

John Holmes: the Elvis Presley of porn

By R. Marc Kantrowitz



At a time when making adult films was a crime, John Holmes was the king.

He made over 2,000 such mov-

ies, bedding thousands both on and off screen. Most were women.

His legacy was multi-faceted. He exposed pornography to a mesmerized mainstream America; his drug habit was as legendary as one of his appendages — considered the largest in an industry known for genital excess; and he had connections to one of the most brutal murders in the history of California.

That he died of AIDS at 43 added further tragedy to a life wasted.

Holmes was born in 1944 in a small town in rural Ohio, to a religious young woman who married often, including three times to the same man, who was twice her age. Holmes left home at 16 and, with his mother's permission, joined the

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military, serving in Germany before he was honorably discharged.

He settled in Los Angeles, married a 21-year-old nurse, and worked a variety of dead-end jobs before stumbling into adult films in the late '60s. Tall, thin and attractive with curly brown hair, his mustache and blue eyes added to his allure. Sealing his fate and future was an endowment he described as "bigger than a pay phone, smaller than a Cadillac." Adult film co-star Seka was more blunt, comparing it to a



Actor Mark Wahlberg as Eddie Adams (John Holmes) in 'Boogie Nights'

telephone pole.

In 1971, he introduced Johnny Wadd, a private detective in the mold of Sam Spade in pursuit of crime and women. The character was so popular that numerous sequels followed.

His movies helped usher in the golden age of porn led by fellow future stars in "Behind the Green Door," made in 1972 and starring Marilyn Chambers; "Deep Throat" made the same year and featuring Linda Lovelace and Harry Reems; and the king of them all — "The

Devil in Miss Jones," starring Georgina Spelvin, which became a top 10 grossing film in 1973.

With fame came wealth, followed by drug addiction, which quickly consumed Holmes' life and essentially destroyed his career. Ultimately, his marriage, which had been teetering on the edge for years, also succumbed. He soon was hustling on the street and engaging in various petty crimes to support an out-of-control habit.

To keep out of jail, he became a police informant despite his reputation as an inveterate liar. Falling in with the drug-dealing and partying Wonderland Gang, he became the group's drug courier. When he was ordered one day to deliver cocaine and instead consumed it himself, he incurred the gang's wrath.

With no money, no prospects and no way out, he proposed robbing a wealthy cocaine fiend and friend, Eddie Nash. The highly successful nightclub owner had arrived in the country decades earlier as Adel Gharib Nasrallah, a Palestinian with no money.

Holmes visited Nash at his palatial estate, which housed a Rembrandt, jewelry and other valuables. While he was there, he surreptitiously unlocked a rear sliding door through which the gang later entered after Holmes had departed.

Once inside, the gang members terrorized and robbed a coked-out Nash, inserting a gun in his mouth in an effort to find out where the drugs and money were hidden.

They also partially cut the throat of Nash's 300-pound bodyguard, Gregory DeWitt Diles, in an attempt to get him to talk.

They made off with more than \$100,000 in cash, eight pounds of cocaine, a kilo of heroin and \$150,000 in jewelry.

Nash suspected he had been set up and strong-armed and threatened Holmes, who unwisely was wearing one of Nash's stolen rings. Holmes quickly gave up his cohorts. Brutality awaited.

On July 1, 1981, four members of the Wonderland Gang — William Deverell, Ronald Launius, Joy Miller and Barbara Richardson — were set upon with a steel pipe and savagely slaughtered in their dwelling, which quickly became soaked in blood and dripping with brain matter. A fifth member of the group, Susan Launius, survived the pasting, losing a finger and part of her brain in the process. The press quickly dubbed the massacre the Wonderland Murders and compared it to the barbarism of the Manson family.

Holmes, who had been at the scene of the killings (as either a participant or witness), fled to Florida with a teenaged lover, Dawn Schiller. He was quickly captured as a result of beating Schiller, and was returned to California where he stood trial for the four murders. His palm print on the headboard of a bed that contained the remains of

one of the butchered victims was the most potent evidence in a mostly circumstantial case. In the end, though, he was found not guilty after a lengthy jury trial.

He returned to the adult movie scene and made money, but his best days had long faded. In the mid-'80s, he was diagnosed with AIDS. He kept the disease from his female stars in the next two movies he made, which involved unprotected sex.

He remarried in 1987, to Laurie Rose, and a year later he was dead. His wife, mother and half-brother honored

his wishes for cremation by scattering his ashes in the gentle waters off Los Angeles, which slowly carried them off into eternity.

Epilogue

No one was ever convicted of the Wonderland Murders, though the involvement of Eddie Nash, who wound up doing time for other offenses, was fairly clear.

Meanwhile, books, articles and two movies, "Boogie Nights" starring Mark Wahlberg as Eddie Adams, nee Dirk Diggler (Holmes), and Alfred Molina as Rahad Jackson (Nash), and "Wonderland" starring Val Kilmer as Holmes, documented and immortalized the life of a sizzling star that disastrously exploded. [E]

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