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Remembering Princess Diana

10 years later, her influence — on her boys, her charities, and the world — lives on. Here's why

By Sarah Lyall



Kim Knott/Camera Press/Retna Ltd.

She appears only in short, tantalizing flashbacks that flicker across the screen and remind you all over again how young and luminous and full of promise she was. But even as a ghost, Diana manages to be more vividly alive than anyone in *The Queen*, last year's award-winning movie about the extraordinary outpouring of emotion that followed the Princess' death in 1997.

That was the way it always was with Diana, whose star blazed so brightly and whose life was extinguished so suddenly. August 31 will mark the tenth anniversary of that bewildering night when the black Mercedes in which she was traveling slammed into a pillar in the Pont de L'Alma tunnel in Paris, robbing the world of perhaps its most vibrant public personality. (Also killed, along with the Princess, were her companion, Dodi Fayed, and their driver, Henri Paul.) But Diana has not let go of her tight hold on the public

imagination. In a world that worships celebrity, where movie stars, models, and "personalities" are the glue that binds us all together, no one has emerged to take Diana's place. Perhaps no one ever will.

"She had a vast love affair with the public, and the public responded in spades," says historian Amanda Foreman, best-selling author of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, about an 18th-century Lady not unlike Diana. But Foreman is quick to note that being "photographed and ogled and written about is not enough to make you loved. It was the kind of personality that Diana had, a combination of charisma and extreme vulnerability and sex appeal." Adds the American historian Doris Kearns Goodwin: "There are plenty of beautiful women who do philanthropic things, whose marriages have ups and downs. With Diana, it was all these elements coming together — her personality, her beauty, her royal title, and the nature of her death" — that made her an icon.

Even now, it is as hard to pin down the phenomenon that was Diana as it is to describe air or to hold water in your hand. She was a mass of contradictions, a human Rorschach test, someone people saw through the prism of their own prejudices and obsessions. She was beautiful, untouchable, royal; she was flawed, troubled, all too mortal. She lived a rarefied life of wealth and glittering celebrity; she often seemed lonely. She was saintly and endlessly giving; she was needy and endlessly wanting. She was a master manipulator of her public persona, but was hounded, and ultimately killed, by the paparazzi whose attention she craved. She fed off the world's adoration but never seemed to find the love and security she so transparently needed.

"I think [at the end] she was still a very unhappy girl in many respects," says Richard Kay, who wrote about Diana for London's *Daily Mail* and became part of her trusted inner circle, speaking to her frequently through her final months. "She sort of despaired that she would ever find happiness. What she was looking for didn't really exist. She wanted too many paradoxes."

There is nothing paradoxical or ambivalent about the extravagant events planned to celebrate her life and mark the anniversary of her death. On July 1, the day that would have been her 46th birthday, her sons, princes William and Harry, now 24 and 22, are hosting a memorial concert at Wembley Stadium in London; proceeds are to go to the Princess' memorial fund and to some of her



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favorite charities. Diana's old friend Elton John will perform, as will Duran Duran, one of her favorite bands. The Princess' love for musical theater and for the ballet will be represented too: Sir Andrew Lloyd Weber is to stage a medley of hits from his musicals and there will be a performance by the English National Ballet. The princes are calling it the Concert for Diana: "We wanted to have this big concert...full of energy, full of the sort of fun and happiness which I know she would have wanted," Prince William said in an interview last winter. "It's got to be the best birthday present she ever had."

Then, on August 31, the Royal Family, as well as friends and representatives of the Princess' charities, will attend a memorial service in London, to include, as Prince Harry has said pointedly, "both sides of the family, our mother's side and our father's side — everyone getting together." As of this writing, the guest list is still being worked out, but Diana's ex-husband, Prince Charles, is expected to attend and so is his second wife, Camilla Parker Bowles, the Duchess of Cornwall, who is widely blamed for destroying his marriage to Diana.

This month, the long-awaited book *The Diana Chronicles* will be published. Written by the British-born former *Vanity Fair* and *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown, the book is an examination of how Diana's character was shaped by the powerful, and not always sympathetic, women in her life. Over the summer, documentaries looking back on Diana's life will flood TV screens, while newspapers and magazines will produce glossy commemorative issues and special sections

All this attention is a reflection, at least in part, of how people related to her personally. "She touched everyone in a different way," says Ingrid Seward, editor in chief of *Majesty* magazine. Diana was an icon with a common touch — a heroine to the insecure, the troubled, and every bride who did not get along with her in-laws. Even those who professed not to like her were oddly drawn to her.

"A lot of people saw a bit of themselves in Diana, especially women," Seward explains. "How many women have been in unhappy marriages, unhappy relationships? And there was Diana, going through what millions of them were going through too."



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The difference, of course, was that Diana went through it all in public. Her fairy-tale marriage to the heir to the British throne fell apart in full view of the world. He couldn't give up his mistress. She, unable or unwilling to conform to the stuffy traditions of the Royal Family, became increasingly unhappy and unstable and sought comfort in lovers of her own.

But many people cheered her on as she navigated the dark waters surrounding the British Royal Family, which she wryly called the Firm. "The thing that I always liked about her was that when the Royal Family bullied, she stood up to them. That took a lot of courage," says Stephen Frears, who directed *The Queen*. In contrast to the fussy, culture-bound royals, "she was so vivacious in the film, so young and fresh."

Frears sounds half in love with her, and truly, when Diana directed the laser beam of her attention on you, it was as if there was no one else in the world. She made grown statesmen behave like infatuated adolescents, as the world saw in that famous photograph of a black-tie dinner in New York where Henry Kissinger, seated next to the Princess, his attention directed at her famous décolletage, appears completely besotted

She was also a good friend. "I miss her," says Richard Kay, "as someone I could confide in and who could confide in me. She was not the paranoid schizophrenic, as many contemporary writers have her. She had a lively sense of humor, did wonderful impressions. And she worried constantly about being seen to do the right thing."

Still, Diana could withdraw affection as easily as she gave it. Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, experienced this capriciousness firsthand, and even after all this time, she still sounds upset when she talks about it. "The saddest thing, at the end, we hadn't spoken for a year, though I never knew

the reason," she told *Harper's Bazaar* earlier this spring. "I wrote letters, thinking whatever happened didn't matter, let's sort it out. And I knew she'd come back. In fact, the day before she died, she rang a friend of mine and said, 'Where's that Red? I want to talk to her.'"

It has been said that Diana irrevocably changed the Royal Family — "It's vital that the monarchy keep in touch with the people," she once declared — and Britain itself, bringing raw emotion to a buttoned-up country. Ten years later, there's a sense that Diana's death was a real turning point. "She changed the face of royalty; she dragged it into the 20th century," Seward says. "I think it was coming anyway, but Diana personified it, the modern sense of people" — the royals, as well as Britons as a whole — "being much more open about their feelings."

England has had its periods of public mourning before, notably after the deaths of Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, but never before has it happened in quite the way it did with Diana, in the era of sound bites and the 24-hour news cycle and images instantaneously broadcast around the world. "Real-time reporting creates its own momentum," Amanda Foreman says. Viewers saw people on TV crying and leaving bouquets of flowers at the palace gates, and they started to weep and want to pay their respects too.



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For a few fragile weeks in 1997, the monarchy seemed genuinely in danger of collapse. "Diana was a disaster for the monarchy," Foreman says. "She hurt them terribly. But they are beginning to recover." No longer competing with his more charismatic, more popular ex-wife, Prince Charles has come out all right. He is an eccentric and slightly fusty king-in-waiting, but also a caring father and dedicated environmentalist. Camilla Parker Bowles has, surprisingly, resurrected herself as an uncontroversial figure who adores her husband and — in contrast to her predecessor — doesn't hog his limelight or draw attention to her problems, whatever they may be.

Queen Elizabeth, battered in the court of public opinion after Diana's death, celebrated her Golden Jubilee, 50 years on the throne, in 2002. She stands now as a symbol of constancy, prudence, tradition, duty, and old-fashioned British values in a time of bewildering change. (Ironically, *The Queen* — with Helen Mirren's Oscar-winning performance — is ultimately a valentine to Elizabeth II, and reflects the sharp shift in public opinion. But the film could not have been made even five years ago.) And Diana's sons, raised in the glare of publicity, have replaced their mother in the gossip columns.

Prince Harry is a hard-partying wild child whose Zimbabwean girlfriend, Chelsy Davy, shares his penchant for clubbing and drinking. Last March, it was announced that Harry, having graduated from Sandhurst military academy, planned to fight with the rest of his unit (the Blues and Royals regiment of the Household Cavalry) in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Prince William — respectable and levelheaded, with his mother's charming smile — keeps company with longtime girlfriend Kate Middleton, a sleek brunette whom he met when both were students at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Always impeccably turned out, Kate doesn't seem to suffer from any of the nerves Diana showed in her early days with Charles, and apparently has been welcomed as a safe choice by his family.

The princes are also working for their own charities: William is a patron of Centrepoin, which helps the homeless, and Harry of Sentebale, which helps young AIDS victims in Southern Africa. It seems that both are becoming the sort of people that Diana hoped they would when she said: "I want my boys to have an understanding of people's emotions, their insecurities, people's distress, and their hopes and dreams."

William and Harry have repeatedly expressed the wish that their mother be left to rest in peace. But the question of exactly how she died — whether it was a simple accident or the result of some sort of conspiracy — has still not been legally resolved. Last December, a three-year, \$7.3 million inquiry conducted by Lord Stevens of Kirkwhelpington, a former metropolitan police commissioner, concluded in an 832-page report that there had been no conspiracy. The accident, it said, was simply that: an accident.



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Yet the questions won't go away; like J.F.K.'s death, Diana's will always be shrouded in mystery in the eyes of those inclined to see conspiracies. Diana's inquest, a legal procedure that determines how a death came about, still hasn't taken place. Scheduled for this spring, it was delayed yet again when Mohamed Al Fayed, the owner of Harrods and father of Dodi, Diana's boyfriend, demanded more time to amass evidence for his theory that the British establishment, led by the Royal Family, had orchestrated her death.

There are other unanswered questions about Diana, perhaps the most compelling of which is what would she have become, had she lived. It is as impossible to imagine an older Diana as it is to imagine a middle-aged Marilyn Monroe or an elderly Princess Grace. But partly because Diana did die young, and was so widely photographed in life, it seems safe to assume she will be of interest to future generations. "Even 100 years

from now, historians will have those images," says Doris Kearns Goodwin, "and that will probably keep her memory alive and vivid."

There is no question that in her final years, Diana was looking for a new direction, as her brother, Earl Spencer, noted in his oration at her funeral. Richard Kay, for one, believes that she found it: "The last year truly liberated her.... Once she shed the title and everything that went with it, she became a bigger, more global figure. It was the year of Kissinger, [of meeting] Hillary Clinton, Mother Teresa, and the whole land mine thing." (Diana had made headlines for her ardent campaign against the use of these antipersonnel weapons, particularly in third world countries.) In the public arena, he adds, "she was at the pinnacle of her success."

Earl Spencer may have summed it up best, in his ringing words at the funeral: His sister was "a very British girl who transcended nationality," a woman "with a natural nobility, who was classless and who proved in the last year that she needed no royal title to continue to generate her particular brand of magic."

While her reputation has ebbed and flowed over the years, the mood has softened now to an appreciation for what Diana was, and a sadness for what she might have become. As Ingrid Seward says, "It's like the opposite of that line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: 'The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.' With Diana, the good seems to live after."

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