



Betty White
photographed
in 1974 for the
CBS sitcom
*The Mary Tyler
Moore Show*

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*Despite all of the
turmoil going on in
the world, there's
one thing we can
all agree on:
Betty White was
simply the best.*

By Jim Colucci

THE ONE & ONLY

FOR PHOTO CREDITS, SEE PAGE 124

EW YEAR'S EVE ALWAYS MARKS A SHIFT IN TIME, OFTEN bittersweet. But for the television industry in particular, this past December 31 marked the end of an era, with the passing of one of the medium's pioneers and longest-working stars, Betty White.

White's fans around the world took to social media, not just to mourn, but to revel in the actress's incredible 80-year career that lasted right up until her death, 17 days short of her 100th birthday. "The world looks different now," Ryan Reynolds, White's co-star in the 2009 film *The Proposal*, tweeted upon hearing the news. "She managed to grow very old and somehow, not old enough."

Despite the icon's advancing age, no one could ever envision a world without her—because actually almost no one alive can remember a time before Betty White. She was perhaps America's most famous senior citizen, but ironically she predated the Social Security program by more than 13 years. And for the TV industry, White was there from the beginning, present and in focus when they turned on the first, experimental TV cameras in Los Angeles in 1939.

At just 17 years old, White got her first showbiz break in the burgeoning medium, wearing the dress from her recent high school graduation in a performance of the musical *The Merry Widow*. World War II intervened, during which the future star drove a supply truck to armed garrisons hidden in the Hollywood Hills.

From left: Betty White and actor Eddie Albert pose during a 1952 broadcast of *Hollywood on Television* in L.A.; White on the set of the comedy series *Date with the Angels* in 1957



But when TV started up again in earnest in the late '40s, the then 20-something was once again in front of the cameras. This time, White filmed 5½ hours a day, six days a week, on the unscripted local L.A. show *Hollywood on Television*, ad-libbing, singing, and doing improv comedy; if they asked her to juggle, she said yes and then learned how, showing early fake-it-till-you-make-it spunk.

The 1950s brought the dawn of now-classic game shows, and for season after season the quick-witted and wickedly funny White proved to be an asset to them all, from *What's My Line*, *Match Game*, and *Password*—where she would meet the love of her life in that show's host, Allen Ludden—ultimately to a show of her own. That 1983 NBC dating show, *Just Men!*, lasted just one season but brought White a Daytime Emmy as Outstanding Game Show Host, making her the first and, to date, only woman to win the award.

As she found reasons to spend more time on the East Coast with Ludden, whom she married in 1963, White became a frequent guest on Jack Paar's *Tonight Show* in New York, and later combined her acquired expertise in the talk format with her lifelong passion for animals into the 1971–1972 series *The Pet Set*. Over 39 episodes, White welcomed her famous friends, their pets, and other more exotic animals, scrupulously researching each creature and educating the world about its preservation, an experience she described as her happiest on TV to date.





From left: White on the set of *Date with the Angels* in 1957; sitting pretty in pink in 1965; riding in style in a Chevrolet during the 1955 Christmas parade in L.A.; celebrating her second Primetime Emmy win with her co-stars from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1976



WHITE BECAME A FIXTURE THROUGH EVERY DECADE OF TELEVISION, popping up on *The Carol Burnett Show* or aboard *The Love Boat*. She headlined talk shows and sitcoms—four of which were titled simply *The Betty White Show* because from the start we couldn't get enough of her—and often broke new ground. In an era when other small-screen leading ladies were limited to wearing pearls to vacuum their sitcom living rooms, White was not just a performer, but also a producer of her early comedies *Life with Elizabeth* (1952–1955) and *Date with the Angels* (1957–1958).

White already had many high-profile credits on her résumé, yet it was more than 20 years into her busy career before she landed the first of two roles on comedy megahits that would forever etch her into TV history. In 1973, when CBS's *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was looking for a “sickening, icky Betty White type” to play a guest role in the sitcom's Season 4 premiere, its producers were reticent to approach the actual Betty White for fear of impinging on her real-life friendship with the show's star. But after auditioning a

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BETTY AND ME

I had met Betty White a few times in passing, but once I started doing research for my book *Golden Girls Forever* I had a good excuse to sit down for an in-depth talk. At the time, Betty's assistant was an older lady named Donna; they had been introduced by who else but their veterinarian, and Donna had become one of several longtime assistants Betty would have in her even longer career. I called on an early February day and asked Donna for a spot on Betty's calendar.

“Betty is so busy,” Donna warned me. “She has one hour open, on April 3.”

I knew enough to leap at the opportunity. “I'll take it!”

I arrived at Betty's house in Brentwood on the designated afternoon, having just completed a lunch interview with a pair of *Golden Girls* writers, over which I had

inadvertently consumed a bit too much iced tea. When I rang Betty's doorbell, both she and Donna answered.

After saying a brief and nervous hello, I had to confess to Betty. “I am so sorry to ask this right away, but I really need to use your bathroom.”

Betty did not miss a beat. “Oh, I'm sorry, but I don't have one,” she teased. “You know, I'm so nice, I don't go to the bathroom. And so my visitors have to go to the service station on the corner.”

Then, having gotten her laugh, she directed me to a powder room to my right.

When we did sit down together, it was in Betty's living room, sunlit and decorated in buttery shades of yellow. It felt like sitting inside Betty's happy personality. With her golden retriever Pontiac, who had flunked out of seeing eye dog training for being too friendly, lying on my



Colucci and White during an appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 2000. “We brought her [White] a photo of our Boston terrier, Herman, which she oohed and aahed over,” recalls Colucci. “Having Betty holding a photo of your dog was like getting a blessing from St. Francis!”

feet, I peppered Betty with every *Golden Girls* question I'd ever wanted to ask, and her thoughtful answers did not disappoint.

They say you should never meet your idols, but Betty disproved that. She had the external sweetness, politeness, and warmth you would expect from Rose Nylund—but with the bonus of the quick and brilliant mind of Betty White underneath. We covered in our one hour together as much *Golden Girls* as I had with others in four or five.

As an interviewer, when you are offered only a short window of time with a subject, you know you can often run long. But at exactly one hour and one minute on my tape recorder's digital readout, Donna interrupted to alert

us that Betty was about to be running late. At age 84, she had no choice but to keep to the strict schedule necessary to juggle acting work, animal activism, and responding in longhand to fan mail on her blue and Betty White stationery.

At the end of that first interview, Betty grew philosophical. Her own mother, Tess, she told me, had passed at 85, and so Betty wondered how much more time she would have to cram in even more accomplishments. In hindsight, it turns out that she needn't have worried; she would experience a career renaissance at age 88, becoming even busier and leaving her fans clamoring for more.

As timing would have it—and Betty was a master

at timing—I was booked to appear on the “Golden Fans at Sea” cruise, sailing from Fort Lauderdale on this past January 3 for five days of *Golden Fun*. But by the time we sailed, what had originally been planned as a birthday card crafting day and a celebration of Betty's 100th had turned into a design session for handmade memorials and a celebration of life. Although the loss was still fresh for us, her most ardent of fans, we were happy to have each other to mourn with. We looked to the skies off the shores of Rose Nylund's Miami and said aloud to Betty with new meaning, “Thank you for being a friend.”

Jim Colucci is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling book *Golden Girls Forever: An Unauthorized Look Behind the Lanai*.



dozen or so candidates, they realized they needed the real deal. So White, now in her early 50s, began playing the most sexually charged character of her career in Sue Ann Nivens, WJM-TV's on-air "happy homemaker" with an off-air nymphomaniac streak. Sue Ann became a recurring, integral member of what is now recognized as TV's first powerhouse sitcom ensemble, and White scored Emmys in 1975 and 1976, which she found particularly gratifying. "I started out as an actress in the business, but then I did game shows and talk shows, and I became a 'television personality,' and there's a big difference," White said. "They don't think of you as an actress. So everybody was so surprised—why, Betty could act! And it really did turn my career completely around."

White got another high-profile chance to display those acting chops when she landed the role of Rose Nylund on the 1985 NBC sitcom *The Golden Girls*, co-starring Bea Arthur, Rue McClanahan, and Estelle Getty. The show was an instant, international smash, spending six of its seven seasons on the Nielsen ratings Top 10 list, and winning White yet another Emmy trophy in 1986. When Bea Arthur left the show in 1992, America wasn't ready to say goodbye to White and company and their inimitable comic timing; so the three remaining Girls bought an Art Deco Miami Beach hotel and checked into CBS's 1992 sequel sitcom, *The Golden Palace*, which began streaming in January as a Betty White tribute.

Rose Nylund once philosophized that "the older you get, the better you get—unless you're a banana." White continued to prove Rose right. She spent the '90s landing laughs on such CBS sitcoms as *Bob*, opposite Bob Newhart, and as the mother of Alfred Molina



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—BETTY WHITE

on *Ladies' Man*. On the big screen, she cornered the market on hilariously foul-mouthed old ladies in such films as *Lake Placid* (1999) and *Bringing Down the House* (2003). In 2010, at 88, an age when most performers have long since slowed down, White was gearing up for a long and fruitful final act. She captivated a new generation with her scene-stealing turn in *The Proposal* (2009) and a Super Bowl ad for Snickers; in turn those social media-savvy fans successfully lobbied for her to appear on *Saturday Night Live*, a gig that made her both the oldest host in the show's history and subsequently the oldest person at that time to win a Primetime Emmy, her fifth.

WHAT SAME SPRING, WHITE BEGAN A SIX-SEASON RUN AS sardonic senior Elka Ostrovsky on the TV Land network's original sitcom *Hot in Cleveland* alongside fellow sitcom veterans Wendie Malick, Jane Leeves, and Valerie Bertinelli. *Hot in Cleveland* yielded yet another success for the near-nonagenarian, prompting her to remark modestly to the press, "How lucky can one old broad get?"

It was only in recent years, as PBS prepared its 2018 docu-special *Betty White: First Lady of Television*, that the story came to light about how White once refused to cave to pressure from southern TV affiliates to fire African American tap dancer Arthur Duncan from her 1950s iteration of *The Betty White Show*. "I'm sorry, but he stays," White responded, defiantly vowing to showcase her friend. White's marriage to Ludden, which lasted just short of 18 years until his death in 1981, made her the stepmother to his three children; but the career-focused actress had consciously opted not to have children of her own, making her yet another kind of role model for similarly minded women.

White earned dozens of major nominations and awards—including a spoken-word Grammy won at age 90. And she continued to receive volumes of fan mail and job offers, as her agent, Jeff Witjas, informed her, up until her last days, to remind her how much she was loved as America's de facto grandmother. But it was White herself who defined the legacy she was most proud to leave: her work for such conservation causes as Actors and Others for Animals, Morris Animal Foundation, and the Los Angeles Zoo, where she served as a trustee for nearly 40 years. "The two parts of my life—the animal part and the television part—I work them together as much as I can," she said in a 1997 TV Academy interview. "I just would like to know that I made people laugh, and I made people think a little bit. And I'd like to be remembered as Betty, their good friend that they invited into their home." ❧



From top left to bottom right: White, pictured with actor Michael J. Fox, backstage after her Emmy win for lead actress in *The Golden Girls*; all smiles with her golden co-stars; chatting with James Corden in the green room during a 2017 appearance on *The Late Late Show*; White (as Sue Ann Nivens) in a scene from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1977; posing in the press room at the 16th annual Screen Actors Guild Awards in 2010

