

FEATURES

THE SHOWMANSHIP MUST GO ON: Remembering the Liberace legacy on the centennial of his birth

by Matthew Crowley/Contributor to Las Vegas Newswire – May 30, 2019

THE SHOWMANSHIP MUST GO ON

Film: *Behind the Candelabra* (made-for-cable drama/romance, 2013,

Rated: TV-MA, 118 minutes)

Airdate: (PDT): June 5 @ 2:30 p.m. on HBOSG

Budget: \$23 million

Box office: \$13.4. million (foreign release)

Stars: Michael Douglas, Matt Damon, Scott Bakula

Supporting Cast: Debbie Reynolds, Paul Asanti, Rob Lowe, Dan Aykroyd, Paul Reiser, Boyd Holbrook, Cheyenne Jackson.

Director: Steven Soderbergh

Pop quiz: Name the quintessential Las Vegas entertainer.

Many people might guess Elvis Presley, whose “Viva Las Vegas” might double as an unofficial city anthem. But Liberace, the piano king with the shining rhinestones, fistfuls of piano-shaped rings, furry, feathery outfits and over-the-top showmanship, ruled Las Vegas entertainment for decades before the swivel-hipped rocker hit it big at the International Hotel in the 1960s.

Liberace – who was born Wladziu Valentino Liberace on May 16, 1919, in West Allis, Wis., and died on Feb. 4, 1987, in Palm Springs, Calif. – would have turned 100 this year. And during his lifetime, he was a smashing success and became an icon, particularly in Las Vegas. Audiences can revisit a chapter of his unique life – both on and off-stage – as HBO re-airs the Michael Douglas-led biopic, *Behind the Candelabra*.

A life of firsts

Former Liberace Museum collections manager Brian Paco Alvarez calls the pianist the single-most important and influential individual performer in Las Vegas history, performing for more years and drawing more audience than Elvis or the Rat Pack ever did. Liberace began performing in Las Vegas in 1944, and continued performing both in Las Vegas and internationally, until just before his death.

Measured in terms of earnings, Liberace was indeed a megastar, pulling in \$50,000 a week in 1955 at the Riviera – about \$470,000 to \$475,000 in today’s dollars. The New York Times reported that Liberace’s income averaged \$5 million a year for more than 25 years. And in November 1986, just Liberace’s Riviera performance space was designed for him, a first for a Las Vegas entertainer, says Alvarez. He merited the room because

he could fill it – he'd built a fan base through his previous Las Vegas performances at the Last Frontier and a television program, *The Liberace Show*, that debuted in 1952, broadcast from Los Angeles.

The Liberace Show was TV's first syndicated series; within its first two years, it was carried on more stations than *I Love Lucy* or *Dragnet*. The show won Liberace two Emmy Awards – one for male personality and one for best entertainment program. As described in *The New York Times*, Liberace's shows were both fun – he could zip through Chopin's "Minute Waltz" in 37 seconds and Tchaikovsky's "Piano Concerto No. 1" in four minutes – and extensive, spanning more than two hours with only short breaks for costume changes.

Honing his talents began early for Liberace, who started his music studies at the Wisconsin College of Music at age 7 and was performing with the Chicago Symphony as a teenager. In its obituary, *The New York Times* suggested that the epiphany moment for the pianist's performance style may have come in 1939. Liberace, who'd been performing a classical concert, fulfilled an audience member's shouted request and played the novelty song "Three Little Fishies" as an encore. He pushed boundaries and remained playful the rest of his career. "Through exaggeration, I could get my point across much more easily," Liberace wrote in *The Wonderful Private World of Liberace*, an autobiographical picture book published in 1986 and cited by *The New York Times*. "Don't wear one ring, wear five or six."

Liberace's sway transcended popular performance and rock 'n' roll and even is reflected in hip-hop, Alvarez says. "His influence continued to grow and grow until he passed away," Alvarez adds. "He was the original king of bling. He was a marketing genius. He was the one who put that candelabra on the piano."

Liberace's influence continues: His flamboyant costumes, featuring flowing capes and feather boas are obvious in the styles of many performers who came after him, including Elton John (whose story is told cinematically in the new film *Rocketman*), Cher, Madonna and Lady Gaga.

More recently, a collection of Liberace's costumes was displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of New York's Costume Institute exhibit, which runs through Sept. 8 and opened with a gala May 6 hosted by Lady Gaga and tennis star Serena Williams. Last February, Chloe Flower, Cardi B's pianist, played Liberace's crystal piano at the Grammy Awards. Given Liberace's contribution to Las Vegas' entertainment history, now might be a fitting time to honor his legacy, perhaps with the naming of a street. Past city officials may have been reluctant to do so because Liberace was gay. (Soderbergh notably told the BBC that "Behind the Candelabra" appeared on HBO because major movie studio executives feared it would be "too gay" for wide release).

But times have changed, Alvarez said, and Las Vegas, and the world, are ready.

"Is the timing right? Without a doubt," Alvarez said, "it would be a very fitting thing to name a street for Liberace now. It just makes sense."

Behind the scenes of Behind the Candelabra

The Plot: A boy-meets-boy romance, *Beyond the Candelabra* is based on *Behind the Candelabra: My Life with Liberace*, a 1988 memoir by Scott Thorson. The movie debuted on HBO on May 26, 2013, and was released in United Kingdom cineplexes on June 7, 2013. Set in 1977, it tells the story of Liberace (played by Michael Douglas) as the consummate performer – unfettered, unpredictable and riveting – and his five-year romance with the much younger Thorson (Matt Damon). Thorson, an animal trainer, goes to see a Liberace show in Las Vegas and is invited backstage. Relying on his veterinary training, Thorson says he might be able to resolve the temporary blindness of one of Liberace’s dogs. Thorson treats the dog and romance ensues.

The movie highlights Liberace’s apparent bid to mold Thorson into a younger version of himself through plastic surgery and a failed push to adopt him. It also chronicles Thorson’s drug abuse, the dissolution of the romance and his \$113 million palimony suit against Liberace (eventually settled for \$95,000). The movie ends with the pianist dying of AIDS at age 67 in 1987.

The plaudits: *Beyond the Candelabra*, which competed for the Palme d’Or – the highest prize awarded at the Cannes Film Festival in France – was viewed favorably by critics, who give it a 92 percent “fresh” rating on RottenTomatoes.com, while its audience approval on the site is 71 percent. London’s Telegraph newspaper said the movie was the “runaway hit” of that year’s Cannes festival.

“Behind the Candelabra” star Michael Douglas told the online magazine Slate that director Steven Soderbergh raised the idea of a Liberace movie in 2000 on the set of “Traffic,” but didn’t find an entry point until Thorson published his memoir. Douglas said Soderbergh told him, “I read the book and I thought, ‘OK ... I know how to get in. It’s got a sort of finite period of time that we’re dealing with.’ ”

Slate also reported that although the movie hews closely to Thorson’s accounting, the book’s accuracy is in question. The British newspaper The Guardian reported that Thorson’s claim that Liberace forced him to have plastic surgery was never independently corroborated.

Addressing the gay lifestyle: As Rolling Stone’s Rob Sheffield wrote in 2013, *Behind the Candelabra* details an era when Liberace stayed firmly in the closet. The pianist sued a British tabloid for libel after it suggested he was gay, and won. “(Liberace) was from the bad old days before Elton (John), before (David) Bowie, a time when even Freddie Mercury was in the closet,” Sheffield wrote.

But Debbie Reynolds, who played Liberace’s mother, Frances, in *Behind the Candelabra*, told entertainment columnist John Katsilometes, then of the Las Vegas Sun, that Liberace’s homosexuality was hardly a secret among his friends.

“Everyone knew Lee was homosexual,” she said in 2013, referring to Liberace by his nickname. “On the Strip in those days, everyone knew everything about everyone. If you knew him personally, you knew it. We knew that this young boy was someone he was romantically involved with, and he had other relationships before Scott (Thorson) with young men he used in his act.”

Longtime art critic and former UNLV professor Dave Hickey suggested in a 1992 essay, “A Rhinestone as Big as the Ritz,” that by leveraging his flamboyant personality to become famous, Liberace could “Americanize the closet, democratize it, fit it out with transparent walls, take it up on stage and demand our complicity in his ‘open secret.’” Yet even in 2013, Liberace’s sexual identity impacted the distribution of the biopic. Soderbergh told the BBC that *Behind the Candelabra* appeared on HBO because major movie studio executives feared it would be “too gay” for wide release.

A show of hands: The Las Vegas Sun reported that Michael Douglas gained the look of a piano virtuoso in *Behind the Candelabra* thanks to the magic of special effects. The actor’s head was digitally grafted onto the body of Juilliard-trained pianist Phillip Fortenberry, a longtime performer at the Liberace Museum (which closed in 2010).

Strapped for cash: In one scene, Reynolds as Liberace’s mother is playing a “Win with Liberace” slot machine that lacks the coins to pay the jackpot she hits. The New York Times’ Mike Hale called the moment “painfully funny.”

What the critics said:

“Douglas looks great and acts it too in one of the two or three most electric and dialed-in performances he’s ever given onscreen. He catches Liberace’s humor, self-regard and mocking self-deprecation, work ethic, iron whim, generosity, spitefulness and ultimate aloneness.” – Todd McCarthy, *The Hollywood Reporter*

“Michael Douglas’ spectacular performance as Liberace demonstrates a rarely discussed benefit. Freed from his trademark macho sulk, Douglas gains all sorts of unexpected charisma – he’s genuinely funny and surprisingly sexy.” – Emily Nussbaum, *The New Yorker*

“It’s both a romp and uncomfortably real.” – Dave Calhoun, *Time Out*

“It is a troubling film, in part because of its in-the-boudoir focus. ... it paints such a narrow portrait of the man who was for a time the most famous entertainer in the world that it comes dangerously close to realizing Liberace’s greatest fear – that he would be remembered simply as ‘a crazy old queen.’” – Mary McNamara, *the Los Angeles Times*

“The stunning and quite intimate performances by Michael Douglas and Matt Damon are awardworthy.”
– Joanne Ostrow, *Denver Post*.

Alvarez, however, claims that *Beyond the Candelabra* does Liberace an injustice, portraying him negatively and covering only a tiny slice of his life. Liberace’s early career – his rise from a teenager playing in silent-movie houses under the stage name “Walter Busterkeys” to the hit TV series to his domination of stages worldwide – is never explored. Neither, he adds, is the influence of Liberace’s mother, Frances, or his father, Salvatore, who played French horn in John Philip Sousa’s band.

Behind the Candelabra also missed Liberace’s kindness and compassion, Alvarez says, adding that the pianist cared about the communities he lived in, including Milwaukee and Las Vegas.

“He was a gentle soul who did not like controversy,” Alvarez says. “Unfortunately, there were people who took advantage of his kindness and generosity.”

To offer feedback on this story or suggestions for future stories on Las Vegas Newswire, contact Managing Editor Steve Bornfeld at SBornfeld@lvcva.com.

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