

Johnny Carson (1925-2005)



By defying the TV reductionism that renders all things knowable and ultimately trivial, Carson made himself into one of the medium's only characters worth watching, night after night. . . . [W]e knew Johnn Carson like we knew ourselves. Which is to say we hardly knew him at all.

Steven D. Stark, *Glued to the Set*



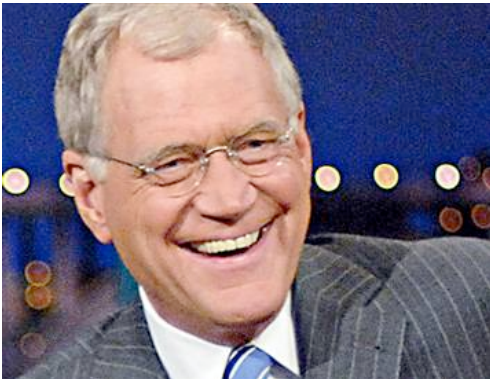
In the early 1990s, in a series of *Saturday Night Live* skits, Dana Carvey and Phil Hartman parodied their fellow NBC late night program, the long running *Tonight Show* (1954-), As Johnny Carson, the show's host from 1963 to 1993, Carvey reduced the talk show legend to a series of familiar ticks and the constantly repeated, applicable to everything, exclamation "That's wild stuff"; mimicking sidekick/announcer Ed McMahon, Hartman was all boisterous laughs and endlessly repeated "Heigh-o's." For critic Ken Tucker, the parodies, "at once mean and respectfully accurate," spelled cultural doom for the king of late night: "Carvey was pointing out the way Carson had become increasingly out of it, seemingly unaware of the pop culture around him" ("Still Crazy").

In a May 1991 installment of the recurring sketch, Carvey answered Ed's "Here's Johnny" summons and emerged from behind the curtain not in his usual dapper sport coat and slacks, not with short, graying hair, not to perform his usual

golf-swing-punctuated monologue and announce “We’ll be right back,” but as “Carsenio,” a bleached-blonde, flat-topped, Caucasian- version of African American comedian Arsenio Hall, the late night syndicated host whose fist-pumping, hipper humor and more contemporary guests had begun to woo away the younger end of Carson’s demographic.

The sight of the Carvey version of the King of Late Night stooping to emulate his distant rival could only provoke sadness, not laughter, in the longtime-*Tonight Show*-watcher. The spectacle of Carson trying to be the “terminally charmless” (Shales) Jay Leno, his successor as *Tonight Show* host, or Carson-as-Letterman, the loser in the “network battle for the night” (Carter) that erupted after Johnny’s retirement, would be just as distressing. The Johnny Carson who had become an American icon, “NBC’s answer to foreplay” (Tynan 315), “history’s most effective contraceptive” (*People Weekly* 1989), and “the greeter and spokesman for the United States” (Letterman, quoted by Zehme), while remaining an essentially private, reclusive individual—“the Garbo of Comedy, the Salinger of Television” (Zehme)—that Carson never really changed. “The idea that one man, basically unscripted, could last on TV for 30 years,” a former NBC executive would maintain, “it’s a freak of television” (quoted in Zoglin).

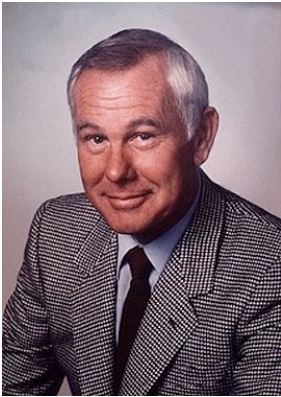
When Shakespeare left the theatre for good, he put the London stage behind him completely and remained content to be a retired impresario back home in Stratford; when Carson, the most watched performer in the history of entertainment, his show the biggest money-maker the medium had ever known, left television after his 4,530th show, he returned home to Malibu pretty much never to be seen again. “Like sun and moon and oxygen,” Bill Zehme, contemplating his disappearance, would write movingly in 2002, “he was always there, reliable and dependable, for thirty years. Then he wasn’t anymore. And he didn’t just simply leave: He vanished completely; he evaporated into cathode snow; he took the powder of all powders.” In



January 2005 the news broke that Carson, who had spent almost his entire career on NBC, was occasionally providing jokes for David Letterman’s *Late Show* monologue on rival CBS. Soon after, on January 23rd, 2005, came the shocking news that Johnny Carson was dead from emphysema, having passed away while these pages were being written. Judging by

some of the hagiographies that appeared in the media after his death, critic David Edelstein would justifiably complain, "You'd think that Carson was some sort of egoless saint of television."

More than just a celebrity (defined by Boorstin as someone merely "known for his well-knownness" [57]), the "Greatest Generation" (Shales) Carson once represented something distinctly American. "More people look at Johnny," an NBC press agent once bragged about its prize commodity, "than look at the moon" (*People Weekly* 1989). But what did they see? As television scholar Jimmie Reeves once observed, Carson was never a simple star in the firmament: "It's [Carson's] elusivity that keeps him fresh. . . . We can put ourselves into him. He's familiar enough to be recognizable, yet unique enough to be interesting. There's more to Johnny Carson than meets the eye" (quoted in Stark 184).

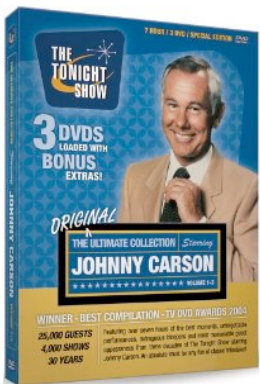


In private, Johnny Carson was, by all reports, a loner, uncomfortable in social situations, seemingly ill-suited to the life of celebrity. The screenwriter George Axelrod once observed that "Socially, [Carson] doesn't exist. The reason is that there are no television cameras in living rooms. If human beings had little red lights in the middle of their foreheads, Carson would be the greatest conversationalist on earth" (quoted in Tynan 312). (The camera, Tynan quipped, "act[ed] on him like an addictive and galvanic drug" [311].)

Critics like Richard Poirier have documented the pronounced tendency of key figures in American literature, culture, and politics to create imaginary public personas often at odds with their private selves. Though Carson's long-time producer Fred de Cordova once insisted that while "George Burns and Jack Benny assumed a façade," his star was himself "not a character named Johnny Carson" (quoted by Stark 185), was it not in fact his "negative capability" that enabled him to become not only Carnac the Magnificent and Aunt Blabby, Art Fern and Floyd R. Turbo, but also his greatest creation: Carson the congenial conversationalist?

A year after Carsenio made his appearance, Carson ended his run just short of three decades behind the desk. His final two shows, cultural spectacles comparable to the series finales of *M*A*S*H*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends*, drew huge audiences (50 million watched the last one, a guest-less retrospective clip show, on May 21, 1992), but it was the penultimate one, in which Bette Midler crooned "One More for My Baby (and One More for the Road)" to an obviously moved Carson, that everyone

remembers, producing as it did what David Bianculli called “a perfect moment of television, a guaranteed tearjerker, and a fitting finale (even if it was a day early) to one of the most durable and impressive careers in show business” (342). Television scholar David Marc would see in Carson’s retirement the end of an era: “For 30 years, prime time was bracketed by two men: Walter Cronkite, who gave the news in his daily report, and Johnny Carson, who reviewed the news in his daily monologue. . . . Johnny, like Walter, is part of the lost world of three-channel culture” (quoted in Tucker, “Johnny’s Last Laugh”).



Though he came to be a Hollywood gatekeeper with the power to make or break careers—scores of comics, from Roseanne Barr to Jerry Seinfeld credited him with their first big break—Carson never shed his image as a Midwestern boy (born in Iowa, he grew up in Nebraska). Watch *Johnny Goes Home* on *The Ultimate Collection* DVDs, narrated by and starring Carson as he wanders about Norfolk, NE, even sitting down for a refresher penmanship lesson by his now-elderly grade school teacher, and it becomes apparent that Johnny had not succeeded, nor perhaps even attempted, to take the farm out of the boy. If fellow Nebraskan talk show host Dick Cavett would discern in his one-time boss and later rival “that wonderful naughty-fraternity-boy quality . . . he never outgrows” (quoted in Zoglin), Carson’s impish taste for the risqué, his adeptness at double entendré, were equally apparent to any alert viewer.

As Edelstein insisted in a discerning obituary,

When Carson succeeded Steve Allen and Jack Paar as host of . . . the *Tonight Show*, the shift in tone was radical. Although Allen was underappreciated as a satirist, he had a fundamentally earnest presence, and Paar was, if anything, overearnest (to the point of bathos). But Carson was cutting: There was always a chill behind the twinkle. If he cultivated the look of a boyish Midwesterner . . . , he could turn into a bad boy (or a smutty-minded boy) in an instant.” Although no one seems able to confirm (and Carson himself denied it) that he once responded to a Persian-cat-toting Zsa Zsa Gabor’s invitation “to pet my pussy?” with “Sure, if you move that damn cat



out of the way!" (Cox 77), he very definitely did tell the voluptuous Dolly Parton that he would "give about a year's pay to take a peek under there" (Cox 84), and who can forget his wide-eyed response, captured in close-up, when the late Madeline Kahn responded to his inquiry about her phobias with "I do not like balls coming toward me." Carson's use of "the camera as a silent conspirator," Kenneth Tynan once observed, was his "most original contribution to TV technique." But it was not his only one.

Writing in *USA Today*, Wes Gehring would offer an astute analysis of Carson's comic style:

[B]ecause Carson was such a student of laughter, he often existed as a pluralist comedian, gifting audiences periodically with such signature expressions as Oliver Hardy's embarrassed tie-fiddling look, Stan Laurel's teary elongated face, Benny's direct address (staring at the camera) deadpan, and a Groucho Marx eyebrow twitch after a mildly suggestive double entendre. What made these and other assorted funny footnotes all Carson was the ease with which he segued through such shtick. It was a tour de silly each night of the week. (68)

He was a superb physical comedian, as good at pratfalls as a Chevy Chase, willing to get down on all fours, pretending to be a dog gobbling the Alpo a real dog had rejected, saving Ed McMahon's live ad. Wonderfully uneasy with the parade of animals the San Diego Zoo brought to the show, he could secure uproarious laughter from a face-off with an orangutan, a marmoset urinating on his head, a boa constrictor's tail surprisingly emerging between his legs.

Virtually every recognizable figure from entertainment and politics, both fellow icons and lesser lights, from Martin Luther King to Dean Martin, Richard Nixon to Bob Hope, Shelley Winters to Carl Sagan, Bill Clinton to Tiny Tim, sat down beside him. "It is still the most exciting moment in show business to walk out from that curtain and sit in this chair," Tom Hanks has confessed (Zoglin). He was absolutely wonderful with children and the elderly, and with ordinary Americans (deemed "civilians" by the show's staff), he could be the perfect host, hardly ever condescending, though often playful (that time, for example, when he pretended to eat one of the prized potato chips in which a woman had found a variety of animal

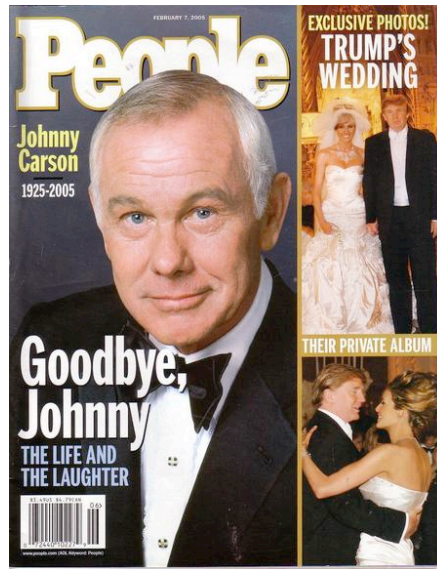
and human faces).

With *Dragnet's* Jack Webb, he could do tongue-twisting verbal humor about copper clappers and kleptomaniacs, or, as President Reagan, revisit Abbott and Costello, Hu, Watt, and Yasser Arafat replacing Who, What, and friends. The *Ultimate Collection* Carson DVDs are full of such moments of clever, imaginative, often literate comedy. In one particularly memorable skit, Carson, dressed in Renaissance garb, plays Hamlet, reciting, or so it seems, the famous "To be or not to be" and "Alas, Poor Yorick" soliloquies, but Shakespeare's powerful words turn out to be mere product placement for a shameless series of commercials: "sleep no more" inspires a plug for Sominex; "The heartache, and the thousand natural *shocks*/That flesh is heir to" (my italics) leads to an ad for Aamco; "ay, there's the rub," turns out to be, of course, a set-up for promotion of Mentholatum Deep Heat Rub." Yorick, in turn, is warned not to leave Denmark without his American Express Card.

But it was, of course, Carson's monologues that were his comic signature. Whether his one-liners produced laughs or bombed (he was a master at transforming even his failures into hilarity), his opening litany of jokes, almost certain to include gags about Ed's drinking, bandleader Doc Severinsen's wardrobe (or substitute Tommy Newsom's drabness), and his own former wives, was often the highlight of the show and sometimes the only part of the show for which sleepy Americans could stay conscious. Carson "dealt with topical events as reliably as Walter Cronkite," Bianculli has observed, "and the impact of his monologue made Carson the TV equivalent of Will Rogers: one joke could make all the difference in indicating whether someone (or something) was up or down, in or out" (341). It should not surprise us that Carson's monologue came to possess such influence, for as Stark notes, "like an anchorman (or a president), Carson was one of the few performers whom TV etiquette allowed to address the camera directly—the culture's ultimate sign of respect and authority" (183).

In perhaps the most discerning piece ever written on Carson, Kenneth Tynan articulates the dilemma that faced Carson both the performer and the icon: "Singers, actors, and dancers all have multiple choices: they can exercise their talents in the theatre, on TV, or in the movies. But a talk-show host can only become a more successful talk-show host. There is no place in the other media for the gifts that distinguish him—most specifically, for the gift of re-inventing himself, night after night, without rehearsal or repetition. Carson, in other words, is a grand master of the one show-business art that leads nowhere. He has painted himself not into a

corner but onto the top of a mountain" (353-54).



If television had a Mount Rushmore, Johnny would be on it.

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