

MARILYN MONROE

“Life as a legend”

BY RACHEL GALVIN

Like a fluttering butterfly, Marilyn Monroe was lured by the light of Hollywood and her glow still radiates into popular culture 44 years after her untimely end. Her irreplaceable sparkles stem not from her talent as a great actress or her way with melodies, not from the rumors of her scandalous affairs or her troubled past—although this certainly added to her notoriety. It was her all-encompassing sexuality that made us and continues to make us drool, no matter what the script said or what song she sang.

Vulnerable and voluptuous, bombshell Marilyn Monroe knew how to turn a phrase, smoke a cigarette, make an entrance and flick her head back with pure rapturous laughter—all to make love to the camera and anyone who dared to watch. This type of excitement was threatening in the buttoned-up post-war era of the '50s, where women were supposed to be housewives, not

movie stars. Marilyn, herself, once said, “Sometimes I've been to a party where no one spoke to me for a whole evening. The men, frightened by their wives or sweeties...the ladies would gang up in a corner and discuss my dangerous character.”

Her rare mix of brazenness and shyness may seem an oxymoron but it put her in the spotlight. From the moment Norma Jean Baker was discovered as just another “Rosie Riviter” joining the workforce by a photographer looking to capture some cheesecake for “Yank Magazine” to the day she died tragically at only 36-years-old as the woman every man wanted to have and every woman wanted to be, she exuded star quality. Soon she became a household name. She has had nearly 300 biographies charting her every move, performed in 30 movies, had three husbands, posed for Playboy and other magazines that every



Yankee boy had hidden in his locker and more. She became America's sweetheart.

It was and is easy to be seduced by her breathless vulnerability as a warm-hearted home wrecker, fragile gold-digger or whatever combination suited the fancy of the producers in her many films including, "Gentlemen Prefer Blonds," "Some Like It Hot," "Bus Stop," "Seven Year Itch," "How to Marry a Millionaire" and many more.

Despite the murmurs of polite society and the protests of her husbands, she taunted and teased her way to the top. She was all woman, ahead of her time and a monument to full self-expression. The enticing concoction she mixed up on screen became more palatable with a touch of ingenious humor with a frenzied stir of pure sugar. When asked about her supposed nakedness, she commented once, "It's not true that I had nothing on. I had the radio on." This type of banter was just more fuel for the fire, driving men wild and the media wilder. But she wasn't reinventing the wheel; tongue in cheek wit and sexuality was brilliantly used by Mae West in her day. Marilyn just knew how to do it better. She was self-invented yet as real as anything, touchable, wanton—not a character, although, her complicated life would be squeezed into a two-dimensional characterization imitated throughout the ages.

Gloria Steinem, in her book "Marilyn: Norma Jeane," linked the rise of feminism with the interest in Marilyn among women in the decade following her death. Her self-invention became a model that women could use to be themselves—something ossified later by the likes of Madonna, who mimicked her with her "Material Girl" video taking after Marilyn's "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend." She took what Marilyn started to a whole new level.

But something about Marilyn's naivety continues to invite audiences in for more. There was nothing toxic about what she was serving up, it was safe and everything a girl should be. She became the '50s ideal, perfectly poised along with James Dean and Elvis as legendary sex symbols. At 5'5", she would be short by today's model standards yet her body type fit the perfect '50s ideal—even at a now unthinkable size 12.

Her shape perfectly accentuated the pushed up breasts, cinched in waist and puffed out skirts first begun by Christian Dior's "New Look" in 1947.

All in all, she was always Marilyn—an entity that stood alone no matter what the medium and became a brand recognizable still today—the tragic dumb blond. Recognized world-wide, she was as pure as Coca Cola and as homegrown as apple pie. She was

the kind of girl every man dreamed to bring home to mama and the lil' devil he hoped to bed.

And her history is just as elusive from her troubled tales of being born illegitimate to being shuffled among foster homes and married at a young age—only to follow with multiple marriages. She seemed to give her all to the world of celluloid and leave nothing for herself. But her generosity came at a cost and some feel that the emptiness eventually overcame her, that she committed suicide. Others protest, giving into more grandiose ideas of her final days, including conspiracy theories and mob hits, bringing up her rumored affairs with RFK and JFK. The bottles of pills they found near her bedside were symbolic of many things: the secrets she hid inside, the inner self she tried to run from, the way that others tried to bottle up that sexual fireball she had become and contain her—afraid they would be engulfed by her heat.

The bright lights of Hollywood came at a painful cost for the orphaned Norma Jean Baker. But Marilyn was not blind to its effects. She said, "Hollywood is a place where they'll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul."

The Boca Raton Museum of Art is showcasing her life through a series of photographs. This on-screen goddess is revered through 268 works by more than 80 artists, including including Eve Arnold, Richard Avedon, Bernard of Hollywood, Peter Blake, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Antonio de Felipe, Milton H. Greene, Ernst Haas, Tom Kelly, Douglas Kirkland, Christopher Makos, Yasumasa Morimura, Mel Ramos, Mimmo Rotella, Sam Shaw, Bert Stern and Andy Warhol. They will be exhibiting their view of her through everything from photography to pop art. The "Life as a Legend" collection will be spotlighted from December 6-April 1, 2007.

When asked why this international exhibition was brought to the museum, George S. Bolge, Executive Director, said, "At a time when moral responsibilities and ethical values are being overlooked by society's head-long plunge into the pursuit of money and power, I felt that it might be beneficial at this time to examine, in depth, our "fall from grace" as exemplified in the making of the career and the fashioning of the "icon" known as Marilyn Monroe. This investigative analysis is carried out by the real purveyors of public achievement—the artists." ☒

Boca Raton Museum is located at 501 Plaza Real in Mizner Park, Boca Raton. 561.392.2500. www.bocamuseum.org. *More quotes by Marilyn Monroe can be found at www.brainyquote.com.

