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Friday, June 26, 2009

Farrah Fawcett: 1947-2009

Life and death of an 'Angel'

Pop icon and TV/film star Farrah Fawcett loses her long battle with cancer

Mekeisha Madden Toby / Detroit News Television Writer

Actress Farrah Fawcett had the warm, mega-watt smile of an angel and her feathered mane was as good as a halo. Best known for her brief but memorable role on TV's "Charlie's Angels," Fawcett stole men's hearts and inspired a trend that had women all over the world curling and spraying their way to winged perfection.

The pop icon died Thursday in a Santa Monica, Calif., hospital after losing a long, very public battle with anal and liver cancer. She was 62.

Fawcett left "Charlie's Angels" after one season (1976-77), but that's all the time she needed to make her indelible mark on popular culture. An overnight sex symbol, a poster of her in a dampened, clingy red swimsuit sold in the millions.

Advertisement "Farrah represented a whole post-feminism shift," said Elayne Rapping, a professor of television and the culture of celebrity at the University at Buffalo-SUNY. "Yes, 'Charlie's Angels' was known as a 'jiggle show,' but it also introduced the idea that women can be strong and do anything a man can do even in high heels and not have a hair out of place. And what an incredibly sexy head of hair she had."

Other roles would shape the way we looked at the Texas native, including her Emmy-nominated performance as a battered woman who eventually fought back in the 1984 made-for-TV movie "The Burning Bed." The flick was based on the true story of a Dansville, Mich. woman. But it was Fawcett's time as Jill Munroe, one in a trio of mystery-solving beauties, which made her a star.

Over the years, Fawcett's other TV credits included the small-screen flick "Poor Little Rich Girl: The Barbara Hutton Story" (1987), "Small Sacrifices" (1989) and "Criminal Behavior" (1992). As for movie credits, she co-starred in "Logan's Run," "Saturn 3," 1997's "The Apostle" and 2000's "Dr. T and the Women."

When Fawcett appeared on "Late Show with David Letterman," to promote "The Apostle," she delivered a loopy and distracted interview that led many to speculate she was on drugs. She later blamed her strange behavior on questionable advice from her mother to be playful.

In 2005, Fawcett headlined her own reality show "Chasing Farrah." TV Land, which produced the series, is rebroadcasting the first two episodes Saturday.

"Farrah Fawcett was full of life and loved to have fun," said Larry W. Jones, president of TV Land. "For the past three years, everyone has been preoccupied with her illness and airing 'Chasing Farrah' allows us to remember her true essence and charisma."

Health issues

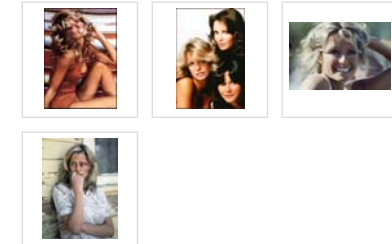
Fawcett was diagnosed with anal cancer in 2006. Then 59, she still maintained a strict regimen of tennis and paddleball but began complaining of exhaustion. She underwent two weeks of tests and was told the devastating news.

As she started treatment, she enlisted the help of long-time companion actor Ryan O'Neal, the father of her son, Redmond, born in 1985.

Earlier this week, O'Neal told Barbara Walters that he'd asked Fawcett to marry him and she had agreed.



Her poster became an icon of the 1970s.



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O'Neal's proclamations of love only added a new chapter to Fawcett's life as of late, a span of time chronicled in the television documentary "Farrah's Story."

The video-diary of sorts aired on NBC last month and drew more than nine million viewers. NBC is re-airing the special tonight.

Determined to tell her side of the story, Fawcett agreed to make the documentary, in part, to silence the media maelstrom that has raged around her cancerous maladies. "Farrah's Story" featured interviews with her, O'Neal, her good friend Alana Stewart and former "Charlie's Angels" co-stars Jaclyn Smith and Kate Jackson. Both women battled and later overcame breast cancer.

In the documentary, a very determined and occasionally humorous Fawcett was shown seeking cures in Germany as well as the United States, battling the disease with all her might even as her body weakened. In one unforgettable scene, Fawcett was shown shaving off most of her trademark locks before chemotherapy could claim them. Toward the end, she's seen huddled in bed, barely responding to a visit from her son.

"I do not want to die of this disease," she said at one point in the film. "So I say to God, because it is after all, in his hands, 'It is seriously time for a miracle.'"

Humble beginnings

Born Feb. 2, 1947, in Corpus Christi, Texas, she was named Ferrah Leni Fawcett by her mother, Pauline, who said she added the Ferrah because it sounded good with Fawcett. The actress later changed the "e" in Ferrah to an "a."

After attending Roman Catholic grade school and W.B. Ray High School, Fawcett enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin. Fellow students voted her one of the 10 most beautiful people on the campus and her photos were

eventually spotted by movie publicist David Mirisch, who suggested she pursue a film career.

After overcoming her parents' objections, she agreed and left college for Hollywood. Soon she was appearing in TV shows such as "That Girl," "The Flying Nun" and "I Dream of Jeannie."

But the best was yet to come for Fawcett -- who was eventually billed as Farrah Fawcett-Majors because of her marriage to "Six Million Dollar Man" star Lee Majors. The two divorced in 1982.

"She was an angel on Earth and now an angel forever," Majors told the Associated Press Thursday.

Fawcett is survived by her companion O'Neal; son Redmond O'Neal; father James William Fawcett; and a host of family and friends. Funeral arrangements were not complete at press time.

Farrah Fawcett

Born: Ferrah Leni Fawcett on Feb. 2, 1947, in Corpus Christi, Texas

Illness: Revealed she had cancer in 2006.

Died: June 25, 2009 in Santa Monica, Calif.

Family life: Once married to "Six Million Dollar Man" star Lee Majors (1973-1982). Lived with actor Ryan O'Neal and had one son, Redmond O'Neal.

TV start: Had guest roles on "I Dream of Jeannie," "The Flying Nun" and "The Partridge Family" before landing her breakout role on "Charlie's Angels"

Source: imdb.com

On TV

'Farrah's Story'

9 tonight, NBC, Channel 4

'Chasing Farrah'

9 p.m. Saturday, TV Land

'BIO Remembers: Farrah Fawcett'

10 p.m. Monday, BIO

mmadden@detnews.com (313) 222-2501 The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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