

Gone Too Soon

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36. She died of an accidental overdose. A little over a year later, the 35th President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated while riding in the Presidential limousine in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas. He was 46 and still remains to be the youngest President elected and the youngest to die in office. Another leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., was also assassinated. He was 39 years old when he was shot on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Another icon gone too soon was Elvis Presley who, coincidentally, met his untimely fate in Memphis, Tennessee as well. He was found in his home and was 42 years old.

The list of leaders, icons, and prominent individuals that have gone on to pass, often too soon, could go on and on. One individual in particular that many might not know as much about, but is also a late great, is Larry Leon Hamlin.

Hamlin is different from the others mentioned here. Though a late great gone too soon, he didn't sing, dance, preside over the country, model, or get the press that the others received. He did, however, have a dream like Martin Luther King, Jr. His dream involved theatre. He lead people, the way John F. Kennedy did, but he lead them to be able to appreciate and understand theatre in a way that wouldn't have been possible had it not been for him. He produced, directed, and wrote pieces that involved the kind of entertainment similar to the type Marilyn Monroe acted in. Still, Hamlin is not as widely known as the others, but deserves equal accolades.

Born in Reidsville, North Carolina on September 25, 1948, Hamlin took to theatre very early. He realized his passion for theatre after being in a first grade play at the age of five. We should recall that there was another five year old who, years later, would prove to be passionate about his craft too - Michael Jackson. At five, Jackson became a member of the Jackson 5 with his brothers Tito, Jackie, Jermaine and Marlon. From then on, entertaining became Jackson's life. Hamlin's involvement in his passion was very similar Jackson. He wanted to be part of theatre and all it encompassed right from the start. He acted from first grade all the way through high school. After high school Hamlin attended Johnson & Wales University in Rhode Island and migrated toward an interest in business, which he majored in.

Post graduating from Johnson & Wales, Hamlin decided that he

needed to make a decision about what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. The verdict came easily - theatre. Hamlin went on to take theatre classes at Brown University and became part of the school's theatre company. He eventually formed his first company, Star Theatre Productions, while in Rhode Island in the mid 1970s. There were hardly any black theatres in the country and Hamlin wanted to change that. Upon moving back to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Hamlin noted the lack of black theatre once again and founded the North Carolina Black Repertory Company in 1979. He was the executive and artistic director.

Around the time that Hamlin was forming his first company, Jackson was also making a name for himself with some "firsts." It turned out that Jackson too, had interest in theatre. In 1978, Jackson made his first movie debut starring as the Scarecrow in *The Wiz*, a classic hit. In 1979 when Hamlin introducing himself to the world and founding another company to head up, Jackson was introducing himself to the world as a solo artist. He released his first solo as an adult, *Off the Wall*. Jackson was on a mission to solve the problem of only being associated with his brothers by releasing solo projects, and he was doing well.

Hamlin was on a mission as well. He had a thing with solving problems too—he had to solve them. During the 1980s, Hamlin was taken aback by the rate at which different black theatre companies were being forced to drop and close due to lack of funds, management, and material. Being the problem solver that he was, he envisioned a conference where the individuals of the black theatre could all unite and share with each other their knowledge, experience, and overall love for theatre. Having a conference would help maintain black theatre for years to come. His vision turned into the National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF) and it debuted in 1989. Through this debut, Hamlin was definitely defining himself.

The '80s proved to be a defining period for Jackson as well. In 1982 he released the album *Thriller* and it sold

over 50 million copies worldwide, crowning him the "King of Pop." In 1983 Jackson did his now signature move, the moonwalk, for the first time. In 1984 the King of Pop got his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In 1985 he co-wrote *We Are the World* with Lionel Richie. The song was written as a charity single to help benefit the poor in Africa and



the United States. It was a brilliant effort and combined 45 popular musicians.

Founding the NBTF was also a brilliant move. When it debuted, there were over 10,000 attendees, 30 performances, and 17 of the

best black theatre companies represented. The first chairperson of the festival was the renowned Maya Angelou who brought along her friend, the iconic Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey also had ties to Jackson. In 1993 the King of Pop invited Winfrey to his Neverland Ranch in Santa Ynez, California for a live interview. It was his first interview in fourteen years

and was shown all over the world. It became the fourth most-viewed non-sports program in US history.

Obviously Winfrey has clout. When she teamed up with Angelou to support the NBTF, she served as a celebrity guest and helped draw some attention to the occasion. The coverage of the event ranged both nationally and internationally. It was noted by well-known publications as a "historic and culturally significant event." Since the debut, the biannual event has grown exponentially. Hamlin is the only American producer and artistic director to produce eight National Black Theatre Festivals. The festival now draws in more than 60,000 people and includes a host of celebrity regulars such as Denzel Washington, Malcolm-Jamal Warner, Angela Bassett, Cicely Tyson, Sidney Poitier, and Malik Yoba just to name a few.

The NBTF, managed by the North Carolina Black Repertory Company Hamlin founded, has not only united black theatre for the country, but it has also invigorated the city of Winston-Salem. With people filling up hotels and restaurants over the span of the almost weeklong festival, a lot of money is brought in. Winston-Salem has become a cultural landmark.

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