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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

DE GUSTIBUS | SEPTEMBER 17, 2010

Lady Gaga and Liberace: Separated at Birth?

His spangles, her spikes. Hmm. Makes you miss the old days.

By ERIC FELTEN

Two news stories presented themselves over the last week by wonderful way of coincidence. The first, widely covered, was Lady Gaga's appearance at the MTV Video Music Awards. Much less noticed was the news, reported in the Las Vegas Review-Journal, that the city's Liberace Museum will be closing its doors for good, a victim of reduced cash flow born of audience indifference.

These stories go together so well because, though commentators have rushed to declare Ms. Gaga the new Madonna, the David Bowie of our day, or Elton John, Boy George and Bette Midler all rolled into one, her real progenitor is the original purveyor of flamboyant rhinestone-studded excess, Liberace. And for all her notoriety, I suspect that Ms. Gaga will have trouble crafting a legacy as enduring as the bejeweled, bewigged Vegas original (which, if the fate of the museum is any indication, is not very long).

The similarities between the two performers go beyond their shared affinity for outlandish costume. Ms. Gaga has achieved the pinnacle of fame. So too did her template: As hard as it may be to imagine now, Liberace was once one of the biggest pop acts in the business, with a listing in the Guinness Book of World Records as the highest-paid musician in the world.

How to measure Liberace's impact? As a young man, Elvis admired Liberace's ability to engender buzz, and strove to do the same.

Ms. Gaga is an artifice—a "plasticized android," in the apt words of Camille Paglia—a contrived persona. Yet there again, Liberace was well ahead of her. He, too, was an elaborate, preposterous self-invention. "I think of myself as a product that I created," Liberace once told New York magazine. "It's serious business."

Ms. Gaga has inherited the firm.



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Liberace was always making an extravagant fuss over his mother. Ms. Gaga is disconcertingly devoted to her daddy.

All that said, there are, of course, obvious differences between the two pop stars. Liberace wore furs; Gaga wears meat.

Other differences are notable as they tell us much about how the tastes of the target audience have changed over the years. When Liberace wooed his audience he was all obsequious smiles and

Liberace in Denmark, 1981.

ingratiating congeniality; Ms. Gaga's default facial expression is a vapid stare.

And then there is the whole tired business of trying to shock the bourgeoisie. When Liberace sued a British newspaper for insinuating that his sexual preference was not for women, the showman testified in court that he was against homosexuality, "because it offends convention and it offends society." Putting aside any question of his fibbing, note the quaint concept—that one might not want to offend convention.

By contrast, Ms. Gaga struggles with a problem peculiar to our age. She wants desperately to offend convention, but the like-minded stars of the last few decades have effectively run the batteries down on the shock machine. Ms. Gaga makes a show of immolating a lover with her flame-throwing bosom—we yawn.

That pressure is added to another inexorable demand, one under which Liberace also labored, a need to outdo yesterday's spectacle with something more spectacular. But the greatest pressure on such shows comes from the spectacle never being enough. Spectacle alone lacks the desirable veneer of sophistication. The most successfully extravagant performers are careful to dress their blingy entertainments in the mantle of Art.

Liberace justified his showy show by ladling up Chopin along with the boogie-woogie and the arpeggiated ballads. It helped that he was actually a virtuoso. Uncompromising cultural critic and pianist Samuel Lipman once lamented Liberace's effect on the world of classical music. But he acknowledged grudgingly that, "Liberace played rather well. He displayed at all times a large, accurate, and brilliant technique."

Ms. Gaga may have a yet-to-be-revealed mastery of the keyboard, but if so, she doesn't need it. She is fortunate to be plying her trade at a time when art is about concept. Ours are post-modern times, when even the most inane gesture can be transformed into a Serious Statement of Cultural Importance.

In the wake of Ms. Gaga's appearance, clad in a dress made out of meat, at the Video Music Awards last weekend, the BBC convened a panel of professors to deconstruct the meaning of her abattoir couture. "It taps into the artistic tradition of the *memento mori* or the still life," raved the head of the art department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. A fellow who teaches fashion design at the University of Westminster delivered the inevitable plaudit of the moment: "What she's doing is quite subversive"—a sentiment as trite as it is untrue.

I guess every age gets the Liberace it deserves. Ours, alas, is Lady Gaga. At least we can take comfort in the certain knowledge that someday the lights will go out at the Gaga museum too.

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