

coverstory

BY JAY BOBBIN



Dick Van Dyke

The Kennedy Center Honors celebrate Dick Van Dyke and others

The Kennedy Center Honors still can be surprising, in that some legends of the performing arts haven't gotten them sooner.

A prime example: Dick Van Dyke, one of the most beloved stars in television history. He's in this year's Honors "class" as CBS broadcasts the 43rd annual ceremony Sunday, June 6, reconfigured for the coronavirus-pandemic age with segments taped in and around the Center in Washington, D.C. The latest Honors also celebrate actress-director-choreographer Debbie Allen, singer-songwriter and activist Joan Baez, country-music superstar Garth Brooks and violinist Midori. Past Honors recipient Gloria Estefan is the host.

A winner of five Primetime Emmy Awards plus a Tony (for "Bye Bye Birdie") and a Grammy, the ever-friendly Van Dyke muses that being notified of his Kennedy Center Honor "completely escaped my comprehension. It's just beyond my expectations. I had no idea this was coming."

While he's gratified to receive the Kennedy Center Honors, the 95-year-old Van Dyke reflects, "I just took jobs as they came. I went from vaudeville to radio to nightclubs to television. I've had it all ... and how lucky can you get? I've been trying to piece together the events of the past 70 years and how I got here!"

Here, Van Dyke reflects on some highlights of his career.

"Bye Bye Birdie" (1960-61 on stage, 1963 on film): "We were doing previews in Philadelphia, and the writers came down with a new song – and it was 'Put On a Happy Face.' And Chita (co-star Rivera) said, 'You know, Dick doesn't have anything to do in the first act. Why don't you give it to him?' And my life changed, right there. What a gal."

"The Dick Van Dyke Show" (1961-66): "It was very carefully crafted, because of the way Carl (creator-producer Reiner) wrote. He made us all believable, and the cast was just dynamite from the very beginning. Mary (Tyler Moore) had never done comedy, and she picked it up so fast."

"Mary Poppins" (1964): "Out of Carl's hands, I fell into Walt Disney's hands, and that was just lovely. That movie is going to be around for a long time."

"Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" (1968): "As we were finishing up that picture, Sean Connery was leaving the James Bond series – and ('Chitty' and Bond producer) Cubby Broccoli came to me and said, 'Do you want to play Bond?' And I said, 'Have you heard my British accent?' And that was the end of that!"

"Diagnosis Murder" (1993-2001 as a series, with related TV-movies both before and after it): "I never saw myself as a sleuth, but it worked. And at one point, I had all my kids and all my grandkids on the show!"

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