

# [***Johnny Carson: What Our Current Late-Night Hosts Can Learn From the King***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BPX-X1D1-JBR6-935J-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** Lee Habeeb

**Highlight:** Americans, Carson understood profoundly, were tuning in to escape the news of the day.

**Body**

When many of us think of [*Johnny Carson*](https://www.newsweek.com/johnny-carson-1925-2005-122535?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), the man who dominated late-night TV for decades, memories of our family pop into our heads. "My dad would always say the same thing," former late-night host [*Conan O'Brien*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/conan-obrien?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) recalled. "Let's just watch a little bit of the monologue. I'm laughing and my father's laughing and how often can you watch something with your father, you know? He [Carson] crossed generations."

Carson crossed partisan divides too, divides that were as alive in his generation as they are now. Unlike late-night hosts today who are overtly partisan and overwhelmingly favor Democratic politicians—Steven Colbert, [*Jimmy Kimmel*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/jimmy-kimmel?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and the five hosts of *The Daily Show* come to mind—Carson had too much respect for his audience to choose sides.

"You never knew Johnny's ***politics***," [*Jay Leno*](https://www.newsweek.com/jay-leno-never-gave-donald-trump-permission-use-his-letter-1786926?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) said with admiration. "Johnny would come out and equally make fun of everybody." Indeed, Carson played host to seven presidents and, as he put it when asked, "thankfully for comedy." Carson understood that his job was not to sway elections or change the audience's mind about the issues of the day but to entertain it.

"I think one of the dangers if you are a comedian, which basically I am, is that if you start to take yourself too seriously and start to comment on social issues, your sense of humor suffers somewhere," Carson told Barbara Walters in 1984.

"Some critics have said that our show doesn't have great sociological value, it's not controversial, it's not deep," Carson added. "But *The Tonight Show* basically is designed to amuse people. To make them laugh."

It was a serious business to [*Carson*](https://www.newsweek.com/bill-maher-remembers-johnny-carson-20-years-later-64987?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)—and a serious responsibility—bringing people together for some late-night laughs. Americans, he understood profoundly, were tuning in to *escape* the news of the day.

He had the good fortune of rising up the ranks in television at a time when personal biography was less important to audiences than the capacity to entertain. Performers also understood that the less we knew about their personal lives the better.

The closest Carson came to explaining himself was during a *Tonight Show* appearance by celebrity interviewer Rona Barrett. Up until then, America knew little about the man, aside from his recurring marriage problems. Barrett started by asking Carson some basic biographical questions. Carson obliged, and within moments he was a guest on his own show.

Asked about his childhood, Carson told Barrett he was the product of a good Midwestern home. "I guess what you'd call [a] normal upbringing. You know, the heart of the country," Carson replied. "My folks were supportive in what I wanted to do."

Barrett then asked Carson if he'd always known what he wanted to do for a living. Carson said he'd known since he was 12 or 13 that he wanted to be an entertainer.

That's when things got interesting: Barrett proceeded to ask a series of questions most guests of Carson would be afraid to ask, especially on his show.

**Barrett**: You like the attention?

**Carson**: Oh, sure.

**Barrett**: But why? Why you? Why at age 12 or 13?

**Carson**: Because I was in a play and I got up and did something and people laughed, and all of a sudden you say, 'Hey, that sounds pretty good.' So it makes you the center of attention.

**Barrett**: But *why* did you want the attention?

**Carson**: Hmm?

**Barrett**: Why did you want the attention?

That was a moment millions of Americans would never forget. For the first time, Carson was stumped. There were no clever comebacks, just an awkward pause.

**Carson**: Why did I want the attention? Because I was shy. [Another pause.]

Because I was shy. Now that sounds like ambivalence, right?

Carson wasn't finished with the answer to Barrett's question, feeling the need to explain why being an entertainer was a natural extension of his shyness.

**Carson**: When you're onstage in front of an audience, you're kind of in control. When you're off the stage or in a situation where there are a lot of people, you're not in control, and I felt awkward. So I went into show business thinking I could overcome that shyness.

**Barrett**: Where do you think the shyness emanated from?

**Carson**: I bought it in Chicago. [Audience laughter and applause.]

Carson used a joke to escape from Barrett's line of questioning, and he would spend much of his life escaping from life itself, we learned from the biography *Carson the Magnificent: An Intimate Portrait*, by Bill Zehme. No one, even Carson himself, knew why.

But what made him the king of late-night comedy? Two attributes would come up repeatedly from the most gifted entertainers of their day: his timing and generosity.

"He had the perfect barometer in his head of when to go and when to stay out," comedian and former late-night host Arsenio Hall said. "He could save you if the show needed it, or he could let you do your thing."

Carson's timing was a product of his love of magic, said a magician and member of the world-famous Magic Castle club in Los Angeles, where Carson was a member. "Johnny loved magic and used lessons learned from the craft as a host. It played a real role in his success."

Carson's love of magic started early. He was born in Iowa, and his family moved to Norfolk, Nebraska, when he was 8 years old. There, he honed his magic skills for the same reasons young men pick up guitars: to meet girls. "I thought that would be a good way to go to parties. Be the life of the party and get girls," Carson explained. "Neither worked well."

If magic helped explain Carson's success, so did his generosity. He never cared if his guests got the big laughs and was always happy to play the role of straight man if necessary. "In the end, he put out a better product because he was smart enough to know how to give room to funny or engaging people and let them shine," Zehme wrote.

Many of those guests included up-and-coming comedians, whom Carson championed. Indeed, his show launched many of the great comedians of the past half-century, people like Gary Shandling, Ellen DeGeneres, Joan Rivers, Jerry Seinfeld, Jim Carrey, Steven Wright and Roseanne Barr.

"You knew you were bringing your little gift to him of a joke, and you knew he was gonna open it and love it," the late Joan Rivers once recalled. "And he knew where you were going. He knew when to come in and he knew when not to come in."

In 1981, Seinfeld, 27, made his debut on Carson's show. "I don't wonder what it's like to be an Olympic athlete and spend years on something that goes by in five minutes, because I know," he said of the experience. "If you're on *The Tonight Show* and Johnny Carson likes you, you're in show business, and if he doesn't, you're not." Things worked out for Seinfeld, who would appear on Carson's show on many more occasions.

Carson had one additional talent: He mastered the art of self-deprecation and allowed his show's ensemble—Ed McMahon and Doc Severinsen were a part of his merry team—to tease him incessantly about his ex-wives. This made Carson not just more appealing but more human.

In his 1978 *New Yorker* profile of Carson, Kenneth Tynan wrote that he mastered "the art of the expected." Every night for what seemed like a lifetime, the show's bandleader would start that great late-night theme song, McMahon would proclaim, "Heeeeeere's Johnny" and out from the curtains would step a well-tailored, well-tanned Carson. And for an hour, or until we fell asleep, the world was a better place.

Carson walked away from his show in 1992 after 30 years at the top of the late-night ratings. In his dramatic finale, he had this to say to his audience: "I'm one of the lucky people in the world. I found something that I always wanted to do and I enjoyed every single minute of it.... I hope when I find something I want to do that I think you will like and I come back, you will be as gracious inviting me into your homes as you always have been."

Carson never did come back. Peter Jones, director of the documentary *Johnny Carson:King of Late Night,* sent a letter to Carson every year or so asking for his cooperation in a TV biography, but the answer was always no.

"The reason I don't go back or do interviews is because I just let the work speak for itself," Carson told *Esquire* in 2002.

He died on January 23, 2005, from emphysema at age 79. The work, if you look it up on YouTube, still speaks for itself.

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2373523/johnny-carson.jpg)

**Graphic**

Johnny Carson

Photo by Keystone Features/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Johnny Carson hosts an episode of "The Tonight Show" in December 1964. "'The Tonight Show' basically is designed to amuse people. To make them laugh,” he said.

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