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Annette Funicello: Forever Young

As a child I was devastated by a rumor that she had died. I later watched her capture a city's heart.

posted by John Stark, April 9, 2013 [More by this author](#)



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Annette Funicello in 1975

I remember exactly where I was the moment I heard that Annette Funicello had died — some 56 years ago. It was the most shocking news I had ever heard, prior to the Kennedy assassination.

The year was 1956. I was 8 years old. I was on a cement playground at the Evergreen Elementary School in Whittier, Calif., which was Richard Nixon's hometown. I had stayed after school to play with some classmates. My friend Raleigh came over to me with a stunned look on his face. "I just heard that Annette died," he told me. "She was killed in a car crash."

A few minutes later one of the Crabtree girls came running over with an update: "Darlene and Cubby were with her. They died too!" It was a Mouseketeer massacre.

There was an iron slide in the center of the playground. I

climbed the ladder to the platform at the top of it. But I didn't go down the slide. I just stood there holding onto the handrails, looking out at the world, trying to comprehend what I had just heard.

Annette — never Funicello, just Annette — was gone.

But Annette didn't die that day, nor did any other members of the Mickey Mouse Club. The radio and TV news later reported that it was a false rumor sweeping Los Angeles.

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Funicello did die Monday at age 70, from complications of multiple sclerosis. Every media outlet reported her death, just after announcing Margaret Thatcher's. Both women's obits made the front page of The New York Times.

Seems people loved Annette more than they did Margaret. Tributes from fans of the Mouseketeer icon were all over the Internet. "Thatcher was a historic character, but I didn't spend every

afternoon watching her on TV growing up,” wrote one fan. “I have to admit, this one hurts,” said another. Wrote one man: “She was every little boy’s first love in that era. The little boy in me just died with her.”

Why so much attention for someone who was pretty much out of the public eye for 48 years? After Annette made her last “Beach Party” movie with Frankie Avalon, *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*, in 1965, she semi-retired to get married and raise a family — though she and Avalon did reunite in 1987 to make *Back to the Beach*, a parody of the genre. And in the late 1970s and early 80s she was on TV promoting Skippy peanut butter.

Annette was the first celebrity that boomers like me could call his or her own. She was our generation’s first sweetheart, before Mary Tyler Moore and Jennifer Aniston. She proved that a child performer didn’t have to be precocious and that the girl-next-door could wear a two-piece bathing suit. Nothing says baby boomer more than a Mickey Mouse cap.

Her career lasted only as long as her youth, and ours.

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In 1981, when I was a reporter at the San Francisco Examiner, a friend of mine, the late Steve Silver, gave me an Annette Funicello scoop. He was the master showman who created the *Beach Blanket Babylon* revue, which began in 1974 and is still running at the Club Fugazi in North Beach, a few doors from where I lived. He named his show after the “Beach Blanket” movies, which he grew up on. They influenced his wacky artistic sensibilities. *BBB* takes place on a beach, with a cast of characters that includes surfer dudes, a lifeguard and tap-dancing M&Ms wearing dark sunglasses.

“Annette’s accepted my invitation to come to *Beach Blanket* for a one-night show,” he told me with childlike glee. “I’m starring her in a tribute to the ‘Beach Blanket’ movies.” For the special show he booked a much larger venue, California Hall, at Civic Center. Like my friends and colleagues, I was skeptical. Could he fill the place? Annette Funicello? Did anyone care? She wasn’t Donna Summer or that other famous woman who went by her first name, Cher.

But when word hit the papers, the show immediately sold out. At that time San Francisco was in the midst of the AIDS crisis. Everyone was still reeling from the assassinations of Mayor George Moscone and Harvey Milk, and the Jonestown massacre, a few years earlier. We needed our innocence back and Steve knew it.

The night of the show (see a clip of it on YouTube) the energy at California Hall was electric. To recreate a beach, Steve had brought in two tons of sand to cover the stage. Annette’s entrance was from the top of a staircase. Muscle men were placed on the steps holding giant beach balls.

As Annette proceeded down the stairs, the beach balls parted, revealing her presence. At 39, she looked as trim and lithe as she did in *Muscle Beach Party* or *Beach Blanket Bingo*. She was dressed in a recreation of the white outfit she wore on the Mickey Mouse Club show. “Annette” was printed across the front of it in large type, just like when she was a twelve-year-old. (“I had the back of the top Velcroed, so she wouldn’t have to put it on over her head,” Steve later told me.) She was sporting black felt Mickey Mouse ears. As she sang, danced and camped it up with the *Beach Blanket* crazies for the next two hours, the audience couldn’t stop cheering. There was so much stamping of feet when she took her curtain call that it sounded like the 1906 earthquake.

In 1992 Annette told the world that she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis five years earlier. From that announcement on she quit making any public appearances. Instead, she established the Annette Funicello Research Fund for Neurological Diseases. She fought her debilitating disease in private with courage and dignity. She even underwent brain surgery. Her slow death lasted 26 years, longer than her career.

When I heard she died Monday, I was transported back to that iron slide — the one that I stood atop as a kid. How could life be so unfair, I wondered then. I wonder now.

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