



## Garland, Judy (1922-1969)

by Tina Gianoulis

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A film still of Judy Garland playing Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

To call Judy Garland an icon of the gay community is a massive understatement. Garland's fragile but indomitable persona and emotion-packed singing voice are undeniably linked to gay culture and identity. This is especially true for gay men, but lesbians also are drawn to identify with Garland's plucky toughness and vulnerability.

Garland's signature song, "Over the Rainbow," is the closest thing we have to a gay national anthem, and many claim that it was pain over Garland's death from an overdose of drugs in June 1969 that sparked smoldering gay anger into the Stonewall riots and fueled the gay liberation movement. Whether true or not, this story has such poetry that one feels it ought to be true.

After all, in the intensely closeted pre-Stonewall days, gays often identified themselves to each other as "friends of Dorothy," referring to Garland's 1939 role in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Garland was virtually born a performer. Her parents owned a theater in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, where little Frances Gumm was born on June 10, 1922. She began singing and dancing on stage at the age of four. She toured in vaudeville, performing with her sisters, before being discovered in 1935 and signed to a contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film studio.

She changed her name to Judy Garland and starred with Mickey Rooney in the *Andy Hardy* film series before being cast in her career-defining role in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Early in her career, studio doctors began giving Garland prescription drugs. The "speed" she took to lose weight made her too nervous to sleep, so she was given tranquilizers and sleeping pills, beginning a destructive cycle that would continue throughout her life and finally kill her.

Garland was painfully insecure; and, unfortunately, she began her career at a time when performers worked under contract to powerful studios and had little control over their careers. Her attempts to take charge of her career caused the studios to reject her as a troublemaker, but Garland's powerful talent and sheer heart propelled her through comeback after comeback.

After Garland's childhood career ended, she wowed audiences in her first adult role in *Meet Me in St. Louis* in 1944. In 1954, after more difficult years, she starred powerfully in *A Star is Born* with James Mason.

When the film roles were not there, she went back on the concert stage, performing long runs at New York's Palace Theater. Despite an Academy Award nomination for a stunning performance in *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) and a brief but memorable television show on CBS (1963-1964), Garland found herself nearly penniless. Near the end of her life, she performed anywhere she could, even in piano bars when she could find no other work.

Garland was adored by gay fans throughout her career, but her connection to the world of homosexuality

did not stop with her fans. Her beloved father, Frank Gumm, had been a closeted gay man, and Roger Edens, her strongest supporter in the early days at MGM, was also gay.

Even two of Garland's husbands, Vincente Minnelli and Mark Herron, were gay, which made possible an intergenerational *ménage* when Herron had an affair with Peter Allen, who was married to Garland's daughter Liza Minnelli.

Garland has to be ranked among the most memorable and indefatigable performers in the history of American popular entertainment. She made over thirty feature films, received a special Academy Award, and was nominated for two others. She also garnered several Emmy nominations and a special Tony Award.

Garland made numerous recordings, including the Grammy Award-winning *Judy at Carnegie Hall*, which has never been out of print. Her concert appearances became legendary, both for their triumphs and their spectacular failures.

Perhaps the most touching, and telling, picture of Judy Garland, embedded in the memories of gay men and lesbians of a certain age, is the way she ended many of her concerts. Dressed in drag as a hobo, her smudged face showing the pathos of the eternal outsider, she approaches the audience and sits on the edge of the stage. Looking far away, she sings "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," with intense lonely sweetness, longing for that impossible land where dreams come true.

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**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.