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REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

The captivation of those who can offer diversion

The full-saturation media coverage of Michael Jackson between his unexpected death June 25 and his memorial service Tuesday understandably has us wondering about celebrity in our country and our cultural values.

There is a long tradition of such issues and an equally long tradition of cultures going gaga over famous performers of all kinds — bestowing on their own talented entertainers the equivalents of Academy and Emmy awards and Kennedy Center honors.

In ancient Greece, Olympic victors received public honors, including the privilege of life-long dining at state expense. Midway through the brutal Peloponnesian War, the controversial Athenian statesman Alcibiades was criticized for sponsoring the unprecedented number of seven chariot teams at the Olympic Games. He defended his extravagance by pointing out that by coming in first, second and fourth with three of his teams — then as now, everybody loved a winner — and by “taking care that everything else was in a style worthy of victory,” he had done something “honorable and left behind an impression of power” that brought credit to all Athenians.

Alcibiades also lavished money on choruses for performances at public festivals. All this money directed at what even the Greeks would call entertainment was, he claimed, “no useless folly,” despite the envy of those who were jealous of the fame he thereby achieved.

Alcibiades knew his political base. The Greeks had held their Olympic Games even when being invaded by massive Persian coalition forces. The Athenians staged their tragedies and comedies at a Super Bowl-scale festival every one of the 27 years they were at war with the Spartans.

In our country, major league baseball and pro football were played right through World War II. NFL games were played the Sunday after President John Kennedy was assassinated. Movies made big profits during World War II. James Cagney won his only Oscar in 1942 for his role in “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”

In February 1968, while South Vietnamese army and U.S. forces were still fighting to beat back the Tet offensive, the 5th Dimension accepted the Grammy for their record of the year “Up, Up and Away,” and Elvis won for his gospel record “How Great Thou Art.” Nothing, it seems, sates our need for diversion and our fascination with the gifted human beings who divert us.

We might question whether our time and money could be better spent. But what answer would our soldiers have given in World War II, the Berlin airlift, Korea, Vietnam, Beirut and the Persian Gulf War after they had been given a reminder of home and the gift of laughter by the tireless Bob Hope and the assorted singers, dancers, actors and comedians who traveled in his USO shows? One Vietnam vet writes of the shows from 1964-72 on DVD: “I remember sitting down by myself after catching the show in person at the air base in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, and just feeling good. That feeling didn’t return watching the show again, but the memory of it did and with it a feeling of gratitude to Hope and everyone who traveled with him.”

Our lives are hard. Entertainers come into them and take us out of them in ways that only “celebrity” figures in politics, religion, education and science can.

Who can blame fans of Michael Jackson for giving a new meaning to “I Want You Back”?

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