

Cultural Daily

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Childhood Heroes: Part 1, Mickey Mantle

Eric · Tuesday, August 19th, 2014



I've been blogging a lot about my childhood lately. My first discovery of anti-Semitism on Valentines Road in suburban Westbury, New York. My horrendous, forced-upon-me Bar Mitzvah at Temple Sholom, also in Westbury. A lot of pain, a lot of negativity, blah blah blah. We all have it. So what? Can I really transform the microcosm of my own pain into the universality of art? Make it the story of other people's pain and suffering? Like O'Neill? Arthur Miller? Tennessee Williams?



The three greatest American playwrights. Not that I'm a great American playwright. I'm not. But...I'm a theater prof and a self-proclaimed spoken word artist. And these three dark and tragic playwrights have always inspired and motivated me.

Then this week I read about Maya Angelou's passing.



Our esteemed, though perhaps not so critically-acclaimed, poet laureatess. And I'm reminded about the life-long transformation of her personal pain and story into beauty, into art, that uplifts and inspires. In a different way than the men above. Do I want to do this? Can I possibly do it? I don't know.

But today, I want to give it a shot. I want to blog about my...childhood heroes. Do you have any? Who are they? Is the innocence of childhood the only time we can have "heroes"? I know some of you would definitely argue, "No, I still have heroes. People who I look up to, who inspire me." But for me, I think when I finally "grew up," say by the end of my extended adolescence, I was done with heroes, people who I put on pedestals to inspire me and who I wanted to emulate. I wanted to live my own life, perhaps in my own "heroic" way.

Anyway, my first hero ever, I'm embarrassed to admit, was...Mickey Mantle.



Number 7. "The Mick." The Hall of Fame New York Yankee center fielder of the mid 1950s, who, long before I ever reached the age of 10, was the be-all and end-all of my childhood hero worship.

The Mick was, inarguably, the greatest “switch hitter” in the history of baseball, meaning he could bat from both the left and right sides of the plate. He won the almost-unattainable Triple Crown of baseball in 1956. Most home runs, most runs batted in, highest batting average. It’s only been done twice since. Carl Yastrzemski did it for Boston in 1967 and Miguel Cabrera did it for Detroit in 2012. But back in 1956, when I was nine years old, it was nothing less than miraculous.

The New York Yankees were the “Bronx Bombers,” the greatest “dynasty” in sports. At least in baseball. They were absolutely loved by us New Yorkers, and absolutely hated by the rest of the nation. They just won too goddam much! It seemed like they went to the World Series every year, and won most of them. And Mickey Mantle was their most glamorous, most talented, and most celebrated player. His rippled, Oklahoma farm boy back was sculpted like a champion bodybuilder’s. He could run faster than the gods themselves. Fastest home to first base speed in the history of baseball. He could steal more bases than anyone else in the game, hit baseballs further than anyone else, and play center field as good as Willie Mays and Joe DiMaggio. We all knew he was going to the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.



But The Mick was flawed...which only made him all the more loved by Yankee fans around the world, and by young hero worshipers like me, on Westbury, Long Island. You see, The Mick was born with a congenital osteomyelitic condition in his left leg, and many of his family members had succumbed to Hodgkin’s Disease, cancer of the lymphatic system, more times than he liked talking about. We worried about The Mick. He was vulnerable. And then, on top of that, he was always getting hurt. As early as his 19 year old rookie year, he tore the cartilage in his right knee, running down a fly ball in right field, while DiMaggio was still playing center. Later on in his career, he got tangled up with a drainage cover in center field in Yankee Stadium, and he got carried off on a stretcher, much to the horror of a national television audience. Of course, when he came back weeks later, he hit the ball out of the park in his first at bat. Mick was like that, the stuff of legend.



Off the field, he had a free-wheelin’, impish manner that we all loved too. He was always getting into innocent trouble with his Yankee pals, Whitey Ford, the great Yankee left hand pitcher, and Billy Martin, the one-time Bomber second baseman who would later become Yankee manager, only to get his ass fired more times by Yankee owner, George Steinbrenner, than he got hired. Little did we know, or care, that Mantle was a life-long alcoholic and womanizer. Those weren’t even terms of conversation back then. President Kennedy? Mickey Mantle? Womanizers? No way. The press protected them from that kind of scandal. It was an unspoken “rule of the game.” Just like the old Hollywood movie stars, Mantle and sports heroes were like gods to us kids. Like gods to fans around the world, no matter what their age. We didn’t want to hear about our heroes’ imperfections. Their flaws. It wasn’t until the women’s movement of the late 60s and the shocking revelation that even the great Magic Johnson had the HIV virus, that our sports heroes became all too human.

Like I said, when “I grew up,” I was embarrassed that Mickey Mantle was my first boyhood hero. He became so “un-cool” after he left baseball, often showing up drunk, as a trophy athlete at Las Vegas show time events, much like ex-boxing champ Joe Louis had a generation before him. He had a sad, alcoholic decline, and even his great baseball reputation was tarnished by the changing and maturation of the times, by his later life exploits, and by his damaged public image.

But hey, I can't, or won't, ever deny my childhood hero worship of Mickey Mantle. Sure, maybe I was just a kid, and there wasn't much choice about it. All us New Yawk kids loved The Mick. It was just a given. As if by osmosis. Mickey Mantle was a god among men. Our "hero." No if, ands, or buts about it. It's only a shame that we all have to eventually... grow up. Have the blinders removed from the innocent eyes of our childhoods. A shame and a necessity. Because apparently, it's part of the whole deal.

But here's to The Mick, the one and only Mickey Mantle, my first hero.



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