

# 11 Elvises and 10,000 fans to gather at park

Tribute artist from Canton will portray Tom Jones, too

**BY STEVE RICCI**  
*News Staff Reporter*

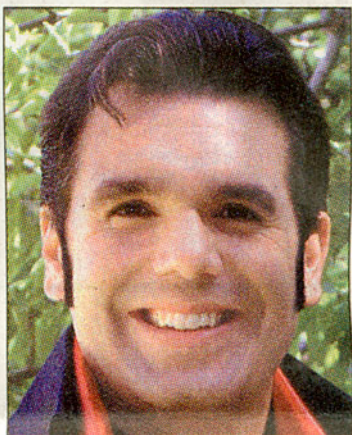
Award-winning Elvis tribute artist Chris Ayotte of Canton will be among the entertainers filling Ypsilanti's Riverside Park today and Saturday for the Michigan Elvisfest. But Ayotte has more than "Blue Suede Shoes" and rhinestone jump-suits up his sleeve.

Ayotte will be part of the festival's newest offering – entertainment by a handful of artists who'll be performing as Cher, the Blues Brothers, Ray Charles, Jerry Connelly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Tom Jones and Roy Orbison.

Ayotte, who won Michigan Elvisfest's 2004 Director's Choice Contest, also will perform this weekend as Tom Jones.

"I'll curl up my hair and wear a big belt," he said.

Ayotte is one of 11 Elvis tribute artists – out of respect for Presley and their own identities, they don't use the term "impersonators" – performing at the seventh annual Michi-



**Chris Ayotte: Entertainer is a GM marketing manager by day.**

gan Elvisfest in Depot Town.

"I love making people laugh – and I love inspiring and entertaining them," the 37-year-old Canton resident said.

The event is among the largest Elvis Presley festivals in North America, with about 10,000 spectators expected this year. The expected attendance is a significant increase over the 2005 event, which drew about 7,000, in part because Graceland

SEE **ELVISFEST**, B3

■ **All you need** to know about this weekend's Elvisfest, **B3**

# Graceland promoting event this year

has been helping to promote the event this year. Michigan Elvisfest has always been sanctioned by Elvis' Graceland estate, but the promotional effort upped the ante when Graceland put the festival on its Web site and fan club lists this year.

Among other features of the festival, local favorite and Ann Arbor resident Chris Solano will reprise his Elvis routine. And little person Duke Mason, a 46-inch-tall Elvis tribute artist from Joplin, Mo., who has been performing across the nation, will be among the entertainers.

Ayotte's performances are just part of his repertoire. He is the kind of guy who seems to always be on, constantly championing at the bit to engage and connect, whether unabashedly imitating one of 11 famous entertainers or making quick shifts to mimic nine U.S. presidents, five famous politicians, 13 well-known celebrities and six famous broadcasters.

Trim and energetic, Ayotte's bouffant hairdo and jet-black mutton-chop sideburns complement his tan skin. He carries around a deck of Elvis Presley playing cards, and bears more than a passing resemblance to his favorite images of the King of rock 'n' roll, those taken in the late 1960s and early '70s.

A marketing manager for General Motors Corp. by day, Ayotte moonlights by performing Elvis tributes and his other imitations at private parties and corporate and community events. But he said his love for Elvis is "the foundation" for all his acts.

Born in Tuscon, Ariz., Ayotte moved to Shelby Township at age 4. Several years later, in 1977, he remembers watching Walter Cronkite on television at a friend's house the day Elvis died.

He recalls how his friend's dad, a tough autoworker, broke into tears.

"I was struck by his reaction," Ayotte said. "I realized (Elvis) was a very important man to influence this man."

A short time later, Ayotte

## Michigan Elvisfest



FILE: LON HORWEDEL, THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

**Elvis tribute artist Johnny Loos belts out "America The Beautiful" during last year's Elvisfest in Ypsilanti.**

■ **What:** Two days of concerts by tribute artists, and other activities.

■ **Where:** Riverside Park in Ypsilanti's Depot Town.

■ **When:** Today, 5 p.m.-midnight; Saturday, noon-midnight. Gate opens at 4 p.m. today and 11 a.m. Saturday.

■ **Tickets:** \$10 today; \$15 Saturday. Children 10 and under free. (Special arrangements available for family reunions, corporate and organization picnics and bus tours.) Tickets can be purchased online via credit card, or at the gate.

■ **Web:** [www.mielvisfest.com](http://www.mielvisfest.com)

■ **Notes:** Handicap parking available at the public lot on Rice Street across from Riverside Park. Handicap and senior drop-off only available

at front entrance.

### Featured events

■ Elvis tribute concerts.

■ Viva Las Vegas Tent – Blackjack and Texas hold-'em, sponsored by the Ypsilanti Jaycees. Tickets to the Viva Las Vegas Tent can be purchased online at [www.vivalasvegastent.mollyguard.com](http://www.vivalasvegastent.mollyguard.com).

■ Children's Fun Area – Visit [www.mielvisfest.com](http://www.mielvisfest.com) for a detailed list of children's activities.

■ Dress Up and Join the Fun – Adult Elvis and 1950s costume contests; judging at 5:30 p.m. Saturday.

■ Pig Out in the Park – Dine on fine swine at a barbecue cookout.

■ Door prizes – Donate items at the gate for a chance to win prizes. Mott's Children's Hospital needs new stuffed toys and phone cards. The Salvation Army has listed items it needs on the Web at [www.sawashtenaw.org](http://www.sawashtenaw.org).

■ Big Raffle – First prize is a 52-inch high-definition television; second prize is a trip for two to Graceland in Memphis, Tenn.

■ Elvis Autorama – 100 classic cars and hot rods, hosted by America's Most Wanted Car Club, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday.

started listening intently to Elvis albums. He performed as Elvis in a 10th-grade choir show and an 11th-grade marching band competition. Throughout his school years, he also regaled friends with imitations of classmates, teachers and various celebrities.

"I'd be Howard Cosell in the locker room, cracking jokes and doing my shtick," he said.

Ayotte graduated from the University of Michigan with history and political science majors in 1991. After several job-related moves with GM, he came back to Michigan and saw his first Elvisfest.

"I had an epiphany moment a few years ago when I was watching some of Elvis' TV specials," Ayotte said. "I was struck with Elvis' high standards, his charisma and the passion he had for the music. I saw his good looks and his vocal dynamics. It's hard not to like

him, and I think the good performers learn how to tap into that."

At Elvisfest, Ayotte said, he was surprised by the numbers of female admirers who rushed the stage – many of whom, he noted, are fans of specific tribute artists.

"I think God gifts each of us," Ayotte said. "The question we have to ask is what are our gifts, what are our passions and what can we be to give back to life and to others. I'm tapping into my gifting, which is to entertain and delight people, and make them laugh. And you know, especially in this day and age, people need to laugh."

More information about Ayotte is available on his Web site, at [www.chrisayotte.com](http://www.chrisayotte.com).

Steve Ricci can be reached at [sricci@annarbornews.com](mailto:sricci@annarbornews.com) or 734-482-4685.