

On a dreary, late fall evening in 1963, when I was 26 years old and barely one month removed from my New York City roots, I wandered into a now extinct downtown San Francisco singles bar called Extension 21. Feeling lonely, somewhat homesick, and a little forlorn, I was just about to leave after downing my second gin and tonic when HE walked in with three of his unidentified cronies.

I was as awestruck as any 10-year-old boy at being in the presence of the man I immediately recognized as Joe DiMaggio, the Yankee Clipper, one of my childhood heroes. He was 49 at the time, and exactly as I would have imagined. With his regal bearing, tall and slender frame, perfectly coifed silver hair and beautifully tailored clothes, he looked like he just stepped off the cover of *Gentlemen's Quarterly* magazine.

Ordinarily, I'm a gregarious individual who is not at all bashful about approaching strangers, even if they are celebrities. But there was something about this dignified, aloof man that kept me glued to my barstool. To attempt to initiate a conversation with this larger than life American icon seemed completely inappropriate, even though he sat no more than five feet away from me. So I sublimated my hero worship with an occasional furtive glance cast in his direction.

As I was feeling inundated by the endless hackneyed clichés used to describe DiMaggio in all of the eulogies offered up in the electronic and printed media following his death last February at age 84, it became clear that Americans were mourning for their lost innocence as much as they mourned his passing.

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel beautifully articulated America's lament for her lost heroes in their 1967 song, "Mrs. Robinson"

*Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?
A nation turns its lonely eyes to you,
woo, woo, woo*

*What's that you say, Mrs. Robinson,
Joltin' Joe has left and gone away,
hey, hey, hey*

Those of us who came of age in the years following World War II swallowed whole the idealized image of America that was portrayed in movies like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. We liked to see ourselves as a nation of Jimmy Stewarts - average, well-meaning people who believed in an America where honorable



An Ode to Joe D.

Alan Mills laments the passing of an era and venerates a great American hero, Joe DiMaggio

intentions always triumphed over the forces of evil. We never doubted that we lived up to the ideals expressed in the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address and etched on the Statue of Liberty.

Rarely - if ever - did we question the whitewashed version of American history we were spoon-fed in our expurgated school textbooks. Racism was something peculiar to the eleven Southern states, we thought. If you were white and middle-class, you wholeheartedly believed that America was the land of opportunity, where any poor boy could grow up to become president. Words like injustice, exploitation, and imperialism were not part of our vocabulary; or at least they did not apply to the United States.

For the hordes of European immigrants who escaped poverty and political and/or religious persecution in their homelands, America did deliver on its promises. Their dreams of upward mobility were realized,

and they were able to get good jobs, purchase homes and educate their children.

Unlike our later misguided military ventures, America's participation in World War II was in fact a noble undertaking. We had no choice but to confront the scourge of Nazism and fascism. I fondly remember attending a series of block parties celebrating the end of the war, a phenomenon that occurred throughout the nation.

The post-World War II decade was an unparalleled era of peace and prosperity for Americans. As a nation, our collective pride and self-confidence flourished in a way that it probably never will again.

Television shows like *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* became the prototype for the ideal American family - with a mom who reveled in her role as mother and housewife, a caring dad who was the solid breadwinner, and two attractive, mischievous, but always respectful, children. The clan was housed in a ranch-style, suburban home surrounded by the proverbial white picket fence. The word "dysfunctional" was never uttered.

We treated our athletic heroes with deference, and their feet of clay were not exposed by a prying, ubiquitous media. It is in this context that the phenomenon that was Joe DiMaggio must be viewed. He belonged to the era that predated free agency, before lawyers and agents came on the sporting scene, and before we became jaded and cynical.

Joltin' Joe handled success and fame with so much class and dignity; he richly deserved the adulation he received. Compare the way he comported himself in public with the juvenile and bizarre antics of Dennis Rodman.

Ernest Hemingway paid tribute to DiMaggio by using him as a symbol for grace under pressure in his novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway wrote, "I would like to take the great DiMaggio fishing," the old man said. "They say his father was a fisherman. Maybe he was as poor as we are and would understand."

San Francisco Chronicle columnist Ken Garcia eloquently captured the essence of DiMaggio with these words, "His humble background seemed to capture the spirit of an era when heroes walked quietly, almost dismissive of their own achievements."

Rest in peace, Joe D. We'll miss you more than you'll ever know.