Rock Our World

July 1, 2000 By Michael Musto

Rock Hudson was the first person ever to get AIDS—at least according to the media. When the world found out in July 1985 that the ’50s macho screen icon “had it,” the press developed a sudden passion to cover the disease. More than 6,000 Americans had already died from AIDS, but with Hudson’s famous face on it, the fag-and-junkie epidemic suddenly counted.

The chronic closet case didn’t bare his chest right away. On July 17, he appeared on former costar Doris Day’s TV show looking pale, gaunt and shockingly wasted. His publicist insisted he’d been on an extreme diet; in fact, Hudson had been diagnosed with lymphoma and Kaposi’s sarcoma. A week later, in Paris for experimental treatments, Hudson collapsed in the lobby of the Ritz Hotel, and UPI announced he had inoperable liver cancer, possibly linked to AIDS. The media went wild, and even President Reagan, who was two years shy of saying AIDS in public, called to wish him well.

But it was too late. Hudson was near death—and near coming out. A week later, from a UCLA hospital bed, he gave Dr. Michael Gottlieb permission to confirm the AIDS reports. The effect was so galvanizing that old pal Elizabeth Taylor vowed to devote herself to ending the crisis. Journalist Randy Shilts later wrote, “Doctors…called the announcement the single most important event in the history of the epidemic.”

I vividly remember my own mixed reaction to all the hoopla: relief that those in power might finally take action; rage that it took a celebrity to make it happen. I cried for Rock, but even more for America’s warped priorities.

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