

The King dethroned

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NIAGARA FALLS — The King was here, but his followers missed the memo.

The first annual Niagara Falls Elvis Festival was marred by slim crowds and some angry vendors over the weekend.

Most wondered why the event wasn't promoted more, and felt sorry for the top notch entertainers gathered at Oakes Garden Theatre.

"One of the Elvis' said (on Friday), 'I'm not sticking around, there's no one to sing to,'" said vendor Sheila Szalai, who paid nearly \$600 with her husband Karl to operate a jewelry booth for the three-day event. By Saturday afternoon, they had made just two sales.

"We won't be back."

The sour mood hung over the venue Saturday as Elvis tribute artists played to barely 150 people by late afternoon. It was a far cry from the thousands organizers expected for the inaugural event.

"This is stupid, this place should be packed," said Niagara Falls resident Della Meunier. "I love Elvis, and I am very disappointed for this. Fans just didn't know it was going on."

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There was little promotion for the event leading up to Friday's opening. In addition to

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Oakes Garden Theatre, tribute artists were booked at the Hard Rock Cafe and Boston Pizza.

General manager William Maurice, who has performed as Elvis for 40 years, admits the event may have stretched itself too thin for its first year. If it returns, he said he'll concentrate on just one location.

"I just need to make sure the Elvis fans have what they want," he said.

Maurice has been part of several Elvis festivals, but they weren't "as tough as this one here."

Access to the park was fenced off, and despite the sounds of Presley filling the lower end of Clifton Hill, few people took the plunge to purchase tickets, even with drastically reduced tickets.

The event originally charged \$90 for a weekend pass, but tickets for Saturday — the busiest day of the festival — were dropped to \$10.

Elvis fan Maria Carmevale of Stoney Creek phoned some local hotels prior to the event,



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Niagara Falls Elvis Festival general manager William Maurice performs during Saturday's event at Oakes Garden Theatre.

and few of them knew it was going on.

"It was very badly organized," he said. "It just hasn't been advertised enough."

She felt the event should be free, letting thousands of tourists come in and spend money on food and vendors.

Deborah Morin agreed, and figured there should be festival staff on Clifton Hill letting tourists know what's going on.

While she enjoyed the enter-

tainment, the paltry crowd was hard to ignore.

"I feel bad for them," she said. "Maybe they need to put (tickets) down to \$5."

Despite the rough weekend, Maurice is confident the festival will be back next year.

The King and his fans deserve no less.

"You try put Elvis down in front of a fan," he said. "Go ahead, give it a shot. You won't last long."



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Crowds were slim for the first annual Niagara Falls Elvis Festival, held Friday to Sunday at Oakes Garden Theatre.