



The King Of Maximalism, Liberace

Inside the World of Sequins and Fur

Words by ANNA JOHNSON
 Images courtesy of Liberace Estate

The original king of maximalism, Liberace, threw himself headfirst into the whirling heart of American showbiz, becoming the highest-grossing performer in the world for nearly five decades. His raw talent was palpable, and combined with his infectious stage presence and theatrical clothing, his popularity grew quickly, like a fever. Fingers moving at the speed of light and sparkling with a million enormous Swarovski rings, he could stun a theatre hall into silence when he took to the keys, charming listeners old and new.

Liberace was born into modest beginnings in Wisconsin but quickly found his way to the stage. By four, he was already at the piano, claimed by many to be a musical protege. Yet, it wasn't just his ability to play that set him apart—it was his approach to entertainment, his extravagant flair in each performance, that made him stand out in the crowd. After the Great Depression in the '30s, the virtuoso's work ethic was unshakeable as he began to play in cabarets and strip clubs to make money for his family. His pianos sparkled with

rhinestones, his fingers dazzled with rings, and his world of sequins, capes, and fur coats left audiences speechless.

But there was more to it. Behind the sequins and fur was a man who had learned early on how to navigate his identity. Liberace's flamboyant wardrobe became both a statement and a shield, allowing him to remain hidden in plain sight. As Brian Paco Alvarez, chair of the Liberace Foundation, once put it, he lived in a "closet that was fitted with glass walls."—In sequined lederhosen, his clothes allowed him to embrace his true sexuality.

And those clothes? They weren't just clothes. They were *his* brand—bold, dramatic, and unforgettable. He wore men's fashion pushed to the limit: dickies, button-in cuffs, sequins, fox fur coats, and capes. Often in a jumpsuit to facilitate quick changes between shows, at home, he is said to have worn monogrammed silk pyjamas and gold slippers. He was not one for sweatpants and hoodies.

Liberace didn't stop at redefining fashion, his approach to showbiz came with a similar, exuberant glamour. In his words, 'classical music with the boring parts left out'. His performances weren't concerts; they were *productions*, full of glitz, drama, and an unapologetic embrace of extravagance. By the time he settled in Las Vegas, his name was synonymous with wealth and fame. His mansion, still standing today, is a monument to a time when style and spectacle were the essence of showbiz.

Yet, even in a city built on excess, Liberace's legacy remains everlasting. His Las Vegas mansion, still echoing with the shimmer of rhinestones and the lull of gentle piano, stands as a monument not only to his talent but to a way of life that dared to dream bigger than life itself. Through his artistry and outrageous style, Liberace blazed a trail for future generations of performers, to welcome, and celebrate their true, dazzling, authentic selves.

MARTYN RAVENHILL

In conversation with ANNA JOHNSON

Liberace's legacy lives on exactly as it was through the walls of his Las Vegas mansion. At his peak of fame from the '50s to the '70s, the pianist was the highest-paid entertainer in the world. When Martyn Ravenhill, or "the crazy guy who bought Liberace's mansion", as he would describe himself, saw the bank was selling the superstar's home for a shockingly low price in 2013 and was at risk of demolition, he felt a sense of duty to step in and preserve the virtuoso's memory. Originally from Surrey, England, he tells us about the "magic carpet ride" that led him to take on the ambitious task of buying and restoring the performer's home in Las Vegas.

ANNA JOHNSON. Martyn, we would love to start by hearing a little bit about who Liberace was. While I know my parents were big fans of his, the younger reader might not be quite so familiar.

MARTYN RAVENHILL. Yes. I'm the crazy guy who bought Liberace's Mansion. Now, you are probably far too young to know who Liberace was, but he was a very, very famous pianist. The Queen used to commission him to come and play for Royal Command performances, she just loved him. Liberace was the pianist in the orchestra for the Super Bowl when they would play the National Anthem of America. To give you an idea of who he was, everybody was dressed in black at this particular Super Bowl. He didn't like that. He wanted to stand out. So, he dressed in a white suit. That was early on in the evolution of his style. He gradually started bejewelling, putting precious stones, rhinestones, feathers, and then furs onto his clothing. It became a very expensive habit! He pushed dress for success to the extreme. His motto was, "I didn't get dressed up like this to go unnoticed." He had very famous friends - he knew Boy George, Michael Jackson, and Elvis Presley. They copied his dress sense and his outrageousness: the furs, the mink coats, the diamonds and jewels. He made himself extremely famous by

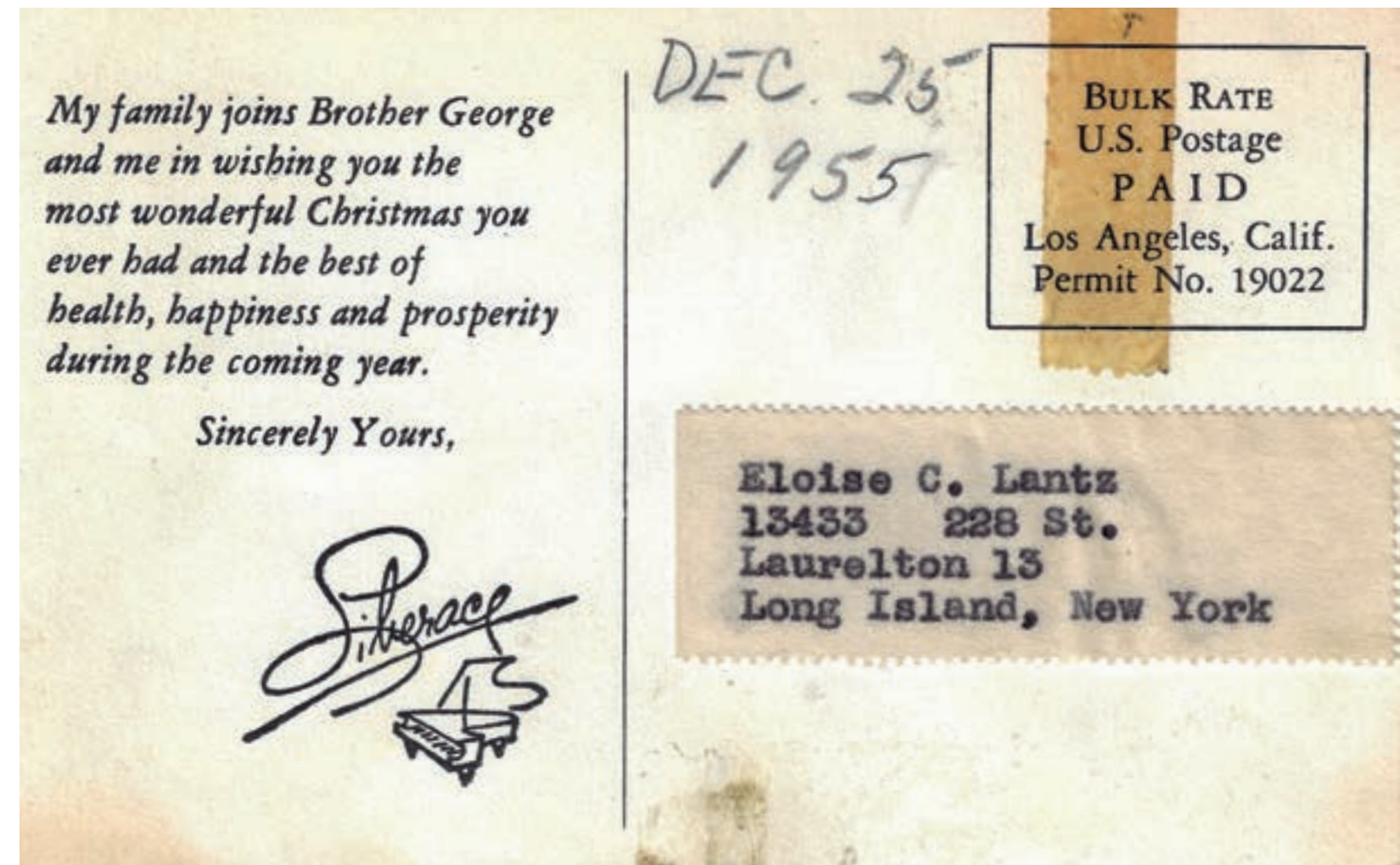
wearing these outrageous costumes. You'd never seen anything quite like it, especially considering he was born in the twenties. Imagine it—men's wear was quite rigid in its suits and ties, and he was wearing ostrich feathers! He *wanted* to be out there. He was absolutely iconic.

A.J. He sounds like he was ahead of his time. Could you tell us how you became involved in all of this? How did it all start?



Liberace and his family, 1955.
Image given to Martyn Ravenhill by the late Mrs. Eloise Lentz's daughter, a devoted Liberace fan and an avid collector

M.R. I bought his house just over 11 years ago, but I didn't plan to buy it. It just... happened! I was very happy and living in Mexico at the time. When I was 22 years old, I went to live in Ibiza just for the summer of '86. It was the most marvelous, magical time. I had a friend in London who wanted me to download a film for him using Pirate Bay. So I said, "What's the movie?" and he said, "[it's] 'Behind the Candelabra'. It's about the



pianist Liberace." When [the movie] finished, a caption on the screen read, "Is there anyone out there who'll buy Liberace's mansion?" I flew out here, from Mexico, to see it. It needed saving, it needed *caring* for. I thought the world owed him that because he had a very difficult exit. He was one of the first celebrities to die of AIDS. It's like I heard this little voice in my ear saying, "Buy it!" It was calling me, so I stepped up. I thought to myself: they have Dollywood for Dolly Parton and Graceland for Elvis Presley. Perhaps we could do a Liberace Land. It has honestly been fascinating. It was a heck of a magic carpet ride, really.

A.J. When you first stepped into the mansion, what was your first impression?

M.R. There's a spirit there. When you walk into the house, it's the same feeling you might have if you greedily drank a glass of champagne. You suddenly see this sloping staircase go upstairs, all gold, and you look around and just see mirrors everywhere. Back then, it had been locked up and hadn't been taken care of for a while. There was all this marble, a sort of emptiness and a little chirping smoke detector. I saw all these mirrors around and faced with myself. I felt a sense of guilt. A

sense of duty. I just felt a yearning. I was someone who didn't need the money. I didn't have to run a business there. Everyone else who had bought it had done so to make money out of the place. I just couldn't stand the idea of it being knocked down.

A.J. How did you make sure it was exactly the same as the original house?

M.R. There was a Liberace museum, and the manager gave me Polaroid photographs from a few days after [Liberace] died, showing every room of the house. He had some gorgeous things. There was a beautiful antique desk with parchment paper, a solid silver inkwell, and a real ostrich feather quill to write with. Right next to it was a yellow rubber ducky from the Dime Store. But that was Liberace. He opened up an antique shop to sell some of his findings and had to close it because he couldn't bear to part with anything. He liked tons of everything. He was a pack rat—he kept buying more houses just to store all the things he had.

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A.J. What was your favourite discovery?

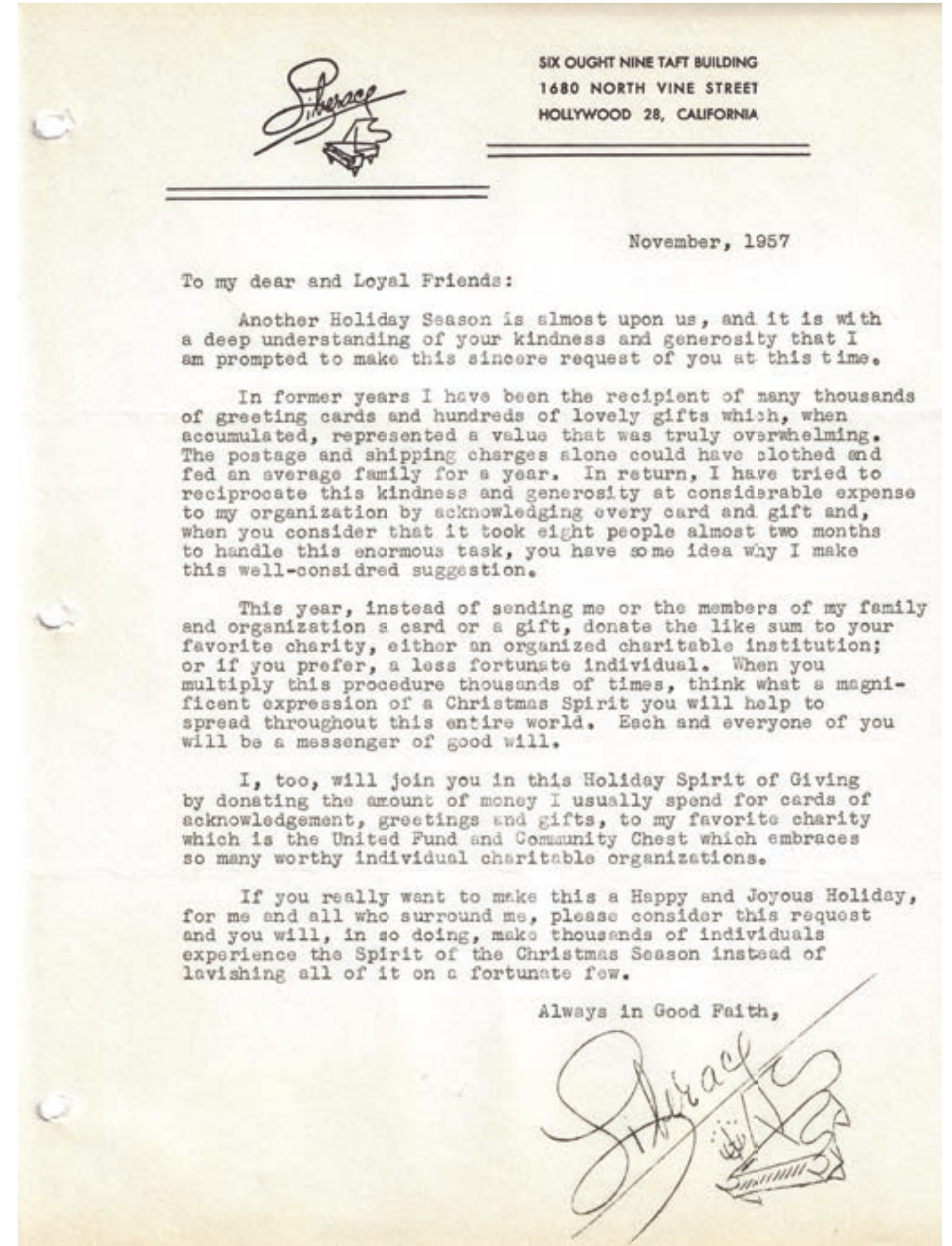
M.R. When I moved into the Liberace Mansion, I had come from the Pacific, and I used to go to the beach every day to see the sunset. I missed the ocean. In the Moroccan Room, you can see all the houses above. You can see the strip from south to north and the mountains in the distance. I watched the sunset from there with a glass of wine, letting it punctuate the day. It's still my favorite room.

A.J. What does Liberace's legacy mean to you on a personal level?

M.R. I admire him. It was a time when gay people couldn't say they were gay. Otherwise, they'd be condemned or they'd be trashed. People would think less of them. He changed all of that. He really helped show business and the entertainment industry by putting himself out there. It took a lot of courage. I wear some out-there clothes sometimes, but nothing like that.

A.J. I was recently reading Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*, and the way you described

Liberace and Queen Elizabeth II



his style reminds me of it. She wrote that something is camp when it's exaggerated, playful, and theatrical.

M.R. Liberace was so camp! The opening of his shows featured an 11-minute clip of him waking up in his mansion, being dressed by his valet, playing the piano, then getting into the pool. The audience would be seeing this on a video screen next to the stand, and then all of a sudden, they saw the

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Rolls Royce leave his house and come on stage. It was supposed to appear as though he had just arrived. Of course, he was there all along. That particular act opened all of his shows. There was a whole humour in it that he played with. There was something risqué. He was a huge hit in Las Vegas—all the women loved him because they knew he was gay, and they couldn't have him. At the same time, he was very good-looking, so they hoped he wasn't. Their husbands loved it because the women would go to the show, and they could sneak off to the casinos and gamble. There was then so much buzz about how good this show was, so the husbands got jealous of the women and started going as well. It was a whole mayhem happening. He became incredibly popular.

A.J. [He is a] very much a larger-than-life character! How do you see Liberace influencing contemporary style? We've seen a recent rise in all things over-the-top in fashion.

M.R. We've gone through the period of bling. People do love bling! There was a time when it was gaudy, but especially in Rap, they just loved the bling. He [Liberace] was the king of bling, he really was. That's not going anywhere. He had a Swarovski crystal-studded grand piano, and his roadster car was covered in crystals. The bling is still very much a thing. He was also very influential in general. He taught Elvis Presley how to dress. He used to wear brown jackets before Liberace. He influenced Boy George and Elton John. That's something we want to carry on: putting

yourself out there and knowing you can make a difference.

A.J. Bling and excess aside, some of the items in the mansion suggest an interest in history, art and culture.

M.R. Yes, he loved ancient Chinese Ming porcelain, and I was able to purchase pieces at an estate sale. The house came only with chandeliers and things I found in the cupboards and

hiding places. There are four gigantic vases, freestanding, almost as tall as a person. Upstairs is a room called the cowboy room, where he bought the wooden floor from an old gold rush saloon which went bankrupt in California. The staircase in the house came from a can-can bar in Paris. He had it brought over in one piece. It's still here now, the staircase the can-can girls used to dance up and down on. There are marble columns here which are over 2000 years old. He loved anything European, and he was very much an anglophile. He loved England so much. His mirrors on the wall have etchings by quite a famous illustrator from Brighton called Aubrey Beardsley. He was the illustrator for Oscar Wilde. Anyway, on the walls of the mansion, there are these huge etchings of Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations, and they're all slightly risqué. You'll see a little cherub with his dicky-doo showing and a woman with her breasts poking out. It was unusual for the '70s. I don't know if he did it for the shock value or the art.

“He came from a very, very poor family, and his parents were immigrants, but he had a dream. He was relentless, he never lost sight, and he achieved the unimaginable.” - Martyn Ravenhill

A.J. How close does Las Vegas hold the mansion, and Liberace himself, to its heart?

M.R. Liberace did a lot for Las Vegas. It wouldn't be what it is right now without him. I thought the property needed protecting. I wanted to make sure that the city wouldn't just tear it down, so I worked

with them, and we created a historic register, which is similar to something we have in the UK called the National Trust. So now it's a historic landmark in Las Vegas. We have private parties, charity fundraisers, corporate events. I give speeches and have students come in. I also opened up a charity, Friends of the Liberace Mansion, designed to follow Liberace's dream. I created it with the mission to provide scholarships for people in the performing and creative arts. Whenever we can, we do, so that helps people get off the ground.

A.J. What do you hope readers will take away from Liberace's legacy?

M.R. I think they will have a sense of fascination with somebody who could see years ahead. He was before his time and somebody whose life was lived to the fullest. He asserted himself in all directions despite coming from nothing. He came from a very, very poor family, and his parents were immigrants, but he had a dream. He was relentless, he never lost sight, and he achieved the unimaginable. He had his own museum, best-selling books, many best-selling records, and stars on Hollywood Boulevard and the Las Vegas Strip. It just goes on and on. What an absolutely incredible life he created for himself. The more I find out about him, the more incredible it all becomes.

A.J. If you could describe this incredible house, encapsulating its energy, history and grandeur in one word, which would you choose?

M.R. Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious! It's from Mary Poppins' movie, and it just means wonderful. It's a nonsensical word, but it really was.

A.J. What did you most recently find?

M.R. Well, I was recently given some of Liberace's old costumes. A friend of Liberace's, Eloise Roth, recently passed away, and her children weren't sure what to do with them, so they came to visit me and gave me some. It was a handmade white mink fur purse with a gold Liberace signed pin. I was also separately given a script of a movie Liberace made out of the mansion, "Liberace's Valentine's Day", and it was quite an incredible script because it mentions the house all the time and these pieces that have been treasured and saved are coming back to me from many directions. It's amazing.

