

# Legendary Don Rickles, king of insult comedy, dies at 90

## Reaction to the death of Don Rickles

### Reaction to the death of comedy legend Don Rickles:

"He was the love of my life. Don Rickles is funnier right now in death than most comics are in life."

— **Chris Rock via Twitter.**

"He was so beloved by everyone. To be insulted by him was the greatest honor. Having the privilege to know him a bit personally, I can tell you that he was the warmest, kindest man you could know, with an unflinching love for his family and close friends, especially his best friend and love of his life, Barbara. But you didn't have to know him personally to know that he was love and kindness personified. If he wasn't, none of his material would work."

— **Sarah Silverman in a statement.**

"He was called 'The Merchant of Venom,' but in truth, he was one of the kindest, caring and most sensitive human beings we have ever known. We are devastated and our world will never be the same. We were totally unprepared for this."

— **Bob and Ginnie Newhart in a statement.**

"Farewell to a comedic legend & dear friend, Don Rickles. I know you're cracking them up in the Great Beyond!"

— **Samuel L. Jackson via Instagram.**

"Don Rickles was one the absolute greats. I feel lucky for the times I was ever in his orbit, my thoughts are with his family today."

— **James Corden via Twitter.**

"Those were the days, my friend @DonRickles We thought they'd never end. We loved you so."

— **Dick Van Dyke via Twitter.**

"One of the all-time great men & comics Don Rickles passed, always a class act & funny as hell. RIP condolences to his family & to America."

— **Whoopi Goldberg via Twitter.**

"He never was Politically Correct and he never apologized for it."

— **Gilbert Gottfried via Twitter.**

"He was a brilliant improvisational comedian. And an excellent actor. And a very nice man. I'm so happy we had him this long."

— **Robert Klein by phone.**

"There were few, if any, that were quicker than Don. He didn't think of the next line he would use, he was already thinking of the line after that."

— **Rich Little in a statement.**

"I've known Don Rickles almost 65 years since we first met as teenagers. I can only imagine his first conversation with God. He might send him back. I love him and I miss him; the world is a sadder place without him."

— **Steve Lawrence in a statement.**

"Being skewered by Don Rickles was side-splitting funny. A gentle soul with rapid fire wit."

— **Barbra Streisand via Twitter.**

"Whenever I wanted to be entertained and just laugh and enjoy life, I would go to see Rickles. We knew each other very well from a long, long time ago. I loved him as an entertainer and I loved him as a person."

— **Marty Allen by phone.**

"We lost a great one. fast furious brilliant for decades the definition of genius."

— **Sandra Bernhard via Twitter.**

"God Bless Don Rickles, aka, Mr. Warmth! Proud to have been heckled by him from the stage many times!"

— **LeVar Burton via Twitter.**

"A God died today. Don Rickles, we did not want to ever lose you. Never."

— **Tom Hanks via Twitter.**

"In lieu of flowers, Don Rickles' family has requested that people drop their pants and fire a rocket."

— **Patton Oswald via Twitter.**

"You brightened our lives every time you were on screen."

— **Ruth Buzzi via Twitter.**

"Don Rickles, you kept us laughing for so many years. We will miss you dearly. Thanks for the zingers. You were one of a kind."

— **George Takei via Twitter.**

"One of the funniest people that ever lived, you dumb schmuck."

— **Billy Eichner via Twitter.**

"90 years of Don Rickles weren't enough. One of the sweetest and most lovely people I had the pleasure of knowing."

— **Jimmy Kimmel via Twitter.**

"Awwww man Rickles is dead. Rest In Peace buddy."

— **Danny DeVito via Twitter.**

"The Merchant of Venom, legendary comedian ... The sweetest guy, great hubby & dad." - Al Roker via Twitter.

"Hockey puck. We've lost Don Rickles. I love him so. Smart, funny, a pro and most important deeply and honestly kind. Kind is what matters."

— **Penn Jillette via Twitter.**

**H**e was only kidding. Really. Don Rickles loved everybody: Black or white, gay or straight, fat or thin. But don't get him started on his wife, or the time she dove into their swimming pool while wearing all her jewelry. And drowned. For more than half a century, the hollering, bald-headed "Mr. Warmth" let everyone have it. Insults rained on the meek and the mighty, from unsuspecting fans to such fellow celebrities as Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Johnny Carson. And few seemed to mind. Rickles, who died Thursday at age 90, was among the most loved people in the business.

### The grandmaster of insult

He was the acknowledged grandmaster of insult comedy. Despite jokes that from other comics might have inspired boycotts, he was idolized by everyone from Joan Rivers and Louis CK to Chris Rock and Sarah Silverman. James Caan once said that Rickles helped inspire the blustering Sonny Corleone of "The Godfather." An HBO special was directed by John Landis of "Animal House" fame and included tributes from Clint Eastwood, Sidney Poitier and Robert De Niro. Carl Reiner would say he knew he had made it in Hollywood when Rickles made fun of him.

Rickles appeared everywhere from strip joints to the 1985 inaugural gala for President Ronald Reagan and remained a popular act well after his ethnic and racial humor had become outdated. In 2008, he won an Emmy for best individual performance in a variety show for the Landis film "Mr. Warmth: The Don Rickles Project." At the ceremony, he joked: "I've been in this business for 55 years and the biggest award I got was an ashtray from the Friars in New York." The Friars gave him a nice statuette in 2013 when they presented him a lifetime achievement award.

Rickles' many friends returned the wisecracks, whether labeling him as a man everyone loved to hate or, as his pal Bob Newhart once joked, a man with whom it was annoying to travel. But the topper came, from all people, radio host Casey Kasem, who dressed up as Hitler at a Martin roast in Rickles' honor and told the comedian: "You are the only man I know who has bombed more places than I have."

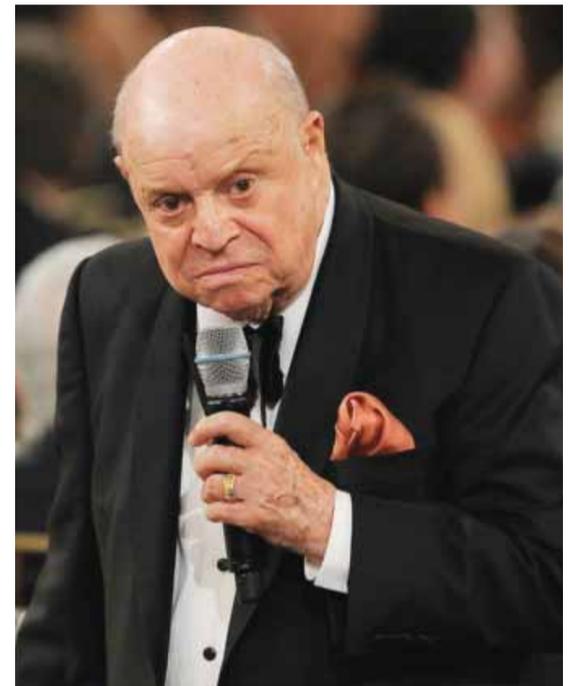
### Top of the mountain

Placed by Jerry Seinfeld on the "Mount Rushmore" of comedy, Rickles patented a confrontational style that stand-up performers still emulate, but one that kept him on the right side of trouble. He emerged in the late 1950s, a time when comics such as Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl were taking greater risks, becoming more politicized and more introspective.

Rickles managed to shock his audiences without cutting social commentary or truly personal self-criticism. He operated under a code as old the Borscht Belt: Go far - ethnic jokes, sex jokes, ribbing Carson for his many marriages - but make sure everyone knows it's for fun. "I think the reason that it (his act) caught on and gave me a wonderful career is that I was never mean-spirited," he once said. "Not that you had to like it, but you had to be under a rock somewhere not to get it." In the 1960s, Rickles was welcomed for the first time to the "Tonight Show" with Carson. He sat down on the couch and muttered, "Hello, dummy." The studio audience was initially startled, but when the host began laughing uncontrollably, so did everyone else. He appeared countless more times, haranguing Carson about not being invited more often or mocking his own love life. "I love my wife, but she's ill," was a typical joke. To his great disappointment, Rickles was never able to transfer his success to a long-running weekly situation comedy.

### Failure to launch

"The Don Rickles Show" lasted just one season (1972). "C.P.O. Sharkey," in which he played an acid-tongued Navy chief petty officer, aired from 1976 to 1978. The show's most notable moment was unplanned: Carson



In this June 7, 2012 file photo, comedian Don Rickles attends the AFI Life Achievement Award Honoring Shirley MacLaine at Sony Studios in Culver City. — AP photos

barged in the middle of a live taping to complain that Rickles had broken his cigarette box when the comedian had appeared on "The Tonight Show" the night before. The tireless Rickles left behind a 10-episode TV series, "Dinner with Don," in which De Niro, Billy Crystal, Jimmy Kimmel, Amy Poehler and others joined him to eat and chat. Distribution and a release date for the AARP Studios production have yet to be announced.

Rickles had set out to be a serious actor, enrolling in New York's American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where classmates included Jason Robards. He had little luck finding acting jobs, however, and supported himself by selling used cars, life insurance and cosmetics - badly, he said. ("I couldn't sell air conditioners on a 98-degree day.") He finally decided to try comedy, appearing at small hotels in New York's Catskill mountains and in run-down nightclubs. The turning point came at a strip joint in Washington, DC.

"The customers were right on top of you, always heckling, and I gave it right back to them," he recalled in 1982. The audience laughed and wanted more. In a style sometimes compared to an earlier insult comic, Jack E. Leonard, Rickles continued to hone his act and got another big break through an unlikely facilitator, his mother. Etta Rickles had befriended Frank Sinatra's mother, Dolly, and persuaded her to encourage her son to check out Don Rickles' act. When the singer stopped by one night in 1957, comic history was made. "Hey, Frank, make yourself at home," Rickles snapped. "Hit somebody."

Instead of being angered, the volatile singer was overcome with laughter. Rickles became the unofficial court jester of Sinatra's Rat Pack, ridiculing his singing, his love life and his alleged connections to organized crime. In a famous 1966 profile of Sinatra for Esquire magazine, Gay Talese described a Rickles performance in Las Vegas attended by the singer and his entourage. "His humor is so rude, in such bad taste, that it offends no one - it is too offensive to be offensive. Spotting Eddie Fisher among the audience, Rickles proceeded to ridicule him as a lover, saying it was no wonder that he could not handle Elizabeth Taylor," Talese wrote. "Then he focused on Sinatra, not failing to mention (then-girlfriend) Mia Farrow, nor that he was wearing a toupee, nor to say that Sinatra was washed up as a singer, and when Sinatra laughed, everybody laughed." — AP