

TV Review: 'American Masters Johnny Carson: King of Late Night'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on May 14, 2012 - 11:42am

- [American Masters](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Conan O'Brien](#) [4]
- [David Letterman](#) [5]
- [Dick Cavett](#) [6]
- [Don Rickles](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Jay Leno](#) [9]
- [Joan Rivers](#) [10]
- [Johnny Carson](#) [11]
- [PBS](#) [12]
- [Television](#) [13]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [14]

CHICAGO – There is arguably no icon on a higher pedestal in the history of television than Johnny Carson, the man who didn't just host "The Tonight Show" for three decades but became a cultural fixture. We let Johnny into our homes and trusted him in ways that I believe just can't happen again in a more cynical TV age. He was a nightly visitor for millions and the new PBS documentary about him, "American Masters Johnny Carson: King of Late Night," is one of the best TV history documentaries yet produced.



TV Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Why is "King of Late Night" so captivating? Not only did the filmmakers get unprecedented access to Johnny's personal and professional archives, they knew how to use those clips to tell his story. With Carson and Ed McMahon gone, they can't be interviewed, but Carson dropped many biographical nuggets over the course of the show. And so when the filmmakers are talking about a young Carson's obsession with magic, there's a clip of the host talking to Bea Arthur about the same subject on "The Tonight Show." It's amazingly well-constructed and allows Carson to speak on his own history and legacy more than you would expect. Old personal films of him spending time with his family are similarly well-utilized.



American Masters Johnny Carson: King of Late Night

Photo credit: PBS

For many people, the key to "King of Late Night" will be the interview subjects and the incredible insight they bring into the legacy of a man

who clearly inspired them. There are the close friends, family, and colleagues like Joanne Carson, Dick Cavett, Doc Severinsen, Don Rickles, Bob Newhart, Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Joan Rivers, that add a level of personal touch to the story. Then there are the many people inspired by Carson, including current entertainment icons like Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brien, Ellen DeGeneres, Jimmy Fallon, Garry Shandling, Drew Carey, Garry Shandling, Steve Martin, and Jerry Seinfeld.



American Masters Johnny Carson: King of Late Night
Photo credit: PBS

Unlike many tribute pieces, the interviews feel much deeper than usual (and the doc doesn't completely avoid some of Carson's controversial faults like his alleged womanizing). It's as if the participants wanted to bring their A-game to honor a man who shaped the industry they adore. You can tell that Letterman, Leno, Fallon, and O'Brien know without question that they are walking in Carson's footsteps. And hearing the regulars on the show like Brooks, Cavett, and Rivers offer their insight into what Carson meant and why he was as successful as he was is fascinating stuff. The insight into Carson's "straight man" ability is particularly interesting. He knew perfectly how to let a guest be a guest, even laughing at their jokes instead of inserting his own.

It helps that "King of Late Night" was a passion project for director Peter Jones. According to the story, he wrote a letter to Carson every year for the last fifteen of his life asking for his participation in a biographical documentary. The notoriously private Johnny never relented. When Carson died, Jones started sending his annual missive to his nephew, Jeff Sotzing, the controller of the Carson archives. He got his approval in 2010, gaining access to family photo albums, home movies, and every episode of "The Tonight Show." When asked why, Sotzing said, "*I didn't want people to forget Johnny Carson.*" We never will.

Johnny Carson interviewed 23,000 guests over more than 4,500 episodes of "The Tonight Show." At his peak, he was drawing more viewers than Jay Leno and David Letterman do today...combined. He changed the course of the medium and "King of Late Night" accomplishes the impressive feat of both deepening his legacy and humanizing the boy who wanted to impress his judgmental mother. Do not miss it.

"American Masters Johnny Carson: King of Late Night" premieres on PBS in Chicago at 8pm CST on May 14, 2012. Check local listings in other markets.



[15]

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