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Subject: Johnny Carson dead at 79

Posted by [cowmisfit](#) on Mon, 24 Jan 2005 01:33:40 GMT

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Quote:LOS ANGELES - Johnny Carson, the quick-witted "Tonight Show" host who became a national institution putting his viewers to bed for 30 years with a smooth nightcap of celebrity banter and heartland charm, died Sunday. He was 79.

Carson died early Sunday morning, according to his nephew, Jeff Sotzing. "He was surrounded by his family, whose loss will be immeasurable," Sotzing told The Associated Press.

He did not provide further details, but NBC said Carson died of emphysema \_ a respiratory disease that can be attributed to smoking \_ at his Malibu home.

Carson often had a cigarette in hand in the early years of "Tonight," eventually dropping the on-air habit when smoking on TV became frowned on. But he remained a heavy smoker for some years afterward, said a former associate who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The boyish-looking Nebraska native with the disarming grin, who survived every attempt to topple him from his late-night talk show throne, was a star who managed never to distance himself from his audience.

His wealth, the adoration of his guests \_ particularly the many young comics whose careers he launched \_ the wry tales of multiple divorces: Carson's air of modesty made it all serve to enhance his bedtime intimacy with viewers.

"Heeeeere's Johnny!" was the booming announcement from sidekick Ed McMahon that ushered Carson out to the stage. Then the formula: the topical monologue, the guests, the broadly played skits such as "Carnac the Magnificent."

But America never tired of him; Carson went out on top when he retired in May 1992. Actress-singer Bette Midler, who memorably serenaded Carson during the final show with "One More For My Baby," recalled him warmly Sunday.

"I was his last guest, and it was one of the most moving experiences of my life. He had it all. A little bit of devil, a whole lot of angel, wit, charm, good looks, superb timing and great, great class," Midler said in a statement.

His generosity to up-and-coming comics who got their big break on "Tonight" was lauded by Bill Cosby and others.

"Johnny was responsible for the beginning and the rise of success for more performers than anyone. I doubt if those numbers will ever be surpassed," Cosby said in a statement.

McMahon said Sunday that Carson was "like a brother to me."

"Our 34 years of working together, plus the 12 years since then, created a friendship which was professional, family-like and one of respect and great admiration," McMahon said in a statement.

"When we ended our run on 'The Tonight Show' and my professional life continued, whenever a big career decision needed to be made, I always got the OK from 'The Boss.'"

Carson's personal life could not match the perfection of his career. Carson was married four times, divorced three. In 1991, one of his three sons, 39-year-old Ricky, was killed in a car accident.

Nearly all of Carson's professional life was spent in television, from his postwar start at Nebraska stations in the late 1940s to his three decades with NBC's "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson."

Carson choose to let "Tonight" stand as his career zenith and his finale, withdrawing into a quiet retirement that suited his private nature and refusing involvement in other show business projects.

In 1993, he explained his absence from the limelight.

"I have an ego like anybody else," Carson told The Washington Post, "but I don't need to be stoked by going before the public all the time."

Carson spent his retirement years sailing, traveling and socializing with a few close friends including media mogul Barry Diller and NBC executive Bob Wright. He simply refused to be wooed back on stage.

"I just let the work speak for itself," he told Esquire magazine in 2002.

Carson did find an outlet for his creativity: He would send a joke occasionally to Letterman, who lost the battle for "Tonight" but remained a Carson friend. Some bits made it into Letterman's monologue.

He also wrote short humor pieces for The New Yorker magazine, including "Recently Discovered Childhood Letters to Santa," which purported to give the youthful wish lists of William Buckley, Don Rickles and others.

Carson made his debut as "Tonight" host in October 1962 and quickly won over audiences. He even made headlines with such clever ploys as the 1969 on-show marriage of eccentric singer Tiny Tim to Miss Vicki, which won the show its biggest-ever ratings.

The wedding and other noteworthy moments from the show were collected into a yearly "Tonight" anniversary special.

In 1972, "Tonight" moved from New York to Burbank. Growing respect for Carson's consistency and staying power, along with four consecutive Emmy Awards, came his way in the late 1970s.

His quickness and his ability to handle an audience were impressive. When his jokes missed their target, the smooth Carson won over a groaning studio audience with a clever look or sly, self-deprecating remark.

Politics provided monologue fodder for him as he skewered lawmakers of every stripe, mirroring

the mood of voters. His Watergate jabs at President Nixon were seen as cementing Nixon's fall from office in 1974.

He made presidential history again in July 1988 when he had then-Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton on his show a few days after Clinton came under widespread ridicule for a boring speech at the Democratic National Convention. Clinton traded quips with Carson and played "Summertime" on the saxophone in what was hailed as a stunning comeback.

Competing networks tried a variety of formats and hosts to challenge Carson, but never managed to best "Tonight."

There was the occasional battle with NBC: In 1967, for instance, Carson walked out for several weeks until the network managed to lure him back with a contract that reportedly gave him \$1 million-plus yearly.

In 1980, after more walkout threats, the show was scaled back from 90 minutes to an hour. Carson also eased his schedule by cutting back on his work days; a number of substitute hosts filled in, including Joan Rivers, Jerry Lewis and Jay Leno, Carson's eventual successor.

Rivers was one of the countless comedians whose careers took off after they were on Carson's show. After she rocked the audience with her jokes in that 1965 appearance, he remarked, "God, you're funny. You're going to be a star."

"If Johnny hadn't made the choice to put me on his show, I might still be in Greenwich Village as the oldest living undiscovered female comic," she recalled in an Associated Press interview 20 years later. She tried her own talk show in 1986, quickly becoming one of the many challengers who could not budge Carson.

In the '80s, Carson was reportedly the highest-paid performer in television history with a \$5 million "Tonight" show salary alone. His Carson Productions created and sold pilots to NBC, including "TV's Bloopers and Practical Jokes." Carson himself made occasional cameo appearances on other TV series.

He also performed in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, N.J., and was host of the Academy Awards five times in the '70s and '80s.

Carson's graceful exit from "Tonight" did not avoid a messy, bitter tug-of-war between Leno and fellow comedian David Letterman to take over his throne. Leno took over on May 25, 1992, becoming the fourth man to hold the job after Steve Allen, Jack Paar and Carson. Letterman landed on rival CBS.

Born in Corning, Iowa, and raised in nearby Norfolk, Neb., Carson started his show business career at age 14 as the magician "The Great Carsoni."

After World War II service in the Navy, he took a series of jobs in local radio and TV in Nebraska before starting at KNXT-TV in Los Angeles in 1950.

There he started a sketch comedy show, "Carson's Cellar," which ran from 1951-53 and attracted

attention from Hollywood. A staff writing job for "The Red Skelton Show" followed.

The program provided Carson with a lucky break: When Skelton was injured backstage, Carson took the comedian's place in front of the cameras.

Producers tried to find the right program for the up-and-coming comic, trying him out as host of the quiz show "Earn Your Vacation" (1954), the variety show "The Johnny Carson Show" (1955-56), the game show "Who Do You Trust?" (1957-62).

A few acting roles came Carson's way, including one on "Playhouse 90" in 1957, and he did a pilot in 1960 for a prime-time series, "Johnny Come Lately," that never made it onto a network schedule.

In 1958, Carson sat in for "Tonight Show" host Paar. When Paar left the show four years later, Carson was NBC's choice as his replacement.

After his retirement, Carson took on the role of Malibu-based retiree with apparent ease. An avid tennis fan, he was still playing a vigorous game in his 70s.

He and his wife, Alexis, traveled frequently. The pair met on the Malibu beach in the early 1980s; he was 61 when they married in June 1987, she was in her 30s.

Carson's first wife was his childhood sweetheart, Jody, the mother of his three sons. They married in 1949 and split in 1963. He married Joanne Copeland Carson that same year, but divorced nine years later. His third marriage, to Joanna Holland Carson, took place in 1972. They divorced in 1985.

On the occasion of Carson's 70th birthday, former "Tonight" bandleader Doc Severinsen, who toured with musicians from the show, said he was constantly reminded of Carson's enduring popularity.

"Every place we go people ask `How is he? Where is he? What is he doing? Tell him how much we miss him.' It doesn't surprise me," Severinsen said.

Carson won a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, in 1992, with the first President Bush saying, "With decency and style he's made America laugh and think." In 1993, he was celebrated by the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors for career achievement.

His nephew said there will be no memorial service.

Sad

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