

Liberace Museum is colourful

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Seven homes, 26 dogs, 30 to 50 cars, 39 pianos, six gold records and more than 400 costumes. Wladziu Valentino Liberace never did anything on a small scale. It's no wonder he and Las Vegas were such a good fit. The entertainer known as Mr. Showmanship was 67 when he died on Feb. 4, 1987, from complications due to AIDS. But his life and exploits are colourfully captured not far from the Strip at the Liberace Museum. The museum is housed in two separate buildings in a nondescript strip mall that Liberace owned near his house. One half of the museum is in what used to be his rehearsal studio and borders a restaurant that the entertainer also once owned. Liberace's over-the-top showmanship may not have been for everyone, but his life was the stuff of legend, and the museum does a nice job of capturing that. The son of an Italian immigrant musician who settled in Wisconsin, Liberace was oversized even at birth -- he weighed 13 pounds (his twin was stillborn). A musical prodigy, he received a scholarship from the Wisconsin School of Music when he was seven. His first professional contract, in a piano bar in 1940, was worth a mere US\$45 a week. Fifteen years later, he was offered \$50,000 a week to play at the opening of the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas after a stint as a replacement host on TV's "Dinah Shore Show" made him a star in the early '50s. Liberace opened his museum in 1979, so he could share his story and belongings. The museum visit starts with a timeline of Liberace's life through photos and prose on a wall, but the glitter is quick to follow with a sampling of the entertainer's cars and pianos. The other half of the museum houses examples of his costumes, jewelry (including the world's biggest rhinestone) and other possessions. As his costumes became more and more extravagant, they also became harder to wear -- one cloak of pink turkey feathers weighed 57 kilograms (125 pounds) alone. Liberace took to arriving on stage by car so he did not have to walk in the cumbersome costumes. Like their owner, the cars were anything but dull. He sought -- and received -- permission from Rolls-Royce to glam up their luxury cars with mirrors and rhinestones. He even had a VW Cabriolet customized to look like a Rolls (during the 1970s gas crisis, he wanted to be more responsible, but just as flashy). His pianos were also an eyeful. A sponsorship deal with Baldwin restricted his choice but apparently he snuck in one beloved Steinway by painting over the logo. Liberace -- his friends called him Lee -- started out in traditional black tails but switched to white to stand out at a 1952 show at the Hollywood Bowl. That led to a gold lame jacket and ultimately to a glittery, feathery, wild wardrobe. Remember, this is a man who liked to boast about slipping into something "more spectacular." Always larger than life, the bedroom in one

home boasted a version of the Sistine Chapel ceiling while his swimming pool sported a piano motif. For those not old enough to remember Liberace in his heyday, the museum has plenty to remind you about where he was in the pecking order of entertainers -- including a photo of Liberace rocking out with Elvis (Liberace on guitar and Elvis on piano) and a theatre marquee showing Liberace as the main event above an "extra added attraction" of Barbra Streisand. "Honestly he was an amazing musician and I think that will translate to any generation," said tour guide Regina De Rosa, herself an aspiring cellist. It's worth timing your visit to the museum to take a tour (11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays). The hosts know what they're talking about and offer plenty of information and trivia during the hour-long walk through the museum. Some examples: -- Liberace was 5-10 and weighed 185 pounds. -- He responded to every piece of fan mail he received. -- He smoked three packs of cigarettes a day. -- He loved Christmas and never performed in December. -- He successfully fought the Internal Revenue Service to write off the cost of his costumes. -- He was a friend of Elvis -- and told the King to glitz it up when it came to costumes. -- His favorite composers were Chopin and Gershwin.