Putting On The Ritts

When famed photographer Herb Ritts died suddenly at 50, the media never mentioned the A-word, let alone his heroic battle against blindness. Gay critics cried coverup. Even his friends were upset. This is the real story they say Ritts wanted told

April 1, 2003 By Degen Pener

For Herb Ritts, Friday the 13th of December, 2002, started routinely enough. Leaving his Hollywood Hills home about 8 a.m., the photographer to the stars (who had become a star himself) traveled by limo to El Mirage, an enormous, dry lake-bed two hours north of LA, where he had done many shoots. The seemingly limitless lake-bed, with its flat, cracked earth, appealed to his minimalist aesthetic: In this desolate landscape, Ritts found that the clean lines and gleaming flesh of his subjects stood out all the more dramatically.

That day, Ritts' assignment was to capture actor Ben Affleck for the March 2003 cover of *Vanity Fair*. When Ritts arrived, his 25-person crew was already busy creating sets and placing lights. The morning was cold, just above freezing, and as the day wore on, the wind kept picking up. "There were dust storms," recalls Erik Asla, one of Ritts' assistants. "It was blowing all over." The roiling, murky conditions were as un-Ritts-like as could be. This was a photographer who held a virtual trademark on golden California sunlight. By mid-afternoon, Affleck was tearing around the lake-bed on a motorcycle. At one point, Jennifer Lopez, accompanying her fiance du jour, jumped on the back of the bike. Ritts—who worked hard to keep the mood on his shoots happy and light—busily recorded the couple's antic display, his bird-like profile occasionally peeking out from behind the large camera. He insisted on working right through the worsening weather. "We were getting all this dust in our lungs," Asla says. "Everyone else tried to take cover. Herb ignored it. His focus was on getting the shots, come what may." The shoot lasted until just after sundown. Heading home, Ritts was literally covered in dust.

Many of the people on that ill-fated shoot developed flu-like symptoms. Ritts himself came down with pneumonia and two days later was admitted to UCLA Medical Center. His condition quickly grew dire. By Tuesday, with his heart rate spiking, he was hooked up to a respirator. "It was like an ambush. He got sick so quickly with this crazy harsh pneumonia. The doctors said they had no idea what this pneumonia was," says Erik Hyman, Ritts' lover of six and a half years. "After Tuesday, he couldn't speak anymore. He was definitely trying to hang in there. He was a fighter." Ritts' life ended at 8:55 a.m. on Thursday, December 26. He was 50.

That afternoon, his friend Steven Huvane, a publicist at PMK/HBH who represents the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Aniston, released a short statement saying only that Ritts had

succumbed to “complications of pneumonia.” As far as it went, this was true enough. But for many years, the openly gay Ritts had had HIV—which he had never publicly disclosed. He had also been diagnosed with AIDS, bounced back from four T cells, even won a battle against sight-threatening CMV. Though the pneumonia that killed him was not PCP, once so common among HIVers, there is little doubt that his HIV-compromised immune system was partly to blame. But even in death, at first nothing about his HIV status was revealed.

From that silence, quite a din has emerged. Mere hours after Huvane announced the cause of death as “complications of pneumonia,” a furious debate sprang up on such message boards as Data Lounge and *aidsmeds.com*. “They’re afraid to say the A-word,” one person wrote. “Pneumonia—yeah, we know what that means,” wrote another. Still, the “Herb Ritts Coverup,” as one posting had it, did not last long. On December 27, the day after Ritts’ death, Huvane was asked by *The Advocate*, the LA gay biweekly, if rumors that Ritts was HIV positive were true. The publicist said yes. “Herb certainly never concealed the fact that he was HIV positive,” he told the reporter. “But he was a quiet man. He didn’t send out a press release.” In the quick-time media cycle, however, the official record had already been laid down by *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, and Huvane’s confirmation struck critics as too little, too late. Pugnacious gay pundits Andrew Sullivan and Michelangelo Signorile had immediately weighed in. “It was downright creepy to see a Reagan-era euphemism for AIDS pop up as the cause of Ritts’ death in obituary after obituary,” wrote Signorile in *New York Newsday*. “Once again, this is a disease that dare not speak its name.”

Calling “complications of pneumonia” a “weird locution,” the openly positive Andrew Sullivan wrote on his web site, *andrewsullivan.com*: “Was…Ritts’ pneumonia a freak and dangerous strain that is newsworthy in its own right (like Jim Henson’s) or was it HIV-related? And do newspapers have some responsibility to tell us which? It seems to me that when an openly gay guy dies at 50 of pneumonia, any decent editor would ask a simple follow-up. Or are they still colluding in the shame that some still attach to an HIV diagnosis?”

In fact, many people who knew and loved Ritts were troubled: “A lot of us got upset that AIDS was not given as the reason,” says Sam Shahid, an art director on two of Ritts’ books. “If anything, we need that out there now more than ever. People don’t think you can die of AIDS—and you can.” Shahid continues, “I was a little surprised because he was very open and supportive of AIDS and gay causes. He was publicly out there.” Of course, with HIV, being “out there” is not the same as being “out,” and now some members of Ritts’ own community were looking at his artwork in a new light. As a writer who calls himself Charlie B wrote on his web site Here Inside: “Ritts’ career idolizing beautiful bodies and creating fame ran like a counterpoint to the destruction of body and success wrought by AIDS… through the 1980s and ’90s.” That the photographer who mainstreamed homoeroticism and celebrated muscled flesh had been sick with HIV was news, to say the least [see “Unfinished Business”]. Although Sullivan’s and Signorile’s anger was aimed at the press, the spectre of the “HIV closet” was threatening to tarnish Ritts’ own legacy.

“There’s nothing to criticize this guy for,” counters David Fahey, his gallery dealer. “If he was paranoid about [people knowing], why would he be so involved with the AIDS cause? It doesn’t

make any sense." In fact, Ritts was an early and faithful AIDS advocate. He helped Elizabeth Taylor start her AIDS foundation, donating $1 million from the shots he took of her 1991 wedding to Larry Fortensky. Over the years, he had been on the advisory board of the Elton John AIDS Foundation and generously donated photos and money to such organizations as APLA and amfAR. Ritts was never afraid to have his name associated with the disease.

Still, the mainstream media (excepting some gossip columns) ignored the controversy because covering it at all entailed reporting that Ritts, in fact, had HIV. Even after Huvane essentially outed Ritts as a PWA to *The Advocate*, *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone* ran adoring tributes to their star photographer without mentioning his HIV status or his brave struggle with the disease. At least one magazine, *Vogue*, allegedly was at great pains to avoid the topic. Kevin Bobolsky, a real-estate agent in Santa Fe, who dated Ritts for two years in the early '90s, says, "I talked to *Vogue* for their tribute, and their whole concern was 'You can't out Herb!'" (*Vogue* did not comment.) The fact that *Rolling Stone*'s editor, Jann Wenner, is openly gay, and that *Vogue*'s Anna Wintour was awarded amfAR's Award for Courage in February for helping, among other things, 'to raise AIDS awareness through…articles, editorials and features,' only underscores the irony. "It's so hush-hush! It's 2003 and so many people don't realize he died of AIDS. AIDS is winning if we still have shame and aren't telling the truth," Bobolsky continues. "If they think they're protecting Herb, they're not."

For *POZ*, Ritts' death raised a host of questions, not least because he is the most famous HIVer to die since lifesaving combination therapy made the disease seemingly manageable. First, why did a man with access to the best care die so suddenly? And why were the press writing the first draft of his history with HIV expunged? Was it out of shame or fear or respect for his wishes? What *were* his wishes? And what about *our* wish—the activist one—for Ritts to have come out as a PWA at the height of his powers? (Ritts had the courage to come out as gay on the landmark 1993 NBC special *The Gay '90s*.) "It would have been great if he had spoken up about it, absolutely," Signorile says. "It would have given enormous visibility at a time when AIDS has receded into the background, particularly given that he had such hip stature with young people."

Ritts, however, clearly did not want the relentless scrutiny that comes with being a celebrity role model. Cindy Crawford, whom he once shot for *Vanity Fair* shaving an in-drag k.d. lang, cuts to the chase: "Herb wasn't about living life untruthfully. But I don't think he had a responsibility to be a poster child. He obviously didn't want to be in that position." Ritts is described by friends and family as a sweet, quiet man—and an intensely private one. They strongly deny, though, that he had something to hide. Openly lesbian singer lang herself says: "[Having HIV] wasn't something Herb was really public about, but it had nothing to do with being ashamed."

But Ritts did not want his condition widely known in his business life, especially in the pre-protease days. "I was carrying around these herbs and putting them in glasses at his jobs, running in the back because he didn't want any of the clients to know, and then walking up and saying, 'Oh, here, Herb, you said you wanted a shake,'" recalls Mark Findlay, a friend and former model who shot often with Ritts. Adds another friend: "I would guess as a photographer he would be concerned with how misinformation about his sight would affect his employment." On top of that,

Ritts' milieu was Hollywood and the fashion world, where youth, beauty and health are valued above all else—and HIV stigma remains strong. As Kevin Bobolsky says, "In Hollywood, everyone believes that the truth would ruin glamour. That's why the truth isn't spoken much." Ritts undoubtedly had, over the years, plenty of chances to witness how Hollywood deals with artists who are "too" true about being gay, let alone HIV positive.

Ritts had disclosed his status, however, to a select group of close pals over the years, including many boldface names, such as Richard Gere, Cindy Crawford, Elizabeth Taylor and k.d. lang. In interview after interview, these stars and other friends attest that there was just one simple reason that Ritts had kept his illness private for so long: to shield his mother from worry. "He was very protective of his mother, whom he worshipped," Elizabeth Taylor says. "She didn't need to know. He knew he would die one day, but he didn't want her to live in fear. He wanted her to enjoy his last days with her—and she did."

Ritts and his mother, Shirley, were exceptionally close. An interior designer in LA, Shirley, 82, decorated all of Ritts' showplace houses, from Santa Fe to Malibu to the Hollywood Hills. Friends describe her as a sharp, sophisticated, socially ambitious lady. "Ritts' eye for detail and for everything being perfect, he got from Shirley," says songwriter Bruce Roberts, who knew Ritts for 20 years. (The photographer, who grew up in the well-to-do Brentwood section of LA, is also survived by three siblings; his father, Herbert, died in 2000.) In the '80s, when having HIV and being gay were inextricably linked in the public mind, hiding AIDS as the cause of death in obituaries was usually an attempt to keep the deceased closeted even in the grave. But for Ritts and his mother, homosexuality was anything but off-limits. He had come out to her as gay while in college, and she had embraced him. "I don't understand people who think there's anything strange about it," Shirley says today. "He was the same person I loved a second before," And over the years AIDS came up often in their conversations. "Many people I know have HIV. I brought it up many times and we would talk about it. We were interested in it," she says.

A few close friends say they tried to persuade Ritts to tell her, but he wouldn't hear it. "I didn't feel that comfortable with him not telling Shirley, but I trusted that he knew what was best," lang says. His lover, Hyman, an entertainment lawyer, puts it this way: "He was just concerned for her health and didn't want to worry her. And he didn't want *her* to worry *him* and try to suggest cures and stuff." His resolve to protect Shirley only deepened in recent years as her husband died and her own health became fragile.

Shirley says she understands her son's decision. "If that's what he wanted, then that was right for him. He didn't think I needed that concern." And she insists she never noticed her son was ill. Never? "It's incredible to me that she didn't put two and two together," Bruce Roberts says. "She's a very bright lady."

So for the 10 days Ritts lay dying in the hospital, just as for the many years since he tested positive, Ritts' friends continued to keep Shirley in the dark. "He had specifically said not to tell her during his life," says his friend Bobby Shriver, a Kennedy family member. "Why would we arrogate to ourselves to tell her now that he seems really sick? Suppose he hadn't died? You have

to respect what people wanted." But if Ritts had stipulated what he wanted his mother to know, he left no instructions for how he wanted his obituary to read—he got too sick too fast. "It's not like he had any time to think about it," Shriver says. In fact, Shirley only learned that her son had AIDS the evening of his death. Shriver bore the burden. "I couldn't pull myself together to tell her right there at 9:30 in the morning," he recalls.

But with the newspapers already calling the hospital for a comment that afternoon, Steven Huvane explains, he could not delay putting out a statement. And because no one wanted Shirley to hear on CNN that her son had had AIDS, a decision was made to leave out that particular detail. "It's not like you think, 'There's a *New York Times* deadline, I'd better go tell Shirley,'" Shriver says. "We did the best we could."

Respecting Ritts' wishes by protecting his mother from the news apparently trumped every other concern. "I can feel for them on a personal level, but these are professionals who deal with famous people in emergency situations all the time," Signorile says. "There was an obligation to discuss it openly with the media and then try to solve the problem of getting to his mother before the news came out." Adds Bobolsky:"Bottom line: It *was* covered up. Whatever the reason—because Shirley did or didn't know—it's still insane. Herb would do anything he could to help the AIDS cause. He wouldn't have wanted it covered up." For his part, Huvane says he was puzzled that not a single news outlet asked him a follow-up HIVquestion about Ritts' death until *The Advocate* called a day later. A spokesperson for AP, however, disputes this. "A reporter… specifically asked whether Ritts had AIDS or his death was related to AIDS. The publicist's response was that he couldn't comment on that," says Jack Stokes, the AP's media-relations manager.

In hindsight, Eric Hyman says he regrets not having immediately disclosed that his lover had AIDS. He's anguished by the controversy, but also angry that anyone would judge him for decisions he and Ritts' friends made in shock and grief at the hospital. "I was shot in the heart—and I didn't do the right thing?" Hyman says, his voice breaking. "The most important man in my life died a horrible, premature death—that was the only thing we could think about. So, yeah, I agree it might not have been the best thing in the world. But I don't know how you are supposed to act when the ground is being pulled out from under you."

Even so, within Ritts' inner circle, there still seems to be a kind of tug-of-war between those who want to speak out about his HIV and those who favor silence. Shirley Ritts herself, when first called for a comment, told *POZ* sharply, "That's his business. Isn't it still his business?" In a later phone call, though, she said, "What in the world is there to be ashamed of? I'm *devastated* I lost my son. I'm not ashamed." And at presstime, AIDS hero Elizabeth Taylor—who had already spoken movingly to POZ about her friend's disease—was still inexplicably obscuring the record on CNN's *Larry King Live*. King: "It was AIDS, wasn't it? I mean everyone—" Taylor: "It was pneumonia."

On the other hand, Hyman and many other friends of Ritts' spoke to *POZ* exclusively because they wanted to set the record straight. "We have to say he had AIDS," Hyman says. "The point we have to get out in the world is that AIDS is not over." More important, he adds, it's what Ritts would have wanted. "If somebody had come to him, 'You need to come out as HIV positive,' there's no

question in my mind that he would have said, 'If you really want me to talk about it, OK.' He would not have denied it."

This is the story that Ritts would have told—and that *Rolling Stone* still could—to help the cause of AIDS. Until the early '90s, Ritts' health was stable. "He was HIV positive," Mark Findlay says. "He wasn't sick." But then, in the early to mid-'90s, after going off AZT and onto a strict herbal treatment, Ritts got much worse. At one point he had only four CD4 cells. "He was really very ill," says Shriver, who persuaded him to abandon the alternative therapy. "He would have died."

It took Ritts a long time to battle back. In 1996, when protease cocktails became available, he immediately went on one—and, Hyman says, "he was very good about compliance." Still, Ritts was no Lazarus. Although the meds gave his immune system a respite, the damage had been done. He was diagnosed with CMV retinitis, a dread viral infection common in the "old" days of AIDS. Doctors told him he was in danger of losing his eyesight. "Oh my God. For Herb, his eyesight? It's unthinkable," says Taylor in a horrified tone. Ritts had implants in his eyes to deliver CMV medication and, for five years, a pick in his arm. "When his eyes were bad, I would read to him," recalls Findlay. At times he was so weak, "I had to just carry him up and down the stairs." Throughout, Ritts never stopped working. "I've seen some brave behavior in my life," says Shriver, "and he was a soldier."

By 2002, Ritts' health was better than it had been in nearly a decade. His CD4 cells were up near 180. Even better, he and Hyman were eagerly looking forward to the new year:Ritts had long had to swear off swimming, a beloved activity, in order to avoid the risk of infection. But the pick was finally scheduled to come out in January 2003. "He and Erik were going to Hawaii. Herb had been given permission by his doctors and he was going to be able to swim for the first time in five years," Shriver says. "He was doing really very well."

No one recalls Ritts being sad, mad or bad as a patient with HIV. Right to the end, it seems, he played his part as the cheerful stoic. "He never said he was in pain," k.d. lang says. "He was always sweet and gentle right to the last minute. He just kept everything light and simple with people." Cindy Crawford echoes lang: "I never heard Herb say a bad thing about anybody, even when you wanted the scoop. If there was one good thing to say, that's what he would highlight. That's what made him an extraordinary photographer. Herb needed to see beauty in the world—and he would find it."

AIDS isn't beautiful. And it's easy to see how someone devoted to beauty would have doggedly kept his own disease outside the frame. He may not have belonged to ACT UP, but neither was he a latter-day Liberace. "It's like the age-old question of people coming out as gay," says k.d. lang. "You can analyze it to death, but it's not really right for someone until it's right." Of her son's determination to play down HIV, Shirley Ritts says, "Our whole family is like that. You get on with your life while you have it. Why wring your hands for what's not going to make it better?"

Ritts rarely addressed the subject of HIV directly, but in 2001, for Artists Against AIDS, he did. Paying tribute to photographers who died of AIDS, he wrote that "there was [one] whose work

on…AIDS always had resonance for me. David Wojnarowicz, who died in 1992, did self-portraits showing a head buried with dirt all over the face, as if he himself has already been buried in the ground.…That image always struck me. It's as if he was already in the ground and yet he was still creating art." Nothing could be further from Ritts' lightness and glamor than Wojnarowicz's dirt and death. But the fact that Ritts found hope even in one of the angriest images ever made about AIDS suggests how much more there was to him—and his work—than meets the eye. And HIV is only one part of that.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Herb Ritts, one of the top photographers of the last 50 years, was essentially self-taught. After graduating from Bard College with degrees in economics and art history, he came home to LA to work in his dad's furniture factory—and "just picked up a camera," recalls songwriter Bruce Roberts, Ritts' then-roommate. "He had this little camera with him all the time. We used to go to the beach looking for people who looked great and then we would just approach them." Like any amateur shutterbug, he also took pictures of his friends, including a little-known actor named Richard Gere. Ritts shot Gere in a beefcake pose—arms behind head, cigarette dangling from his lips—at a gas station in the desert while having a flat tire fixed. Soon, Gere's film career exploded, and Ritts' hot shot became an instant classic. "One thing just led to another until I…found myself working as a photographer," Ritts once said. "I didn't think of it in terms of a career."

And work he did, shooting countless covers for the leading celebrity and fashion magazines of the day. He had a genius for capturing what was essential and emblematic about the famous that seemed to frame them for all time. And whether it was Madonna in Mickey Mouse ears, Jim Carrey in a mermaid tail or Monica Lewinsky in the American flag, he did it with a warmth and wit that were unique in an age of irony, when cool is king. "His total goal was to make you as sexy and beautiful as he could," says former assistant David Jakle. "He was the absolute master of making people comfortable." The trust he inspired in his subjects resulted in such unforgettably vulnerable portraits as Elizabeth Taylor showing off her brain-surgery scar and Stephen Hawking struggling to speak. All the while, Ritts was quietly battling the effects of HIV, including a CMV infection that threatened his eyesight. It was only in his striking nudes that Ritts turned abstract, seeing the (buff and beautiful) human body as exquisite sculpture. "Sometimes as a model, it was almost like, 'But look at me!'" recalls Cindy Crawford. "He would just see the lines and the shapes."

In his 25-year career, there were many milestones. He published eight big-selling books, including Duo, a celebration of love featuring two musclemen, and Africa, documenting 14 weeks with the Masai tribe. "In his house, it was his African works that were up on the wall," says k.d. lang. He took homoerotic imagery mainstream, from his early classic "Fred with Tires" to Marky Mark served up in Calvins. He even persuaded lang to slip into an evening gown for *Vogue*.

Ritts died in full mid-career glory, and in the months after his death, his cover shots continued to hit newsstands. We can only guess how aging—and, yes, surviving HIV—would have enriched his vision. "He was a young, robust, energetic, vital, vibrant man who had a lot that he wanted to do.

He was excited and thrilled about his future," says his lover, Erik Hyman. "He wasn't finished."

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Putting-On-The-Ritts-542-3918