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Liner Notes: Why we won't let musicians rest in peace

Jesse Kinos-Goodin May 23, 2012 – 10:00 AM ET | Last Updated: May 22, 2012 7:02 PM ET



Steve Murray

Disco is back. Well, back on the charts, at least. Following the deaths of Donna Summer and the Bee Gees' Robin Gibb last week, both *The Journey: The Very Best of Donna Summer* and *The Ultimate Bee Gees* are now in the Top 10 on Amazon's bestsellers list. Summer reached No. 1 within hours of her death announcement, since dropping to No. 7, and the Bee Gees, at the time of writing, were at No. 3 and climbing.

This is by no means an unusual occurrence: In the week following the death of Adam "MCA" Yauch earlier this month, sales of the entire Beastie Boys catalogue jumped 1,235%; Whitney Houston's *Greatest Hits* shot straight to No. 1 on iTunes' Top 100 songs after she died in February; Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black* reached No. 1 on the British charts days after her death in 2011; and in 2009, Michael Jackson's *Number Ones*, *The Essential Michael Jackson* and *Thriller* flew off of store (and digital) shelves.

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It's called the "death effect" and it's the same for actors, authors and artists — whether it's an increase in exposure or a supply-induced demand (no more painter, no more paintings), public hunger for a person's work grows exponentially following their passing. When it comes to musicians, however, the situation has the added element of necromancy, a sort of pop culture-tinged resurrection. From conspiracy theories claiming fake deaths to companies using technology to revive long-gone artists, audiences refuse to let musicians rest in peace.

"If you go back to the times in which we start to form really deep attachments to our music and musicians, it's in our adolescence when we're seeking new identities," says Susan O'Neill, a music psychologist and associate professor at Simon Fraser University. "It gives music this particular ability to tap into our emotional layer, more so than any other art form, and it becomes associated with personal memories in our lives. You can see why we have the strong connection."

O'Neill points to a 2001 study called *Functions of Music in Everyday Life*, which found that "happiness-elation and nostalgia-longing were more frequent" in memories triggered by music, "whereas anger-irritation, boredom-indifference and anxiety-fear were more

frequent in episodes with non-musical emotions.”

“And when people have these deep, powerful experiences through music, they might strive their whole lives to recapture them again,” O’Neill adds.

That may explain the recent trend of using technology to create musicians’ ghostly reappearances, a trend kicked off by Tupac Shakur’s hologram at the Coachella music festival this past April. It was a shame, according to Michael Jackson’s brother, Jackie — but only because the Jackson family had the idea to digitally resurrect the King of Pop two years earlier. “Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” he told E! online when asked if he and his brothers would tour with the hologram. “We’re going to honour him on the stage. He’d want us to do our thing to the best of our ability.”

Using lights and mirrors to sell tickets might not fall under everyone’s definition of honouring a person’s memory, especially when it targets fans’ emotional attachment to the deceased. But in terms of marketing, it’s brilliant. For example, Brian May of Queen, who was reported to have used a hologram Freddie Mercury at the 10th anniversary performance of *We Will Rock You* in London this month, told the BBC, “People will come out saying, ‘Did we actually see Freddie?’ ”

And in the fall at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, Glenn Gould, the virtuoso Canadian pianist who died at 50, “will play the piano live for us, via technology,” Mervon Mehta, executive director of performing arts, told the *Post*. As part of the Conservatory’s *BACHanalia* concert, a computer program has “digitized Glenn Gould’s recordings,” Mehta added. “You’ll see the keys and the pedal go up and down.”

While the audience is essentially paying to see the ghost of Gould play one more time, seeing as how he stopped giving public concerts at the age of 32, you have to wonder if this the best way to “honour” the musician, as Jackson would say. Whether it’s a hologram onstage or magically moving piano pedals and keys, fans will still be watching a previously recorded performance, albeit one that, thanks to technology, allows fans to tap into those feelings of “happiness-elation and nostalgia-longing” found to be triggered by music.

At the extreme end of this idea are the the conspiracy theorists who claim many deceased artists are in fact still alive. Shortly after Jackson’s death, for instance, the website MichaelJacksonSightings.com emerged from the depths of the Web, documenting blurry photos of one-gloved strangers taken by fans across the globe. Meanwhile, The Doors’ Jim Morrison has apparently put on a bit of weight and now lives in Paris, the same home as his grave. And before Shakur was a meme-spawning hologram, he was living in Cuba recording music that mentions pop-culture ephemera from after his death, such as the movie *Armageddon*.

But by far the most famous alive/dead artist is Elvis Presley, whose passing is the subject of a wealth of books, and now this year’s straight-to-DVD film, *Elvis Found Alive*. The mockumentary provides a history of Presley’s career, up to and past the point where he “fakes his death” and moves into witness protection. Now he spends his days blending in at Elvis look-alike contests and planning his big comeback, but there’s only one person standing in his way — Barack Obama. Yes, the U.S. President has been preventing Presley’s triumphant return because of the information the singer has connecting Obama to those lefty terrorists, the Weather Underground. “If Obama is not re-elected, I’ll [return],” the Presley character says in the film.

Whether it’s concert tickets, albums or even elections, it seems deceased musicians are always selling something.

• Email: jkinosgoodinn@nationalpost.com | Twitter: [jessekg](https://twitter.com/jessekg)

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