

Dead men can't dance... but they can sell shoes!



By Ron Telpner

Never under estimate a man in sequins! It is only fitting that Liberace's last public appearance, 20 years ago, was on Oprah, shortly before he died. Oprah is now the queen of all media and Liberace, dead 20 years, has just launched a line of shoes at the MAGIC show in Las Vegas.

Yes, the original King of Bling is back in shoe business, along with dead colleagues Bob Marley and Elvis Presley. And business is brisk.

Twice a year, the fashion industry — sellers and, hopefully, buyers — meets in Las Vegas at the MAGIC, Project and Pool shows to see "what's new" and to write some orders. But with over 5,000 brands showing in over one million square feet of display area, the competition for attention and brand recognition is fierce.

It is hard to stand out, but that doesn't stop the brands from trying. This year Paris Hilton was there as was LL Cool J, Jay Z, Russell Simmons, Gene Simmons and others. But it was the long gone celebrities that were attracting attention. Levi's has partnered with the Andy Warhol Foundation to offer up a line of Warhol-inspired jeanswear for men and women. Jimi Hendricks' face adorns purses and t-shirts.

Sure, dead designers have been selling clothes for a long time, but usually because their name continues on a line they established. Coco Chanel, for example, lives on through her brand, as does Perry Ellis, Hugo Boss, and Gianni Versace.

So why resurrect three guys who were fashionable in their own right but certainly didn't contemplate launching a shoe line in their lifetime?

Certainly, these three are more manageable than, say, Michael Vick or Amy Winehouse, if only because all their bad deeds are behind them.

Before Elton John, there was Wladziu Valentino Liberace (1919-1987), the single most charismatic and flamboyant American entertainer of his time. He favored diamonds, feathers and glitter in an age when no one was out of the closet. He ruled television in the '50s with ratings higher than *I Love Lucy*.

Michael Feder, the entrepreneur behind the brand, and his wife, costume designer Karan Feder, are long time Liberace fans, leading licensing efforts for the Liberace Foundation.

They have published books on Liberace, including a kitschy punch out book with Mr. Showmanship in some of his great costumes and a retro recipe book called *The Joy of Liberace*. In their minds, he is alive, active and generating some serious cash flow.

"Liberace represents a great time period in America. He is very much a brand with strong,

positive emotional attachment," Mr. Feder said. According to Mr. Feder, what the world needs now is Liberace-inspired sneakers.

The shoes themselves, licensed to Kashi Kicks, are wild and bling-filled, leading me to wonder whether anyone under 50 really remembers or cares. "For some, there is a certain sense of discovery, so we make sure the point of sale and website tell the story. The youth market likes the story," Feder said.

In 1956, Liberace, then the biggest star in entertainment, was asked to introduce a new talent, a teen sensation who had not yet developed his legendary style, rock and roll's Elvis Presley (1935-1977).

The fact that Elvis himself seemed to morph into Liberace, along with the sequins, rhinestones and capes, all seems to make sense now.

Christian Audigier, creator of the still red-hot Ed Hardy brand, is the instigator of Elvis's new shoes.



If you don't know Ed Hardy, drop the *Harvard Business Review* and pick up any of the gossip or style magazines. You'll see Jessica Simpson, or some one like her, wearing an Ed Hardy shirt or cap.

Audigier describes the shoes for men and women as pure Rock and Roll. "The collection represents the personification of the legendary music artist in a way that evokes fashion forward trends and classic shapes," he said.

The men's sneaker line has the word Elvis "tattooed" near the toe and strongly resembles his Ed Hardy sneaker line, with a twist. Not a blue suede shoe in sight. The women's line, called "Houndogs," actually features a boot of blue suede.

And finally, looking for shoes with a reggae beat, look no further than Bob Marley (1945-1981), mon.

Having negotiated for the Canadian rights to the song "Three Little Birds" for a travel client a few years ago, I know those in the Bob Marley Foundation are sticklers about the use of Marley's image and music. Posters and compilations and

t-shirts, sure. But shoes? Where is the fit? I actually thought it didn't fit, since real Marley fans know that the cancer that killed him started out in his foot!

Musically, Bob Marley couldn't be further away from Liberace and Elvis than Conrad Black is from David Radler.

But to my surprise, Bob's booth was busy, selling shoes that looked suspiciously like Birkenstocks. Women, who often endure serious pain in their feet in the name of style, seem to love these shoes. I was expecting the label to read "No Woman, No Cry".

Does the laid back style of Bob Marley, dead nearly 30 years, translate into today's market? Absolutely. The brand is strong and Marley's records continue to sell. And he'll never get busted again.

Yes, celebrity endorsement is still helping to win over customers of all ages. So why contend with the uncertainty of a Lindsey Lohan or

Britney Spears? Want a little more control? Forget about young Hollywood.

As a manufacturer or licensee, maybe it's time to think "inside" the box.

What's Miles Davis up to these days? He still gets a ton of respect and radio play. Or Duke Ellington. He was always a fashionable guy. And with the twice annual pilgrimage to Las Vegas, I am surprised there isn't a Rat Pack line featuring Frank, Dean and Sammy's favorite looks.

So if you are looking for a face for your brand and your name is not Silver, Parasuco or Bitton, maybe there is a charismatic personality you can resurrect.

Elvis, Liberace and Bob Marley, prove that three dead guys, with a lot of big brand awareness, can still make the cash register ring! ■

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