

THINGS TO DO

Hugh Hefner's Southern California legacy includes the Playboy Mansion parties, the iconic Hollywood sign, and all that jazz

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The legacy of Hugh Hefner certainly begins with Playboy, the magazine he launched in 1953 — the magazine that helped open the doors to a new era of sexual freedom — but it hardly ends there.

Even if you never gazed upon a Playmate's stapled bellybutton, you're living in the long cultural shadow cast by the man known by most everyone simply as Hef.

Hefner, 91, died Wednesday — we'd like to think as he lived, wearing silk pajamas. He was at his home in Holmby Hills, the iconic Playboy Mansion where he'd lived since Playboy purchased it as a West Coast operations for its until-then-Chicago-based editor-in-chief in 1971.

In the hours after news of his death broke, the Internet lit up with debates over what Hefner's life and work meant. Many championed his views of openness and positive acceptance of all kinds of sexual expression, and his backing of civil rights for those of all races, ethnicities and orientations. Others decried Hefner's legacy, noting that Playboy was built on the objectification of women.

Those points are worthy of extended debate, which surely Twitter users and historians will provide.

Here, though, we'll focus on Hefner's impacts closer to home.

The man who turned nudity mainstream and who once printed essays and fiction from dozens of influential writers and thinkers, also pitched the world on a lifestyle that, at a certain place and time, screamed “Southern California.” And in everything from the life he led inside the mansion to his work to save the Hollywood sign to his sponsorship of the Playboy Jazz Festival (at the Hollywood Bowl since 1979), Hef walked that particular walk.

The Playboy Mansion

Soon after Playboy bought the 29-room 1927 Gothic Tudor mansion for \$1.1 million, it became a symbol of the hedonistic 1970s. His lavish parties brought A-listers, C-listers, zoo animals and others to hang out with Playmates and the wannabe pin-ups the magazine attracted.

Two years ago, when Playboy claimed to have found a handful of Polaroids and blueprints from that era detailing secret tunnels connected Hefner’s mansion to the nearby homes of actors Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, Kirk Douglas and James Caan – all once regular guests – everyone wanted to believe. Those pictures, those tunnels, those stars; it all fit a certain myth to perfection. It was eventually found out as an April Fool’s Day hoax, but you can bet that truthers would be digging at midnight if they could breach the mansion walls.

Of course, reality may have been less ideal than the myth.

Actor-comedian Bill Cosby was also a frequent guest at the mansion, and in the many allegations of rape and sexual assault levied against Cosby in recent years one filed by a Riverside County woman alleged that he sexually assaulted her when she was 15 years old and attending a party at the Playboy Mansion. Cosby, who for years was host of the Playboy Jazz Festival, has denied that charge; a trial is set for June 2018.

Actor Rob Lowe wrote in a recent memoir that ~~about the allure the~~ the Playboy Mansion and its legendary parties still amazed him — as it did for many in Hollywood, sports, politics and business — when he first made the guest list as a 19-year-old in 1983.

“I felt a hand on my shoulder,” Lowe wrote. “ ‘Glad you could make it.’ It was Hugh Hefner. In silk pajamas. What if Babe Ruth wore nothing but pinstripes all the time? What if Kobe Bryant never took off his Lakers jersey or Bruce Springsteen still wore his “Born in the USA” headband? It’s one thing to meet a celebrity; it’s something else to meet them in their most iconic form in everyday life. You almost believe it’s some sort of send-up.

“But Hef in PJs at midday in the middle of a party seemed totally organic.”

Within a few years, though, the mansion parties started to lose some luster. The AIDS epidemic, the highly publicized murder of Playmate Dorothy Stratton, and Hefner’s stroke all contributed to its decline.

By the time model-actress Melissa Stetton moved to L.A. and started attending parties there — after submitting photos of herself in a bikini, standard practice for non-celebrity women who wanted to attend — the food was great and the drinks were free. But the C-listers — by now more often the likes of Corey Feldman, Scott Baio and Pauly Shore — felt kind of creepy.

“There were day parties at the mansion, too,” Stetton wrote in a 2014 essay for the website XOJane.com. “I only went to one because seeing sleazy celebrities in daylight is somehow way worse than seeing them at night.”

In 2016, Playboy sold the mansion to a neighbor for \$100 million dollars. Part of the deal was that Hefner got to live there for the rest of his life.

The H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D sign

The world-famous Hollywood sign is, of course, an ad.

Built in 1923 it touted the Hollywoodland real estate development. But 55 years later, in 1978, it had fallen into considerable disrepair. Termites had eaten much of the wood and the “O” had fallen and some miscreant had set fire to part of an “L.” The cost to replace it was pegged at \$250,000.

Hefner went to work.

He threw a party at the Mansion, with the likes of Rita Hayworth and Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley on hand. Well-heeled buyers sponsored the sign’s nine letters, at \$27,777.77 each. Movie cowboy and former Angels’ owner Gene Autry bought an “L,” singer Andy Williams chipped in for the “W” and shock rocker Alice Cooper paid for an “O,” though he said it was in honor of his friend Groucho Marx.

Hefner himself ponied up for the “Y.” And according to an article on the event at the website Anothermag.com, he spoke of the sign as a symbol for all who came to the region to chase their dreams.

“Hollywood is the city of dreams,” Hefner said. “And the Hollywood sign represents those dreams.”

Three decades later, when a plan to develop land near the sign again threatened its future, Hefner stepped donated \$900,000 of the \$12.5 million price to buy the land in 2010. The deal preserved the land – and views of the Hollywood sign – forever.

In thanks, the Trust for Public Land threw Hef a symbolic bone. There's a bronze plaque on a boulder at Mount Lee, now officially known as the "Hugh M. Hefner Overlook."

All that jazz

While the Playboy Jazz Festival has brought jazz to the Hollywood Bowl every summer since 1979, Hefner's history and support for the distinctly American music dates back to Playboy's first issue, in December 1953. In addition to nude photos of actress Marilyn Monroe — next to whom Hefner will be buried — the inaugural issue included an article on Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey and the Dorsey Brothers jazz orchestra.

Author Patty Farmer shared that tidbit — and many, many more — in her 2015 book "Playboy Swings," which (contrary to what one might imagine) is about the magazine and company's history with jazz.

In 1959, to celebrate the magazine's fifth anniversary, Hefner decided to hold the first-ever Playboy Jazz Festival, she told me in a 2015 interview about the book.

"He wanted to throw a big party," Farmer said. "So he started making a list of people he'd like to invite, and ultimately it turned into a three-day extravaganza. Every single person they invited, from Ella Fitzgerald on down, all showed up. The only one who didn't was Frank Sinatra, and it was because he was making a movie."

While the festival didn't return for another 20 years jazz stayed a constant in the pages of the magazine — trumpeter Miles Davis was the first-ever subject of the well-regarded Playboy Interviews — and in the Playboy Clubs that flourished for a time in cities around the world.

Farmer said that Hefner was pleased with the book, for its highlighting of the music he loved but also for noting the contributions he made to civil rights by championing performers of any and all ethnicity.

“He was just really happy that it would be put down as a legacy,” Farmer said. “And his contributions to breaking the color barrier on stage are really something that a lot of people don’t know. If you could swing an instrument, sing a song or tell a joke, that’s the only thing that mattered. I think Hefner was one of the few truly color blind people you’d meet.”



Peter Larsen

Peter Larsen has been the Pop Culture Reporter for the Orange County Register since 2004, finally achieving the neat trick of getting paid to report and write about the stuff he's obsessed about pretty much all his life. He regularly covers the Oscars and the Emmys, goes to Comic-Con and Coachella, reviews pop music, and conducts interviews with authors and actors, musicians and directors, a little of this and a whole lot of that. He grew up, in order, in California, Arkansas, Kentucky and Oregon. Graduated from Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Ore. with degrees in English and Communications. Earned a master's degree at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Earned his first newspaper paycheck at the Belleville (Ill.) News-Democrat, fled the Midwest for Los Angeles Daily News and finally ended up at the Orange County Register. He's taught one or two classes a semester in the journalism and mass communications department at Cal State Long Beach since 2006. Somehow managed to get a lovely lady to marry him, and with her have two daughters. And a dog named Buddy. Never forget the dog.

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