

THE CLOSER

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GUEST COLUMN

THINK INSIDE THE BOX

If you want a celebrity endorsement without the hassle of bad behaviour and trips to rehab, try looking six feet under

BY RON TELPNER

Never underestimate the power of a man in sequins. It's only fitting that Liberace's last public appearance 20 years ago was on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 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 trade 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—meet in Las Vegas at the Magic, Project and Pool shows, to see what's new and to write some orders. But with more than 5,000 brands on display in more than one million square feet of show space, the competition for attention and brand recognition is fierce.

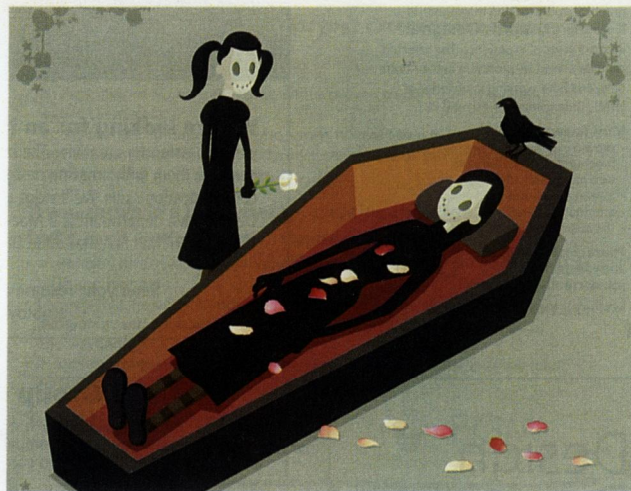
This year Paris Hilton was there, as was LL Cool J, Jay-Z, Russell Simmons, Gene Simmons and others. But it was the long gone celebrities that were attracting attention. As well as Elvis, Marley and Liberace, Andy Warhol lives on thanks to a partnership between Levi's and the Andy Warhol Foundation that spawned a line of Warhol-inspired clothes. Jimi Hendrix's face now adorns purses and T-shirts.

Sure, dead designers—Coco Chanel, Perry Ellis, Hugo Boss—have been selling clothes for a long time, but usually because their name continues on a line they established. But why resurrect people who,

while stylish in their respective heydays, certainly never contemplated launching shoe lines?

"Liberace represents a great time period in America," said Michael Feder, who with his wife Karan manages licensing efforts for the Liberace Foundation. "He is very much a brand with strong, positive emotional attachment." According to Feder, the best way to enhance that "emotional attachment" is through Liberace-inspired sneakers.

The shoes themselves, licensed to Kashi Kicks, are wild and sparkling like the man himself. Liberace was the single most charismatic and flamboyant American entertainer of his time. He favoured diamonds, feathers and glitter in an age when pretty much no one was out of the closet. He ruled television in the 50s with ratings higher than *I Love Lucy*. Still, I 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 tells the story," said Feder. "The youth



market likes the story."

In 1956, Liberace met Elvis Presley, then a young sensation who had not yet developed his legendary style. Before his death in 1977, Elvis seemed to morph into Liberace, with the sequins, rhinestones and capes.

Christian Audigier, creator of the still red-hot Ed Hardy brand (named after a tattoo artist) is the man behind 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 someone like her, wearing an Ed Hardy shirt or cap.

"The collection represents the personification of the legendary music artist in a way that evokes fashion forward trends and classic shapes," said Audigier. The men's sneaker line has the word Elvis "tattooed" near the toe and strongly resembles his Ed Hardy sneaker line, but there's not a blue suede shoe in sight.

And finally, looking for shoes with a reggae beat? Look no further than Bob Marley, mon. Having negotiated the Canadian rights to the song "Three Little Birds" for a travel client, a few years ago, I know how 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 bizarre, since real Marley fans know that the cancer that killed him started out in his foot.

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 laidback 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 still helps win over customers of all ages. So why contend with the uncertainty of a Lindsay Lohan or Britney Spears? Want a little more control? Forget about young Hollywood—it's time to think inside the box. Elvis, Liberace and Bob Marley prove that three dead guys with a lot of brand awareness can still make the cash register sing. **M**

RON TELPNER is chairman and CEO of The BrainStorm Group in Toronto and Dubai. His clients include the very much alive Kenneth Cole