

Final goodbyes: Recalling influential people who died in 2020

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In a year defined by a devastating pandemic, the world lost iconic defenders of civil rights, great athletes and entertainers who helped define their genres. Many of their names hold a prominent place in the collective consciousness — RBG, Kobe, Maradona, Eddie Van Halen, Little Richard, Sean Connery, Alex Trebek, Christo — but pandemic restrictions often limited the public’s ability to mourn their loss in a year that saw more than a million people die from the coronavirus. Here is a roll call of some influential figures who died in 2020 (cause of death cited for younger people, if available):

JANUARY

David Stern, 77. The basketball-loving lawyer who took the NBA around the world during 30 years as its longest-serving commissioner and oversaw its growth into a global powerhouse. Jan. 1.

Terry Jones, 77. A founding member of the Monty Python troupe who was hailed by colleagues as “the complete Renaissance comedian” and “a man of endless enthusiasms.” Jan. 21.

Jim Lehrer, 85. The longtime host of the PBS “NewsHour” whose serious, sober demeanor made him the choice to moderate 11 presidential debates between 1988 and 2012. Jan. 23.

Kobe Bryant, 41. The 18-time NBA All-Star who won five championships and became one of the greatest basketball players of his generation during a 20-year career spent with the Los Angeles Lakers. Jan. 26. Helicopter crash.

John Andretti, 56. Carved out his own niche in one of the world’s most successful racing families and became the first driver to attempt the Memorial Day double. Jan. 30.

Mary Higgins Clark, 92. She was the long-reigning “Queen of Suspense” whose tales of women beating the odds made her one of the world’s most popular writers. Jan. 31.

FEBRUARY

George Steiner, 90. He became one of the world’s leading public intellectuals through his erudition, multilingual perspective and the provocative lessons he drew from his Jewish roots and escape from the Holocaust. Feb. 3.

Kirk Douglas, 103. The intense, muscular actor with the dimpled chin who starred in “Spartacus,” “Lust for Life” and dozens of other films, helped weaken the blacklist against suspected communists and reigned for decades as a Hollywood maverick and patriarch. Feb. 5.

Robert Conrad, 84. The rugged actor who starred in the hugely popular 1960s television series “Hawaiian Eye” and “The Wild Wild West.” Feb. 8.

Mickey Wright, 85. The golf great with a magnificent swing who won 13 majors among her 82 victories and gave the fledgling LPGA a crucial lift. Feb. 17.

Katherine Johnson, 101. A mathematician who calculated rocket trajectories and Earth orbits for NASA’s early space missions and was later portrayed in the 2016 hit film “Hidden Figures,” about Black female aerospace workers. Feb. 24.

Hosni Mubarak, 91. The Egyptian leader who was the autocratic face of stability in the Middle East for nearly 30 years before being forced from power in an Arab Spring uprising. Feb. 25.

MARCH

Kenny Rogers, 81. The Grammy-winning balladeer who spanned jazz, folk, country and pop with such hits as “Lucille,” “Lady” and “Islands in the Stream” and embraced his persona as “The Gambler” on records and TV. March 20.

Fred “Curly” Neal, 77. The dribbling wizard who entertained millions with the Harlem Globetrotters for parts of three decades. March 26.

Bill Withers, 81. He wrote and sang a string of soulful songs in the 1970s that have stood the test of time, including “Lean on Me,” “Lovely Day” and “Ain’t No Sunshine.” March 30.

APRIL

Tom Dempsey, 73. The NFL kicker born without toes on his kicking foot who made a then-record 63-yard field goal. April 4. Coronavirus.

John Prine, 73. The singer-songwriter who explored the heartbreaks, indignities and



Charles Dharapak/Associated Press, File

Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg poses for a photo on July 24, 2013, in her chambers at the Supreme Court in Washington. Ginsburg, 87, developed a cultlike following over her more than 27 years on the bench, especially among young women who appreciated her lifelong, fierce defense of women’s rights. She died Sept. 18, 2020.



Greg Allen/Associated Press, File

Eddie Van Halen of Van Halen performs in Wantagh, N.Y. on Aug. 13, 2015. Van Halen died of cancer Oct. 6, 2020, at age 65.

absurdities of everyday life in “Angel from Montgomery,” “Sam Stone,” “Hello in There” and scores of other songs. April 7. Coronavirus.

Brian Dennehy, 81. The burly actor who started in films as a macho heavy and later in his career won plaudits for his stage work in plays by William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov and Arthur Miller. April 15.

MAY

Don Shula, 90. He won the most games of any NFL coach and led the Miami Dolphins to the only perfect season in league history. May 4.

Roy Horn, 75. He was half of Siegfried & Roy, the duo whose extraordinary magic tricks astonished millions until Horn was injured in 2003 by one of the act’s white tigers. May 8. Coronavirus.

Little Richard, 87. He was one of the chief architects of rock ‘n’ roll whose piercing wail, pounding piano and towering pompadour irrevocably altered popular music while introducing Black R&B to white America. May 9. Bone cancer.

Jerry Stiller, 92. For decades, he teamed with wife Anne Meara in a beloved comedy duo and then reached new heights in his senior years as the high-strung Frank Costanza on the classic sitcom “Seinfeld” and the basement-dwelling father-in-law on “The King of Queens.” May 11.

Fred Willard, 86. The comedic actor whose improv style kept him relevant for more than 50 years in films like “This Is Spinal Tap,” “Best In Show” and “Anchorman.” May 15.

Christo, 84. He was known for massive, ephemeral public arts projects that often involved wrapping structures in fabric. May 31.

JUNE

Shigeru Yokota, 87. A Japanese campaigner for the return of his daughter and more than a dozen others who were abducted to North Korea in the 1970s. June 5.

Bonnie Pointer, 69. She convinced three of her church-singing siblings to form the Pointer Sisters, which would become one of the biggest acts of the 1970s and ‘80s. June 8. Cardiac arrest.

William S. Sessions, 90. A former federal judge appointed by President Ronald Reagan to head the FBI and fired years later by President Bill Clinton. June 12.

Charles Webb, 81. A lifelong nonconformist whose debut novel “The Graduate” was a deadpan satire of his college education and

wealthy background adapted into the classic film of the same name. June 16.

Jean Kennedy Smith, 92. She was the last surviving sibling of President John F. Kennedy and who as a U.S. ambassador played a key role in the peace process in Northern Ireland. June 17.

Ian Holm, 88. An acclaimed British actor whose long career included roles in “Chariots of Fire” and “The Lord of the Rings.” June 19.

Joel Schumacher, 80. The eclectic and brazen filmmaker who shepherded the Brat Pack to the big screen in “St. Elmo’s Fire” and steering the Batman franchise into its most baroque territory in “Batman Forever” and “Batman & Robin.” June 22.

Carl Reiner, 98. The ingenious and versatile writer, actor and director who rose to comedy’s front ranks as creator of “The Dick Van Dyke Show” and straight man to Mel Brooks’ “2000 Year Old Man.” June 29.

Johnny Mandel, 94. The Oscar- and Grammy-winning composer, arranger and musician who worked on albums by Frank Sinatra, Natalie Cole and many others. June 29.

JULY

Hugh Downs, 99. The genial, versatile broadcaster who became one of television’s most familiar and welcome faces with more than 15,000 hours on news, game and talk shows. July 1.

Ennio Morricone, 91. The Oscar-winning Italian composer who created the coyote-howl theme for the iconic spaghetti Western “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly” and soundtracks for such classic Hollywood gangster movies as “The Untouchables” and “Once Upon A Time In America.” July 6. Complications of surgery after a fall.

John Lewis, 80. An icon of the civil rights movement whose bloody beating by Alabama state troopers in 1965 helped galvanize opposition to racial segregation, and who went on to a celebrated career in Congress. July 17.

Regis Philbin, 88. The host who shared his life with television viewers for decades and helped himself and some fans strike it rich with the show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” July 24.

John Saxon, 83. A versatile actor with a lengthy and prolific career who starred with Bruce Lee in “Enter the Dragon” and appeared in several “Nightmare on Elm Street” movies. July 25. Pneumonia.

Olivia de Havilland, 104. The actress beloved to millions as the sainted Melanie Wilkes of “Gone With the Wind,” but also a two-time Oscar winner. July 26.

Herman Cain, 74. A former Republican presidential candidate and former CEO of a major pizza chain who went on to become an ardent supporter of President Donald Trump. July 30. Coronavirus.

Alan Parker, 76. A successful and sometimes surprising filmmaker whose diverse output includes “Bugsy Malone,” “Midnight Express” and “Evita.” July 31.

AUGUST

Wilford Brimley, 85. He worked his way up from movie stunt rider to a character actor who brought gruff charm to a range of films that included “Cocoon,” “The Natural” and “The Firm.” Aug. 1.

John Hume, 83. The visionary politician who won a Nobel Peace Prize for fashioning the agreement that ended violence in his native Northern Ireland. Aug. 3.

Slade Gorton, 92. A politician from Washington state who served as a U.S. Senate Republican leader before he was ousted by the growing Seattle-area liberal electorate in 2000. Aug. 19.

John Thompson, 78. The imposing Hall of Famer who turned Georgetown into a “Hoya Paranoia” powerhouse and became the first Black coach to lead a team to the NCAA men’s basketball championship. Aug. 30.

Tom Seaver, 75. The Hall of Fame pitcher who steered a transformation from lovable losers to Miracle Mets in 1969. Aug. 31. Coronavirus.

SEPTEMBER

Diana Rigg, 82. A commanding British actress whose career stretched from iconic 1960s spy series “The Avengers” to fantasy juggernaut “Game of Thrones.” Sept. 10.

Toots Hibbert, 77. One of reggae’s founders and most beloved stars who gave the music its name and later helped make it an international movement through such classics as “Pressure Drop,” “Monkey Man” and “Funky Kingston.” Sept. 11.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 87. The U.S. Supreme Court justice developed a cultlike following over her more than 27 years on the bench, especially among women who appreciated her lifelong defense of women’s rights. Sept. 18.

Rev. Robert Graetz, 92. The

only white minister to support the Montgomery bus boycott and who became the target of scorn and bombings for doing so. Sept. 20.

Gale Sayers, 77. The dazzling and elusive running back who entered the Pro Football Hall of Fame despite the briefest of careers and whose fame extended far beyond the field for decades thanks to a friendship with a dying Bears teammate. Sept. 23.

Helen Reddy, 78. She shot to stardom in the 1970s with her rousing feminist anthem “I Am Woman” and recorded a string of other hits. Sept. 29.

Mac Davis, 78. A country music star who launched his career crafting the Elvis hits “A Little Less Conversation” and “In the Ghetto,” and whose own hits include “Baby Don’t Get Hooked On Me.” Sept. 29.

OCTOBER

Bob Gibson, 84. A baseball Hall of Famer and the dominating St. Louis Cardinals pitcher who won a record seven consecutive World Series starts. Oct. 2.

Eddie Van Halen, 65. The guitar virtuoso whose blinding speed, control and innovation propelled his band Van Halen into one of hard rock’s biggest groups. Oct. 6. Cancer.

Johnny Nash, 80. A singer-songwriter, actor and producer who rose from pop crooner to early reggae star to the creator and performer of the million-selling anthem “I Can See Clearly Now.” Oct. 6.

Whitey Ford, 91. The street-smart New Yorker who had the best winning percentage of any pitcher in the 20th century and helped the Yankees become baseball’s perennial champions in the 1950s and ‘60s. Oct. 8.

Joe Morgan, 77. The Hall of Fame second baseman became the sparkplug of dominant Cincinnati teams in the mid-1970s and was a two-time National League Most Valuable Player. Oct. 11.

Sid Hartman, 100. The Minnesota sports columnist and radio personality was an old-school home team booster who once ran the NBA’s Minneapolis Lakers and achieved nearly as much celebrity as some of the athletes he covered. Oct. 18.

Spencer Davis, 81. A British guitarist and bandleader whose eponymous rock group had 1960s hits including “Gimme Some Lovin’” and “I’m a Man.” Oct. 19.

James Randi, 92. A magician who later challenged spoon benders, mind readers and faith healers with such voracity that he became regarded as the country’s foremost skeptic. Oct. 20.

Sean Connery, 90. The charismatic Scottish actor who rose to international superstardom as the suave secret agent James Bond and then abandoned the role to carve out an Oscar-winning career in other rugged roles. Oct. 31.

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NOVEMBER

Alex Trebek, 80. He presided over the beloved quiz show “Jeopardy!” for more than 30 years with dapper charm and a touch of schoolmaster strictness. Nov. 8.

Paul Hornung, 84. The dazzling “Golden Boy” of the Green Bay Packers whose singular ability to generate points as a runner, receiver, quarterback and kicker helped turn the team into an NFL dynasty. Nov. 13.

Bruce Carver Boynton, 83. A civil rights pioneer from Alabama who inspired the landmark “Freedom Rides” of 1961. Nov. 23.

Dave Prowse, 85. The British weightlifter-turned-actor who was the body, though not the voice, of Darth Vader in the original “Star Wars” trilogy. Nov. 28.

DECEMBER

David L. Lander, 73. An actor who played the character of Squiggy on the ABC comedy “Laverne & Shirley.” Dec. 4.

Charles “Chuck” Yeager, 97. The World War II fighter pilot ace and quintessential test pilot who in 1947 became the first person to fly faster than sound. Dec. 7.

John le Carre, 89. The spy-turned-novelist whose elegant and intricate narratives defined the Cold War espionage thriller and brought acclaim to a genre critics had once ignored. Dec. 12.

Charley Pride, 86. He was one of country music’s first Black superstars whose rich baritone on such hits as “Kiss an Angel Good Morning” helped sell millions of records and made him the first Black member of the Country Music Hall of Fame. Dec. 12. Coronavirus.