

MOVIES



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# A New Look for Liberace

By PEER J. OPPENHEIMER

**T**HIRTY-TWO YEARS AGO when Liberace was only 13, his mother suggested he become an undertaker.

"That was during the Depression," Lee told me, "when only two professions didn't seem to be suffering: medicine and undertaking. But my heart was set on a music career."

When Liberace became tv's first genuine "matinee idol" 20 years later, two of his biggest sponsors were funeral parlors. And now, with 12 years gone by, Liberace is appearing in "The Loved One," a satirical film on Hollywood's way of life and death—as a casket salesman.

"Isn't playing a secondary role in this movie a bit of a comedown?" I asked Lee.

"No," he answered, "my main purpose is to broaden my entertainment activities to include something besides playing a piano and being a showman and entertainer. I always wanted to get into acting."

Although this is Lee's first major dramatic part, it is

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The tinkling keys, the twinkling candles, the 1,000-watt smile; they've all been left in the wings—as Liberace, the dramatic actor, takes center stage

not his first movie role. In 1949 he appeared with Shelley Winters as a beachcomber-pianist in "South Sea Sinner." In 1955 he starred in "Sincerely Yours." Both films were spectacularly unsuccessful.

But Lee certainly didn't disappear into oblivion. For the past six years, he has traveled all over the world giving concerts. His routine has varied little since he started. He will add a number here or there, but usually he goes back to the old reliable songs: "I'll Be Seeing You," "Clair de Lune," "The Last Time I Saw Paris."

Showmanship always is hard to define—and especially so in Lee's case. Who can tell for sure what causes Liberace's impact on his audiences, which are made up mostly of middle-aged women? His musicianship is adequate. His chit-chat accompanying his performances is mildly amusing, at best. His dress is corny. Probably what has saved him is his sense of humor and willingness to put up good-naturedly with any barbs thrown at him.

When a national magazine described him as "... displaying the most relentless loveliness since Little Lord Fauntleroy," he laughed and replied, "I cry all the way to the bank." At the time, he was earning \$2 million a year.

Liberace was born in West Allis, Wis., on May 16, 1919, one of four children of Salvatore and Frances Liberace. Music has always been part of his life. He played piano by ear when he was only four.

At first his father discouraged him, but he changed his mind after Ignace Jan Paderewski, Poland's great pianist, praised Lee's playing. His first public appearance was for patrons of a Milwaukee ice-cream parlor.

By the time he was 20, he realized he could entertain with his talk, winks, and smiles as well as with his playing. Yet the idea of the beaded tuxedos and the candelabra didn't come overnight. Nor did success.

**"W**HEN I APPEARED on tv, I was referred to as an instant success," Lee recalled. "But it took me 20 years to reach the showmanship bit with the clothes and everything. I got the candelabra idea in 1945 after seeing a movie based on the life of Chopin."

His showmanship extends to his private life as well. A few years ago he lived in a \$100,000 home, complete with a piano-shaped swimming pool, pianolike mailbox, and piano-shaped knickknacks all over. Today, he has a new house, more expensive than the previous one. "In residence" are a Rolls-Royce, a Cadillac, a housekeeper, butler, chauffeur, and other help.

In his spare time, Lee collects antiques, speculates in real estate, and increases his wardrobe at a cost of \$20,000 a year. "I have \$100,000 invested in my wardrobe, which includes 50 to 60 suits, maybe 100 pairs of shoes, and I don't know how many shirts and ties. The drawers are full of them." He also has six gold records, a tribute to the more than 10 million Liberace records that have been sold.

I first met Liberace 12 years ago, just as he hit the big time. Physically, I can't see much difference in him now. He has a few gray hairs, and he's a little slimmer than he used to be. But his mannerisms, his big-little boy attitude, are just the same at 45 as they were then.

The only new ingredient is his bouncy enthusiasm for acting. "This is my chance to create a new Liberace," he told me. And knowing Lee's past success, my bet is that he may succeed!

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