

Milton Berle, 1908-2002: 'Mister Television' to Millions

VOICE ONE:

I'm Mary Tillotson.

VOICE TWO:



And I'm Doug Johnson with the VOA Special English program PEOPLE IN AMERICA. Today, we tell the story of Milton Berle. He was famous for his funny programs in the early years of American television. To many Americans, he was known simply as "Mister Television."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Milton Berle

Milton Berle performed in theaters, on radio and in movies. Yet he is best known as a television performer. He began working in television in nineteen forty-eight. At the time, television was so new that few people could receive it.

Milton Berle's weekly program was so popular that it may have influenced many Americans to buy their first television. Years ago, Americans who did not own a television often went to the home of someone who did to watch his shows. Many others watched it in stores that sold televisions.

Milton Berle became so famous that some Americans considered him as part of their family. He was often called Uncle Milty. Like a family member, he was loved when his jokes were funny and even when they were not.

VOICE TWO:

He was born in New York City on July twelfth, nineteen-oh-eight. His parents, Moses Berlinger and the former Sarah Glantz, were Jews. They named him Mendel Berlinger. He was one of five children.

One day, Mendel put on some of his parents' old clothes. All the adults who saw him said he looked like a small version of the film actor Charlie Chaplin. So, at the age of five years, he entered -- and won -- a local Chaplin look-alike competition.

He became a child actor a short time later. In nineteen fourteen, he appeared in his first film, "The Perils of Pauline." He was just six years old. The same year, he appeared with Charlie Chaplin in another movie.

VOICE ONE:

Mendel was given a chance to join a vaudeville act. Vaudeville was the most popular form of show business in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Vaudeville shows presented short plays, singers, comedians who told jokes, and other acts.

Sarah Berlinger supervised her boy's rise in show business. She pushed him to be a success. Missus Berlinger attended all of her son's performances.

(SOUND: Milton Berle)

"I reached millions of people, who fortunately couldn't reach me. There was one laugh that projected out of the top of them all. That was my mother. And, if people didn't laugh that sat next to her, she used to shove them with the arm and say, 'Laugh it up. That's my son.'"

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen twenty -- at the age of twelve -- Mendel first appeared in a show on Broadway in New York City. He formed a vaudeville act with a girl named Elizabeth Kennedy. Later, he formed his own group. As the years passed, his act improved and he worked as a single performer.

By the age of sixteen, he was forced to make changes. He had grown too tall to be a child actor.

Mendel Berlinger changed his name to Milton Berle. He began performing at New York's famous Palace Theater in nineteen thirty-one. He was twenty-three years old. Later, he appeared in several Broadway shows, including "Ziegfeld Follies."

VOICE ONE:

Early in his adult life, Milton Berle was moderately successful in movies and on radio. He was better known as a comedian who told jokes in nightclub shows for adults. He was reported to be one of the best-paid performers in the country.

Yet, Berle did not become truly famous until he appeared on the "Texaco Star Theater" television program in June, nineteen forty-eight. Three months later, the Texaco Company offered him a permanent position with the program.

The "Texaco Star Theater" opened with four men who looked like gasoline station employees. They sang a song that the company used to sell its oil and gasoline products.

(MUSIC:Texaco Theme)

"Oh, we're the men of Texaco. We work from Maine to Mexico. There's nothing like this Texaco of ours. Our show tonight is powerful. We'll wow you with an

hour-full of howls from a showerful of stars. We're the merry Texaco men. Tonight we may be showmen. Tomorrow, we'll be servicing your cars..."

VOICE TWO:

Milton Berle was a performer who won the love of a crowd by not being lovable. He developed a show business personality that was funny, yet not always pleasant. He acted aggressive, and often appeared to be selfish or uncivilized. Sometimes, he greeted people with the saying, "Good evening, ladies and germs."

One thing that made Berle's television shows popular was the way he

appeared. He knew how to use funny movements and clothing to make people laugh. He would do anything for a laugh. He sometimes wore women's clothing and beauty products. In one show, he explained that he had just paid his taxes. He wore only an empty wooden container, which suggested that the government had taken everything, including his clothes.



VOICE ONE:

Milton Berle dressed in "drag"

Other comedians accused Berle of stealing their jokes. Yet many of the best-known performers in the United States appeared on the "Texaco Star Theater." Like any vaudeville show, his program also offered a mix of singers, dancers and animal acts.

One Tuesday night, trained elephants appeared on the program. The animals left large droppings on the floor. This was a big surprise to the next act -- a group of dancers.

Berle's programs were filled with lots of energy, as we hear in this example.

(SOUND: Texaco Star Theater)

TEXACO MEN: "And now ladies and gentlemen, introducing America's number one television star, who gets his nose into everybody's act, your Cyrano de Bergerac, Milton Berle..."

BERLE: "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen..." (laughing) "Don't laugh, lady. You and I go to the same plastic surgeon..." (laughing) "That's your own nose. I like it. It's my basketball nose. I just had it fixed..."

VOICE TWO:

Milton Berle had a weekly television series from the late nineteen forties into the middle of the nineteen fifties. More than one hundred shows competed on other

networks against his program. They all failed. During one period, four of five Americans who watched television on Tuesday nights watched the program.

In nineteen fifty-one, Berle signed a long-term agreement with NBC, the network that provided his program to television stations across the country. Under the agreement, NBC agreed to pay him two hundred thousand dollars a year for thirty years, even if he did not work.

VOICE ONE:

Berle was tired from performing countless shows. So he demanded the right to take a rest from the program one week in every month. He later said that decision proved to be a mistake. The program began to lose its popularity.

The taste of the American public was changing, and new funny acts were developing. The program also lost popularity when an opposing network added a series of religious talks.

Berle left weekly television in nineteen fifty-six. In the late nineteen fifties, he appeared in a few NBC shows, but then the work seemed to stop.

VOICE TWO:

Berle returned to his roots as a comedian who told jokes, mainly at nightclub shows. He appeared in plays and movies. They included, "Let's Make Love," "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World," and "Broadway Danny Rose." He also made appearances on television.

Milton Berle was known for his work with non-profit groups. He performed for soldiers during World War Two. He appeared in thousands of shows that helped to raise money for different kinds of organizations. In nineteen forty-nine, he helped to organize a television show for the Damon Runyon Memorial Cancer Fund. It may have been the first time that television was used to raise money for a non-profit group.

Berle was married two times to a showgirl named Joyce Matthews. Each time, they agreed to end their marriage. Later, he was married more than thirty-five years to another woman, Joyce Cosgrove. After she died in nineteen eighty-nine, he married Lorna Adams.

VOICE ONE:

For many years, Milton Berle remained a funnyman loved by Americans. He produced projects for several media, and collected awards for his work in television. The Television Academy Hall of Fame added him as one of its members. The story of his life led to the nineteen ninety-two film, "Mister Saturday Night." He also wrote books of jokes and his memories.

Milton Berle had colon cancer. He died at his Los Angeles home on March twenty-seventh, two thousand two. He was ninety-three years old. He had spent more than eighty-five years making people laugh.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This Special English program was written and produced by George Grow. I'm Doug Johnson.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Mary Tillotson. Join us again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.