

Ode to Sammy

by

Adam Eisenstat

Part I: Last Rites

Sammy, I was there at the funeral, with all the others, when you died after your wrenching bout with throat cancer. Yessir, death, “The Big Casino” as you might have said in Rat Pack lingo. I was there at the end, letting the free flowing tributes and emotion and love and warmth wash over me in my hellacious state of extreme sorrow melded with profound joy—a joy at remembering everything you achieved, every adoring fan you touched, every performer you influenced, and most of all Sammy, everything you meant.

I was most touched at the ceremony, ironically enough, by a teary-eyed hack whose work has always nauseated me. His tribute, which had obviously moved him to tears, almost did the same to me. It’s funny how in times of distress, the lowliest among us can rise to the occasion. And rise he did, he soared like a swallow: “Anything I could ever hope to achieve in the glittering halls of the entertainment world will inevitably be overshadowed by Sammy. He is the alpha and omega, the apex and acme of showbiz, and his spirit hovers over every single performer who dances a step, sings a note, or goes anywhere near a stage. Sammy did it all and Sammy did it like no one else.” And then there were the tributes from your people, Sammy. One civil rights leader intoned in preacherly cadences: “Sammy Davis, Jr. was more than a brilliant entertainer,

he was a showbiz iconoclast—a breaker of barriers and a man who proved that talent, sheer talent, is the measure of greatness. Sammy invented the concept of the modern black superstar and more perhaps than any other person, he wrote—with his life—the Fourteenth Amendment of Show Business. He left a constellation of black stars, and he left us love. Sammy was about love.” Janet Jackson said you were the Martin Luther King of the entertainment industry. And I remember you used to say, sometimes as we sat by the pool, “I have a dream: 20 weeks a year in Vegas and leather sofas in the dressing room.”

Then Michael Jackson stepped out of his limo, and paused in front of the media hordes flashing and taping and scribbling away. He stood right before them, and if you know Michael like I do, you realize he’s pretty shy and never does anything like that. It was so amazing, he just stared them down, like he was on a perch 2,000 feet high, then he looked up in the sky and addressed you directly: “I am here because you were there.”

Some shrew from back in the day waxed sentimental: “For 36 daring, dramatic, go-for-broke, what-the-hell years, he inhabited center stage in our national psyche. And when he died in his Beverly Hills mansion, after a long struggle with throat cancer, he was a legend who lived in a time on the other side of time.”

Sammy, do you realize your death triggered an unprecedented national tribute, especially in your old stomping ground? The lights on the Las Vegas Strip went dark for 10 minutes in your memory. This had happened only two times before—after the deaths of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. There was a veritable who’s

who of the entire entertainment industry at your funeral. Celebrity mourners included: Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Liza Minnelli, Mayo Whitman, Esther Rolle, Jesse Jackson, John Amos, Tony LaBianco, Quincy Jones, Susan Anton, William Conrad, Gerald Ford, Smokey Robinson, Abe Vigoda, Jack Palance, Rosemary Clooney, Flip Wilson, Ruthann Buzzie, Ray Walston, John Ritter, Leslie Uggams, Joyce Dewitt, Burt Reynolds, Merv Griffin, Jim Backus, David Carradine, Jimmy "J.J." Walker, Lawrence Hilton Jacobs, Luther Vandross, Gregory Hines, Cicely Tyson, Tony Danza, Scatman Caruthers, Dawn Wells, Antonio Vargas, Norman Fell, Gene Rayburn, Tony Randall, Shirley McLaine, Jerry Lewis, Oprah Winfrey, Paul Shaffer, Ed Asner, Tony Curtis, Sean Penn, Adrienne Barbeau, Alan King, Tom Bosley, Roscoe Lee Brown, LaWanda Page, Judy Carne, Woody Allen, Bob Hope, Clifton Davis, Tim Conway, Ted Danson, Joey Heatherton, Jackie Coogan, Ivan Dixon, Bill Bixby, Pearl Bailey, Lorna Luft, Priscilla Presley, Mark Spitz, Bruce Jenner, Lee Majors, Robert Clary, Ryan O'Neal, George Segal, Richard Dawson, Redd Foxx, Demmand Wilson, Lola Falona, Charo, Dom Deluise, Paul Lynde, Gene Rayburn, Kitty Carlisle, Charles Nelson Reilly, Harvey Korman, Elliot Gould, Donald Sutherland, Dennis Hopper, Ron Howard, Rip Taylor, Hayward Nelson; Isabel Sanford, Frank Gorshin, Dean Stockwell, Jack Nicholson, Buddy Hackett, Dick Van Patten, Steve Buscemi, Gary Coleman, Tony Orlando, Buck Owens, Pam Grier, Phyllis Diller, Harry Guardino, Dan Rowan, Goldie Hawn, Henry Gibson, Artie Johnson, Cher, Sherman Hemsley, Joe Dimaggio, Marv Throneberry, Joe Pepitone, Jim Brown, Walt Frazier, Earl Monroe, and many, many more. Following the funeral there was a 300 car motorcade—one of the longest funeral caravans ever, according to police.

Before the ceremony, I was consoling a member of your family and she told me about how you were passionately fond of a gold watch Frank Sinatra had sent you as a memento of your last great tour. “Shortly before his death,” she said, “Sammy, who could no longer talk, pointed to his wrist and told his trusted valet and aide-de-camp Murphy Bennett by lip movement and signs, ‘This goes in the box with me, man.’”

The tributes continued, voices from the pantheon mourning the loss of one of their own: “Bigger than life in life, Sammy is bigger than death in death, for his spirit is still alive and well and working in us, making music, and light and freedom and we shall not, God help us, see his like again. For he was perhaps the last great exponent of a disappearing art: *mano a mano*—one man, one mike, no tricks, on an empty stage in a lion’s den of a thousand exuberant saloon customers. Could he tame them, could he make them love him, or would he fall flat on his face. He loved it! Sammy did. He loved the sweat and the excitement and, yes, the danger of the lonely, piercing, transforming spotlight. And no person living, no person who ever lived was better at his chosen craft of giving joy.”

A talk show host rhapsodized: “He was, above all else, a lover, a hugger, a toucher, a seeker of human warmth. His advice to black youth: ‘Do it! Go for it! Go for the mountaintop, man. Reach for the stars.’” That reminded me of the time I was watching you from backstage at The Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon and I saw an incredibly vivid demonstration of why you were such a lightning rod of warmth and joy. Let me transport you back to that emblematic moment in showbiz history. This is exactly what you said after being introduced:

“Thank you, thank you . . . You’re beautiful. You got a gorgeous soul, do you know that, Jerry Lewis? I love this guy. Y’know, I finally figured out why we all love Jerry. I finally figured it out after all these years . . . Thank you. I love this guy . . . Thank you. I finally figured it out: we all love Jerry because he makes us feels good. You’re beautiful. Thank you . . .”

A wizened old bluesman, who could barely walk and had to be helped to the dais, said in an otherworldly rasp, “He rambled, he testified, he Sammied. To hear his ‘Mr. Bojangles’ was to hear and understand a history that goes back to the beginning of American show business and forward to the future. ‘The Candy Man can,’ he used to sing, ‘cause he mixes it with love and makes the world tastes good.”

And though it was all so sad—this loss, this sorrow—there was also joy, remembering everything you had achieved, everyone you had touched. The joy tempered our sorrow and salved our loss, which was a wound that would not heal, but could only be treated by you Sammy—through your movies, your music, your books, your being. Something else soothed me greatly, something you once told me that was echoing in my head during the funeral and for weeks afterward: “The world doesn’t owe me anything. I’ve lived, baby. I’ve done it all.”

Part II: Vast and Perverse, Sick and Sensational

Sammy, Sammy, Sammy was about love, man. Bubula, I love you and all you represent: the showbiz tradition, searing contradiction, reckless abandon, and an intertwined public-private existence so vast and perverse as to encompass everything sick and sensational, everything ridiculous and thrilling about America. Sammy, you were and will always be the quintessential embodiment of the peripatetic entertainer who's only at home when he's onstage. A black and a Jew: you covered the bases; you did it all and you did it with a desperate zeal that was simultaneously brilliant and pathetic.

A muse and a minstrel and a manic force of nature; a player in the white man's game. A self-described "Harlem song and dance man" from the time you were three years old¹—a life unlike any other, a black and a Jew—an incarnation of the twin poles of the showbiz cosmos—upon whom was bestowed the opportunity to romp heavy in Vegas, Broadway, Hollywood too, and straddle the juncture where the reign of the Rat Pack on the showbiz circuit and preeminence in the collective fantasy life of America² coincided with the last

¹ Sammy Davis, Jr. started in show business in the early 1930s when he was just three years-old, performing with his father and Will Mastin on the "Chitlin Circuit," first as part a large vaudeville troupe, then later in a pared down version of that act called the Will Mastin Trio. They toured constantly and by the time he was fifteen Sammy had crossed the country 23 times. During his young life on the road, Sammy was shielded by his father from the racism and segregation that scorched the country. He found out about the racial climate in America during WW II, when he was drafted into one of the first integrated units in the army and directly encountered a steady stream of vicious racism for the first time. Sammy ultimately triumphed over prejudice through his gifts as an entertainer and became living proof that color is an insignificant factor when all eyes are focused on the stage.

² The Rat Pack were show business avatars who not only defined an era through their lives and their work, but also established fundamental conventions of performance and audience-entertainer interplay. The turgid emotionalism, sly sexuality, and relentless self-mockery that we associate with the Las Vegas milieu are classic Rat Pack reflexes that have been enshrined and encoded across the entire spectrum of the entertainment world. They navigated a swank and sensual world outside the bounds of conventional morality and—in an era suffused with the

gasp of unquestioned white male dominance. And you were there Sammy, a black and Jew.

Oh Sammy, so often you were laughing with them laughing at you. Remember the shtick at The Summit, during the salad days at the Sands in 1960, while you all filmed *Ocean's 11* and stumped for that famed Vegas lothario John F. Kennedy. Remember the part of the show when Dean would pick you and announce to everyone, "I'd like to thank the NAACP for this trophy." Remember how he routinely alternated insulting Amos'n'Andy cadences with his drunkard and lazy Southerner personae. What about your constant self-deprecating jokes and tendency to break into black dialect during your shtick: "I'm half Puerto Rican, a black, and a Jew. When I move somewhere, baby, da whole neighborhood move on out." Those segues into minstrelsy were a glaring contrast to your mannered well-spokenness, the old darkie routines hinting at a reversion to type or willful defacement of your near impeccable diction.

Maybe you were trying to beat them to the blow, to preempt their capacity to hurt you, and show the world you didn't take yourself too seriously. I know you believed it was the only way you could survive—emotionally and professionally—and you thought it was even heroic to take all the abuse and willfully participate in your own exploitation so that future black entertainers wouldn't have to suffer as you did. The most uncharitable would argue that by allowing yourself to become the butt of Frank and Dean's jokes—a designated sambo mascot—you traded in your dignity for a bunch of cheap laughs and

feeling that "anything can happen"—The Rat Pack possessed a mystique that is unmatched today.

succeeded primarily in becoming the epitome of phony showbiz posturing, especially its transparent sanctimoniousness and caricatured emotion.

And Frank, your hero, your role model, your patron, remember he called you a “dirty nigger bastard” because you publicly lambasted him for his renowned creepiness, and then you had to supplicate before him with profuse apologies to get back in his good graces? Remember how, sometimes when he was on stage, he would use you as a foil, complaining about the watermelon rinds in his dressing room and commenting that in a top hat you “looked like a headwaiter in a rib joint.” Remember the death threats, public protests, and mounds of hateful letters you got after your scandalous marriage to Swedish bombshell May Britt? Remember how you had to actually postpone the marriage in 1960 because Frank, your best man, was organizing JFK’s inaugural festivities and Kennedy’s father thought it would alienate conservatives? Remember how you weren’t even invited to the inauguration? Oh Sammy, the indignities were legion, almost as much as the kudos. But you kept singing and dancing and slapping your knee—a frozen mask of hilarity on your face—in that trademark forced breakup of yours, hoping the cheers and the laughter would drown out the hatred and humiliation.

Sammy I know—I know you were trapped, a prisoner of an impenetrable cage created by your roots in the black world and your ambitions in the white world.³

Sometimes you tried to marry the two worlds, like when you swung with Basie’s band at

³ Sammy struck a Faustian bargain, selling his soul for the opportunity to ingratiate himself with mainstream white America and cavort in the showbiz pantheon with the likes of Frank and Dean. Meanwhile, he continued to profess a strong affinity with his race (he was one of the more high-profile celebrity civil rights activists) and declare his blackness at any opportunity, often caricaturing himself in the process as in his guest appearances on *Laugh-In* where his catchphrase was “Here come da judge.” Probably the most poignant symbol of the contradictions

the St. Dismas House benefit in St. Louis in 1965, doing a percussion-only version of “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” and a medley of then current dances. That was as vital a celebration of blackness as anything I’ve ever seen in the realm of entertainment. But it wasn’t the sort of thing you could ever sustain. You routinely had to revert to self-mockery to assuage the collective racial fears of any audience for which you were performing; your blackness, by its nature, was a threat to the pre-Civil Rights lily-white audiences that were your bread-and-butter. You were trapped Sammy, I know. It was so sad, so hopeless, yet it helped to make you the legend you were and will always be.⁴

Sammy embodied is the fact that up until 1960, he could sing on a stage in a Vegas hotel—and devastate an audience with his preternatural versatility—yet because of segregation, he couldn’t gamble in the casino or eat in the restaurant.

⁴ The awkward political stance and embarrassing spin control of Sammy’s three autobiographies pale next to his considerable talents; watching him on stage, like Elvis, not necessarily stripped of mythological baggage, but astride it—or in the foreground of it—is to realize his transcendent power and uniqueness. However, it’s also possible to realize that his every utterance was pregnant with pathos and schlock.

Part III: Twilight of the Gods

The wife of Sammy's valet, Murphy Bennett, used to clean my mother's house, so that's how I got to know Sammy. I was a music biz comer from an early age, a sort of jack of all trades—manager/publicist/panderer—and Sammy took me under his wing. I guess he liked my verve and my way with a phrase, but mostly I think he saw me as a sort of conduit to “the younger generation.” Still, I wasn't that much younger than him, I just looked young and had entrée to some real decadent, exclusive circles.

Back in '68 I was hanging out with Sammy a lot. Those were very weird times for both of us, and the country too, with the whirl of politics, and war, and hippies, and the music. Man, that music. At first, Sammy and me didn't know what to make of that crazy shit, that loud R&B and trippy-assed British Invasion and that insane noisy jazz they were playing. We came from the world of show tunes and ballads and mainstream jazz, and our own cabaret hybrid of all the great popular music that EVERYONE listened to. It all started coming apart in the sixties, fragmenting in every which way.

Frank's first response, back when rock'n'roll began, was venom, pure rage. He took it as a total slap in the face, a denial of everything we all stood for, everything we thought was great. No one was more convinced than Frank that his way was the best. He was a total zealot when he thought he was right—which was always—an unyielding monster of conviction. In an article he “wrote” for *Western World* magazine, Frank said that rock'n'roll was “The most brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious form of expression it has been my displeasure to hear . . . it fosters almost totally negative and destructive reactions in young people . . . it smells phony and false. It is sung, played, and written for the most part by

cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiterations and sly, lewd—in plain fact—dirty lyrics, it manages to be the martial music of every side-burned delinquent on the face of the earth.”

Frank singled out Elvis as a target of his scorn: “His kind of music is deplorable, a rancid-smelling aphrodisiac.” On one level, his hostility and rage toward rock’n’roll came out of his total love for music—his music. It was, as always, Frank’s maniac love that made him so impulsive, so uncompromising about everything, especially the big things—like music. The strange thing though is that Frank reacted so harshly to the rise of Elvis and the younger generation during one of the highest points of his career, when he was still riding high on the crest of his comeback in *From Here to Eternity*. He was a huge success once again, and making some of his greatest records right at the moment The King was crowned⁵.

With Frank, it was really a territorial thing, and a generational thing, too. He saw it as a serious battle, a war even, with the turf being the very soul of the nation. He thought rock music had no place on the Top-40 charts, but Elvis was just starting a torrid run that would see him dominate the top of the charts for over a quarter of a century. Frank, by the way, ultimately did relent and acknowledged Elvis’s huge popularity when he invited him on his

⁵ Perhaps Frank reacted to Elvis so harshly in the mid-’50s because deep down he knew the younger man represented The Next Big Thing and foreshadowed his later irrelevance. Elvis must have spooked Frank like the ghost of music’s future. The late ‘60s was an especially tough time for Frank, who started groping for an identity after he found out his old broads-and-booze swinger shtick wasn’t working for the kids, indeed most of them thought he was completely passé, and tacky too (the movie *Joe*, with Peter Boyle, nicely captures this mood). He was truly floundering among the peace and love tribes, whether recording albums of Rod McKuen’s poetry, wearing love beads on album covers, or marrying 19 year-old Mia Farrow. Frank, who had just passed the half-century mark, was not a young man and youth, after all, was more important than ever in the ‘60s (not that it didn’t count for a lot when he was young and fresh). In light of his hard times a decade later, Frank’s early violent distaste for rock music might have been a powerful case of repressed jealousy and growing paranoia at the first stirrings of the baby boomer hegemony.

own TV special and actually sang a duet with him—they mocked each other’s style and signature mannerisms. (Despite his vaunted integrity, Frank had a history of succumbing to public tastes he believed to be “deplorable.”)

In ‘68, after doing lots of drugs and hanging out with some pretty freaky people—like Jimi Hendrix, Roman Polanski, Angela Davis, and Richard Nixon, to name but a few—Sammy had a far more open attitude than most of the old-timers. He had long embraced the whole mythos of pleasure and excess that came to be associated with rock’n’roll—Sammy was deep into that lifestyle long before any of the so-called legends of debauchery picked up their first electric guitar—so it came to him easily. Crawling through the gutter, from one LSD orgy to another coke-stoked group scene, from one two-month bender to another stretch of five or six straight days without sleep was Sammy’s idea of living it up. The old-timers thought he was something of a degenerate. Even worse for them was that he seemed far too amenable to the latest fads; they were repulsed by his embarrassing attempts to ingratiate himself with the day’s hipsters (Sammy’s gold lamé hotpants, one of his trademark stage costumes at the time, was the last straw for most of the purists).

It was the year of Elvis’s comeback, which for me, as a music lover and a huge fan of charisma, was an amazing, truly historic event—though obviously, in retrospect, the beginning of the end for Elvis. The blazing radiance of that comeback didn’t last long, but because of Sammy I had a chance to see one of the first few shows. I don’t know if Sammy really cared for Elvis’s music that much, but they were buddies and he knew I

loved him, so he got tickets for a whole group of us: my friends, a couple of his girlfriends, and some other people. He flew us all out to Vegas, where Elvis was playing at the International Hotel. We stayed in Sammy's personal suite at the Sands, which was—believe me—far more than adequate. It was several thousand square feet of lavish splendor, bursting with amenities: full bar, Jacuzzi in the middle of the living room, ceiling mirrors in all the strategic places, a kitchen crammed with sundry delectables, at least four TV sets, a couple hi-fi systems, and more than I can even remember.

We were sitting less than spitting distance from the stage and Elvis was playing to our table for most of the show, striking poses in his white satin Jump suit unzipped to reveal a wedge of bare chest⁶, tossing scarves to everyone at the table, which made the girls squeal with rapturous delight. In the middle of the second encore, "Blue Suede Shoes," Sammy sprang up, knocking over most of the champagne glasses on the table, and cried "Yeahhhhhhhh," as he wiggled his hips like the man onstage.

Now, I don't want to rhapsodize about Elvis and that breathtaking show like some UFO-addled redneck, but let's just say it was spine tingling, near-religious, and ahh . . . honestly. And Sammy, I think he might have enjoyed himself—you couldn't really tell from his crazy display because he always did that sort of thing. Mainly he was happy because we were happy. That's the kind of guy he was. He was sincerely generous—to a fault many would say. But Sammy never saw it that way; he only saw the up side of pissing away money: the immediate pleasure, the appreciation of others basking in his

⁶ James Conaway, "Sammy Davis, Jr., Has Bought the Bus," *The New York Times Magazine*, 1972

largesse, the coo coo vibe of swinging from one roving bacchanalia to another, being the life of the party whenever he felt the urge—which was every night.

After the show we were all invited up to Elvis's room, his private "superstar suite," and just stood there agog as the two men did shtick with one another—so effortless, so on—and The King showed off his accoutrements.

"I want y'all to see my new ring, it's a star sapphire," Elvis said as he laid his hand on a heavy, ornate table next to where we were all standing. The dozen or so of us there bent over to gaze at the massive stone that cast a shadow on Elvis's splayed hand and we did the whole "Ohh" and "Ahh" bit, none louder than Sammy.

Then Elvis looked down at his diminutive colleague, took the ring from his own finger and placed it on Sammy's as he drawled: "This is the biggest black star I ever seen, and I want to give it to the biggest black star I know."

Sammy, without missing beat, said in his best Elvis voice, "Thank you very much." And hugged the big man warmly, his own heavily bejeweled hands meshing with The King's famous gem-studded jumpsuit.

All eyes were transfixed on the pair as Elvis cradled Sammy's finger that he had just christened with the big rock, and held forth in his regal hillbilly manner: "Now this here's a star rub. You see plenty of star sapphires, but you don't see many star rubies. We need some light."

A flashlight was immediately produced by one of The King's attendants and the beam was focused on the ruby. Sammy cried in mock horror, "You've just ruined my good eye," and staggered away, hand clamped to his face.⁷

"We need more light," Elvis boomed. "Get a spot," and soon thereafter a spotlight was placed before Sammy and aimed at his glittering digit. After further commentary on the precious stone, The King's valet appeared with a pair of white turquoise-encrusted pants draped over one arm, which was apparently our cue to vacate the premises. As he was leaving, Sammy said he would like to have a pair of such pants made for himself.

"I give ya my permission," said Elvis as he winked and gave him a flip salute.

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⁷ *ibid*

After Frank heard Sammy was doing coke and running with an unsavory crowd, including Satanists, pornographers, and major druggies—definitely not Frank’s kind of people—he disowned him. He didn’t speak one word to Sammy—a man he had put on the map through his patronage, a friend he had pulled from the brink of catastrophe many times in the past—for more than three years. Frank, purist that he was, vehemently eschewed drugs. He said they were for “freaks, fags, and losers.” But he sure loved his booze, plenty of it too, sick quantities.

One time Sammy and me were at Max’s Kansas City watching the Velvet Underground play, digging the feedback and the weird flamboyance. Strangely enough, it put him at ease and he opened up about Frank for probably the first time since the rift began. Sammy was really choked up—pretty wasted too—and he started talking about how much he missed Frank and how he was so incredibly unhappy that they weren’t getting along. I hate to say it, but Sammy was like a woman when he started yapping about Frank, like a weepy jilted lover. Then his mawkish display turned on a dime into cutting mockery and character assassination. He started talking about Frank’s vaunted but—in Sammy’s eyes—dubious charitable impulse.

“Believe me, Frank ain’t no altruist; he gives away so much money to buy friends and control people, or because he’s guilty about some fucked up thing he did to somebody.” I had no doubt he was speaking the truth, because no one knew better than Sammy that Frank’s generous-family-man-concerned-citizen hokum was nothing more than a sugar-coated gloss on his monstrous temper and destructive tendencies. “We’re all moody bastards,” Sammy said, “but Frank’s the moodiest.”

According to Sammy, pure dominance and unquestioned allegiance from those around him was what Frank really meant when he sang “My Way.” He had a forlorn tone in his voice when he talked about how Frank was never really happy or content, and he certainly didn’t have peace of mind. For someone with such a charmed life, he did seem pretty insecure and miserable, a prime example of how even the most favored sons find their own rock bottom. But Sammy couldn’t maintain such negativity for long. Few could, because after all Frank was The Voice, a miraculous force beyond the man himself; an instrument of transcendence, indulgence, even restraint—everything really.

It seemed like an eternity sitting there with Sammy, practically holding his hand as he swung from manic anti-Frank tangents to depressive pining for his lost idol, tearfully remembering their vast history together, the legions of good times they had shared. It tore him up like nothing else I’ve ever seen. And Sammy had been through a lot, seen his share too—even for a one-eyed black Jew who was a showbiz demigod.

Part IV: Bow-Curtain-Encore

Sammy, nagging questions remain: At what price fame? Do entertainers, unbeknownst to themselves, harbor agendas that go much deeper than communal merriment and self-gratification? Is a so-called “public personality” beholden to more than his or her muse and ego? Some would say these are far from life and death issues, though how many dilemmas and confrontations really are? Still, it’s the accumulation of these personal choices, these stances that actually determine the shape of a life and the legacy that remains. For many, you’ll never be more than the answer to a thousand trivia questions or the incarnation of something laughable and passé. But to those who understand your gifts, who have felt the voltage of your magnetism, and who know the breadth of your travails—especially anyone who is or has ever been a performer—you were and will always remain a bearer of truths and a shimmering paradigm of how to put an audience in the palm of your hand and . . . blow them away.

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