



Liberace (1919-1987)

by Bud Coleman

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Mr. Showmanship, the Candelabra Kid, Guru of Glitter, Mr. Smiles, The King of Diamonds, and Mr. Box Office, Wladzui "Walter" Valentino Liberace was for many the epitome of camp, excess, and flamboyance, yet he was also a gay man who steadfastly refused to acknowledge publicly his sexual identity.

Born into a musical family on May 16, 1919 in West Allis, Wisconsin, Liberace learned to play the piano by ear at the age of four. As a teenager, he played popular tunes in local Milwaukee movie theaters and nightclubs as Walter Buster Keys. He also continued his classical training, debuting as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony in 1940.

After a brief stint with the Works Progress Administration Symphony Orchestra, Liberace attended the Wisconsin College of Music on scholarship.

An encore request after a 1939 classical recital altered Liberace's career-path. His performance of the popular tune "Three Little Fishes" in a semi-classical style proved an immediate audience favorite.

Soon armed with his trademark candelabra on the piano, Liberace found himself booked into dinner clubs and hotels from coast to coast. Audiences immediately responded to his unique musicianship, which blended classical and popular music with glamor and glitter.

In 1950, Walter Valentino Liberace officially changed his name to Liberace. With an act that now included witty banter and some singing, the performer positioned himself to tackle a new market: television.

Begun in 1952 as a summertime replacement for *The Dinah Shore Show*, within two years *The Liberace Show* was the most watched program in the country. The show was on the air until 1956 and garnered Liberace a huge fan base. His record sales now regularly topped two million copies. Although he made several movies, the performer was far more successful on the small screen than on the big one.

Liberace's appearance at the Hollywood Bowl in 1952 was the beginning of another Liberace trademark: elaborate clothes. Fearful he might get lost in the sea of black tuxedos worn by members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Liberace wore a custom-made white suit of tails.

Soon Liberace was spending a small fortune on flashy costumes. His elaborate costumes almost killed him in 1963 when he collapsed back stage after inhaling carbon tetrachloride, a cleaning chemical used on his soiled costumes.

Even though Liberace made his Carnegie Hall debut on September 25, 1953, his true home was not the concert hall, but the Las Vegas showroom. He opened the new Riviera Hotel in 1955, becoming the highest paid entertainer in Vegas with a weekly salary of \$50,000.



Liberace performing in 1983. Photograph by Alan Light. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License.

Liberace's enormous popularity and exposure made him the object of speculation and interest on the part of gossip columnists, who could hardly fail to note his fey mannerisms and effeminacy.

When he arrived in London for a 1956 appearance at Festival Hall, the *Times* of London noted that he was welcomed by over 3,000 girls and young women and "some ardent young men."

When the London tabloid *The Daily Mirror* called him a "deadly, winking, sniggering, snuggling, chromium-plated, scent-impregnated, luminous, quivering, giggling, fruit-flavored, mincing, ice-covered heap of mother love" and "a sugary mountain of jingling claptrap wrapped in such a preposterous clown," Liberace sued for libel, stating that the tabloid insinuated that he practiced homosexuality, then a criminal offense.

In court, the performer repeatedly lied about his sexual life and thereby won the case. Liberace's lies about his sexual life may have been a calculated response to the virulent homophobia of the 1950s. One can hardly blame him for wanting to strike back at his persecutors.

Still, the lies established a pattern of denial and evasion that Liberace practiced for the rest of his life. In his four autobiographical books, there is not a word of his homosexuality, which may suggest not merely discretion, but internalized homophobia.

In the 1960s, Liberace, now a fixture in Las Vegas, made his performances increasingly outrageous. In addition to the fantastic costumes, he made spectacular entrances, sometimes driving on-stage in a custom car and then exiting by seeming to fly away.

In 1979, he opened The Liberace Museum in Las Vegas. It soon became the third most popular attraction in Nevada. It features 18 of Liberace's 39 pianos, numerous costumes, pieces of jewelry, and many of the performer's one-of-a-kind automobiles, including the "Stars and Stripes," a hand-painted red, white and blue Rolls-Royce convertible.

All of Liberace's work to maintain his closet collapsed when Scott Thorson sued the entertainer for \$113,000,000 in palimony in 1982. Dismissing Thorson as a disgruntled employee who was fired for alcohol and drug use, Liberace denied in court that the two had been lovers for five years. Ultimately, the matter was settled out of court for \$95,000.

Thorson, whom Liberace sent to his own plastic surgeon to have his face remodeled in the performer's own image, was replaced by eighteen-year-old Cary James, who shared Liberace's life and bed until the performer's death five years later. James and Liberace both tested HIV-positive in 1985; James died in 1997.

In spite of his ill health and having lost fifty pounds, the sixty-seven-year-old Liberace honored his contract to appear at Radio City Music Hall in 1986, his third record-breaking engagement there. Horrified by Rock Hudson's recent outing and death, Liberace steadfastly refused to disclose anything about his sexuality or health. He told close friends, "I don't want to be remembered as an old queen who died of AIDS."

Liberace died at the age of sixty-eight on February 4, 1987. He left the bulk of his estate to the Liberace Foundation for the Performing and Creative Arts.

Despite the railing of critics that he was a failed artist who debased music, Liberace remains popular: as of 1994, thirty-one new editions of his records had been issued since his death, only seven years earlier.

Liberace was not only immortalized by a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but by two television biographies: *Liberace* (ABC) and *Liberace: Behind the Music* (CBS), both in 1988.

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