Robert Palmer died suddenly of a heart attack last week at the age of fifty-four, which is a bit young to die of a heart attack -- at least for non-smokers. But Palmer, who performed "Addicted to Love" and other hit songs of the 1980s, was a smoker.

We cannot be certain what caused his heart attack, of course, but we know that smokers are two to four times more likely to develop cardiovascular disease and are 70% more likely to die from it than non-smokers. Smokers also tend to die from heart disease about a decade earlier than non-smokers (it is only their tendency to get heart attacks at a younger age that accounts for the statistic, which would otherwise be puzzling, suggesting that smokers are more likely to survive individual heart attacks than non-smokers).

One of the fun things about the 1980s was that it was a decade when both capitalist and counter-culture pleasures were largely tolerated and seemed to mesh comfortably. Videos by Robert Palmer and bands like Duran Duran -- members of which briefly joined Palmer to form the group Power Station, best known for "Some Like It Hot" and a cover of T. Rex's "Get It On (Bang a Gong)" -- suggested to a nation of 80s teens like myself that one could enjoy being surrounded by mohawk-sporting oddballs and still wear a nicely pressed suit. Early MTV videos like "Addicted to Love" (with Palmer in a necktie surrounded by instrument-playing fashion model types), especially New Wave videos, were essentially training films on how to have fun being a yuppie. It was conservatism for punks, as I like to say (in fact, I think I'll write a book by that title, if anyone's interested).

One unfortunate side effect of what might be called mainstream hedonism, though, is that people inclined toward moderation often pick their pleasures more by their cultural associations and psychological effects than by the broader health consequences. If pot and sandals are associated with hippies, then moderate and conservative citizens may shun them, just as they may shy away from drastically mind-altering LSD experiences. Too weird, too subversive. But cigarettes are all too familiar, do not (as yet) have counter-cultural cachet, and seem like something Grandpa might use.

Robert Palmer was known for finding many of the typical excesses of the rock star image distasteful. He said he wore suits on stage because his mother taught him that you should look presentable if you're appearing in front of a large audience. His stage mannerisms were restrained, a demeanor memorably reinforced by the almost robotic movements of the models in "Addicted to Love." But he smoked. And most of the people around him probably didn't think that seemed too wild or troubling, not with rock stars being notorious for death by heroin overdose and other means more commonly frowned upon.

As one of those yuppies-in-training back in the 80s, I too wanted to display a certain amount of self-
discipline while at the same time not being a party-pooper, and I would hardly want to live in a society that avoided fun in all its myriad forms (I was shocked when the authorities here in New York City began enforcing "cabaret laws" against dancing in unlicensed establishments a few years ago). But some pleasures are more dangerous than others. The green hair dye in your mohawk will not give you cancer, despite scare stories you may hear to the contrary. Smoking, on the other hand, may well give you cancer $\frac{1}{2}$ and it is also the leading preventable cause of heart disease.

As the number of celebrity smokers who die young increases, it becomes more and more important to stress that those of us who urge people to quit smoking are not the killjoys -- not if fans enjoyed having those deceased celebs around.

And $\frac{1}{2}$ without meaning any disrespect to Robert Palmer, who will be missed $\frac{1}{2}$ what really troubles me is that David Bowie smokes like a chimney too.

UPDATE: David Bowie has reportedly quit smoking. Maybe he'll prove immortal after all.

Responses:

October 2, 2003

Has anyone bothered to find out if Robert Palmer had a family history of heart problems? Genetics play an enormous role in whether we develop heart problems, cancer, diabetes, etc., etc., and yet only smoking is ever the cause when someone dies?

Give me a break!

And to answer the "question" on your site about "what the warning label doesn't tell you" about cigarettes: What they don't tell you is that the anti-smoker industry is only in existence to spread their own agenda, to disseminate lie after lie, to wrest control over individuals' lives, and (whenever possible) to make big bucks while doing it (Cherner and Glantz, for example).

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