

Johnny Grant Brings Magic to Hollywood Christmas Parade

By Theresa Danna

When honorary mayor of Hollywood, Johnny Grant, retired a few years ago, the famous Hollywood Christmas Parade, a tradition since 1928, got new corporate sponsors and subsequently changed from a beloved local event to a nationally televised special effects and stunt show. The result was disastrous, both for fans and sponsors, and the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce ultimately decided it was no longer economically feasible for the parade to continue.

But this is Hollywood. The show must go on, and that's exactly what will happen on the Sunday after Thanksgiving along Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards, thanks to Grant coming out of retirement to coordinate the parade one more time. Furthermore, the parade will again be broadcast by Grant's former employer, KTLA, the station that had previously aired the parade for 20 years.

"The USC marching band will once again open the parade," said Grant, "and the Marine Corps band will be following somewhere behind them."



A rare photograph of Johnny Grant in full clown make-up.

This year's grand marshal will be former NBA star Earvin "Magic" Johnson, whose interest in Hollywood includes development of a residential and retail center at Sunset and Vine, as well as a nationwide chain of movie theatres.

Parade History

In its early years, the parade was known as the Santa Claus Lane Parade, and it inspired Gene Autry to write the song "Here Comes Santa Claus." Grant recalled several crises of varying degrees that he faced as parade chairman over the years, such as the year that grand marshal Stevie Wonder missed his originally scheduled flight into Los Angeles due to bad weather on the East Coast.

"At the last minute, I arranged for the fire department to pick him up by helicopter as soon as his later flight arrived at LAX, and then fly him straight to the parade," Grant said. "And one year Santa had to wait a bit until an ambulance came to help a woman

along the parade route who went into labor at curbside. Another year there was a delay because Tinkerbell got stuck in the air.”

Grant also pointed out that most people probably don't realize that it was at the Hollywood Christmas Parade that singer Jessica Simpson met her husband, Nick Lachey, who was performing with the group 98 Degrees at the time.

Christmas Past

As endearing as his recollections about the parade are, Grant's most cherished holiday memories are of the years he spent Christmas with American troops overseas, including Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Korea. In fact, it is he, not Bob Hope, who holds the record for number of USO shows—a total of 56.

“My favorite Christmas gift ever,” said Grant, himself a World War II veteran, “was one I received from US Marines in Beirut.” He continued, “It's a GI peach can with a copper wire handle fashioned by one of the soldiers, with a note on it that says, ‘Johnny Grant, the Marines love you.’”

To this day, no matter where in the world Grant might be, soldiers still come up to him and personally thank him for entertaining them over the years.

The Johnny Grant Way of Life

While growing up in Goldsboro, North Carolina, Grant daydreamed about being a movie star but there was one major obstacle to overcome: “Most people probably wouldn't believe this now, but I was shy and had stage fright,” Grant confessed. When he was 16 years old, he met a retired circus clown who put him in makeup and in front of an audience. “I could hide behind the makeup,” Grant explained, “and after a while, I gained enough confidence where I didn't have to hide anymore.”

Grant went on to be a newscaster for his hometown radio station, becoming the first reporter to broadcast live from a courtroom as he covered a murder trial that attracted national attention.

While in the military, Grant hosted a show for servicemen that was heard over New York's WINS radio. After completing his service, Grant came to Hollywood in 1944 and, “with the help of God,” on his first day here met Charlie Chaplin and Sid Graumann in front of the Chinese Theatre.

Years later, after becoming one of the most sought-after hosts, Grant was invited to put his own hand prints in the famous sidewalk at that theatre. Due to the many distractions, including Mickey Rooney cracking jokes behind him, Grant accidentally spelled his name wrong in the cement, writing only one “n” in Johnny. Though he had the opportunity to fix it, he decided to keep it wrong to see what would happen. Once word about the error was out, the Los Angeles Times, which hadn't originally covered the event, ran a story about it.

“I ad lib my life,” Grant smiled. “You've got to love what you do. It's not work to me. I enjoy a good challenge. Just tell me that something can't be done, and I'll show you how it can.”