

## Johnny Carson (born 1925) Comedian and Television Host

**Television Institution.** Millions of Americans tuned into the *Tonight Show*, hosted by Johnny Carson, on a daily basis from 1962 to 1992. It became a television institution and generated more money for NBC than any other TV show during its first decade with Johnny Carson as host — \$20 million annually.

**The Great Carsoni.** Johnny Carson first practiced his entertainment skills on family members with card tricks and other magic acts in a mail-order kit ordered from a magicians' supply house in Chicago. Johnny was known for following his family members around saying "Pick a card, any card." He began earning \$3 a show as "The Great Carsoni," as he liked to call himself after a traveling magician who had passed through Norfolk, Nebraska, where he grew up. Carson's mother sewed him a cape, and his first performance was staged in front of the local Kiwanis club, although Carson appeared in high-school plays as well.

**Shy Teenager.** Despite his antics, Carson was known as a shy teenager. "There was no way of knowing he was going to go on to become a national entertainment figure. He was shy deep down, even though he put on an outgoing appearance," according to an orthopedic surgeon, John Franer, quoted in *Carson: The Unauthorized Biography* by Paul Corkery.

**First Encounter with Hollywood.** After graduating from high school, Carson hitchhiked to Hollywood, where he was arrested and fined \$50 for imitating a midshipman, a story that's often seen as a legend. "Johnny embarked on an adventure, one so laden with implications about his future, that some have wondered if the escapade might not actually be a legend," Corkery wrote.

**Military.** Shortly thereafter, Carson enlisted in the Naval Air Corps. He was transferred to a naval officers' training program based at Columbia University in New York City where he became an ensign; he was assigned to the battleship *USS Pennsylvania* where he supervised the retrieval of 20 corpses. Carson also had "exciting" assignments like checking water levels and decoding documents, but he preferred to tell jokes at the enlisted mens' amateur shows. "He was more interested in writing down jabs and jibes that would amuse the sailors," wrote Donald L. Smith in *Johnny Carson: An Unauthorized Biography*.

**Discovers Talents.** Carson's most important military experience was a conversation with **James Forrestal**, Secretary of the Navy, who asked Carson if he planned to stay in the navy after the war. Carson said no and told him he wanted to be a magician. In response, Forrestal asked Carson to perform some magic, which Carson did with a card trick, but he created more than magic that day — a promise for the future. "For Carson, what was most important about this experience was his discovery that he could entertain and amuse someone as cranky and sophisticated as Forrestal," Corkery wrote in his biography.

**Education.** To take advantage of the educational opportunities from the navy, Carson enrolled at the University of Nebraska after he was honorably discharged in 1946. He majored in journalism with the intent of becoming a comedy writer, but switched his major to speech and drama a few months later because he wanted to become a radio performer. Carson's college thesis titled "How to Write Comedy Jokes" was a compilation of taped skits and jokes from popular radio shows with Carson explaining the comedic technique in a voice-over. It allowed him to graduate in three years.

**Early Work.** Despite his change of heart over his major, Carson fulfilled both of his dreams. While at the University of Nebraska, Carson wrote radio comedy programs. He worked at WOW radio in 1950 for two years as a deejay and a general announcer for two years. He then moved to Los Angeles where he was an all-purpose announcer and sat in a sound-proof booth watching a clock and a cue schedule. Although this was a setback for Carson according to Corkery, Carson ". . . saw the position as a step in a larger plan . . .," which held true as Carson had hoped.

**Attracts Attention of Comics.** KNXT station managers gave Carson a 15-minute show that was broadcasted on Sunday afternoons titled **Carson's Cellar**, which wasn't much of a gamble for the station wrote Corkery. "In TV terms, it was a throw-away time slot that could safely be given over to a beginner." The show poked fun at TV through parodies of other television shows. In fact, Carson announced Red Skelton as the show's special guest star as a lone figure raced across the stage, whom Carson said was Red Skelton. "Carson's lousy time slot on Sunday afternoon was a blessing," according to Corkery, because most comics only watched television on weekends, which was the case with Red Skelton who saw Carson's mockery of his guest-star announcement. Although his show lasted less than a year, it attracted the attention of some big comic stars like **Jack Benny**, Fred Allen, and Skelton, the last of whom hired Carson to write for his television show. Carson would have continued writing jokes and skits for Skelton, if he hadn't been asked to substitute for the star when he broke his leg falling through a prop door. He opened the show with a monologue that began, "Personally, the way I feel right now, I think Red's doctor should be doing the show."

**TV Networks Reward Johnny.** Almost a year later, at age 24, Carson was rewarded with the *Johnny Carson Show*. Once again, he wrote parodies of popular TV shows, but the show also featured dancers and balloons, which "worked well for him, but the total package just didn't click," Corkery wrote. CBS canceled the *Johnny Carson Show* on 28 March 1956, but it led to a game show: *Who Do You Trust?* The show was originally a prime-time production emceed by Edgar Bergen, but ABC was just beginning to establish daytime programming and switched it. "It wanted a lively, offbeat show which would draw attention away from frothing soap operas and goofy children's programs," Corkery wrote. The show eventually became ABC's top-rated program. By 1961, Carson earned \$2,500 per week, which was an incredible salary.

**Success.** In 1962, NBC offered Johnny an opportunity to host *The Tonight Show*, previously hosted by Jack Paar, who recommended him as his successor. Carson said the *Tonight Show* was different from anything he had tried before. "It's a chess game," he said. "It changes right on the air. That's what makes it exciting." The *Tonight Show* earned more money for NBC than any other show on television by the mid 1960s. After a strike and lengthy absences from the show, Carson's salary increased to \$1 million a year, and he was granted complete control of the show.

**Midnight Idol.** In May 1967, *Time* magazine published Carson's photo on its cover and called him the first "midnight idol." Carson even swayed public opinion on national issues. In fact, Carson once quoted a U.S. congressman who predicted a nationwide toilet-paper shortage, which, in turn, created a toilet-paper frenzy. "There was no shortage, but Johnny mentioned the congressman's tissue issue on the air and instigated a national run on toilet paper that had supermarkets and tissue manufacturers working overtime for weeks," Corkery wrote. Despite this power, Carson still strived for more autonomy, which NBC granted with \$12 million dollars to fund Carson Productions, which eventually produced the *Tonight Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman*.

**Tiny Tim's Wedding.** On 17 December 1969, Carson televised Tiny Tim's wedding to his fiancée, known only as Miss Vicki. It served as the *Tonight Show's* most celebrated telecast and attracted the show's largest viewing audience ever. According to Corkery, the event attracted so much attention because Tiny Tim was odd. "Tiny Tim, a long-haired giant of a man, was a true show-biz freak of the late sixties. He looked like a flower child who had been fed on steroids..."

**Creates Turtleneck Trend.** Carson also mentioned his love for turtlenecks one night and received dozens of them in addition to his fan mail. When Carson began wearing his turtlenecks, they became trendy, which exemplified his impact on society. Many offices and restaurants let their employees choose between wearing turtlenecks or ties. Conversely, when Carson said he loathed fruitcakes during the 1986 holiday season, it caused an influx of fruitcakes. When he asked his fans to quit sending them, he received more. Not having learned his lesson, wrote Smith, Carson commented on the situation once again: "Some fruitcake sent me another fruitcake."

**Conquering the Competition.** The *Tonight Show* was the only show of its kind until other networks tried to cash in on the Carson phenomenon, which created a spate of talk shows hosted by Joey Bishop, Merv Griffin, Mike Douglas, David Frost, Virginia Graham, Phil Donahue, and Dick Cavett. Joey Bishop, Carson's primary competition, shared the same time slot with Carson. The show lasted only two years, and the time slot was filled by Dick Cavett, who interviewed **Woody Allen**, **Orson Welles**, Charlton Heston, and Jack Lemmon, which were memorable interviews but unable to compete with Carson. His show was canceled in January 1973. Merv Griffin entered the realm of late-night television in August 1969, but his show was canceled in 1972. The *David Frost Show* also lasted from 1969 to 1972. It was famous for in-depth interviews with **Billy Graham**, Timothy Leary, **Richard Nixon**, Henry Youngman, **Elizabeth Taylor**, and british rock groups. Although none of these hosts came close to competing with Carson, he did make some changes to his show to stay ahead of the competition. On such change was in the location of the show.

**Carson Moves to West Coast.** The *Merv Griffin Show*, *David Frost Show* and *Tonight Show* were all produced in New York, which meant that many guest stars appeared within days of each other on these three shows. As a remedy, Carson produced the *Tonight Show* in Hollywood several months a year to recruit new guests, which was a huge success. "Not only were audiences entranced by new and slightly silly guests that Carson cajoled out of the Hollywood-work, they loved new characters and skits inspired by the mad L.A. lifestyle," Corkery wrote. Carson's producer encouraged him to move the show to Los Angeles permanently, and although he was apprehensive, he complied. Carson had found success in New York when he landed the *Tonight Show*, whereas Los Angeles reminded him of his failure during the early years of his career

**The Mail Room.** Carson received thousands of letters during his 30 years with the *Tonight Show*, many of which are compiled in a book titled *Dear Johnny*, which also lists Carson's 12 most common requests: "To be on the show, autographs (pictures, etc.), Tickets to see the show, Personal items for celebrity auctions, The coffee mug on Johnny's desk or the pencil with the double-ended eraser, Money, To participate in a business venture, Advice on life, love or comedy careers, Did we mention money, To wish a loved one "Happy Birthday" or "Happy Anniversary" on the air, To offer words of wisdom to institutions or organizations and Video cassettes of past shows." However, the most mail generated by a single event was the premature death of his son, Rick, which demonstrated the impact of Carson's personal life on his viewing audience.

**First Marriage.** Although Carson married his fourth wife Alex (Alexis) Mass on 20 June 1987 and remains happily married, he has a history of tumultuous marriages: Jody Wolcott, Joanne Copeland, and Joanna Holland. Carson married Wolcott, whom he met in college, in 1942 and divorced in 1962, reportedly due to stress and depression in Wolcott's life and stress and heavy drinking in Carson's life.

**Second Marriage.** Carson remarried in 1970 to Joanne Copeland because he thought it would help him gain full custody of the three children he had with Wolcott: Chris, Cory, and Ricky, who were said to be funny like Carson. "Neighbors remember them as rambunctious and prone to pranks, not unlike their father, who had in his own youth organized illicit school assemblies and spewed odd smelling odors through the school heating system; the sons themselves were given to tricks and escapades," according to Corkery. Despite their shenanigans, none of the boys were aspiring comedians like their father. Chris became a professional golfer in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Ricky worked as a musician in California, and Cory worked behind the scenes in television production. Due to peer pressures in his personal life and conflicts with NBC about the direction of the *Tonight Show*, Carson and Copeland separated in 1970 and divorced in 1972.

**Third Marriage.** Carson married his third wife, Joanna Holland, in 1972 — the same year as his divorce and on the tenth anniversary of the *Tonight Show*. Between October 1982 and January 1983, this marriage also fell apart.

**Fourth Marriage.** Johnny married his fourth wife Alex (Alexis) Mass on 20 June 1987. Her lack of interest in show business contributed to her successful marriage to Carson. According to the wife of a Carson executive quoted in Corkery's book, "I think Alexis is very good for Johnny . . . She gives him a center and focus and

doesn't need to be a separate personality or star. Alexis is contented to be a consort."

**Farewell Tour.** Carson's farewell tour included stars who were regular guests on the show, as well as those who had not appeared in many years. "Like a Hall of Fame ballplayer making his final tour of the ballparks of America, Johnny Carson's last weeks on the *Tonight Show* took on the aura of an ongoing tribute to an icon," wrote Bill Carter, author of *The Late Shift*. Carson's final telecast on 22 May 1992, was one of the top-rated programs of the year. It included highlights of Carson's 30 year reign as the "midnight idol" and tributes to regular members of the "Tonight" show crew: Ed McMahon and Doc Severinsen. However, most people thought that the second-to-last show, which included Robin Williams and Bette Midler, was even better. Johnny ended his program with a sincere farewell. "I bid you a very heartfelt good night," said Carson.

**Retirement Years.** Although Carson signed a contract with NBC that would allow him to develop and star in television programs, Carson's loyal fans have not seen much of him since the *Tonight Show*. Carson's sidekick on the *Tonight Show*, Ed McMahon, predicted that Carson would return to television in 1994, two years after his retirement, but Carson explained in an interview why he has not returned. "I don't want to do television just to do television . . . You have to have a reason to do it," he had said.

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