

Gay Bar Mourns Elizabeth Taylor



Axel Koester for The New York Times

Patrons of The Abbey in West Hollywood, a favorite hang-out of the late Liz Taylor, pay their respects at a shrine erected in her honor.

By **BROOKS BARNES**

Published: March 24, 2011

WEST HOLLYWOOD, Calif. — Last Halloween, David Cooley, the founder of the Abbey, a sprawling gay bar here, got a phone call. Elizabeth Taylor was on the line, and she wanted to know if it was a good night to swing by.

“I told her not to come,” he said. “It was too busy. And there were already a half dozen Elizabeth Taylors here anyway.”

A gay bar, even a fancy one with chandeliers and a roaring fireplace like the Abbey, seems an unlikely haunt for a megastar. But the actress, who died on Wednesday at 79, was a once-a-week regular in recent years — sipping tequila shots, downing watermelon and apple martinis or simply waving merrily from her wheelchair.

Sometimes she brought her dog, Daisy, who, some bar-goers insist, liked to nod her head along to the bar’s throbbing Madonna soundtrack.

The scene in the “Elizabeth Taylor Room” — her favorite spot amid the Abbey’s many nooks and crannies — was decidedly somber just after news of her death on Wednesday. Regulars, fans and Abbey employees started leaving flowers, candles, pictures and other tokens of affection (an autographed napkin) around a donation Ms. Taylor once made to the bar: a large portrait of herself in her prime.



Axel Koester for The New York Times

Shannon Kelly, left, Jessica Serrano and Tiffany Masters pay their respects at The Abbey in West Hollywood.



Axel Koester for The New York Times

The Abbey was a favorite hang-out of the late Liz Taylor.

Sitting untouched on an empty table nearby was a remembrance from the bar staff, a Blue Velvet martini, a bluish drink made with vodka and blueberry schnapps and named in a nod to Ms. Taylor's 1944 film "National Velvet."

"People have been walking up and starting to cry," said Brian Rosman, an Abbey spokesman and a patron. "Others can't talk, they get so emotional."

Mr. Cooley said it should not be a surprise that people in this proudly rainbow-flag-flying town are responding to her death with such feeling. There have been other gay touchstones — Judy Garland, Bette Davis, Cher, Debbie Reynolds, Madonna — but Ms. Taylor perhaps eclipsed all of them, at least for a certain generation, with her outspoken efforts to raise the profile of AIDS at a time when people still referred to it as "the gay disease."

"Taylor's relationship with gay men provided a new model of gay icon," Paul Flynn, an editor at the British gay magazine *Attitude*, wrote in *The Guardian* on Thursday. "No longer was it enough to be a woman with whom gay men retained a bass-note of empathy, the kind of strung-out glamour/tragedy axis Judy

Garland immortalized."

Ms. Taylor started raising money for AIDS research and victims after her friend Rock Hudson died of the disease in 1985. Over the next 25 years, she would become synonymous with the fight against AIDS, ultimately helping to raise more than \$100 million for the cause.

"For her to testify before Congress as early as she did was really remarkable," said John Scott, the former executive director of the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

Indeed, Ms. Taylor also became a heroine for many gay people for criticizing a slow response to AIDS from politicians. "I'm not even sure if he knows how to spell AIDS," she said of President George Bush in 1991.

"She helped make talking about being gay O.K.," said Mark Conaghan, a tourist from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., who had his picture taken next to the Abbey's shrine on Wednesday night. "She let it be known, God forbid, that she even had gay friends herself."

The Abbey, which opened in 1991 and has grown to 16,000 square feet, has become a tourist attraction because of Ms. Taylor's patronage, which started about four or five years ago, according to Mr. Cooley. Sightseeing buses regularly drive by, with guides pointing out the door through which Ms. Taylor, usually wearing gaudy rhinestone sunglasses, would enter and leave.

One such exit can be seen in a video posted to TMZ.com in June of last year. Ms. Taylor — wearing knee-high boots, a pink blouse and a white golf hat — was wheeled to her car as people shouted greetings.

"Aside from my back, fine," she responds when asked about her health. An Abbey employee follows

behind carrying Daisy.

She was not the only star of her era to frequent West Hollywood's cluster of gay bars. Legend has it that Loretta Lynn once judged a drag contest of men dressed in her likeness. But no other celebrity of Ms. Taylor's wattage became such a presence, said John Heilman, a member of the West Hollywood City Council. "I used to run into her all the time at clubs on the strip," he said.

Still, the Abbey was her hangout. Mr. Cooley said she told him on one of her visits that it was her favorite pub. He had the sentiment printed on a plaque and placed near her donated portrait, which captures her diva qualities: arms extended, wearing an extravagant, shimmering gown recalling her wardrobe in "Cleopatra."

But the bar finds itself continually replacing the plaque.

"People steal it," Mr. Cooley said. "We've screwed it on. We've glued it on. Nothing works. I think it's a symbol to people — that she loved us as much as we loved her."