

Will Marilyn Monroe's DNA reveal the identity of her father?

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Marilyn Monroe is the subject of a new documentary on Netflix

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'Listen, I'd like to ask you. How do you go about writing a life story?' Marilyn Monroe asks in a recording made at the height of her fame. "Because the true things rarely get into circulation." Many hours have been spent poring over the life and legacy of the screen star who died 60 years ago, aged just 36. Yet despite all the documentaries and biographies, mysteries remain.

For instance, no one knows who her father was. A new documentary, *Marilyn, Her Final Secret*, out in June, claims to have solved the riddle. The star, who grew up in a series of Los Angeles foster homes and orphanages after her mentally ill mother abandoned her, never knew her father's identity. Now French film-makers have used DNA technology to analyse a lock of her hair taken by an embalmer on the day she died and matched it to a person they believe to be a surviving relative.

The documentary is one of a clutch of films about Monroe out this year. The most controversial is *Blonde*, the Netflix biopic of the actress starring Ana de Armas, which in the US has been given an adults-only NC-17 rating because of its extreme sexual content. The Monroe mania doesn't stop there; this month Christie's in New York is selling Warhol's painting *Shot Sage Blue Marilyn* — its estimated value of \$200 million would make it the most expensive 20th-century work of art sold at auction. So what is it about the actress that makes us keep coming back to her story?



The documentary features audio interviews with some of those closest to the actress
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I am not immune. After tackling subjects such as Patricia Highsmith, Sylvia Plath and Alexander McQueen, I'm writing a biography on Monroe, due to be published in a few years.

I've always been fascinated by her shimmering luminescence as well as her extraordinary transition from plain Norma Jeane into a movie goddess. To get a fresh perspective I'm going back to the archives to delve deep into her life as well as talking to the few surviving people who knew her. I will examine certain key moments in her life — and afterlife — to paint a kaleidoscopic portrait. "Marilyn Monroe opens the entire problem of biography, the question of whether a person can be comprehended by the facts of a life," said Norman Mailer, who also wrote a book about her.

Mailer's conundrum drives a new Netflix documentary, *The Mystery of Marilyn Monroe: The Unheard Tapes*, which features audio interviews

made in the 1980s with some of those closest to her. They were conducted by Anthony Summers, whose 1985 book *Goddess* has recently been reprinted, and haven't been made public before.

Summers believes there are several reasons why we are still obsessed with Monroe. "She was something beyond the celebrated screen idol — she was funny, she was special, she was a walking secret, there was always something you couldn't reach," he says.



Monroe starred in *Some Like It Hot* in 1959

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Emma Cooper, the director of the documentary, agrees. "People look at her as a kind of Rubik's Cube; they try to figure her out, but she was also trying to figure herself out in the public arena. I think there was an honesty and fragility in her core which speaks to everyone."

In the film we hear the voices of some of the key players from the golden age of Hollywood, such as Billy Wilder, who directed Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Yet some of the most revealing material comes from less familiar names, particularly the family of Dr Ralph Greenson, Monroe's psychiatrist.

Central to the mystery of Monroe is the shadowy nature of her final days, which are examined in detail by Summers. "I don't wish to sound arrogant, but I'm rather confident that I've got as near to what happened as anyone ever will," he says.

He investigates the parts played by John F Kennedy, the president at the time, and his brother Robert, the attorney general. While officials concluded that Monroe's death by barbiturate poisoning was a "probable suicide", conspiracy theorists have speculated that she was murdered on the orders of — among others — JFK, Robert Kennedy, the CIA, the FBI or the mafia. Summers believes that the speculation comes from the mass of contradictory evidence about her final hours.



Monroe was doing well just before she died, says the director of the documentary
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"If you don't have definite answers you get a fertile soil where conspiratorial ideas will flourish," Summers says. "Chuck in the unrelated but huge paranoia surrounding the two Kennedy assassinations and you've got a formula for a dark pit of speculation."

FBI documents featured in the film purport to show that Monroe, suspected by the authorities of having "leftist" beliefs, had talked to the president about "the morality of atomic testing" a few weeks before she died. This was at the height of the Cold War, when Fidel Castro of Cuba was pleading with the Soviet Union for military help. Summers presents evidence suggesting that the Kennedy brothers were compromised by their relationships with Monroe and after her death there was a cover-up to protect their reputations.

Missing from the updated edition of *Goddess* is the shocking image of

Monroe on the mortuary slab, her face saggy after a post-mortem examination. Summers had received the black-and-white photo from a police contact and was unsure about including it in the first book, but was overruled. When it came to be reprinted he decided to leave it out.

Cooper, who has worked on documentaries about Ghislaine Maxwell and Madeleine McCann, feels that it's important not to read Monroe as if she was predestined to take her life. "She was doing so well just before she died," she says. "She was lifting herself out of her own emotional vulnerability and beginning to reject some of the bad choices she'd made in her romantic life."

Just before her death Monroe gave an interview to *Life* magazine and made an astute observation that predicted the way she would live on in our collective fantasies. When you are as famous as she was, she said, "you're always running into people's unconscious".

The Mystery of Marilyn Monroe is on Netflix from Apr 27. Goddess by Anthony Summers is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson at £16.99