

Hollywood and Highland: The Intersection of Dreams and Drugs

The intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue in Los Angeles, California, is one of the most popular landmarks in the city, perhaps in all of the United States of America. This intersection marks the location of a significant portion of the Hollywood Walk of Fame, a stretch of sidewalk that attracts millions of tourists each year to glimpse at more than 2000 terrazzo and brass-built stars, emblazoned with names of the adored and admired in the entertainment industry (Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, 2006). The Walk of Fame is a tribute to individuals, both real and imaginary, who have contributed their lives and their talents to the stage and screen, radio and record, creator and created.

This intersection is symbolic for more than just the pedestrian traffic it receives on a daily basis. The name "Highland," might be attributed less to the physical location of a street perched at the foot of the Santa Monica Mountains, and more to the many entertainment industry employees who suffer(ed) from an addiction. The list of talented addicts is long and distinguished. Many have written about it in song and epithet, while others have covered it on stage, on screen and lurking behind every cable channel and broadcast network in existence. Some of the most gifted, creative, beloved individuals of our time have used it, abused it and died from it. "It" is substance abuse, and the addiction to "it" is but one price of fame that is simply too expensive. In his coverage of this very issue, *Capitalism Magazine's* David Gulbraa asked the question, "How is it that people with everything going for them self-destruct like this?" (Gulbraa, 2006)

Before any stones of guilt are cast, it is necessary to define "people with everything going for them," (Gulbraa, 2006) by exploring who falls into the category of "famous," as well as to establish the parameters of addiction. The goal is to then investigate the relationship between the two and to examine its causes. In closure, we discuss the methods in which these individuals are facing the demons of addiction in an entirely public forum.

FAME DEFINED

A public forum is an ironic term to address the ideology of fame and celebrity. The idea of fame is to honor or celebrate an individual for his or her merits. Celebrity in and of itself tends to be an exaggerated form of fame. The terms are often used synonymously, however for the purposes of this research, "fame" and/or "famous" will be used to indicate the enormous population of talented individuals who have contributed an element of popular acclaim and received recognition within society.

As such, these individuals exist in national and international culture, and include musicians, actors and actresses, writers, directors, producers, and artists. As an entire population group, they are often termed “the business of Hollywood” or simply “the Industry.” As it is so termed, the Industry is plagued by the disease of substance abuse; a disease so much larger and more powerful than any box-office total. It is the disease of substance abuse, and be it alcohol or cocaine, heroin or sleeping pills, addiction - process or otherwise – is a substantial problem.

ADDICTION DEFINED

When considering how or why an addiction may develop, and before attributing a response as to why these individuals in particular seem to be susceptible, it is necessary to re-examine the most current models of thought that define an addiction. Around the world, the condition of addiction tends to fall into one of two categories: the disease model and the social learning model. Within the disease model, “the addict is considered fundamentally different from people who are able to do this,” (Bunce, 1997) referring to an ability to control the intake of a particular substance, such as alcohol. It is a biological illness that may include a predisposition, a particular genetic makeup, or a chemical imbalance that eliminates the ability within the physicality of the body and the decision-making portion of the brain to utilize control. In contrast, Christina Bunce, in a 1997 article from the *Nursing Times* titled “The Vice of Fame...Addiction,” explains that the social-learning model “asserts that problem-drinking and other addictive behavior is learned.” This model reflects upon the factors of occupation, social situations, individual personalities and the manners in which individuals respond to life situations.

It is impossible to categorize every addict who happens to be famous. One might have a dormant biological predisposition, but never use alcohol or other substances, thereby eliminating an addiction altogether. Similarly, an individual who attends every social situation that presents itself with such temptations may also choose to abstain and never fall prey to an addiction. Consequently, given the correct biological or environmental stimuli, it may take one drink or one line of cocaine or enough money and peer pressure to take anyone over the edge and straight into an addiction. Finally, for some, it is simply the overwhelming excitement of an instantaneous life change and subsequent need to escape it that is the stimulus for what becomes an addiction.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAME AND ADDICTION

Whatever the circumstances that place substance into hand, be it the tremendous attention, the pressure to succeed, the lack of privacy, not enough success, too much money, the access, the allure, or just because it's there, there is a caustic relationship between fame and addiction. For the purposes of this research, the influence of the Industry on substance abuse falls into the social learning model. This is because the social and professional pressures, occasions and activities within the entertainment industry, are often what stand as the impetus for addiction. Taken outside the social-learning context, the trigger of addiction in the Industry is twofold; it is the reality of life in the public eye, and it is the reality of life in spite of the public eye.

It has been termed a "crisis of mobility," in which famous individuals are caught between the world in which they came from and the world in which they are entering (Loftus, 1995). To go from a life of obscurity to life in a fishbowl requires an enormous transition, which is often not treaded delicately. Life in the public eye equates with expectations and pressure, both professional and personal, and perhaps the most painful segment, criticism. "For celebrities in the entertainment field, the pressure is always on to turn in a perfect performance, to be better than before, to constantly hit the mark. At the same time, artists tend to be sensitive souls, in touch with naked emotions they mine for our perusal" (Loftus, 1995). They are placed on pedestals, enamored, adored, and held to standards higher than those held for ourselves.

To say nothing of their egos, they are plagued by the same insecurities as the rest of the population. In seeking adoration from fans to mask their insecurities, they tend to feed those same insecurities. The attention is constant, and the effect is a reverse of the ego (Persaud, 1998). An over-abundance of attention reveals too much of the individual to the public. Not enough attention, in an industry where attention is often equated with success, leads to attention-seeking behaviors. Those behaviors are manifested in self-destruction, and self-destruction takes over where self-confidence leaves off. Either circumstance can send the human psyche straight into the arms of relief. Criticism is particularly unfavorable, often harsh, and picking on items of the human persona unrelated to an individual's talent. When these individuals fall, they fall hard. (Cowen, 1998)

The tragic loss of actor River Phoenix is but one of many untimely deaths from a drug overdose; one who fell and fell harder than he could catch himself. Phoenix was adored by the public and his talent unmatched. Every performance he turned in was highly acclaimed, and he was perched for greatness among the others with whom he performed. His

drug abuse was a side note, used as a coping mechanism to address the embarrassment, idolatry and guilt he felt from the overwhelming sensationalism of fame. In 1993, this side note took his life. Said one of his co-stars, actress Judy Davis, “There’s something about stardom and the way it empowers people – he thought he was immune” (Loftus, 2005).

Phoenix’s pal Rodney Harvey, another highly acclaimed actor in the early 1990s, fell into the same sort of magical thinking, wherein “the laws of humankind are suspended” (Loftus, 1995). The talented actor and Calvin Klein model lost his battle to a heroin overdose in 1998, before becoming a post-humus poster child for the Partnership for a Drug-Free America (www.drugfree.org). His cover photo on *Premiere Magazine* was his first in years, but only as a tribute to him and the many who have traveled this road before him. (Millea, 1998)

While Phoenix and Harvey are examples of the ways in which the phenomenon of fame itself can destroy, this says little for the individuals who turn to substances in spite of the fame and their life in the public eye. The famous are still human and may come from families of dysfunction and worlds of chaos as much as anyone else. Overwhelming professional or financial success doesn’t erase broken homes, histories of physical or sexual abuse, failing relationships or personal tragedies. To face challenges in life, such as illness, divorce, infidelity of a partner or financial injury is difficult for anyone. To face those challenges in the press, on the evening news, as the pressure of a prized film/record/television program is released is downright destructive.

In a world of overexposure, the public is continuously exposed to the way the famous deals with the mundane trivialities of life. *US Magazine* runs a photographic section in its weekly issue entitled “Stars: They Are Just Like Us.” Whether photographed at the grocery store, the gas station, the dry cleaners or the doctor’s office, they are chased around and captured on film, living their personal lives, yet living them entirely in public (<http://www.usmagazine.com/>).

The temptation to relieve this pressure of constant exposure, to hide from the public, to become invisible, and even to maintain the image that is perceived, is everywhere. Cocaine can not only revive a dwindling level of energy but also burn a few extra calories. Alcohol flows freely at every corner, even for those not quite old enough to do it legally. If there is physical pain, there is a doctor and pharmacist in the Industry willing to take that pain away. For the right amount of money, connections, autographs and collectibles, favors will be granted and a solution, however temporary or destructive, will be found. The tolerance is in the addiction and in the environment. As long as the abuse is accepted, it will continue.

There are consequences. “Anything taken to an extreme can be addictive,” wrote Walter Goodman in his review of *Fatal Addictions*, an NBC Special Report from 1989 (New York Times, 1989). Research has not proven otherwise since 1989, and when an individual with no limits, no protection and no sense of when too much is enough, is exposed to this plethora of temptation and relief, the addictive process only worsens.

For most of these individuals, the money doesn’t run out. Like their celebrity status, they are celebrated every day. The famous live in a complimentary world, where clothing, meals, cars, jewelry and every possible need and desire is graciously taken care of by someone else’s dollar. Nothing is unattainable and nothing is off-limits. With that, the mindset becomes that everything is for sale, and happiness can be bought for the right price.

This leads to an hedonistic approach to life. With the financial means to obtain anything and everything, the human psyche feels a desire to seek the items or pathways to bring about the most complete pleasure while also bringing back a sense of self, normalcy, and a way to cope with the outside world. It is a lifestyle that caters to the pleasures often brought on by alcohol and drugs, be they legal or not (Morin & Craig, 2000). It is ironic that these pleasures alter the state of consciousness to believe that the sensations of drugs and alcohol are normal and ideal.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

So many have missed out on these great years. From the most classic of entertainers – Elvis Presley, Judy Garland and Janis Joplin, to the endless list of today’s stars, including Courtney Love, Pete Dougherty, Keith Richards, Robin Williams, Steven Tyler, Michael J. Fox and countless others, the identities continue with revelations and sad truths of substance use and abuse, not to mention histories of tortured genius, self-consciousness and years of emotional baggage. In such circumstances, the advantage of financial success can help support various treatment options. This population is fortunate to have the financial wherewithal to invest in the variety of treatment options.

Yet, with beachfront locations, spa services and sunset views, luxury treatment options are null and void if these individuals are not committed to getting treatment. They are forced to reconcile that even in treatment, they are in the public eye.

Keeping an eye on such trends, the Industry has instituted not only an awareness and support network for those who are finding themselves powerless over a substance, but also providing Industry employees with treatment services to their door. Television and film production studios are now offering AA meetings (www.spe.com), while directors, producers and executives are extending schedules to accommodate periods of treatment and wellness as needed.

As challenging to comprehend the phenomenon of addiction, the challenge is no less when an individual has the eyes of popular culture tracking every move. Hollywood and the Industry can make anything look good, but it can just as easily tear down the image it creates. There is no one identifiable cause, yet the effect is clearly predictable and detrimental. The solution is probably no different than for the rest of the population, except to attempt to respect the one element of life that famous individuals lack – privacy.

Until the Industry can honestly identify this burgeoning problem and provide the means not to tolerate it, the pattern will continue. The avenues taken to offer assistance are evidence that the Industry has identified Hollywood's dirty secret. The goal is to enhance that identification and bring Hollywood and Highland, and the Industry as a community, back to its image of shiny terrazzo and brass stars.

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