



Flip Wilson

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Chapter 1

Flip Wilson

Flip Wilson (December 8, 1933 – November 25, 1998) was an African American comedian and actor. In the early 1970s, Wilson hosted his own weekly variety series, *The Flip Wilson Show*. The series earned Wilson a Golden Globe and two Emmy Awards.^[1]

In January 1972, *Time* magazine featured Wilson's image on their cover and named him "TV's first black superstar".^[2]

1.1 Early life

Born Clerow Wilson, Jr. in Jersey City, New Jersey, he was one of ten children born to Cornelia Bullock and Clerow Wilson, Sr.^{[3][4]} The latter worked as a handyman and, because of the **Great Depression**, was often out of work. When Wilson was seven years old, his mother abandoned the family. His father was unable to care for the children alone and he placed many of them in foster homes.^[3] After bouncing from foster homes to reform school, 16-year-old Wilson lied about his age and joined the **United States Air Force**. His outgoing personality and funny stories made him popular; he was even asked to tour military bases to cheer up other servicemen. Claiming that he was always "flipped out", Wilson's barracks mates gave him the nickname "Flip" which he used as his stage name. Discharged from the Air Force in 1954, Wilson started working as a bellhop in San Francisco's Manor Plaza Hotel.

At the Plaza's nightclub, Wilson found extra work playing a drunken patron in between regularly scheduled acts. His inebriated character proved popular and Wilson began performing it in clubs throughout **California**. At first Wilson would simply ad-lib onstage, but eventually he added written material and his act became more sophisticated.

1.2 Career

During the 1960s, Wilson became a regular at the Apollo Theater in Harlem and was a favorite guest on *The Tonight Show*, *Laugh-In*, and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. In 1970,

Wilson won a Grammy Award for his comedy album *The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress*.

1.2.1 *The Flip Wilson Show*



Wilson in a 1970 publicity shot

A routine titled "Columbus," from the album *Cowboys and Colored People*, brought Wilson to Hollywood industry attention and led to the development of his own television show. In this bit, Wilson retells the story of **Christopher Columbus** from an anachronistic urbanized viewpoint, in which Columbus convinces the Spanish monarchs to fund his voyage by noting that discovering America means that he can also discover **Ray Charles**. Hearing this, Queen "Isabel Johnson", whose voice is an early version of Wilson's eventual "Geraldine" character, says that "Chris" can have "all the money you want, honey — You go find Ray Charles!" When Columbus departs

from the dock, an inebriated Isabella is there, testifying to one and all that “Chris gonna *find* Ray Charles!”

In 1970 Wilson’s variety series, *The Flip Wilson Show*, debuted on NBC. He performed in comedy sketches and played host to many African-American entertainers, including The Jackson Five, The Temptations, comedian Redd Foxx, and basketball player Bill Russell. He greeted all his guests with the “Flip Wilson Handshake,”: four hand slaps, two elbow bumps finishing with two hip-bumps. George Carlin was one of the show’s writers, and Carlin also made frequent appearances on the show, as the two would expand Carlin’s news-weather-sports satire. Wilson’s characters included Reverend Leroy, materialistic pastor of the “Church of What’s Happening Now”, and his most popular character, Geraldine Jones, who always referred to her boyfriend, “Killer”, and whose line “The devil made me do it” became a national catchphrase.

The Flip Wilson Show aired through 1974, generating high ratings and popularity among viewers and winning strong critical acclaim, with an unprecedented eleven Emmy Award nominations during its run, winning two. Wilson also won a Golden Globe award for Best Actor in a Television Series.



Wilson as the Fox with Sandy Duncan as Pinocchio and Liz Torres as the Cat in *Pinocchio*

1.2.2 Later years

After *The Flip Wilson Show* ended its run, Wilson made guest appearances on numerous TV comedies and variety shows, such as *Here’s Lucy* starring Lucille Ball and

The Dean Martin Show among others. Ed Sullivan invited Wilson to perform several times on his popular Sunday night show, and Wilson later singled out Sullivan as providing his biggest career boost. Wilson acted in TV and theatrical movies including *Uptown Saturday Night* and *The Fish that Saved Pittsburgh*. In 1976, he appeared as the Fox in a television musical adaptation of *Pinocchio*, starring Sandy Duncan in the title role and Danny Kaye as Mister Geppetto, with songs by *Laugh-In* composer Billy Barnes.

In 1984, Wilson hosted the remake of *People Are Funny*. From 1985 to 1986, Wilson played the lead role in the CBS sitcom *Charlie & Co*. Wilson’s last role was a cameo appearance in the sitcom *Living Single* in November 1993.

1.3 Personal life and death

Wilson was married twice; he married his first wife, Lavenia Wilson née Dean, in 1957; they divorced in 1967. In 1979, he married Tuanchai MacKenzie; they divorced in 1984. After winning custody of his children in 1979, Wilson performed less in order to spend more time with his family. Before becoming ill, he was an active lighter-than-air pilot.

On November 25, 1998, Wilson died of liver cancer in Malibu, California, aged 64.^[1]

1.4 Discography

- *Flip Wilson’s Pot Luck* (Scepter 520, reissued as Funny and Live at the Village Gate, Springboard SP 4004)
- *Flippin’* (Minit 24012)
- *Cowboys and Colored People* (Atlantic ATS 8149)
- *You Devil You* (Atlantic SC 8179)
- *The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress* (Little David LD 1000)
- *The Flip Wilson Show* (Little David LD 2000)
- *Geraldine* (Little David LD 1001)
- *Flipped Out* (Sunset Records SUS-5297)

1.5 In popular culture

The phrase “What you see is what you get” was often used by Wilson’s Geraldine character and inspired researchers at PARC and elsewhere to create the acronym WYSIWYG.^[5]

1.6 See also

- Biography portal

1.7 References

Notes

- [1] Watkins, Mel (1998-11-27). "Flip Wilson, Outrageous Comic and TV Host, Dies at 64". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 10 June 2010.
- [2] "Flip Wilson (January 31, 1972)". *time.com*. Retrieved 10 June 2010.
- [3] Tafoya, Eddie M. (2011). *Icons of African American Comedy*. ABC-CLIO. p. 89. ISBN 0-313-38085-6.
- [4] Pierce, Ponchitta (April 1968). "All Flip Over Flip". *Ebony* (Johnson Publishing Company) **23** (6): 65. ISSN 0012-9011.
- [5] Lohr, Steve (2001). *Go To*. Basic Books. p. 128. ISBN 0-465-04226-0.

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- Miles, J. H., Davis, J. J., Ferguson-Roberts, S. E., and Giles, R. G. (2001). *Almanac of African American Heritage*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall Press.
- Potter, J. (2002). *African American Firsts*. New York, NY: Kensington Publishing Corp.

1.8 External links

- Flip Wilson at the Internet Movie Database
- Flip Wilson at the Museum of Broadcast Communications Encyclopedia of Television
- Biographical Information on Flip Wilson by Professor Kathleen Fearn-Banks at the University of Washington.
- Flip Wilson on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on YouTube
- Flip Wilson at *Find a Grave*

Chapter 2

The Flip Wilson Show

The Flip Wilson Show is an hour-long variety show that aired in the U.S. on NBC from September 17, 1970 to June 27, 1974. The show starred American comedian Flip Wilson; the program was one of the first American television programs starring a black person in the title role to become highly successful with a white audience. Specifically, it was the first successful network variety series starring an African American.^[1] During its first two seasons, its Nielsen ratings made it the nation's second most watched show.

The show consisted of many skits over 60 minutes. It also broke new ground in American television by using a 'Theatre-in-the-Round' stage format, with the audience seated on all sides of a circular performance area (with some seats located *behind* the sketch sets on occasion).

Wilson was most famous for creating the role of Geraldine Jones, a sassy, modern woman who had a boyfriend named Killer (who, when not in prison, was at the pool hall). Flip also created the role of Reverend Leroy, who was the minister of the Church of What's Happening Now!. New parishioners were wary of coming to the church as it was hinted that Reverend Leroy was a con artist. Wilson popularized such catchphrases as "What you see is what you get", and "The devil made me do it!".

Geraldine Jones was a huge part of *The Flip Wilson Show* and was played by Wilson wearing women's clothing. Some of "Geraldine's" most famous quotes are, "The devil made me buy this dress!, Don't you touch me, honey, you don't know me that well!, You devil, you!" and "What you see is what you get!"

In one episode of the show, "Geraldine" and Bill Cosby were in a skit called "The Night Nurse" where Geraldine and Bill were in a hospital. Bill was supposed to be the sick patient and Geraldine was the nurse. "She" was convinced that he was there for a swollen ego. It ends with Geraldine lying in the hospital bed watching her favorite show, *Iron Hips*, while Cosby leaves. In another, she is with Ray Charles and presents him with a reward from the Ray Charles Fan Club, which is a kiss on the cheek. Ray asks what he can do for her, and she says that she has been rehearsing a song in the shower for the past week that she wanted to sing with him. All in all, Geraldine Jones was

a favorite of *Flip Wilson Show* fans, and a major part of the show and the years that the show was running.



Wilson as Herbie, the ice cream man with an attitude, and guest star Joe Namath, 1972.

In addition to the skits, Wilson also signed many popular singers to provide entertainment. African-American singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, Stevie Wonder, The Jackson 5, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight & the Pips, The Pointer Sisters, Charley Pride, The Temptations, and The Supremes appeared on the program, as well as many contemporary white entertainers like Bobby Darin (a frequent guest on his show), Roy Clark, Joan Rivers, The Osmonds, Johnny Cash, Johnny Mathis, Roger Miller, and Pat Boone. Usually, the singers also chose to partake in skits with Wilson.

Wilson's clout allowed him to get both the new breakout performers (such as The Jackson 5, Roberta Flack, Sandy Duncan, Lily Tomlin, George Carlin, Richard

Pryor, Albert Brooks, Lola Falana and Melba Moore all of whom became very popular during this period) as well as established singers. In late 1971, gospel legend Mahalia Jackson made one of her last public performances on *The Flip Wilson Show*.

While *The Flip Wilson Show* first shared a studio with other television series, Wilson's massive popularity allowed for him to get his own set of soundstages, starting in the fall 1972 season. As the seasons went on, however, the show's ratings slipped; ratings across the variety show genre began a terminal decline in the mid-1970s. This, coupled with Wilson's repeated demands for higher raises in his salary, caused the series to go over its budget and led to its cancellation.

Half-hour versions of the series aired on TV Land from 1997 to 2005. In 2011, the show began airing on TV One. As of July 2012, half-hour versions of the show have been featured on the Aspire network.

2.1 Ratings

- 1970-1971: #2^[2]
- 1971-1972: #2^[3]
- 1972-1973: #12^[4]
- 1973-1974: Not in Top 30^[5]

2.2 References

- [1] [The Flip Wilson Show](#)
- [2] [ClassicTVHits.com: TV Ratings > 1970's](#)
- [3] [ClassicTVHits.com: TV Ratings > 1970's](#)
- [4] [ClassicTVHits.com: TV Ratings > 1970's](#)
- [5] [ClassicTVHits.com: TV Ratings > 1970's](#)

2.3 External links

- *The Flip Wilson Show* at the Internet Movie Database
- *The Flip Wilson Show* at TV.com

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