

on the
road

VIVA LAS VEGAS

Images: Dan Howell and Steve Prue
Words: Desiree Browne

Even with two of them under my belt, I have a hard time explaining what Viva Las Vegas Rockabilly Weekend actually is. Say “music festival” and you think of waifs in braided headbands camped in front of a stage. To call it a convention suggests neck beard fringe fandom that includes costumes. Viva has the DNA of a music festival—over 70 bands came out for its eighteenth year—but it’s almost all indoors at The Orleans Hotel and Casino. It’s got burlesque, pool parties, a car show, a pinup contest, dance classes, tattoo sessions and more. It attracts diehard fans from around the globe who have their own kind of deep “nerdiness.” So when you ask me, “How was Vegas?” the first thing I say is, “Intense!”

You dance until the sun, unseen from the windowless casino, rises in the desert, but the exhaustion doesn't truly hit you until you collapse into your seat on your return flight. I felt insulated from the rest of my life; I felt so connected to the other 7,000 people milling around the casino.

Viva is unquestionably about the music but celebrates a lifestyle. And, as with anything, the people make it amazing—the people that want to talk to you wherever you go, the people who are excited about the bands and the people who just get it. They get why you spend weeks talking about Vegas with your friends; they get why you miss the smoky casino and the ringing in your ears when you get home. It's meeting people and feeling a quick closeness that made my friend nickname Viva a "rockabilly summer camp."

The women, especially, are one of my favorite parts of Viva. We get into near-maniac outfit preparation—according to the Facebook groups and the blogs, women start making wardrobe spreadsheets about six weeks in advance—but it's wonderful to see. There is a sea of women primed to perfection in vintage finds they've searched for, made themselves, or have had made-to-order. At the car show, we're all hot-rod honeys, posing for a friend's phone or a pinup photographer. And we're such a range: dainty girls in full skirts, the full-sleeved bombshells and the perfectly pompadoured butch girls in vintage men's slacks. Bold self-confidence radiates from the concrete with the same heat as the sun. I



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feel more beautiful around gorgeously dressed women who go out of their way to give genuine compliments because nothing feels better than a real compliment from a woman. And I, for my part, have stopped girls to snap photos of a well-curated ensemble or the perfect accessory.

You can't possibly meet the thousands of attendees but you can watch them—pachucos in custom zoot suits next to teddy boys who are next to greasers with arms around the waists of women in western wear. Tattoos place people in the scene. I don't have any myself, but I like that they tell a story—or don't—and are just pretty. Some are retro purists with nothing but Sailor Jerry-style work, but Viva is full of former punks and goths, a secret some tattoos tell. My favorites are the girls with big, aggressive tattoos peeking out of vintage sundresses to rival the boys' ink collections.

There are the tattoos, though, that are not as nice. Around four a.m. one morning this year, a Puerto Rican friend talked to me outside of one of the record shops about how he had a hard time enjoying a band earlier that day when he spotted someone in the audience with an SS tattoo. He was angry, yes, but confused, too. The two of us love Viva but we wonder, at times, whether everyone welcomes us.

"Where are the black people?" my mom asked me as she looked at the Viva website. I'd asked for my Viva 17 ticket for my birthday present last year and she didn't really understand why I would want to go.

Not seeing black faces didn't stop me from going to Vegas, but for two

years, I've been scanning for other black women on the dance floor. I wanted to see normal women, not the ones who stood out because they were pinup models or burlesque performers basically working the weekend. I found Kelli, a friend of a friend from L.A., and we bonded first over being two of the few black women there and then for liking a lot of the same bands. Walking around with Kelli this year, I spotted more black women. Next year I hope to see even more.

It's a conversation I'm sick of having, but I've been told rockabilly isn't a black thing. That's not true, not when every Viva DJ has some Jackie Wilson, Nappy Brown, Winonie Harris or Bunker Hill in their case of 45s and one of the biggest hits of the weekend was Buzz and the Flyers—a famous 1980s East Coast rockabilly band fronted by the legendary Buzz/Dig Wayne...a black cat. But then I remember the Confederate flags I've seen at Viva, inked on arms or stitched onto car club jackets, and it's easier to understand the people of color who stay away.

I'm already thinking about my next Viva: the dancing, the bands that are about to become new favorites, the tattoos—not the uncomfortable tattoos, though. Maybe after the third one, I can have words for how incredible Viva Las Vegas really is. |||

