**Among Deaths in 2016, a Heavy Toll in Pop Music - The New York Times**

Death may be the great equalizer, but it isn t necessarily evenhanded. Of all the fields of endeavor that suffered mortal losses in 2016 ” consider Muhammad Ali and Arnold Palmer in sports and the Hollywood deaths of Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds ” the pop music world had, hands down, the bleakest year. Start with David Bowie, whose stage persona ” androgynous glam rocker, dance pop star, electronic experimentalist ” was as as his music. The year was only days old when the news came that he had died of cancer at 69. He had hinted that his time was short in the lyrics of his final album, released just two days before his death, but he had otherwise gone to great lengths to hide his illness from the public, a wish for privacy that ensured that his death would appear to have come out of the blue. Then came another shock, about three months later, when Prince accidentally overdosed on a painkiller and collapsed in an elevator at his sprawling home studio near Minneapolis. Death came to him at 57, and by all indications no one, including Prince Rogers Nelson, had seen it coming. As energetic onstage as ever, holding to an otherwise healthy regimen, he had successfully defied age into his sixth decade, so why not death, too? Leonard Cohen, on the other hand, in his 83rd year, undoubtedly did see it coming, just over his shoulder, but he went on his ” I hesitate to say merry ” way, ever the wise, troubadour playing to sellout crowds and shrugging at the inevitable, knowing that the dark would finally overtake him but saying essentially, Until then, here s another song. It was as if 2016 hadn t delivered enough jolts to the system when it closed out the year with yet another death. George Michael, the 1980s sensation whose aura had dimmed in later years, was 53 when he went to bed and never woke up on Christmas. Pop music figures fell all year, many of their voices still embedded in the nicked vinyl grooves of old records that a lot of people can t bear to throw out. The roster included Paul Kantner of Jefferson Airplane Keith Emerson and Greg Lake of Emerson, Lake and Palmer Glenn Frey of the Eagles and Maurice White of Earth, Wind Fire. Leon Russell, the piano pounder with a Delta blues wail and a mountain man s mass of hair, died. So did Merle Haggard, rugged country poet of the common man and the outlaw. He was joined by the bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley and the guitar virtuoso who was practically glued to Elvis s swiveling hips in the early days: Scotty Moore. And then there was George Martin, whose genius had such a creative influence on the sounds of John, Paul, George and Ringo (and, by extension, on the entire rock era) that he was hailed as the fifth Beatle. If the music stars could fill arenas, so could idols of another stripe: the mighty athletes who left the scene. No figure among them was as towering as Ali. Some called him the greatest sports figure of the 20th century, the boxer who combined power, grace and brains in a way the ring had never seen. But he was more than a great athlete. Matters of war, race and religion coursed through his life in a publicly turbulent way. Some people hated him when he refused to be drafted during the Vietnam War, a decision that cost him his heavyweight title. But more people admired him, even loved him, for his principled stands, his high spirits, his lightning mind, his winking and, yes, his rhyming motormouth. Until illness closed in, little could contain him, certainly not mere ropes around a ring. Palmer, too, was transformational, golf s first media star. The gentleman s game was never quite the same after he began gathering an army on the rolling greenswards and leading a charge, his shirt coming untucked, a cigarette dangling from his lips, his club just that, a weapon, as he pressed the attack. An entire generation of postwar guys took up the game because of Arnie, and not a few women did, too. He was athletically blessed, magnetically cool, telegenically handsome ” but he was somehow one of them, too. The same was said of Gordie Howe, Mr. Hockey, a son of the Saskatchewan prairie who tore up the National Hockey League, hung up his skates at 52 and died at 88 and of Ralph Branca, a trolley car conductor s son who was a living reminder that one crushing mistake ” his, the fastball to Bobby Thomson that decided the 1951 National League pennant ” can sometimes never be lived down. Pat Summitt, the coach who elevated women s basketball, led her Tennessee teams to eight championships and won more games than any other college coach, could not defeat Alzheimer s disease, dying at 64. And within months the National Basketball Association lost two giants from different eras. Clyde Lovelette, an Olympic, college and N. B. A. champion who transformed the game as one of its first truly big men, was 86 his hardwood heir Nate Thurmond, a defensive stalwart who battled Russell, Wilt and Kareem in the paint in a Hall of Fame career, was 74. Even older, in the baseball ranks, was Monte Irvin. When he died at 96, there were few people still around who could remember watching him play, particularly in his prime, in the 1940s, when he was a star on the Negro circuit but barred from the major leagues. He made the Hall of Fame anyway as a New York Giant and became Major League Baseball s first black executive, but when he died, fans pondered again the question that has hung over many an athletic career shackled by discrimination: What if? A different question, in an entirely different sphere, arose after the stunning news that Justice Antonin Scalia had died on a hunting trip in Texas: What now? In the thick of one of the most consequential Supreme Court careers of modern times, he left a void in conservative jurisprudence and, more urgently, a vacancy on the bench that has yet to be filled, raising still more questions about what may await the country. Other exits from the public stage returned us to the past. Nancy Reagan s death evoked the 1980s White House, where glamour and West Coast conservatism took up residence on the banks of the Potomac. John Glenn s had us thinking again about a burst of national pride soaring into outer space. The deaths of Tom Hayden and Daniel Berrigan, avatars of defiance, harked back to the student rebellions of the 1960s and the Vietnam War s roiling home front. Phyllis Schlafly s obituaries were windows on the roots of the right wing s ascension in American politics. The death of Janet Reno, the first woman to serve as attorney general, recalled the Clinton years, all eight of them, from the firestorm at Waco, Tex. to the international tug of war over a Cuban boy named EliÃ¡n GonzÃ¡lez, to the bitter Senate battle over impeachment. On other shores, Fidel Castro s death at 90 summoned memories of Cuban revolution, nuclear brinkmanship and enduring enmity between a strongman and the superpower only 90 miles away. The name of Boutros the Egyptian diplomat who led the United Nations, led to replayed nightmares of genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia. The death of Shimon Peres removed a last link to the very founding of Israel and conjured decades of growing military power and fitful strivings for peace. And that of Elie Wiesel, in New York, after his tireless struggle to compel the world never to forget, made us confront once again the gas chambers of Auschwitz. If writers, too, are even in fiction, then the world is poorer without the literary voices of Harper Lee, Umberto Eco, Pat Conroy, Jim Harrison, Anita Brookner, Alvin Toffler, Gloria Naylor and William Trevor, not to mention the playwrights Peter Shaffer, Dario Fo and, Edward Albee ” all dead in 2016. But just as treasured were those who spun for our viewing pleasure ” none more lustily than Ms. Fisher, the Princess Leia of the Star Wars tales. Just a day later, capping a year of startling deaths, Ms. Reynolds, a singing and acting leading lady of an earlier era, died at 84 in the throes of a mother s grief. Devotees of the Harry Potter movies were saddened by the death of Alan Rickman, who played the deliciously dour professor Severus Snape in that blockbuster franchise but whose career, on both stage and screen, was far richer than many of Snape s younger fans may have known. Zsa Zsa Gabor s celebrity, by contrast, outshone a modest acting career. Gene Wilder and Garry Shandling died in the same year, both having perfected a brand of hilariously neurotic comedy fit for a culture. And this time Abe Vigoda, of the Godfather movies and Barney Miller, actually did die, after having not actually done so years ago when wildly uninformed people spread the word that he had. On the other side of the camera were directors whose vision came to us from all parts: Jacques Rivette, the French New Wave auteur, with his meditations on life and art Abbas Kiarostami, the Iranian master, with his searching examinations of ordinary lives Andrzej Wajda, a rival to Ingmar Bergman and Akira Kurosawa in some critics eyes, with his haunting tales of Poland under the boot first of Nazis and then of Communists. A long roster of television stars of a generation or two ago passed on, images of their younger selves frozen in time: Noel Neill ( Adventures of Superman ) Alan Young ( Mister Ed ) Robert Vaughn ( The Man From U. N. C. L. E. ) William Schallert and Patty Duke (father and daughter on The Patty Duke Show ) Dan Haggerty ( The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams ) Florence Henderson ( The Brady Bunch ) and Alan Thicke ( Growing Pains ). And Garry Marshall, the creative force who practically owned prime time with Happy Days, Mork Mindy, Laverne Shirley and more, died at 81. On Broadway, lights were dimmed in memory of Brian Bedford, Tammy Grimes and Anne Jackson, all brilliant in their day. The architect Zaha Hadid left behind monuments to her fertile imagination and shaken acolytes around the world. The street photographer Bill Cunningham, who found fashion statements on every corner, was suddenly missing, making Manhattan, overnight, a less idiosyncratic, less interesting place. That smiling skinny man pedaling his bicycle among the honking cabs in a blue French worker s jacket with a camera slung around his neck ” what a picture! ” had split from the scene. So had seemingly a generation of fellow photographers who had made art in recording the last half of the 20th century: Ruth Gruber, Marc Riboud, Louis Stettner and more. And so had the TV journalists Morley Safer and Gwen Ifill and the TV commentator John McLaughlin, all of whom had tried to make sense of it. Music s other precincts were emptier without the conductor and revolutionary composer Pierre Boulez and the new music soprano Phyllis Curtin the jazz artists Mose Allison, Bobby Hutcherson and Gato Barbieri the rapper Phife Dawg (Malik Taylor) and the Latin megastar Juan Gabriel. Silicon Valley saw a giant depart in Andrew S. Grove, who led the semiconductor revolution at Intel. The television industry lost a executive, Grant Tinker, who in the 80s made NBC the network to watch in prime time. Astrophysics, and the smaller world of women in science, said farewell to a pioneer and a champion in Vera Rubin. And for tens of thousands of people who might have choked to death had they not been saved by his simple but ingenious maneuver, the passing of Henry J. Heimlich prompted not just sympathy but, even more, gratitude. Come to think of it, eliciting a large, if silent, thank you from those who live on is not a bad way for anyone to go. Which brings us to Marion Pritchard. Few who died in 2016 could have inspired measures of gratitude more profound. She was a brave young Dutch student and a gentile who risked her life to save Jews from death camps in the early 1940s, in one instance shooting a Nazi stooge before he could seize three little children she had been hiding. By her estimate she saved 150 people. How many were still alive when she died a few weeks ago at 96 is anyone s guess. But we know for certain that some were, and we can reasonably surmise that a good many more were, too, all of them still in possession of her selfless gift and her matchless legacy, their very lives.

**William McDonald**

2017