

Red Skelton (1913-1997)

Red Skelton, my favorite comedian, is gone. That's what ran through my mind in 1997 when I had heard that he passed away. Another part of my childhood has disappeared. I still remember the movie that "made him," *The Fuller Brush Man*. I thought it was hilarious. Growing up as a kid, I watched his TV show every week. I loved his characters; I loved his humor; I loved that it was live.

Richard Bernard Skelton was born in rural Vincennes, IN, on July 18th, 1913, two months after the death of his father, who was a circus clown. Left with four boys, Skelton's mother worked as a cleaning woman and elevator operator. Yet, she instilled in him a love of art, which would always be his second love, and she ignited his interest in comedy by providing him with tickets to vaudeville shows. Skelton left home at the age of ten to join a medicine show traveling through the South and Midwest. At 15, he joined the vaudeville circuit. Two years later, working at a Kansas City theater, the 17 year-old Skelton met Edna Marie Stillwell, a 15 year-old usher. They were married a year later. She also became his vaudeville partner, writer, and manager. Though they later divorced, they remained close, and she continued to manage his career. Skelton always credited her with bringing him up from a \$50 a week performer to a \$7,500 a week star.

He debuted on radio and on Broadway in 1937, and on film in 1938's *Having a Wonderful Time*. Skelton went on to appear in many MGM comedies in the 1940s and 1950s, but he eventually became unhappy with his films and turned to television. *The Red Skelton Show* made its debut in 1951 and was a major success on both NBC and CBS. The show showcased his talent for mime, a talent that transcended language. He could evoke tears as easily as laughter. He created a range of memorable characters, including Freddie the Freeloader, Sheriff Deadeye, Willie Lump-Lump, and San Fernando Red.

The show, which Skelton always ended with his trademark line, "Good night, and God bless," ranked seventh in the prime time ratings when CBS cancelled it in 1970 as part of a bid to attract younger viewers. He never forgave the network. "My heart has been broken," he told a Las Vegas audience after the cancellation.

He went on to perform live, doing 75+ performances a year, and he became a very successful artist, specializing, appropriately, in clown faces—commanding some \$80,000 each. He also earned some \$2.5 million a year from his lithographs.

