

What Killed Elvis Presley

43 Years Later, Legitimate Questions Linger

A journalist from Time Magazine was speaking to composer Leonard Bernstein in the late 1960s when the topic of the greatest cultural force of the 20th century came up. When the reporter suggested Picasso, Bernstein was quick to disagree.

"No," Bernstein said. "It's Elvis. He introduced the beat to everything, and he changed everything – music, language, clothes, it's a whole new societal revolution – the 60s come from it."

It's hard to argue that, from the moment Elvis Presley first took to Ed Sullivan's stage on September 9, 1956, it changed societal norms. Music historians and rock writers can quibble about the origin of rock and roll (and they'd be right to do so). But Presley's introduction saw a cultural shift unlike anything on television or radio before.

His rise sparked an uprising in the 1960s, both political and cultural. Forty-three years after the King of Rock and Roll died in his upstairs bathroom at Graceland mansion in Memphis, Tennessee, the impact of his career still has a tremendous impact on entertainment and the music industry. With more than 1 billion units sold, 129 charted albums, and a collected 67 weeks on the top of those charts, Elvis left an unprecedented legacy in his wake.

So, too, linger the questions surrounding his untimely passing. While conspiracy theorists occasionally grace the tabloids, linking his death to everything from Bigfoot to UFOs, there are still some legitimate questions revolving around his death. It's likely, as with many deaths from yesteryear, that the mystery will always remain - but it still appeals to even the casual fan and devoted skeptic many years down the line.

The Straight Facts

On January 8, 1935, Elvis Aron Presley was born in a small house, no bigger than a remote cabin, in Tupelo, Mississippi. On July 18, 1953, he walked into Sun Records and paid \$3.98 to record two demos, under a ruse that he was doing it as a gift for his grandma. It wasn't long before the rest of his storied life became well-documented history. His rise, stumble, and comeback are all fascinating parts of his legacy. However, his final hours are less clear.

In 2014, his then-girlfriend Ginger Alden opened up in a memoir about her time with the King. She found him unresponsive, lying unconscious on the floor of his Master Suite bathroom. After a half-hour fight to revive him, doctors at Baptist Memorial Hospital pronounced him dead at 3:30 p.m on August 16, 1977.

The Lead-Up

Elvis' cause of death appears to have been heart failure, attributed to his long history of drug abuse. Presley had fallen into a vicious cycle of prescription medications, including barbiturates, opiates, and sedatives. By 1973, his health was already in severe decline. It was the same year of his divorce from Priscilla Presley nee Beaulieu. He overdosed on barbiturates twice in that year alone, once falling into a coma. According to his primary care physician Dr. George Nichopoulos, Elvis felt that by getting the drugs legally prescribed, he wasn't just a "common junkie."

The Doctor

Dr. Nichopoulos may well deserve some of the blame for the King's passing. In the final 20 years of Elvis' life, according to charges filed against the doctor, he prescribed more than 12,000 pills and other drugs – so many that they were carried in three separate suitcases while on tour.

How did Dr. Nichopoulos manage to prescribe well beyond what was necessary? He claimed the pills were for Presley's entire entourage. In 1981, he was charged with over-prescribing. However, he was acquitted of all charges and held onto his medical license until 1995.

The Questions

While Elvis' drug history is probably the most well-known aspect of his passing, the more sordid details of what happened were largely kept under wraps. Despite an enormous public persona, Elvis managed to keep much of his life private from the public.

After he was pronounced dead, the family demanded a private autopsy. Conducted by Tennessee's Chief Medical Examiner Jerry Francisco, its findings are curious. Francisco did not relate the cause of the coronary to the prescription drugs in his system. "Had the drugs not been there, he still would have died." said Francisco to the American Medical News.

Numerous fellow pathologists called Francisco out, stating there was no way his death was not related to the amount of pharmaceuticals found in his body. They claimed the medical examiner was siding with the family's desire for privacy rather than hard science.

Due to the autopsy request being private, the findings were sealed until 1993 when the public finally was allowed to see the physician's notes, but never the full report. Shortly after his passing, Ballentine released a shameless tell-all entitled "Elvis: What Happened" featuring never-before-told stories from Presely's bodyguards. The book was a shameless cash-in, and its author was quickly decried in the press as the worst kind of tabloid journalist and opportunist.

So a potentially faulty, sealed autopsy, a desire for privacy, and unproven gossip essentially held back any real investigation into his death. It wasn't until two years later that Elvis' drug use was seriously considered a potential cause of death.

There were some other, legitimately bizarre medical problems that could have played a factor as well. An article in The Mirror revealed that his bowel was twice the length it should have been, with stool built up more than 4-months old.

But what caused his heart to fail is still somewhat a mystery due to conflicting reports. The sheer amount of pharmaceuticals in his system almost makes it a guessing game – which one, if any, killed the King? Some have pointed to a potential allergic reaction to codeine, which he was using to treat a dental procedure. Others have pointed to an enlarged heart and lung problems.

Conclusion

Again, the truth is we'll likely never know what happened. The ensuing 43 years have only led to more speculation, crazy theories, tabloid exploitation, and some degree of salvaging his reputation. What led to Elvis Presley's heart failure is a mystery that will always endure, a thorn in the side of both fans and historians alike.

At the very least, Elvis Presley's reputation as an artist and performer, as well as the cultural revolutions he indirectly incited, hold much more sway in his legacy than his unfortunate, untimely death.