

Joan Davis
Patrick Andre

Joan Davis was an American comedic actress known for her work in film, radio, and television. She was born Madonna Josephine Davis in St. Paul Minnesota on June 29, 1912, although some list the year as early as 1907. This earlier date seems unlikely since her parents, LeRoy Davis and Nina Mae Sinks Davis were said to have married in 1910. The discrepancy seems to arise from a birth certificate that was amended 32 years later.

Raised as an only child, Davis started performing at the age of three. Within a few years she was entering and, by her own account, winning many amateur talent shows. By high school, she sang, danced, and imitated Charlie Chaplin. Davis also juggled and spun dishes while doing comedic monologs, talents that she incorporated into her vaudeville act with husband Si Wills, who she married in 1931. Her talent at twirling dishes routine led to her first appearance in motion pictures in 1935.

Joan Davis was on contract with Twentieth Century-Fox from the mid-1930's to early-1940's. Her early roles were short, comic relief scenes that did not lead to any breakout opportunities. With a slightly nasal sounding voice, and offhand, simplistic delivery, she was well suited for radio. On August 28, 1941, she first appeared as a guest on the *Rudy Vallee Show*, eventually became a regular. Davis performed song parodies and was noted as being his most annoying fan. Davis was entrusted with taking over the show in 1943 when Vallee joined the Coast Guard, whereupon it was renamed *The Sealtest Village Store*.

Within two years Joan Davis moved to CBS to do *The Joan Davis Show*, which was also called *Joanie's Tea Room*. This program aired from 1945 to 1947 and during the next season Davis was the star of *Joan Davis Time* (1947-1948), which continued the basic premise of *The Joan Davis Show*. By now Davis was commanding an annual contract worth \$1 million, money she used to start her own production company. Her final radio work was *Leave it to Joan*, a summer replacement for *Lux Radio Theater* in 1949 which then ran a single season from 1949 to 1950. Before leaving radio she appeared on Tallulah Bankhead's *The Big Show* and Eddie Cantor's *Time to Smile*.

In 1950, Davis transitioned to television. Her first attempt was an unsold pilot called *Let's Join Joanie*. When *I Love Lucy* premiered in October 1951, sponsors wanted other shows of that style and her *I Married Joan* fit that bill. Premiering in 1952, it co-starred Jim Backus as her husband and community judge, and Davis' real-life daughter, Beverly Wills as her younger sister. The show found moderate success, but by the fourth year, with ratings slipping, and Davis having health problems, the show was cancelled. In 1956, ABC approached Davis with a new show which was never produced. Her last role was in a 1958 made for TV movie, *Joan of Arkansas*.

Joan and husband Si divorced in 1947 and after her television run she disappeared from public view for the most part. In 1960 a house fire claimed most of Joan's personal photographs and family items along with mementos from a lifetime of professional performing, dealing a blow to future researchers. Davis died the next year of a heart attack on May 24, 1961, in Palm Springs California. Tragically, the Palm Springs house caught fire on October 24, 1963, resulting in the deaths of her 30-year-old daughter Beverly Wills, her two grandsons, ages 4 and 7, and Joan's mother Nina Mae, who was 72.

Rumor that Lucille Ball bought up 98 episodes of *I Married Joan* and had them destroyed in order to retain Ball's "Queen of the Fifties" reputation were untrue. Some were being played during Davis' lifetime and then in the early 1980's copies were found by The Christian Broadcast Network which began playing the show.

Joan Davis has 48 credits for movie and television work and received two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for motion pictures and for radio. Although many actors said Davis was difficult to work with, there is indications she was a devoted and responsible grandmother to her daughter's children.

Information for this biography was taken from *Funny Ladies* by Stephen Silverman, from John Dunning's *On The Air – The Encyclopedia fo Old-Time Radio*, *Hold That Joan: The Life, Laughs and Films of Joan Davis* by Ben Ohmart, from Internet Movie Database and Wikipedia.