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DON RICKLES

(Biography)

Don Rickles is one of the 20th Century's most famous funnymen. For almost 40 years he has appeared in top showrooms in Atlantic City, Reno, Lake Tahoe and Las Vegas. He is regarded among the world's top entertainers.

Rickles is also highly visible on TV, as well as in motion pictures, including appearances in Universal Pictures' "Casino," directed by Martin Scorsese, appearing with Robert De Niro, Sharon Stone and Joe Pesci, "Toy Story," a revolutionary computer animated feature, for Walt Disney Pictures, and the now cult classic, "Kelly's Heroes," as well as early career roles in "Run Silent, Run Deep" and "Rat Race." He is also seen in the mega-hit "Toy Story 2." Additionally, he has starred in live stage productions and, along the way, has had two best-selling comedy albums.

A small step forward in Rickles' career occurred in 1957 at a small Hollywood nightclub. One night, Frank Sinatra wandered in. Rickles, still "unknown," eyed Sinatra and said, "I just saw your movie, 'The Pride and the Passion,' and I want to tell you, the cannon was great." And, "Make yourself at home, Frank. Hit somebody."

Sinatra doubled up laughing and became one of Rickles' biggest boosters among Hollywood celebrities. Rickles soon became the "in" comic among the Hollywood stars, who flocked to his nightclub engagements to become the targets of his "insults."

In 1959, Rickles signed for his first Las Vegas appearance. He clicked immediately and has headlined there every year since. In the mid '60's, even though he had attained some success in nightclubs, Rickles was still far from a national name. He had been working in clubs, and doing television and motion picture acting assignments for more than 15 years.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment of his breakthrough, Rickles believes the ball really started rolling on the night of October 7, 1965, during his first appearance on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show." His freewheeling performance that night became the talk of the showbusiness industry and caused nationwide comment among the press and public.

Until then, Rickles' TV appearances had been limited to acting assignments on situation comedy and dramatic shows. A fine actor who graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York, Rickles had frequently received rave reviews for his acting ability. But now, the door was wide open for him to appear on TV as a comedian.

The next important breakthrough for Rickles occurred during the summer of 1967. He was signed to appear on "The Dean Martin Show." Rickles, in his first guest appearance on a major prime-time variety show, scored a major success.

Immediately after taping his first appearance on "The Dean Martin Show," Rickles was signed for a second guest spot on that program. Celebrities were invited to sit in the audience to become the targets of Rickles' "insults." Rickles did not know as he walked onstage who he'd be confronting. Among others he faced that night were Danny Thomas, Jackie Cooper, Bob Newhart, Lena Horne, Dean Martin, Ernest Borgnine, Don Adams, Ricardo Montalban and Pat Boone. He proceeded to ad-lib for one hour (eventually edited down to 20 minutes for the show). For weeks afterwards, people throughout the country repeated Rickles' lines. Particularly memorable was his remark as Bob Hope walked into the studio and took a seat. It was during the Vietnam war. Rickles snapped, "What's Bob Hope doing here? Is the war over."

Meanwhile, the public was discovering that behind the sharp Rickles' barbs was deep affection and love for those whom he seemed to be taunting.

"If I were to insult people and mean it, that wouldn't be funny," Rickles told an interviewer. "There is a difference between an actual insult and just having fun."

By year's end all three major networks and every major independent producer were besieging Rickles with ideas for a TV series of his own. He has since starred in prime time series for ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX. During the '70's and '80's, Rickles also hosted or co-hosted seven television specials.

In 1980, his star became even brighter internationally when he became the toast of British society as a result of an appearance at Grosvenor House in London during a fund-raising gala. The guest of honor was Princess Margaret, who laughed heartily at Rickles' barbs directed at her, as did many other British theatrical, political and social leaders when it came their turn to be zinged. Afterwards, the Princess invited Rickles and his wife to her table so that they could become better acquainted. The British press for days afterwards headlined what Rickles said and did. Offers to make concert appearances in that land have since been pouring in.

Another TV appearance of note came in 1984 when Rickles received one of the highest honors an entertainer can be afforded. He was invited by President Reagan to perform at the televised Inaugural Gala, where he "zinged" the President, the Vice President and other of the nation's dignitaries gathered for the occasion.

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Don Rickles was born in New York City. As a teenager, he performed in high school plays and at neighborhood dances before starting to work in small nightclubs.

His "insult" style just happened. Two years after his discharge from the U.S. Navy in 1946, he was working in nightclubs. Never a great joke teller in the traditional sense, Rickles suddenly found himself talking directly to the audience and throwing "off the cuff" lines at them. The laughs came and the rest, as they say, is history.

Rickles is also well known for his many charitable involvements. Among his proudest moments was the dedication on February 7, 1982 of the Barbara and Don Rickles Gymnasium at Sinai Temple in West Los Angeles, California. The gymnasium was built with funds raised by Rickles and many of his star friends during a special performance at the Ahmanson Theater in the Los Angeles Music Center. Rickles and his wife Barbara live in the Los Angeles area. They have a daughter Mindy, a son Lawrence, and recently became grandparents for the first time.