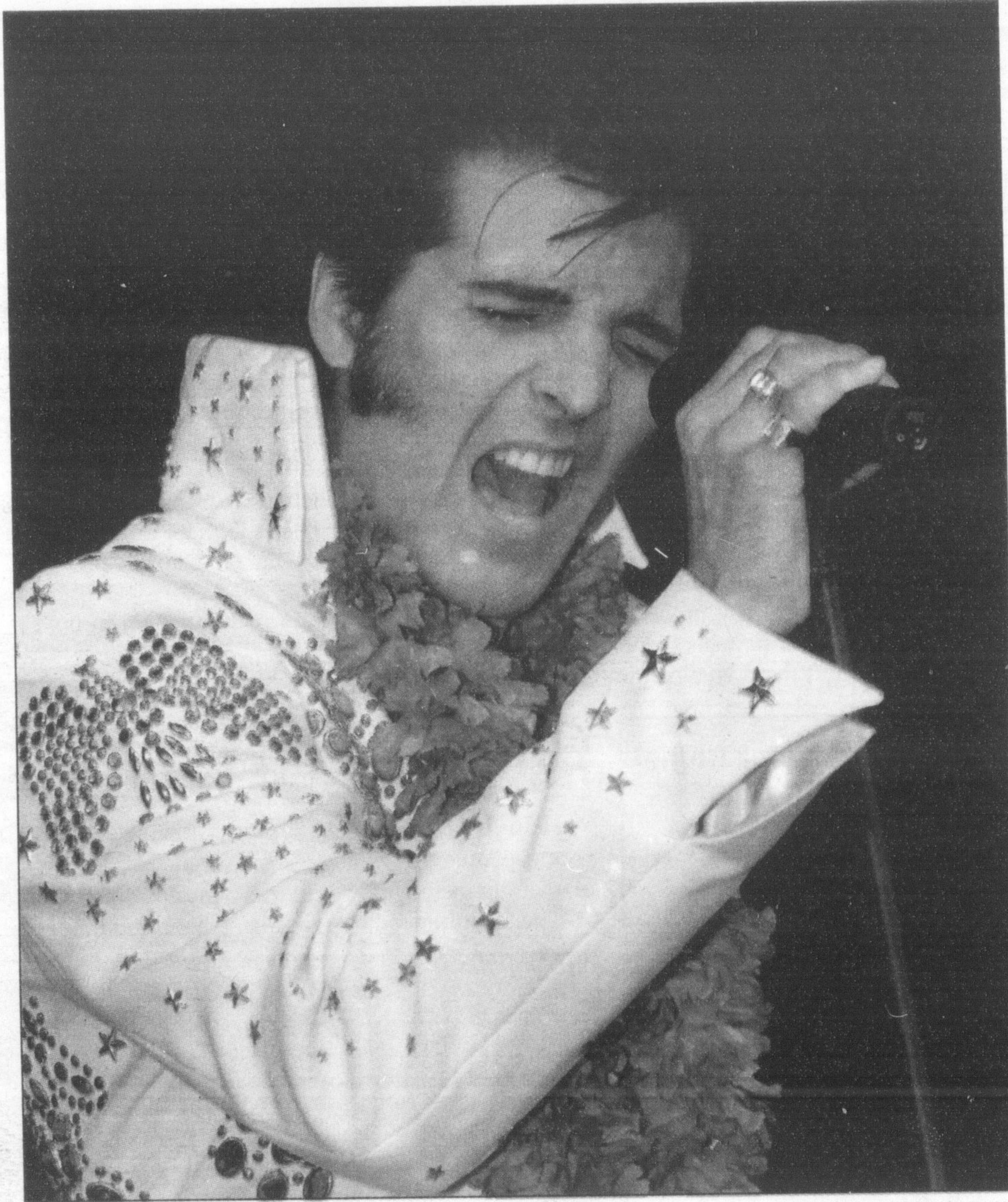
It's a rare opportunity to sit in "Elvis's" dining room, since he's on the road so much. Kabakos just returned from a festival in B.C., and later this week he'll perform in Windsor followed by a festival in Michigan.

On July 22, Kabakos will perform at Mohawk Racetrack in a free evening concert, a show he's looking forward to.

"Milton's been my first and number one supporter," he said.

This isn't just any Elvis-wannabe.

In 2001, Kabakos took first place in the Images of the King World Competition in Elvis's hometown of Memphis, Tennessee.



FILE PHOTO BY GRAHAM PAINE

HONOURING THE KING: Stephen Kabakos belts out an Elvis Presley tune in concert.

Since then he's given up competing — there's nothing left to prove, he said — and is constantly working on improving his show. He plays for audiences of up to 5,000.

From as far back as he can remember, Kabakos was an Elvis fan, thanks to his mom who exposed him to the music early on.

The day Elvis died, August 16, 1977, was the day Kabakos truly glimpsed what an impact the King of Rock and Roll had.

Kabakos was only six, but he remembers seeing his mom upset and asking her who

Elvis Presley was.

"He's the guy you watched on TV and listened to on the radio," his mom replied.

Not long after, Kabakos began his own Elvis collection, asking for his first Elvis cassette tape the following Christmas.

"I was a genuine Elvis fan," Kabakos said.

He became adept at entertaining his family, never turning down their pleas to "do his Elvis act."

At that point, he was lip-synching. He did his first public Elvis performance — still lip

synching — in Grade 10 at E.C. Drury High School and was nicknamed Elvis.

So it seemed only natural when Kabakos entered the second annual Collingwood Elvis festival about 10 years ago.

Only this time, he was singing for real.

Though he had no vocal training and had never before sung in public, Kabakos took second runner up in the amateur category.

Performing an addiction

He had caught the performing bug.

He worked on perfecting Elvis's every nuance and intonation, not to mention his dance moves, by watching footage over and over again, often in slow motion.

He enrolled in singing lessons and even took a martial arts class — Elvis had a black belt — which gave him insight into many of Elvis's stage moves.

A few years later, he took the coveted first place in Memphis.

Kabakos formed a back-up band, the TVB Ensemble, which included male "doo-wop" singers from Milton.

Today, the band has grown into a 13-piece ensemble.

One of his highlights was performing with the Jordanaires — Elvis's back-up vocal group — and D.J. Fontana, the legend's drummer.

The men gave him real insight into what made Elvis tick, Kabakos said, and what might have led to his untimely death.

Today, Kabakos and his band perform at what Kabakos calls "high quality venues" including various community theatres. They have a long-standing engagement at Mississauga's Stage West theatre.

In his shows, Kabakos covers the various eras of Elvis, from the golden years to the Vegas years.

A number of costume changes help ensure the accuracy of each era.

Although Kabakos has read books and watched documentaries to learn more for his show, he said it's not something he does for fun.

"Lots of times I don't like to watch the documentaries because I know how they're going to end (with Elvis's death). They all end the same way and it saddens me."

Stephanie Hounsell can be reached at sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com.



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