



# LOVE ME TENDER

An otherwise sensible Sharon Stephenson rocked down the aisle in the footsteps of stars like Angelina Jolie and Britney Spears at her Las Vegas wedding

It took a health scare, a milestone birthday and an industrial quantity of pinot noir to convince me I was ready for marriage. I met Martin in a grimy London pub 15 years ago and we've barely been apart since. Yet somehow I've managed to dodge the marriage bullet.

It's not that I'm philosophically opposed to marriage – I love getting dressed up and going to other people's celebrations. It's more a case of never wanting it for myself. Neither of us is religious and, to be honest, conservatism isn't a close friend. I also lack the gene that would let me spend so much on something I can neither drive nor live in. And let's not forget the old chestnut that if you love someone, you don't need a album full of drunk people in tuxedos to prove it.

The tipping point was our decision to head overseas, specifically to the Middle East where de facto relationships are frowned upon. Marriage, it seemed, was a train that was finally going to arrive at my station. Naturally, we rejected the idea of a conventional wedding ceremony. If we were going to do it our way, there was only one option: We'd say "I do" in Las Vegas with an Elvis impersonator. Of course we were being ironic – an Elvis ceremony is so tacky it's cool.

Figures show that of the 120,000 splittings that take place in Las Vegas every year, most are of couples who are a little older, have been married before and are open to something different. And, obviously, have a great sense of humour. We tick several of those boxes, especially, I hope, the latter. And what better way to begin married life than with a big, fat laugh?

The decision to wed without family or friends went down well with most. Others were placated by the promise of a knees-up when we got home. But whether you do it at a cathedral with 1000 of your nearest and dearest, in a vineyard, registry office or in Sin City, the dilemma remains the same – what to wear? A wedding dress is one of the most symbolic garments a woman will ever put on; it has to be special.

Bridal shops and internet searches yielded the same disappointing result: Traditional 'meringue' dresses that weren't me. I wanted a minimalist yet funky frock that wouldn't clash with Elvis. Fortunately I found the perfect number while on holiday in Hong Kong – a Chloé dress I wouldn't have to diet myself stupid for.

Driving from California to Las Vegas, you pass through miles of emptiness until – bam! – a wall of neon hits you in the face. An oasis of excess in the vast Mojave Desert, Vegas messes with your mind, your comfort zone and your wallet. Yet among this insanity, a wedding takes place every few minutes. →

The love-in started in 1912, when neighbouring state California passed a law requiring couples to wait three days between acquiring a marriage licence and getting hitched (to ensure the hangover had worn off). Nevada, however, had no such qualms, and so evolved the industry that today lets you partake in ceremonies as outlandish as the city that spawned them.

You can, for example, opt for an Egyptian, Star Trek, Hawaiian or mobster-themed ceremony. The supremely lazy are catered for with a drive-thru wedding that requires little more effort than rolling down the windows. You can ride down the aisle on a Harley, take your vows at the top of a rollercoaster, in a gondola or above the Grand Canyon. All you do is show up with proof of age and \$75, get your marriage licence, and off you go to join the ranks of Frank Sinatra, Angelina Jolie, Demi Moore, Jon Bon Jovi and, of course, Britney Spears.

It's a no-brainer to go the Elvis route – I'm not a fan but figure if you're going to do it in Vegas, it should be in the spirit of the city's unofficial patron saint. The Graceland Chapel, north of the infamous Strip, was the first to introduce Elvis weddings and was endorsed by the King himself. Since it opened in 1947, it has united more than 250,000 couples from all over the globe.

Via email, we arrange a package that costs around \$550 and includes one of America's leading Elvis impersonators Brendan Paul (who has been on Oprah and Jay Leno's shows) as well as a DVD, photos and flowers. I'm touched that the onsite florist goes to immense trouble to source my out-of-season favourite blooms, oriental lilies, and that Brandon Reed, Graceland's ever-obliging manager, sets me up with hair and makeup the morning of the event.

The white stretched limo sent to collect us at our hotel elicits much laughter. We're dropped at the Clark County Marriage Bureau, in a mongrel neighbourhood of light industry and homeless folk, where it takes 15 minutes to sign away our singledom.

Then it's onto Graceland to meet Brendan, aka Elvis, who, thankfully, is the pre-hamburger version of the late King. I'm nervous but Elvis soon has us doubling over with laughter. In fact, we spend the entire ceremony with smiles on our faces. Forget the angst and family feuds of a conventional wedding – our day is so much



**ABOVE:** Sharon and Martin eschew the Star Trek- and Egyptian-themed options for a 'traditional' Vegas wedding. **LEFT:** Elvis croons the connubial vows.



fun we almost forget we're acquiring a legal status neither of us ever thought we'd have.

After a quick run-through, Elvis walks me down the aisle to a beautiful rendition of *Love Me Tender*. It's as cheesy as a fondue, but he's got such a good voice, it's like the real thing is in the room. Because he isn't a licensed celebrant, local minister Rev Marie Stapleton performs the official duties. We opt for the traditional 'love, honour and respect' vows, which are pretty much the only traditional thing about our day. Next Elvis jumps in with his 'special Elvis vows': "I promise to take you as my hunk-a, hunk-a burning love, to always love you tender and never return you to sender."

We're treated to a sublime version of *Can't Help Falling in Love* before Rev Stapleton says a few words about travelling life's journey together. At least I think that's what she says – by now, my adrenaline's pumping so fast, she could be reading the back of a cereal packet for all I know. What I do hear are the words, "By the power vested in me by the State of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife." And then it's over; the most terrifying and exhilarating thing I've ever done.

It's probably unconstitutional not to feature *Viva Las Vegas* somewhere in an Elvis ceremony, so the final act is Elvis encouraging us to sing and sway along to his rousing rendition. We have our obligatory Kodak moment at the chapel, before jumping into Elvis's SUV to drive to the iconic Vegas sign. The journey's the most →

surreal part of the day: I'm sitting in the passenger seat, my new husband's in the back and Elvis is negotiating rush-hour traffic.

Appropriately, we're booked into the Cirque du Soleil show *Love*. We rush back to our hotel, get changed and strike out for the opulent Mirage casino, where our VIP tickets provide a ringside seat. From there it's a short stroll to Japonais, one of the Mirage's 15 restaurants. Afterwards we retire to the adjacent Beatles-themed club where the cocktails flow until the small hours.

Back home, the most frequent questions I'm asked are, "Was it fun?" and, "Would you do it any other way?" To which my answers are an emphatic "yes" and "no". A Vegas wedding isn't for everyone, but it fitted our needs perfectly. My husband, a man more used to expressing himself through the animation he draws for a living than via grandiose statements, summed it up simply and beautifully when he said: "Our wedding was different and special – and, best of all, it was us." 📍 Sharon was a guest of Air New Zealand ([www.airnz.co.nz](http://www.airnz.co.nz)) and Las Vegas Tourism ([www.visitlasvegas.com](http://www.visitlasvegas.com)).

PHOTOGRAPHS BRIAN HENDRICKS

### Making it legal in Vegas

The requirements for marriage differ state to state in the US but Nevada laws make it easy. All you need to obtain a marriage license (which costs \$75) is proof that you're over 18.

You must ensure your marriage is registered in the US. There's no legal obligation to register your overseas marriage in New Zealand, however you can do so if your Las Vegas ceremony is witnessed by an authorised official from a New Zealand embassy. The advantage of registering your marriage in New Zealand is that a marriage certificate can be issued to you from New Zealand, for your records. This certificate does not replace the marriage certificate supplied in the US, however.

It pays to get a certified copy of your marriage certificate before you leave the US. Nevada charges \$13 and it takes a week to process.

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