

LIBERACE

b. May 16, 1919

d. February 4, 1987

PIANIST & ENTERTAINER

*“Nakedness makes us democratic;
adornment makes us individuals.”*

**A world-class pianist
and showman, he was
once the highest paid
entertainer in the world.**

Liberace was a world-class pianist and showman, as famous for his flamboyant wardrobe and stage persona as he was for his immense talent.

Wladziu Valentine Liberace was born into a musical family in West Allis, Wisconsin. His parents emigrated from Poland and Italy. A prodigy, Liberace could play the piano by the age of 4.

As a child, Liberace was bullied for his effeminacy, avoidance of sports and speech impediment. He took refuge at the piano. As a teenager, he began studying at the Wisconsin College of Music and performed as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

When his family suffered financial hardship during the Great Depression, Liberace earned money playing popular music at weddings, movie theaters, speakeasies and other venues. Those experiences helped shape his trademark style, which he called “classical music with the boring parts left out.”

Liberace created a unique mix of classical and contemporary arrangements, often performed in extravagant medleys. Critics uniformly bashed him, but their opinions left his popularity unaffected.

In response to one caustic review, he famously quipped, “My manager and I laughed all the way to the bank.”

In 1944 Liberace premiered in Las Vegas and eventually made the city one of his many homes. Routinely wardrobeed in sequins, lace, feathers and fur, he dazzled audiences at an enormous, jeweled piano topped with a Louis XIV candelabra.

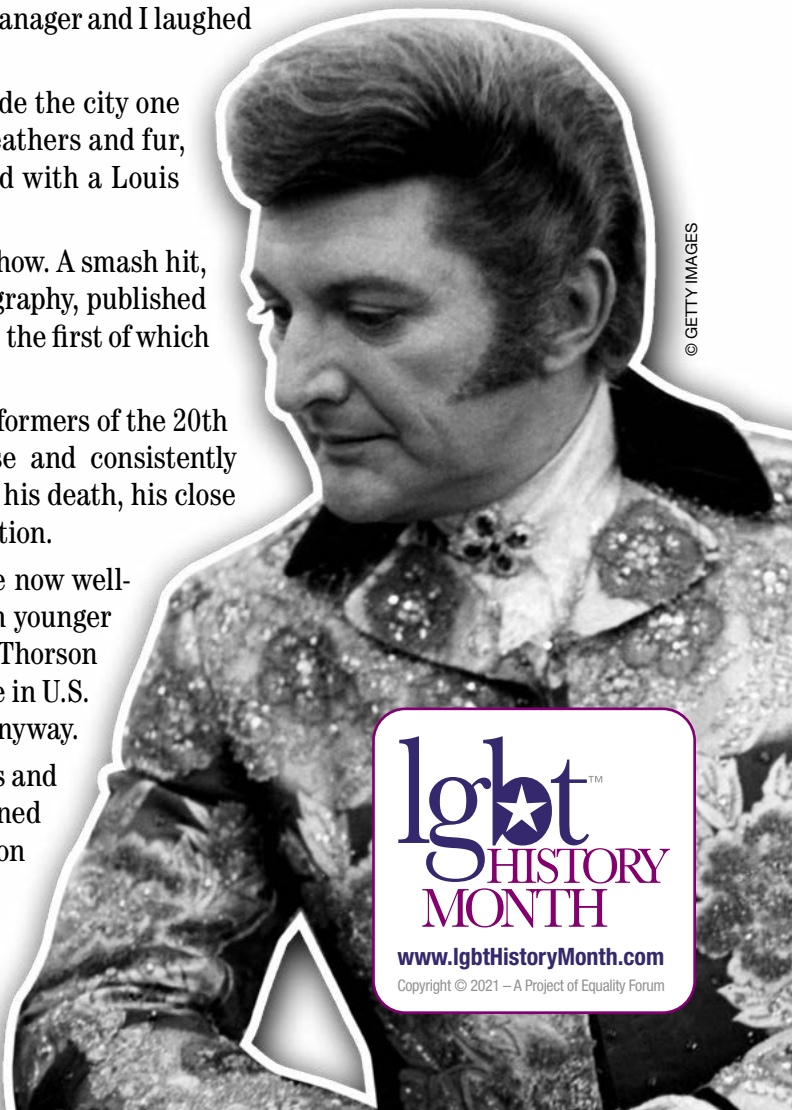
Liberace debuted on television in 1952 with his own variety show. A smash hit, it was broadcast on more than 200 U.S. stations. His autobiography, published in 1972, became a best seller, and he wrote several cookbooks, the first of which was reprinted seven times.

Liberace became one of the most famous and highly paid performers of the 20th century. He maintained an overwhelmingly female fanbase and consistently denied — and sued over — allegations that he was gay. After his death, his close friend, the actress Betty White, confirmed his sexual orientation.

The HBO biopic, “Behind the Candelabra” (2013) depicts the now well-known affair between Liberace and Scott Thorson, his much younger lover. When Liberace kicked Thorson out of his mansion, Thorson attempted to sue Liberace in the first same-sex palimony case in U.S. history. The judge threw out the claim, but Liberace settled anyway.

Liberace produced six gold albums, earned two Emmy Awards and received two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He turned one of his mansions into a museum and started a foundation offering scholarships to young artists.

Though undisclosed at the time, Liberace died less than two years after he was diagnosed with HIV.



© GETTY IMAGES

lgbt[™]
HISTORY
MONTH

www.lgbtHistoryMonth.com

Copyright © 2021 – A Project of Equality Forum