

Joe Franklin: Back after a short break

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Longtime radio and television host Joe Franklin, best known as “Mr. Nostalgia,” is a television and radio mainstay who hosted an astounding 21,425 installments of *The Joe Franklin Show* television program through 1993.

His radio show, *Joe Franklin’s Memory Lane*, is now heard weekly on WOR-AM and daily on Bloomberg Radio. In the business he loves since 1949, it seems as if there is no one from the political, entertainment, or sporting world that he has not interviewed at one time or another. All in all, he estimates that he has hosted a half-million guests.

His political guests have included five U.S. presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton, the latter of whom was on his show when he was still the governor of Arkansas.

Although John F. Kennedy never appeared on the show, he did appear on Franklin’s stage at Channel 7 in New York in 1960. At the time Kennedy and Nixon, both of whom were presidential candidates, were rehearsing for a televised debate in an adjoining studio. When one of Franklin’s guests dropped dead, the presidential aspirants raced in to try and revive him.

The scores of guests from the entertainment field that Franklin has interviewed includes Al Jolson, Rudy Vallee, Frank Sinatra, Eddie Cantor, Barbra Streisand, Pat Boone, Mickey Rooney, Robert Klein, and Bruce Springsteen. His favorite of all time was Bing Crosby.

“I always thought of him as being mechanically reproduced,” said Franklin. “When he walked in and I saw that he was flesh and blood, my insides turned because I was so excited.”

The boxing world has also been well represented, with such notables as Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, Max Baer, Billy Conn, Joe Frazier, “Slapsie” Maxie Rosenbloom, “Two Ton” Tony Galento, Emile Griffith, Mike Marzurki, Vito Antuofermo, Al Certo, Buddy McGirt, and Lou Duva going, in Franklin’s words, “eyeball to eyeball” with him.

“All of my guests have been wonderful,” said Franklin during a recent interview at his Times Square office that is cluttered with memorabilia dating back more than six decades.

“Because I’ve been doing what I love for my whole life, I can say that I’ve never had a bad interview. I’ve loved every one of them. And I remember each and every one of them.”

He recalled having both Joe Louis and Billy Conn on the same show around 1955. Both, he says, were absolute gentleman. But what happened after the show is what Franklin remembers so vividly.

“Joe Louis was taking me and the director to lunch,” recalled Franklin. “On the way we

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sideswiped a taxi and the cab driver got out and got real tough with Joe. He told Joe to open his window and abused him racially. He obviously didn't recognize him.

"I was waiting for Joe to kill him, but he just listened quietly and the cabbie drove away," continued Franklin. "I asked Joe why he didn't do something. He said, 'If someone insulted Enrico Caruso would he sing him an aria?' Joe was a very articulate man."

He also had Dempsey and Tunney on at the same time, and was very touched when they embraced. Although Franklin is not much of a sports fan, he considers Dempsey and Babe Ruth the "biggest two [athletic heroes] of all time."

"When I met Jack he was arthritic, but he was still bigger than life," said Franklin. "You could tell he was so tough, with such an interesting past, but I most remember him just being a kind, sweet, brilliant man."

Although he has had Ali on the show performing magic tricks, and Tyson discussing his beloved pigeons, one of his favorite guests from the world of fistiana was Galento.

"He could have been a comedian, he was so funny," said Franklin. "He told me he was in a hotel one night and there was a drip in the sink that was keeping him up. He called the desk clerk and said, 'I got a leak in my sink.' The clerk told him to go ahead."

While it could be argued that Franklin lives in the past, he begs to differ with that assessment. He has been collecting memorabilia for more than half a century, long before it became a passion and lucrative business for so many people. Around his office are scores of records, magazines, books, film posters, and vintage photos dating back to the thirties.

"I used to ask all of my guests for a souvenir," said Mr. Nostalgia. "I never had any intention of selling them. I still don't. As you can tell, I haven't. President Reagan gave me a tie clip. George Raft gave me a sweater. Collectible is a big word and celebrity memorabilia is a big passion today, but it wasn't then. I discovered the field inadvertently. I guess I'm a soothsayer."

He is also a dinosaur. Until six months ago, Franklin still had a rotary phone. Never once has he employed a talent coordinator. Moreover, he is true to his New York roots, where he was raised on the same street as James Cagney on Manhattan's Upper East Side. One of his best childhood friends was Tony Curtis, who was then known as Bernie Schwartz.

His longtime television aide-de-camp is Richie Ornstein, a champion bodybuilder who formerly worked with Dan Lurie and Jack LaLanne, and who regularly counsels others on the inexorable link between nutrition, exercise, and physical and mental health.

Entertainment has, and always will be, his life. You need not look beyond the following facts to realize that. "I never had a driver's license," said Franklin. "I never played golf, never went to the beach. My feet have never touched sand. I never played cards or went to a horse race, never had a credit card. My life has been work, just work. There have been times I've done television three times a day and radio at night. And I've loved every minute of it. I just keep going. I never

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get drained. ”

Recently someone showed Franklin an article that stated that Charlie Chaplin, John Wayne and Cary Grant had never appeared on a television talk show. Franklin took great pride in setting the record straight. All had been on his show, with Wayne even giving Franklin a pair of boots as a souvenir.

“My whole life has been lived tongue-in-cheek,” laughed Franklin, the married father of one son, Brad, and grandfather to two children.

“I like to kid the whole world. I’m just having fun making fun of everything. Billy Crystal imitated me for four years on *Saturday Night Live*. The first time I met him, I told him that one of us was lousy.”

Although Franklin is getting on in years, he has no plans on slowing down. He is still in his office daily, fielding more than 100 calls a day from people hoping to get on his show.

When the curtain finally falls on his glorious career, he wants his gravestone to read, “I’ll be back after a short break.”