

# Peter Tork, Court Jester of the Monkees, Is Dead at 77

The Monkees in a scene from their television show, from left: Mike Nesmith, Micky Dolenz, Davy Jones and Peter Tork. The Monkees were an unabashedly manufactured band, and Mr. Tork was positioned as the goofy one. Bettmann/Getty Images

By **Anita Gates**

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Peter Tork, a struggling musician who became an overnight teenage idol in the 1960s with [the Monkees](#), died on Thursday at a family home in eastern Connecticut. He was 77.

His son, Ivan Iannoli, said the cause was complications of a rare form of cancer that was first diagnosed in 2009. Mr. Tork, who grew up in Connecticut, lived in Mansfield, east of Hartford, according to The Hartford Courant.

The Monkees were an unabashedly manufactured band, created by Hollywood producers in the 1960s to capitalize on the astounding popularity of the Beatles. The members — Mr. Tork (the oldest, at 24), Davy Jones, Micky Dolenz and Mike Nesmith — were cast as the stars of an NBC sitcom, “The Monkees” (1966-68), in which they performed and dealt with comic situations with a childlike irreverence, much as the Beatles had in their hit films “A Hard Day’s Night” and “Help!”

The Monkees during the height of their popularity in the 1960s: from left, Mr. Nesmith, Mr. Tork, Mr. Jones and Mr. Dolenz. Among their hits were “Last Train to Clarksville,” “Daydream Believer” and “Pleasant Valley Sunday.” via Reuters

Mr. Tork was positioned as the goofy one, the court jester. The director Bob Rafelson, one of the show’s creators, compared him to Harpo Marx.

Because they were created for television, did not write their own songs (that was left to professionals like Gerry Goffin, Carole King and others) and did not play their own instruments (they mimed playing on camera), the Monkees were disdained by many; if the Beatles were the Fab Four, the Monkees quickly earned the derisive nickname the Prefab Four.

But they surprised many in the music industry, and perhaps themselves as well, when they became popular both on television and on the charts.

Their show won the Emmy Award for outstanding comedy series in 1967, and the band’s many hit records, including “Last Train to Clarksville,” “Daydream Believer,” “Pleasant Valley Sunday” and the infectious if simplistic “(Theme From) The Monkees” (“Hey, hey, we’re the Monkees / And people say we

Monkee around ... ”), for a while earned them sales on the same stratospheric level as the Beatles’.

Both Mr. Tork and Mr. Nesmith were accomplished musicians — Mr. Tork played several instruments — and Mr. Dolenz and Mr. Jones were seasoned singers. (As a child, Mr. Jones had played the Artful Dodger in “Oliver!” on Broadway.) But because studio musicians did the playing on the first two Monkees albums, the notion that they were not a real band persisted.

That began to change in 1967, when the group released what came to be considered its signature album, “Headquarters,” on which they played most of the instruments themselves and wrote several of the songs. Mr. Tork co-wrote some of them, and he shared lead vocals with Mr. Jones on the wistful ballad “Shades of Gray.”

(Peter Tork vocals were a rarity on Monkees albums — he was by far the group’s weakest singer — but he had some memorable ones, often laced with humor, beginning with “Your Auntie Grizelda” on the band’s second album, “More of the Monkees.”)

The Monkees recorded for only three years before disbanding; their popularity faded after their TV show was canceled, and Mr. Tork left the band in 1969.

But the group enjoyed a revival in the 1980s and reunited for numerous concerts and tours, although usually without Mr. Nesmith.

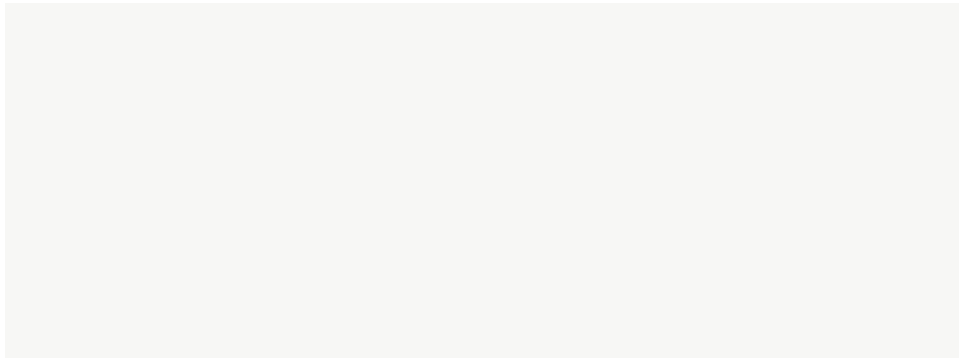
Mr. Tork recorded his first solo album, “Stranger Things Have Happened,” in 1994. He later formed a blues band, [Shoe Suede Blues](#), with which he continued to perform and record until recently. The band’s latest album, “Relax Your Mind,” was released last year.

“The blues is about community,” Mr. Tork told *The Courant*, explaining his genre switch. “Not about how lonely I am, but everybody’s been lonely.”

Peter Halsten Thorkelson was born on Feb. 13, 1942, in Washington, the son of Halsten John Thorkelson, an economics professor, and Virginia Hope (Straus) Thorkelson. The family moved to Connecticut, where Peter graduated from high school in Storrs. He attended Carleton College in Minnesota, but left before graduating and moved to New York, where he performed in folk clubs in Greenwich Village and met another up-and-coming musician, Stephen Stills.

In California, where both had relocated, Mr. Stills tried out for the Monkees. When that didn’t work out — some sources say Mr. Stills was rejected because he had bad teeth; Mr. Stills himself said that he rejected the job because he wanted to write songs for the show but that would have meant surrendering his music publishing — he recommended Mr. Tork, because people had always told the two that they looked alike.

Mr. Tork left show business shortly after leaving the Monkees and at one point taught high school in Santa Monica, Calif. There were financial problems, and personal ones as well; he dealt with alcoholism and drug abuse, and served a short prison sentence for hashish possession in 1972.



Mr. Dolenz, left, and Mr. Tork with the Monkees at Town Hall in New York in 2016. The Monkees recorded for only three years, but the group had a revival in the 1980s and continued performing into the 21st century. *Matthew Eisman/Getty Images*

Later in his career he made guest appearances on a handful of television series, including “The King of Queens” and “7th Heaven.” His last movie role was in “I Filmed Your Death,” a horror drama yet to be released.

Mr. Tork reunited with his fellow Monkees for a world tour in 2011 and with Mr. Dolenz and Mr. Nesmith in 2012 for a tour that included a tribute to Mr. Jones, [who died that year](#). In recent years the surviving Monkees released two albums.

Mr. Nesmith and Mr. Dolenz went back on the road last year, without Mr. Tork, for a tour billed as “The Monkees Present: The Mike & Micky Show.” (That tour was interrupted when Mr. Nesmith underwent heart surgery but resumed this year.)

Mr. Tork’s marriages to Jody Babb, Reine Stewart and Barbara Iannoli ended in divorce. In addition to his son, he is survived by his fourth wife, Pamela Grapes, whom he married in 2014; two daughters, Hallie Iannoli and Erica Thorkelson; a sister, Anne Thorkelson; a brother, Nick Thorkelson; and three grandchildren.

Like many artists, Mr. Tork concluded that happiness came simply from doing the work. “It’s about getting to play the music full time,” he told The Los Angeles Times in 1992. “It’s not about the following anymore, the fame game. A little bit of fame is fun, but I’ve had enough, thank you.”

Peter Keepnews and Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

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