

Fake items abound in this world; hundreds of supposed John Lennon autographs actually postdate his 1980 death. But Elvis "is the worst," Mr. Luke says. Beyond the sheer volume and variety of odd King collectibles—a set of birthing forceps supposedly used to deliver him sold on eBay this fall for \$600—Elvis himself was generous, giving away thousands of belongings during his lifetime. Complicating matters further, his executors never comprehensively cataloged what he owned. When Elvis, who would have turned 68 on Wednesday, died in 1977, entertainment memorabilia was largely viewed as garage-sale flotsam. As a result, says a spokesman for the estate, scores of items simply "wandered out" of the star's home.

Today's megastars are taking note. Madonna, for one, recently hired a team to catalog her memorabilia, in large part to guard against fakes sinking her collectability in the future. (She started getting serious about the effort after the Hard Rock Café trumpeted ownership of one of her molars; she says one isn't missing. Hard Rock declined to comment on the dental dispute.) Darlene Lutz, the singer's art adviser, says her team is archiving items with a computerized cataloging system similar to those used by museums. The white

wedding gown Madonna donned in 1984 for her "Like a Virgin" MTV awards performance was among the first entries. "She knows it's her only shot at controlling what happens to everything," Ms. Lutz says.

For its part, Graceland, the Memphis headquarters of the Elvis Presley estate, says it's seen a dramatic spike in requests from collectors to help determine what's real. But rendering opinions on what's authentic and isn't, says Graceland lawyer William R. Bradley, "would open us up to all kinds of liability." What's more, Graceland trimmed its budget in 2002 due to a downturn in foreign tourists, leaving the estate with a staff of three archivists, down from five. "We're overloaded," a spokesman says.

Experts say the proliferation of fakes is dragging down prices for authentic Elvis memorabilia. One notable example: The "Sun 209," the first 45 Elvis recorded for the tiny Sun Studios, traded for \$2,500 three years ago. But prices have sunk to around \$1,500 since unscrupulous dealers started peddling bootlegged re-releases as originals. (The real 45s have three circular indentations called "push marks" under the label that form a triangle—but the re-releases are otherwise nearly identical.)

Items without pristine ownership histories are increasingly going unsold on the auction block. In

October, Florida collector Bill Williams put up for auction a guitar some experts believe is the first instrument Elvis ever played. But because Mr. Williams didn't have hard evidence backing up the claim—a photo of Elvis playing it, for example—no one bought it.

"Fakes are making buyers incredibly leery," says John Heath, a leading Elvis collector and appraiser in Marion, Ark. He recently paid \$12,000 for several 1956 concert handbills he saw on eBay that he says turned out to be "unequivocally bogus." (Among other problems, he discovered a handbill was never printed for Elvis's 1956 concert at the New Frontier Casino in Las Vegas, although he had bought one.) Kevin Pursglove, a spokesman for eBay, says the firm never vouches for authenticity, instead leaving the issue "entirely between buyers and sellers."

One particularly troublesome collectors' niche: autographs by the King. Boston manuscript dealer Kenneth Rendell, a longtime handwriting expert by profession, estimates that 95% of the Elvis autographs currently listed on online auctions are forgeries. Deal  
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## Rise in Fake Celebrity Memorabilia Vexes Collectors

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ers sometimes offer handwritten lyrics to Presley's famous songs but they're almost always fake, he says. It turns out: "Elvis absolutely hated to write."

Certainly, some Elvis items are holding their value. The King's elaborate jumpsuits sell for around \$100,000 each. (Up-close concert photos help prove he actually wore them; he also perspired so profusely in his later years that many are sweat-stained.) Only a few dozen posters for his 1970s concerts are known to exist and are valued at about \$20,000 in good condition. And a signed program from a 1950s national tour he

did with a group of bands—he wasn't headlining yet—can bring \$1,200, according to Mr. Luke, president of TreasureQuest Auction Galleries.

Still, even experts can be fooled: In September, Mr. Luke put a gold record for the Elvis song "Promised Land" up for bids on Sothebys.com. But a potential bidder tipped him off that Elvis's 1975 recording of that song never went gold. Mr. Luke checked and yanked the item from the sale. Sotheby's declines to comment on Elvis fakes, but a spokeswoman confirms that it is currently investigating a recent claim from one buyer that a \$60,000 dinner

jacket allegedly worn by the King might not have been.

With all the bogus material floating around, some vigilant collectors are taking extra steps to verify their prizes' authenticity. After Heather Mozart paid \$5,500 at Christie's in 1999 for a pink and black 1955 jacket worn and autographed by Elvis, the San Francisco collector hired a Michigan laboratory that uses chemicals to date materials. The results: The ink was from the 1980s. She says she demanded a refund and got it. (Christie's confirms the incident.) "I'm not one of those people who believe Elvis was still around signing things in the '80s."