

# An era ends for NBC's 'Tonight Show'

## Carson casts long shadow

By Suzanne Gill

It was inevitable and we knew it. Someday Johnny Carson, like Jack Parr, Steve Allen and others less memorable before him, would retire as host of "The Tonight Show." In May 1991, Carson caught the network by surprise when he announced that he considered this his final season. On Friday, May 22, he will sit behind the desk as host for the last time.

Carson's retirement isn't as serious an event as many he has helped us mark: the first moon landing, the painful late '60s, the fall of communism and seven-and-a-half presidential campaign seasons. It's a milestone nonetheless, and his three decades' tenure is an achievement not likely to be matched in television. The jester who first sat on the throne on Oct. 2, 1962 (he was introduced by Groucho Marx), can rightfully claim the crown.

For years, this retirement business seemed like a game. Each autumn, there has been an anniversary show: 23 years, 27 years, who could take it seriously?

There were guest hosts, then permanent guest hosts. Johnny was off on Mondays, he was off on Tuesdays, and about half the time he was off on vacation. Then there were his wives, who were known to divorce him. Surely he would have to keep working just to meet his alimony payments.

The show business equivalent of panic set in shortly after the beginning of the new year. That's when the phone started ringing with requests from the famous and the wannabes to make a date to visit Johnny, whether for the first time or the last. Carson added four Tuesday appearances to his schedule, but seating on the Carson couch is limited; bookings were full more than a month ago.

It isn't just Johnny Carson who leaves "The Tonight Show" on Friday. Sidekick Ed McMahon, who has been laughing at Johnny's jokes since the beginning, and band leader and sartorial scapegoat Doc Severinsen (along with the band) will disappear as well. Behind the scenes, a score of Carson staffers, who have produced the show for over a decade, also find themselves at a turning point.

Among them is co-producer Jim McCawley, who has booked

comedians and others on the show for 15 years. For a comedian, a six-minute shot on "The Tonight Show" is both a rite of passage and a launching pad to fame. McCawley has arranged first "Tonight Show" bookings for Eddie Murphy, Gallagher, Garry Shandling, Roseanne Barr, Sam Kinison, Paul Reiser and Keenen Ivory Wayans.

"The very first call I made was to David Letterman," McCawley remembers. Letterman, who had his pride even then, had already auditioned six times and wouldn't submit again. McCawley wisely said okay.

McCawley does much of his work away from the office. He is a regular at comedy clubs, where he offers pointers even when he isn't ready to extend the coveted booking. He's watched some comics work 10 years to get ready for late-night. Others have never worked out, and McCawley cites the comedy franchises of "certain cable channels" for spoiling many a young comedian for "Tonight."

"We are the last bastion of standards of good taste and decency in broadcasting in the comedy world. And Jay (Leno) will continue that tradition because he shares those values."

Even when Auni Blahby, Carnac and the Mighty Carson Art Players have left the stage.

For a jubilation some can brag about, tune in Friday, May 15, for Sea World's All-Star, Lone Star Celebration, the first of six Sea World specials airing on The Family Channel this year. Patrick Duffy and Marie Osmond are the hosts of this tribute to Texas heritage that highlights many famous locations. In addition to musical performances by Waylon Jennings, Fabian, George Strait, Gloria Loring, Restless Heart and Natalie Cole, you'll hear anecdotes by famous Texans Barbara Mandrell, John Hillerman, Morgan Fairchild, Katherine Helmond, Farrah Fawcett and Jaclyn Smith.



Read. Then Recycle.

Tuesday on Showtime, Sissy Spacek narrates a segment of Shelley Duvall's *Bedtime Stories*.

\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$  
\$ ATTENTION COLLEGE \$  
\$ BOUND STUDENTS \$  
\$ Last year more than \$150,000,000 in scholarships and grants went unused.  
\$ Regardless of your grades or family income, we'll find financial aid for you.  
\$ WE GUARANTEE IT!  
\$ For more information call: (313)855-7025  
\$ Or write to us: COLLEGE GRANT CONSULTANTS  
\$ 71 E. Long Lake Rd.  
\$ P.O. Box 911  
\$ Bloomfield Hills, MI 48303  
\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$