



American Legends: The Life of Mama Cass Elliot

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes Elliot's own quotes about her life and career *Includes footnotes and a bibliography for further reading *Includes a table of contents “If you truly dig what you are doing, if you lay it out that way, nobody can not respond. That's what rock and roll is; it's relentless.” – Mama Cass A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history's most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors' American Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of America's most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known. In the 1950s, popular music in the United States, Britain, and Europe jumped cultural tracks and went off in all directions, each form enjoying its own fan base, and its own way of overlapping with fellow genres. From the straight-laced life of the American 1950s, the social revolution that led to the unfettered 1960s spurred the accelerating development of rock music, an enormous industry of folk artists and hybrid masterpieces that could previously only have survived in a cell of “specialty” interest, along with an explosion of varying jazz styles. The African-American musical community massaged the traditional blues genre into countless personalities after discovering that it fit with almost every type of musical expression available, and even classical music splintered into a myriad of new interests, leaving the traditional viewpoint of the 19th and early 20th centuries behind. In short, musical exploration went off into a frenzy of change, and there were as many avenues of musical performance to join as there were distinct cultural groups to sustain them. On top of this fragmenting of styles, in which newly emerging social groups could adopt a distinctly tailored version for themselves, the era of the flower child dawned in California. This phenomenon increased both the options for original musical creations, and exponentially, the possibilities for melding the legion of styles, recently-formed social beliefs and behaviors, a new visual presentation and celebration of the self, and the celebration of traditionally revered melody and harmony. Such an age could not have served as a better societal laboratory in which to produce an enigmatic, talent-laden, highly intelligent, vocally-gifted, and contrasting artist to previous norms, such as Cass Elliot, endearingly known to millions as Mama Cass. Primarily hailed as a member of the legendary group, The Mamas & the Papas, Cass would lead other bands as the only female singer. Her fame there does not go unrecognized because these bands were of inferior quality. To the contrary, her work with the Triumvirate, the Big Three, and the Mugwumps, was exceptional. However, the blossoming hippie movement required an iconic hippie band, and The Mamas & the Papas were perfectly designed to serve as the prototype. Part of this lay in visual perception, as America was not yet prepared to adore a lead female singer who did not come from either a sanitized version of the Madison Avenue model, or the from the nature-fresh, abstract hippie image. Mixing the hippie beauty and cinematic, boardwalk look of Michelle Phillips, The Mamas and Papas soprano and former model, with the “earth mother” appearance and dark timbre of contralto Cass Elliot, not only made Elliot's participation possible through a successful contrast, but enabled the group to assemble its distinct, accurate, and rich vocal personality. Once the band's breakup occurred only a few short years later, Cass Elliot was free to move at will in the soloist's world, and appeared on every important talk show, worked with dozens of famous artists from different generations, and compiled a discography considerably larger than is generally known.

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