Meet Walter Mercado, a Latinx wizard who changed TV forever

Growing up Latinx, I was raised with a couple of things that, upon going to school and learning how my white friends lived, weren't as common as I thought. Sometimes it just didn't come up. I, for example, never talked about the caped, androgynous man who appeared on Spanish-language news and delivered daily horoscopes with great theatricality. That was my normal, and I never really registered how less… *dramatic* the news was on English-language networks. This caped astrologist of my youth, Walter Mercado, was an icon and a fixture of Latin American life. But I, caught between cultures, had no idea how large he loomed.

Mucho Mucho Amor: The Legend of Walter Mercado is a Netflix documentary that explores the life of a Puerto Rican television giant that, for his tremendous fame, managed to maintain a private life that afforded him a level of mystery. Directed by Cristina Costantini and Kareem Tabsch, the film gives a loving and comprehensive overview of Mercado's life, leaning on interviews with Mercado and other Latinx icons like Lin-Manuel Miranda and Eugenio Derbez to convey the influence he had across generations.

That impact was largely reflected in the title, which quotes Mercado's familiar sign-off: lots and lots of love. Mercado, as the documentary details, became a sort of secular spiritual figure – like a pope, but not affiliated with any one religion. He consciously pulled from all of them, which was both a shrewd strategy for amassing a large international TV audience and also a big part of his appeal. The other is the aforementioned theatricality: Mercado loved capes and robes

and elaborate sets. He bucked gender norms, relishing in traditionally feminine gender expression in an extremely (and hostile) heteronormative culture, stopping just shy of disclosing a sexual identity beyond one memorable quote, where he says, “I have sexuality with the wind, the flowers, the garden.”

Mercado’s expression of love and performance of gender made him a queer icon

You believe him when he says it because there was no one really quite like Walter Mercado.

There’s some ugliness to that; a central conflict in the documentary is the deterioration of Mercado’s relationship with his longtime agent, Bill Bakula, who, at one point, wrested legal control of Mercado’s name, image, and work away from him. In this conflict, Mercado is depicted as both naive and amicable, a man who may have been scammed and implicated in scams, but only because he wanted to do the work of bringing joy to people with his shows.

It’s a genuine delight that has endured to the present. The last portion of *Mucho Mucho Amor* spends a little time with Mercado toward the end of his life at the premiere of an art exhibit dedicated to his career in 2019. It’s the most touching part of the film because it’s where Mercado gets to see what so few do: progress and how his life’s work made it happen. While Mercado’s sexuality remained private for his entire life, his expression of love and performance of gender made him a prominent queer icon in a culture that, for most of his life, had so few. Mercado died in late 2019 after a lengthy retreat from the public eye. But before his passing, he got to see a generation of Millennials that identify as Latinx over the gendered Latino/a, who were able to be out and proud and make content that centered their queerness online. He witnessed them find their communities.

Watching *Mucho Mucho Amor* was like having a lock opened inside

my brain. I discovered a bit of nostalgia I didn’t even know I was harboring; lovingly explored in the same way pop culture aimed at a white audience is all the time. Like learning how to cook a meal you grew up eating, *Mucho Mucho Amor* connected me with my past. It’s like the way air smells different and your heart feels a little bit bigger when you’re home with people you love and miss.

https://www.theverge.com/21334233/mucho-mucho-amor-walter-mercado-review-netflix