“It Takes a Sinner to Appreciate the Blinding Glare of Grace”: Rebellion and Redemption in the Life Story of the “Dark” Celebrity

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This article uses narrative analysis to consider the use of the language of sin and redemption in American journalistic eulogy for 4 recently deceased male celebrities—Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Marlon Brando, and Richard Pryor—in leading entertainment and news magazines including People, TV Guide, Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, Time, and Newsweek. Thematically united by their well-known misbehavior, these men were the kinds of public figures whose stories had to undergo some sort of narrative repair to have a happy ending; furthermore, these celebrities were eulogized within a broader popular culture increasingly characterized by memorial, therapeutic confession, and faith-based political conservatism. Coverage of these 4 deaths was remarkable in the extent to which temptation, sin, and the possibility of redemption were openly discussed in journalism, and each celebrity’s struggle with his demons was understood as representative of modern American life.

This article considers the use of the language of sin and redemption in journalistic eulogy for male celebrities who died within roughly a 2-year period: Johnny Cash (September 2003), Ray Charles (June 2004), Marlon Brando (July 2004), and Richard Pryor (December 2005).

Celebrity deaths now routinely receive a great deal of press attention, and some become “media events,” akin to national funerals that people “attend” through the media (Couldry, 2003; Dayan & Katz, 1992; Kear & Steinberg, 1999; Mazzarella & Matyjewicz, 2002; Walter, 1999). Previous research has found that popular figures’ lives are retold in a remarkably uniform narrative that draws moral lessons from a
star’s life difficulties but in the end forgives and celebrates him or her. This plot includes an unhappy or very difficult childhood, exceptional talent or beauty, the lucky break or “discovery,” genius or beauty misunderstood, surrender to temptation followed by public disfavor and midlife crisis, recovery and comeback, and the ironic cruelty of death just when the person was being appreciated anew (Kitch, 2000). Much of this storyline can be seen, too, in coverage of these recent deaths, and in that sense, this material extends the evidence for the commonalities of celebrity eulogy into the 21st century. Yet the journalistic treatment of these particular celebrities in contemporary American culture makes for an interesting separate study.

Thematically united by their well-known misbehavior and/or tragedies in life, these were the kinds of public figures whose stories would have to undergo some sort of narrative repair to have a happy ending. They can be seen as “dark” celebrities: one a “Man in Black” who publicly empathized with criminals; another whose skin was black and who sang gospel music with lyrics about sex; a third whose dramatic roles epitomized misery, from pathos to brutality, and whose final years were spent in isolation; and a fourth whose own experiences as a Black man fueled his controversial comedy routines about American life. Furthermore, these celebrities were eulogized within journalism steeped in memorial (from the many recent World War II veteran tributes to heroic depictions of American soldiers dying in Iraq) and against the broader backdrops of therapeutic popular culture and faith-based political conservatism that has coincided with an increase in religious or spiritual news content (Furedi, 2004; Hoover, 1998; Silk, 1995). Coverage of their deaths was remarkable in the extent to which temptation, sin, and the possibility of redemption were openly discussed in journalism, and each celebrity’s struggle with his demons was understood as representative of modern American life.

Few would be surprised that Johnny Cash’s life story was told in these terms; it also may seem predictable that the popular, smiling Ray Charles would be well remembered at death. Marlon Brando and Richard Pryor seem to be obvious contrasts, one an eccentric recluse who sneered at public opinion and the other a confrontational performer who once set himself on fire while freebasing cocaine. Yet these hypotheses would be based on what we “know” about the celebrities through media coverage. In terms of their professional and personal life trajectories, these four men actually had a great deal in common. The differences in the ultimate cultural meaning of their respective lives and deaths—and the question of whether their sins were forgiven—lay, in the end, in the narratives and object lessons through which they were remembered in popular journalism.

THEORY AND METHOD

Building on the work of cultural critics such as Leo Braudy (1986), John Caughey (1984), Richard Dyer (1986), and Joshua Gamson (1994), a growing body of liter-
ature has examined the role of celebrities in modern public life. This work has addressed the nature of fans’ imaginary relationships with such people; it also has considered the function of celebrities as symbolic figures into whom both media producers and audiences project notions about ideal American life, the process through which celebrities become “negotiated symbols in a human shorthand by which we process the world” (Braudy, 1986, p. 588). “Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society,” claims Dyer (p. 8). Joshua Meyrowitz (1984) writes that we think of certain stars as “media friends,” explaining

We follow celebrities through various phases of their personal lives and public activities, and their life stages often become some of the key signposts we use to mark and recall the different periods of our own lives. With the help of programs such as Entertainment Tonight and publications such as People magazine, we keep up with their romances and problems, their good years and bad years. (pp. 63, 66)

Celebrity coverage also can be seen as an example of the journalistic use of personalization to discuss social and political issues (e.g., Larson & Bailey, 1998) and of the routine invocation of “typicality” in explaining heroism in a post-September 11 culture (Hume, 2003). As Gamson (1994) has explained, since the early 20th century, celebrity heroes, although praised for their special qualities, have been validated in journalism through a construction of their ordinariness. Such a construction comes not only from the Hollywood publicity machine but also from those most often accused of attacking the famous. In her study of tabloid journalism, S. Elizabeth Bird (1992) found that although such publications frequently focus on celebrities’ problems, they are increasingly likely to portray them in a sympathetic light. The illumination of a “real person” behind a manufactured image is an appealing story in what Frank Furedi (2004) calls our “culture of emotionalism,” a climate in which confession of faults by public figures is not only welcomed but expected and “offers a route to public acceptance and acclaim” (p. 42). At the same time, this sharing strengthens the illusion that the celebrity is not so different (and perhaps is even worse off!) than you and I—and, conversely, that none of us is so far from fame.

The “typical” problems of celebrities are revealed in plotted tales that seem to merely unfold over time in news media. Of course they do not merely unfold; especially when crafting a “life story” told in retrospect, journalists necessarily play an active role in how celebrities’ lives are assessed. As Hannah Arendt (1958) once wrote about historical scholarship, “[a]ction reveals itself fully only to the storyteller … who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants” (p. 192). Accordingly, this study embraces the theoretical understanding of news as a form of storytelling and sometimes myth-making, a cultural model deriving from the early communication theories of Émile Durkheim (1915/1995) and George Herbert Mead (1934). In this view of production (and reception), journal-
ism is “a symbolic strategy; journalism sizes up situations, names their elements, structure and outstanding ingredients … ” (Carey, 1997, p. 141). Those “situations” are explained in story form, containing “themes that repeat themselves over time” (Bird, 2003, p. 30). “Like myth,” Jack Lule (2001) explains, “the news tells us not only what happened yesterday—but what has always happened” (pp. 19–20).

Although mythic themes in news coverage are powerful because they are familiar—they are, in their larger cultural meaning, not news—they nevertheless are complex and flexible in their uses and interpretations. Myths, writes Michael Schudson (1995) in his history of news, “do not tell a culture’s simple truths so much as they explore its central dilemmas” (p. 164). They also recur in ways specific to a particular historic context. In his study of news coverage of religion, Stewart Hoover (1998) defines journalism as a process of “manipulating symbols and presenting narratives in such a way that they are relevant to the cultural context within which that journalism functions” (p. 200). He maintains that in today’s environment, an “underlying religiosity of the American public” (p. 184) is part of this context shaping news narrative. Moreover, he notes that “[r]eligion news is no longer only news about religion” but instead is “defined by contemporary spiritual, moral, and ethical quests and often expressed in individual actions quite outside the domain of traditional religions” (pp. 193–194). At the same time, religion scholars have begun to take popular culture seriously as a site in which faith is defined and debated (see, e.g., Badaracco, 2005; Lyden, 2003).

Method in this study flows from theory, in that these celebrity-death stories have been examined for their narrative structure; it also derives more broadly from cultural critic Raymond Williams’s (1961) belief that “it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins” (p. 47). Narrative analysis is rooted in structural and semiotic analysis, which have been used to understand folklore, literature, and popular communication most notably by Vladimir Propp (1928/1968) and Roland Barthes (1977) and have been applied to the study of fictional mass-media texts including television shows (Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Newcomb, 1991) and films (Wright, 1977). More recently, narrative analysis has become a common tool for understanding journalism as well (see, e.g., Barkin, 1984; Bird & Dardenne, 1997; Dahlgren, 1999; Darnton, 1975; Eason, 1981; Fisher, 1985; Lule, 2001; Zelizer, 1990).

Narrative analysis of journalism is a search for the common thematic and structural choices reporters and editors made, consistently over time and across media. This kind of study takes note of the events and anecdotes in stories (what is in them and what is left out) as well as overall plot development (how, in what order and with what language, the story is told; how it opens; how its conflict is established and resolved; and how it ends) and characterization (who, within the story structure, emerges as the most salient players and how they interact). When
studying related material, the researcher considers not just each story’s individual content and structure but also (indeed, more importantly) recurring characters and subplots across all evidence. The researcher attempts to understand the connotative as well as denotative meanings of media language and imagery—what is suggested generally about culture, as well as what is literally depicted with regard to the reported event or profiled news subject. As Barthes (1977) explained, it is at this second level of communication that mythic ideas are conveyed via journalistic narrative. Lule (2001) adds that “myth—and perhaps news—[is] an important way a society expresses its prevailing ideals, ideologies, values, and beliefs.” (p. 15).

Magazines were chosen as the medium of study because they are especially well suited to defining the lasting meaning of cultural icons in terms of national identity (Kitch, 2005). Magazines are a journalistic medium in which celebrity lives are regularly dissected and held up as lessons for living, by editors and writers who routinely use the inclusive first-person plural to speak on behalf of the country. In addition, magazines have a long relation with celebrity culture, having reported on fascinating public figures since the emergence of modern mass media a century ago (Gamson, 1994).

The evidence for this study comes from all of the coverage of the deaths of the four subjects appearing in four major American celebrity/entertainment magazines—People, Entertainment Weekly, TV Guide, and Rolling Stone—and the two leading newsmagazines, Time and Newsweek, which, as James Baughman (1998) and others have documented, have turned their attention increasingly toward celebrity culture in recent decades. The analysis primarily considers the content and structure of text, although it also notes how photographs were used to underscore certain characterizations of the subjects. The evidence includes all stories published immediately following their deaths. Except to the extent that the memorial tributes reprinted or drew on earlier coverage, this study does not include discussion of these celebrities in previous or subsequent issues of these magazines.1

The four celebrities are discussed not in the order they died but rather in what the analysis reveals to have been their levels of salvation, from lightness to darkness.

1Examples of subsequent coverage would include promotion and reviews of the biopic films Ray, starring Jamie Foxx, later in 2004, or Walk the Line, about Johnny Cash, in 2005. The plots of these films—featuring actors approved by the celebrities themselves prior to their deaths and full of “authentic” details meant to create the feeling of documentary rather than fictional texts—strengthen and advance the stories that were told in journalism just after Charles’s and Cash’s death, and they are relevant to the broader cultural phenomenon examined in this article. They are not analyzed here, however, because study of the conventions of film versus those of journalism may call for expanded theory and method not within the purview of this article.
In many ways, Johnny Cash had scripted his own memorial story, having spent much of his life engaging in and singing about sin, weakness, regret, and recovery and having, after a midlife crisis, embraced the Christian beliefs of his second wife, June Carter Cash. Certainly it also helped “the story” that he performed dressed entirely in black and openly talked about salvation and grace. As *Newsweek* noted, “his obsessively forthright self-presentation and chronic self-examination” were part of his public image (Gates, 2003, p. 98). *Entertainment Weekly* made the same point while putting the metaphors into play: “Johnny Cash’s soul had been the battlefield for plenty of celebrated skirmishes over the decades. Usually, the inner conflict was as clear-cut as his near-mythic stature in country music: drugs or sobriety, rage or peace, God or the other guy” (Willman, 2003, p. 310).

Eulogies for Cash used these kinds of religious terms, as well as concepts such as darkness and death, extensively, and not always with the acknowledgment that Cash himself had created his celebrity persona around them. Leading the rhetorical excess was not a gushy celebrity publication but the newsmagazine *Time*. The following several quotations are all from *Time*’s tribute cover story (Corliss, 2003), which also was the source for the title of this article:

Demons found him even when he wasn’t looking for them. He dressed like a hip coroner and sang like a gunman turned Pentecostal preacher. His haunting songs perfectly matched his haunted voice … His songs played like confessions on a deathbed or death row, but he delivered them with the plangent stoicism of a world-class poker player dealt a bum hand. (p. 62)

Cash sang of specific injustices and eternal truths; he was the deadpan poet of cotton fields, truck stops and prisons. He was a balladeer, really, a spellbinding storyteller—a witness, in the Christian sense of the word. Here was a man who knew the Commandments because he had broken so many of them. (pp. 62–63)

Inside Cash, the churchman and the outlaw were having a brawl. (p. 64)

[his last songs were] the testimony of a man apologizing for living while preparing for death. (p. 65)

As is typical in the telling of most celebrity life tales, the coverage emphasized Cash’s difficult childhood, although it also established that, from the start, he had a “gift” and the love of a good woman. *Rolling Stone* contained this anecdote: “Apart from his mother’s unshakable belief in his musical talent—‘God has his hand on
you son,’ she told him when he was a boy, ‘don’t ever forget the gift’—little in Cash’s impoverished background suggested that the extraordinary life he would lead was possible” (DeCurtis, 2003, p. 72). Entertainment Weekly characterized his origins similarly, calling him “the Arkansas dirt farmer’s son who might almost have taken the closing words of The Grapes of Wrath as a grist for a real-life, guitar-slinging sequel and mutual love affair with the working downtrodden” (Willman, 2003, pp. 32–33).

Cash’s own disadvantages were seen to have uniquely qualified him to be, as singer Kris Kristofferson told both TV Guide and People, “a champion for people who didn’t have one” (“The Man in Black,” 2003, p. 43), a spokesman for “the underdogs, the downtrodden, the prisoners, the poor” (Smolowe & Dougherty, 2003, p. 82). In Rolling Stone, Bob Dylan claimed: “If we want to know what it means to be mortal, we need look no further than the Man in Black. Blessed with a profound imagination, he used the gift to express all the various lost causes of the human soul” (“Remembering Johnny,” 2003, p. 74).

In this life story, then, Cash’s “gift” was not merely musical talent but the insight and empathy to speak for others in dark circumstances, a special access to truth that excused his own bad behavior. Rolling Stone called him “part rural preacher, part outlaw Robin Hood [who] was a blue-collar prophet,” going so far as to claim that, as “this dark figure who never really fit … the quintessential outsider,” he was a role model for “all these bad-boy [rap] artists who are juggling being on MTV and running from the law” (DeCurtis, 2003, pp. 72, 73). Entertainment Weekly’s cover story opened with an almost apocalyptic conceptual photograph of Cash standing in an overgrown graveyard, under a leafless tree and next to a crooked, wooden cross, playing a guitar and singing with his eyes closed as wind whipped back his hair and coat (Willman, 2003, p. 30).

Yet Cash was not really “bad,” because, as he fought his demons, he offered up testimony and confession. Musician Marty Stuart told People, “What kept him credible with people was that when he made mistakes, he was the first one to raise his hand and say, ‘I did it. I messed up.’ He had a humble nature, and you couldn’t not forgive him” (Smolowe & Dougherty, 2003, p. 84). In Rolling Stone, singer Merle Haggard recalled having seen Cash perform in San Quentin Prison while he himself was incarcerated there: “He chewed gum, looked arrogant and flipped the bird to the guards—he did everything the prisoners wanted to do. He was a mean mother from the South who was there because he loved us” (“Remembering Johnny,” 2003, p. 74). He also recounted Cash’s advice when he appeared on Cash’s ABC variety show: “Haggard, let me tell the people you’ve been to prison. It’ll be the biggest thing that will happen to you in your life, and the tabloids will never be able to hurt you. It’s called telling the truth” (“Remembering Johnny,” 2003, p. 74).

Although surely this can be seen as canny career advice, it is presented in eulogistic testimony (and it is interesting how we come to know of Cash’s failings and
repentance primarily through the testimony of others he helped or guided) as proof of his willingness to repent and his desire to be saved from himself. Here, as the story was told, the crucial plot development was the love of another good woman. Overlooking the circumstances of their union (both left their spouses, with whom they had children), the magazines uniformly presented June Carter as the “miracle” whose Christian faith saved Cash’s life (when he was addicted to painkillers in the 1960s) as well as his soul. “His salvation was literally waiting in the wings,” wrote People (Smolowe & Dougherty, 2003, p. 84), and Entertainment Weekly used a quote from singer Reba McEntire to create this picture of the sinner saved by the hand of Providence: “For him to have had such a rough life, then to be paired up with such a strong woman, I think that was God’s way of saying ’Buddy, I think you need a little help’” (Willman, 2003, p. 33). The successful outcome of this intervention allowed the story to end with Cash’s sobriety and late-in-life comeback, through which he presumably influenced a new generation. The narrative closure also enabled Time to end its cover story with this:

… if some felt shock at the news of Cash’s passing, they could segue into celebration over a difficult life made exemplary, an outlaw redeemed by a woman’s devotion. Besides, if you believe, the Man in Black is now garbed in white, and the doting husband has eternity to spend with his beloved. (Corliss, 2003, p. 66)

RAY CHARLES: “SHEER EROTIC JOY”

Such language returned in journalism 9 months later when Ray Charles died. Although it is likely that he would have received more coverage in the newsweeklies had he not died the same week as former President Ronald Reagan, in the entertainment magazines (one of which, People, also reported extensively on the Reagan ceremonies), there was a great deal of coverage, in the same kinds of dramatic tribute language the magazine had used for Cash and with similar metaphors of good and evil, light and dark.

In several ways, the life stories of the two men really were parallel. Born 2 years apart into Southern poverty during the Great Depression—“with his [Charles’s] family being even poorer than most, ‘nothing below us ’cept the ground,’ as he put it” (Farley, 2004, p. 90)—both nevertheless had musical gifts and, according to the story, mothers with unshakable faith in them. Rolling Stone recounted of Charles, “[h]is mother insisted that there was nothing he could not do if he set his mind to it, telling him, ‘You’re blind—you ain’t stupid’” (DeCurtis, 2004, p. 98), and Time contained this anecdote: “Ray’s mother told him, before she died when he was 15, ‘You might not be able to do things like a person who can see. But there are always two ways to do everything. You’ve just got to find the other way’” (Farley, 2004, p. 90). Noting his mother’s death and his 17-year drug addiction, Entertainment

As with Cash, Charles’ “overwhelming odds” combined with his “genius” and his “passion” to explain his unorthodox approach to music that brought Black traditions into the mainstream while offending the respectable Southern Black community. As Newsweek explained, Charles got his start “scandaliz[ing] good church people by appropriating the conventions and inflections of sacred music, and helped invent what we now know as soul music,” a genre that drew on religious passion to express “sheer erotic joy” (Gates, 2004, p. 75). This tension provided the lead for the majority of the stories about his death, and it gave him authority as a musician. Rolling Stone’s tribute article opened this way:

The battle between sin and salvation, between Saturday-night revels and Sunday-morning sanctity, rages at the heart of American popular music. But for Ray Charles, those combating urges were one and the same, and he made the music to prove it. Beginning in 1954 with his R&B hit “I’ve Got a Woman,” Charles set tales of desire, longing and lust to the propulsive rhythms of gospel, breaking the ground for what would soon be called soul music. (DeCurtis, 2004, p. 97)

Ironically, it was this storyline, and the language used to tell it, that cast Charles as a pseudo-religious leader, even though he never had the kind of faith, let alone conversion, experienced by Cash. The music itself gave him a kind of holy status. Time claimed that Charles “showed us that soul was good for the spirit” (Farley, 2004, p. 90). This was one of three magazines to call him, in either title or text, “Brother Ray” (Farley, 2004; Ritz, 2004; Sinclair, 2004). Borrowing the lyrics of a Charles song, Entertainment Weekly declared, “It’s crying time, again. Brother Ray has left us for good” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 43). As Newsweek noted, “blues and gospel formed the deepest layer of his sensibility” (Gates, 2004, p. 75), and, in the retelling of his life story, Charles’s music became his redemption.

As he frequently had pointed out throughout his life, he did not particularly seek redemption, although only in Rolling Stone was this a significant subplot. In a secondary article, the ghostwriter of his autobiography recalled what Charles had told him in 1975, more than 10 years after he had stopped using drugs, “that every day he still drank lots of gin and smoked lots of pot … ; that he had a huge appetite for women; that he wasn’t even certain how many children he had fathered; that he was unrepentant about it all” (Ritz, 2004, p. 98). Yet this frank recollection closed with his comments from an interview given a year earlier, after he had been diagnosed with liver cancer:
[Charles] I used to think all that church praise, all that hooting and hollering, was overdone. Stop shouting. Be cool. Besides, if God is God, why does he need all this praise? Now I’m thinking it ain’t God who needs the praise—it’s us who need to do the praising. The praise makes us stronger. That’s why I’m getting stronger.

[Interviewer] What’s the source of the strength?

[Charles] Used to think it was me. But now I see my strength has limits. I used to think that I’m in control of this whole motherfucking operation—my music, my band, my life, my ladies. But soon as you start thinking that way, brother, run for cover. ’Cause someone’s about to kick your ass. (Ritz, 2004, p. 100)

This article was accompanied by the rare somber photograph of Charles, shown sitting in a chair with his head down. Far more common were pictures (and one in particular, at the piano) of him in performance, smiling broadly, with his head joyfully thrown back, an image of surrender and salvation. That shot appeared over the title of Newsweek’s tribute essay, titled “We Can’t Stop Loving Him” (Gates, 2004, p. 75). Time closed its coverage by returning to the character of Charles’s mother: “He did his mother proud. He found that other way” (Farley, 2004, p. 90).

RICHARD PRYOR: “PROFANE AND PROFOUND”

Richard Pryor’s mother also was an early inspiration, although of a different sort. All of the coverage after his 2005 death recounted the nature of his birth as the start of his tragicomic destiny. Newsweek reported: “He was born Richard Franklin Lenox Thomas Pryor. Pryor’s mother was a prostitute, and each of the names apparently came from one of her Johns. He was, in short, the personification of the idea that tragedy feeds great comedy” (Peyser & Samuels, 2005, p. 61). People noted that he was “raised by his grandmother, who ran the brothel where his mother, Gertrude worked; his father, Buck, was an occasional pimp and bartender. ‘His comedy was born of pain and poverty,’ says [a] close friend” (Espinoza, 2005, p. 88).

From this harsh entrance into a cutthroat world of urban poverty came Pryor’s style as well as his material, as the story goes. “Pryor’s comedy came wrapped in barbed wire,” wrote Newsweek, describing

his indelible cast of characters: junkies, hustlers, winos. They were angry, proud, insecure, profane—people no one found funny before. But Pryor mined their stories for truth as well as humor, and he told their stories with a streetwise vernacular that verged on poetic performance art … “His very presence gave Black people a chance to laugh and feel good about stuff that usually pissed us off,” says [comedian] Chris Rock. (Peyser & Samuels, 2005, p. 61)
The violence of his upbringing and his comedic subject matter spilled over into an out-of-control life, explained *Time*: “His no-holds-barred comedy was matched by a private life that seemed an unending soap opera—outbursts of violence, run-ins with the law, and drug abuse …” Yet precisely because Pryor used his own life as material, the magazine contended, he became “America’s most celebrated comic revolutionary” (Zoglin, 2005, p. 35). In addition, as suggested in the previous passage from *Newsweek*, the authentic brutality of his youth, along with the color of his skin, gave him a special access to truth.

As with Johnny Cash, the kind of “truth” Richard Pryor told was a matter of witnessing the dark side of human existence; it was an acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of evil rather than a lesson about goodness. *Entertainment Weekly* quoted *Saturday Night Live* producer Lorne Michaels as saying that “the pressure on Black comedians to be role models was tremendous when Richard was coming along. Well, Richard wasn’t that. He tried. But he naturally moved into the role of truth teller” (Brown, 2005, p. 15). Michaels added that Pryor’s appearance on *SNL*, a show including a skit in which Pryor traded racial insults with Chevy Chase, “lent integrity and credibility to our show. His appearance as host defined the outer limits of what we could do … He made us, by association, more legitimate.” Referring to Pryor’s routines about racism, the magazine also quoted comedienne Lily Tomlin: “The kind of laughter he evoked was the laughter of liberation” (Brown, 2005, p. 16). The article concluded: “That was Pryor: a humble introvert who boldly told truth to power—told truth to everybody, really, and perhaps most notably, told truth to himself, about himself, and at his own expense” (Brown, 2005, p. 17).

And there—in Pryor’s description as, ultimately, “a humble introvert”—was the narrative shift from street-savvy, profane, urban Black man to an ordinary American just like any of us. “For all of his supposed fearlessness, what made him so magnetic, so familiar to his audience was his neurotic, almost sheepish vulnerability,” wrote *Entertainment Weekly*, which called him “America’s profane [Mark] Twain” (Brown, 2005, pp. 17, 14). While acknowledging his excessive use of drugs and alcohol, his seven marriages, and his four heart attacks, the magazines emphasized his emotional fragility. *Newsweek* claimed that, “like his bombastic characters, he also had a charming humility. ‘I had some great things and I had some bad things, the best and the worst,’ Pryor once said. ‘In other words, I had a life’” (Peyser & Samuels, 2005, p. 61).

These qualities did not prevent Pryor from a midlife fall from grace, common to the life plot of the other celebrities as well. He “could never fully escape his demons,” (Espinoza, 2005, p. 68) even at the height of his success in the 1970s, a time when “the tempting excesses of celebrity—coupled with the comic’s long-standing attraction to the abyss—drew Pryor closer and closer to oblivion. His infamous 1980 self-immolation was the beginning of the end …” (Brown, 2005, p. 16). He rarely performed after he was diagnosed in 1985 with multiple sclerosis. Enter-
tainment Weekly wrote: “By the time he was gone, in other words, he’d been gone a long time. And yet, last week, something precious and ineffable was lost … ” (Brown, 2005, p. 15).

Despite his absence from the public eye for two decades and his lack of a comeback, Pryor’s death was still marked as a “loss” of something “precious.” Certainly one part of that loss was, as the stories concluded, his ability to grasp the dark truth and to bring it to light while breaking taboos in popular entertainment. Most of the magazines acknowledged the debt of many young Black comedians (all of them men) to Pryor’s trailblazing style. *Newsweek* claimed: “You can draw a straight line from his angry, impolite comedy to Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, the Wayans brothers and Dave Chappelle” (Peyser & Samuels, 2005, p. 61). The magazine quoted comedian Martin Lawrence: “He did for comedy what politicians do for movements. He passed a law that said it was OK (sic) to tell it like it is” (Peyser & Samuels, 2005, p. 61). *Time* proclaimed that “his ruthless honesty and performing brilliance set a standard by which every comic since must be measured” (Zoglin, 2005, p. 35).

Another part of the loss, however, was the example of his sheer survival and endurance, qualities described as both admirable and pathetic. Most of the magazines illustrated their tribute articles with photographs of Pryor either early in his career, when he appeared youthfully hopeful, or late in his illness, when he gazed at the camera with a frightened and almost pleading expression. *TV Guide* closed its article, titled “Tribute,” with that note: “The later images of a subdued Pryor, debilitated by his struggle with multiple sclerosis and longtime substance abuse, are a stark contrast to the wild energy he once had on stage and screen. But Pryor’s daughter Rain says that even at the end, ‘his soul was as strong as ever’” (Battaglio, 2005, p. 13).

**MARLON BRANDO: “A LIFE OF ENORMOUS, ABUSIVE APPETITES”**

Nearly the same conclusion might have been written about Marlon Brando when he died in 2004, also “a stark contrast to the wild energy he once had on stage and screen.” But it wasn’t. The lack of this forgiving spirit was anticipated by the actor Jack Nicholson (2004), who began his own tribute to Brando in *Rolling Stone* with this declaration: “Marlon Brando is one of the great men of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and we lesser mortals are obligated to cut through the shit and proclaim it” (p. 53). Nicholson’s voice was indeed the exception within a less-than-celebratory public assessment of Brando’s life, after decades of reports of the reclusive actor’s eccentricity and physical decline. Like Pryor, Brando had no late-in-life comeback, and the characters he played, similar to the characters who populated Pryor’s comedy routines, were frightened, brutal, wounded, and criminal. Yet Brando did not exhibit the public vulnerability that Pryor (and Cash and Charles) had; indeed, he expressed open contempt for public opinion.
His life story paralleled those of the other men in several ways. He had had a difficult start, which *Time* referenced succinctly and parenthetically in its mention of his “troubled and rebellious past (cruel and drunk father, wistful and drunken mother)” (Schickel, 2004, p. 73). *People* wrote that “his own bruised, inarticulate genius [was] fueled in part by unhappy memories of an alcoholic, often absent mother, Dorothy, and a brutal father, Marlon Brando Sr., a traveling salesman” (Gliatto, 2004, p. 83). *Entertainment Weekly* reported that he suffered from “a deeper torment than even the hard-luck tales from his early days could explain: His parents were alcoholics (his father abusive, his mother a frustrated actress); he was kicked out of military school for insubordination, and sidelined from the draft by a bad knee” (Schwarzbbaum, 2004, p. 23). Paralleling the other men’s drug-fueled trouble with the law, Brando endured personal tragedy when his son murdered his daughter’s lover and the daughter subsequently committed suicide (although the difference is that this was not Brando’s own “sinning” on the public stage). In addition, like Charles, he had “an untold number of other children born of various wives and non-wives” (Schwarzbbaum, 2004, p. 28).

Brando broke the boundaries of his profession by creating a new kind of acting that departed from existing styles and genres. Certainly the same can be said of the music of Cash and Charles, but in Brando’s case, his unusual talent was remembered as alienating (as was true of Pryor’s early comedy). “Brando was touched by genius,” explained *Time*, “by which we mean that he did things in his art that were unprecedented, unduplicable and, finally, inexplicable”; to make its point clearer, this essay (labeled “Appreciation”) was titled “A Hostage of His Own Genius” (Schickel, 2004, p. 73). *TV Guide* recalled Brando’s “genius” as a challenge to American moral standards of the mid-20th century: “Sweating, bawling and absolutely electrifying, he became a dangerous new icon of masculine sexuality” (Fox & McDonagh, 2004, p. 6). *Entertainment Weekly* used a sexually charged adjective to make the same point, observing that “never was a talent more potent” (Schwarzbbaum, 2004, p. 26).

It is this last quote that hints at the narrative departure in Brando’s story, or, rather, to the reason for a lack of cohesive narrative. When Brando’s career faltered at midlife, he “squandered” not just his career but his looks, and this theme dominated coverage of his death. “He created the modern Hollywood ideal (or is it an anti-ideal?) of sexually dangerous, antiauthoritarian, anti-glamorous masculinity … but he let his once beautiful face and body balloon in later life as if he despised his very flesh,” declared *Entertainment Weekly* (Schwarzbbaum, 2004, p. 26). *People* began its coverage of his death, “At the end of his life, Marlon Brando was a broken-down colossus, his body giving out after a life of enormous, abusive appetites,” and went on to call him “one of Hollywood’s saddest examples of talent waylaid and wasted” (Gliatto, 2004, p. 80). *Time* described Brando in his early acting days as a “stud, possibly the most gorgeous (and authentically sexy) male the movies had ever seen” but later in life as being “encased in fat and cynicism,” a
change that was “sad and to some of us infuriating” (Schickel, 2004, p. 74). Newsweek wrote that “his ballooning weight seemed like a fortress to keep the world out” (Peyser, 2004, p. 73).

In this sense, Brando (or at any rate, journalistic characterizations of him) can be understood less as a hero than as what Jack Lule (2001), in his typology of mythic characters in news, identifies as the “trickster,” a character from folklore: “the Trickster is driven by physical appetites, lust, and desire. He has no control over his impulses … [he] serves as an exemplary model in reverse … the Trickster archetype shows what happens if the rules laid down by society are not observed” (p. 124). Although at first we (audiences and journalists) knew what to make of the young actor, his lack of impulse control made a mockery of the public image through which, as a “genius,” he had begun to make some narrative sense: Brando “let himself balloon into an unsettlingly eccentric, supersized version of the handsome, muscle-bound star who first electrified Hollywood” (Gliatto, 2004, p. 82).

As implied in the defense mounted by Jack Nicholson (himself arguably another trickster), the line between trickster and hero is a fine one. Dominated as these stories were by the theme of Brando’s weight, there were tributes of sorts, and even gestures toward forgiveness and immortality. People quoted Brando’s sister as saying, “I’m glad he’s free now,” and concluded, “Brando could be said to have freed Hollywood, paving the way for at least two generations of actors … Without Brando, there would most likely be no Al Pacino, no Robert De Niro, no Jack Nicholson, no Sean Penn or Johnny Depp” (Gliatto, 2004, p. 82). Time remembered Brando as a generational icon whose art ultimately justified his heroic status:

if you were young and impressionable in the ’50s, he was forever Our Guy—a man whose inarticulate yearnings, whose needs and rages somehow spoke for a silent generation, privately nursing our grievances at the bourgeois serenity of our elders. We would get mad at his fecklessness, but we never quite lost our faith in him … Now that he’s gone, that faith abides … The work will abide—while the often foolish and more often misspent life that these performances mysteriously drew upon will fade away, lost at last in the hum and buzz of our infinitely distractible media age. (Schickel, 2004, p. 74)

DISCUSSION: WHO GETS SAVED?

This last quote contains a touch of unintended irony, in its suggestion that Time magazine—or, more broadly, “we,” the public—has access to truth found somewhere beyond the borders of “our infinitely distractible media age.” Yet, as can be seen in several of the previous excerpts, this is only one of a number of remarks that provide a second layer of meaning to this kind of journalism, a metacommentary on the life-story summary within the summary itself. It is from these cues that we are to know not only the facts of the person’s past but also the lasting cultural meaning of
his life, a lesson more important than the trivia of celebrity gossip (“the hum and buzz” or “the shit”). Indeed, that bigger truth, as *Time* suggested, can make the actual facts unimportant. That must be one conclusion of this study, because, when one considers the facts of these four performers’ lives, even as they are divulged in these accounts, one notices the similarities as much as the differences.

Of course, all four were men, and their sex is no doubt one explanation for their life stories being retold as a battle against temptation (with the implication that boys will be boys); it is hard to imagine a female celebrity publicly engaging, for decades, in the substance abuse and sexual promiscuity of either Ray Charles or Richard Pryor and then being remembered so fondly. S. Elizabeth Bird confirms that there remains a double standard in the ways celebrities’ life choices are explained in media. She notes that “prowess with women” is one element in the heroic tale reported after the death of a famous man and that a life of multiple relationships with women merely underscores that prowess rather than detracting from the man’s character; although affairs and divorces might be reported as scandals during a male celebrity’s lifetime, after his death, they become folded into his life story as inevitable consequences of his masculinity (Bird, 1992, p. 182).

It is further worth noting that women play similar supporting roles in these men’s stories. In all four cases, the male celebrity had a sympathetic woman at his side (or close to) the end, a daughter or sister, or “the right” wife who finally understood him. Even more striking is the role of mothers in the stories. All of these men lived long, troubled lives, yet only two of them regained professional success and public esteem, while the other two were seen as unable to get up again after the blows life had delivered to them in middle age. Resilience and redemption were reserved in these narratives for the two men—Cash and Charles—who had begun their lives with good (as opposed to drunk and immoral) mothers who loved them and believed in them unconditionally.

Beyond stereotypical gender ideals, the specific parallels in these four men’s life stories—the childhood poverty or neglect, the many wives and lovers, the unorthodox talent, the abuse of drugs and alcohol, the public fall from grace—do raise the question of why their eulogies took such different shape in journalism. The answers do not seem to lie in obvious identity markers such as race or class. Indeed, these factors seem almost irrelevant, given that the two White men received the best and worst eulogistic portrayals and that the only one who was not born into abject poverty, the White Brando, suffered the worst portrait of all. If race and class were a factor in

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*I owe this insight to Patricia Bradley, Professor Emeritus at Temple University, in correspondence about the death of Richard Pryor (personal communication, December 12, 2005). She commented on the forgiving nature of news coverage of his passing, noting, “bad boys are allowed to be bad boys when their badness apparently only hurts themselves. The truth is that badness always impacts negatively on the world around them. But since these negative aspects of bad boyhood primarily hurt women, they are brushed aside (how many interviews have we seen with any of the exes, even the many that bear celebrity children)?”*
these stories, they were, like gender, unifying narrative elements that lay a potential foundation for these men to enact the American dream of success despite the odds.

Johnny Cash’s narrative was by far the most flattering of the four. He was explained as a tortured soul who felt deeply for others; who faced “demons” (his sins were described in passive terms, as things that happened to him, rather than things he chose to do); and who was saved by sobriety, religion, and the love of a good woman. The latter three aspects of his life seem to have been quite real, although they were well-known “facts” in part because he kept singing and talking about them. It is not the purpose of this discussion to suggest that the positive tone of his eulogy was inappropriate—just that it was probably inevitable and that it was due partly but not only to the retrospective narrative choices of journalists.

All four men took up political and social causes during the 1960s and 1970s, and these were mentioned to varying extents within the coverage. In the cases of Cash (performing for and identifying with prisoners, including murderers), Pryor (directly addressing White racists in his comedy routines), and Charles (refusing to perform in segregated concert halls), their activism was seen as part of their empathy and access to “truth,” whereas Brando’s affiliation with the Native American Rights movement was seen as evidence of his increasing marginality and eccentricity, a distraction from his real work.

Both Charles and Brando were described as “geniuses,” although only Brando’s genius was seen as “inexplicable.” In striking contrast, Newsweek wrote of Charles (referring to his shift, later in his career, toward country-western and pop music)

The purists had long ago forgiven him for selling out, if that’s what he’d done—and even shrugged off his Diet Pepsi commercial—because who are you to tell a genius what to do with his gift? You say thank you. (Gates, 2004, p. 75)

All four men committed sins of excess, sins of the flesh, although only in Brando’s case did this fault literally result in excess flesh, and only in Brando’s case was “appetite” given as cause of death. More direct links between substance abuse and cause of death could have been made for Pryor, Charles, and Cash. Yet it was Brando who had committed the worst sin of all in America: getting fat. Brando’s softness was a significant departure from the masculinity of the celebrities’ shared narrative, especially within a popular culture in which the celebrities most vilified for weight gain—Elizabeth Taylor, Kirstie Alley, Wynonna Judd—are female and in which popular reality shows include The Greatest Loser.

3For this insight, I thank one of the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article, who is right that “celebrity journalism is full of the tribulations of stars who work hard against the threat of fat, and their struggle is documented approvingly, making them more human and sympathetic. Brando’s indifference to this is reproval to the code of celebrity, and I think it is an important element in his failure to be redeemed.”
weight-loss program charting ordinary people’s return to “normal” life through intensive dieting and exercise. Moreover, the loss of his glamorous image may have, paradoxically, resulted in the loss of audiences’ sense of him as a “real” person with whom they could, or wanted to, identify; in the end, he was not how Americans would like to see ourselves. The corporeal aspect of Brando’s demise may have seemed the most visible gesture that he did not wish for public forgiveness of his personal and professional lapses.

That outreaching wish—at least, as it was expressed through retrospective journalism—was the primary narrative difference in eulogistic coverage of these four men. In these stories, significant attention was paid to the celebrities’ varying levels of willingness to share their feelings in public ways and to seem “open” to audiences. Sociologist Frank Furedi (2001) describes this aspect of the “culture of emotionalism” by explaining that “public figures are regularly judged by the way they feel rather than by their deed or the outcome of their action” and that such a person’s choice to keep his or her problems private is “pathologised (sic) and denounced as cold and inhuman” (p. 37).

Cash confessed and repented, repeatedly. Charles did not repent but confessed to sinful urges in music that had the rhythms and fervor of gospel. Pryor seemed to have been punished by the humiliation and lasting disfigurement from his attempted suicide plus his battle with multiple sclerosis, all of them very public forms of atonement for previous sins. Brando continued to indulge his appetites and shut himself away from the public; although he had been admired for creating film characters who spurned the world, he was reviled, or at best seen as “inexplicable,” when he did it himself.

In the resulting set of life-story narratives, Pryor and Brando both fell from grace, the first as a tragic victim of his own demons, the second as a swaggering and eventually glutinous hero whose innovative brilliance was squandered. In contrast, the life stories of Cash and Charles were told as journeys toward grace, as a tale of lifelong struggle between good and evil finally resulting in redemption. In the popular journalism surveyed in this study, Ray Charles was forgiven (“we can’t stop loving him”), Richard Pryor was understood and grudgingly admired (“America’s profane Twain”), and Brando was at least pitied (“a hostage of his own genius”). Yet it was Johnny Cash who was saved. Eulogized in Rolling Stone as “a legend who never stopped being a common man” (DeCurtis, 2003, p. 70), it was Cash who, ultimately, stood for the American experience and for a secular articulation of the traditionally Protestant notion that “grace” is available to all of us.

The presence of the concepts of sin, repenting, forgiveness, and redemption in this kind of reporting supports scholars’ assertions that journalism can be understood as a form of cultural narrative and that myth-making in journalism is a layered, narrative process that occurs over time. The extensive, almost excessive, use of religious language in these particular articles also may illumine broader,
early-21st-century social trends in a politically conservative America unusually concerned with memorial, therapeutic spirituality, and open expressions of faith.

The journalistic coverage examined in this article offers evidence of the extent to which popular communication both reflects and constructs a society’s contemporary concerns by telling stories that place symbolic characters into familiar plots. The unusually high profile of Protestant religion in current American life may account for increasing references to salvation in secular media, confirming Stewart Hoover’s (1998) contention that “the underlying religiosity of the American public” (p. 184) is part of the cultural context that shapes news narrative today. The conservative political and social climate with which this religiosity coincides may provide some explanation for the nostalgic focus, in these particular stories, on a certain type of mid-20th-century masculine bravado. Yet the relation between religion and media is dialogic, and we must consider the possibility that media content shapes religion and politics as much as religion and politics shape media content. If the long-instructive story of “the sinner redeemed” is now repeatedly told not just in church but also in entertainment magazines, then surely journalism and popular culture have acquired a central role in articulating some of our most important cultural ideals, including faith and spirituality.

At the very least, the coverage described in this article is evidence that entertainment reporting today conveys something more than just gossip. In his argument as to why popular culture deserves serious critical attention, George Lipsitz (1990) noted that what may seem like “a sideshow can sometimes be the main event” (p. 20). He was writing about music, but the same case can be made for People and Rolling Stone and other publications that anoint the famous and analyze their meaning. In their pages, the Man in Black and Brother Ray live out moral fables, reenacting not just their own experiences but ours as well, within a secular celebration of forgiveness and salvation. These stories are not merely entertainment; they are, for many people, the central tales of an ideal American life.

REFERENCES


