



## Griffin, Merv (1925-2007)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Merv Griffin was a popular band singer, the host of his own successful talk show for over 20 years, the creator and producer of such long-running television game shows as *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*, and a wealthy media mogul.

Although Griffin married and reportedly had affairs with several women, including Judy Garland, his bisexuality was apparently an open secret, especially within the show business communities of Los Angeles and New York.

He was married to Julann Wright from 1958 until they divorced in 1976. They met when Wright was a secretary-assistant to television personality Robert Q. Lewis. The couple had a son, Anthony Patrick, born in 1959.

The divorce was officially attributed to "irreconcilable differences." In an autobiography, Griffin described the divorce as coming at "a pivotal time in my career, one of uncertainty and constant doubt. So much attention was being focused on me that my marriage felt the strain."

After the divorce, Griffin was publicly, if perhaps not romantically, linked to several female celebrities, particularly actress Eva Gabor, and was a close friend of former First Lady Nancy Reagan. He served as an honorary pall bearer at the funeral of President Ronald Reagan in 2004.

Griffin remained rigidly in the closet. He expertly, and often jocularly, sidestepped any questions in interviews concerning his private life or sexuality. For example, in a 2005 interview with the *New York Times*, he said: "I tell everybody that I'm a quartre-sexual. I will do anything with anybody for a quarter."

Much to his consternation, Griffin became embroiled in two high-profile scandals in 1991. He was first sued by Brent Plott, a former employee of Griffin's, who filed a \$200 million palimony lawsuit.

Later that same year, choreographer Deney Terrio, the host of the television variety show *Dance Fever*, which Griffin had created, filed a lawsuit against Griffin alleging sexual harassment.

Griffin characterized both lawsuits as extortion; they were both ultimately dismissed.

When Griffin died in 2007, *The Hollywood Reporter* posted an article written by Ray Richmond, who once worked for Griffin, on its web site with the opening line, "Merv Griffin was gay." The article was promptly removed from the web site only to be re-posted later with the benign headline, "Griffin never revealed man behind the curtain."

The international news agency Reuters picked up the article as part of its usual entertainment feed but then cancelled it as well, with the explanation that the story was dropped "as it did not meet our standards for news."



Merv Griffin. Photograph by Linda Bisset. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License.

By then, however, the Internet-based information aggregator Yahoo! News published the article, via Reuters, with the much more explicit headline, "Merv Griffin died a closeted homosexual."

A highly salacious, and largely unverified, biography, *Merv Griffin: A Life in the Closet*, by Darwin Porter, was published in 2009. In his book, Porter alleges that Griffin had a long list of famous male sexual partners, including, among others, James Dean, Rock Hudson, Roddy McDowall, Montgomery Clift, Peter Lawford, and Marlon Brando.

## **Biography and Career**

Mervyn Edward Griffin, Jr. was born on July 6, 1925 in San Mateo, California, to Mervyn Edward Griffin Sr., a successful stockbroker, and the former Rita Robinson.

He was known as "Buddy" Griffin as a child. Overweight and awkward, "Buddy" showed little interest in sports, and instead found enjoyment playing the piano. He took piano lessons from one of his aunts and exhibited genuine talent.

He also organized weekly entertainments on his family's back porch, recruiting other children from the neighborhood as stagehands and actors. "I was the producer, always the producer," he once reminisced in an interview.

As a boy, Griffin started singing in his church choir, and later, as a teenager, earned extra money as a church organist and piano player of popular music at weddings and parties.

After graduating from San Mateo High School in 1942, Griffin attended San Mateo Junior College and then transferred to the University of San Francisco, but left before getting a degree.

Griffin began singing on the radio at the age of 19, appearing on *San Francisco Sketchbook*, a nationally syndicated program, from 1945 to 1948. The bandleader Freddy Martin heard Griffin on the radio and invited the singer to tour with his orchestra, which Griffin did for four years.

One of their biggest hits together was the novelty song "I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts," recorded in 1950, which sold over three million copies.

Griffin was next discovered by Doris Day, who was so impressed with one of his performances at a Los Angeles nightclub that she arranged for a screen test at Warner Brothers Studios for a possible role in her 1953 film *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*.

Although Griffin was not successful in securing a role in that film (he appeared, uncredited, in one short scene), his screen test led to supporting roles in the musical *So This is Love* (1953) and a western *The Boy from Oklahoma* (1954).

Griffin soon grew disillusioned with the film industry, however, and bought out his contract with Warner Brothers. "I couldn't stand doing other people's words, waiting for the next shot," Griffin remarked in an interview. "That just bored . . . me."

He decided to focus his career on television, instead. He was a featured singer on weekly variety programs, and the host of several daytime game shows in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Griffin started his talk show career as a guest host on *The Tonight Show*, occasionally filling in for then-host Jack Paar.

In 1962, Griffin launched his own program, *The Merv Griffin Show*, which remained on television in various iterations until 1986, in both daytime and nighttime formats, and on broadcast television as well as in syndication sold individually to local stations. The show won multiple Emmy Awards during its long run.

As a talk-show host, Griffin maintained a low-key, unpretentious, and genial persona. Most of his guests were entertainers and "personalities" such as Zsa Zsa Gabor, but he also booked politicians and authors and comedians. Although he generally avoided controversy, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, he gave a platform to guests who criticized the Vietnam War, including philosopher Bertrand Russell and comedian Dick Gregory.

In 1964, Griffin founded Merv Griffin Productions and established his reputation as a successful television game show developer with *Jeopardy!*, a quiz show where contestants are given an answer and have to formulate the appropriate question. He also produced the show and wrote its memorable theme music as well.

*Jeopardy!* premiered in March 1964 and ran for eleven years; it was later revived in 1984 and has continued to be a staple of syndicated television.

Griffin also developed and produced *Wheel of Fortune*, in which contestants compete to identify a mystery word or phrase. It premiered in January 1975 and went on to become the most successful game show in American television history.

Like *Jeopardy!*, *Wheel of Fortune* remains on the air in syndication.

In 1984, Griffin expanded his company to Merv Griffin Enterprises and broadened his interests to include hotels and casinos and real estate, as well as his television production company.

In 1986, he sold the television production company to Columbia Pictures Television for \$250 million. His wealth in 2003 was estimated at \$1.2 billion.

### **Personal Life**

In April 1991, Griffin found himself in the middle of a media storm when Brent Plott, a 37-year old former employee, filed a \$200 million palimony lawsuit against the mogul, claiming breach of contract.

"We lived together, shared the same bed, the same house," Plott revealed in an interview with *NBC Nightly News*. "He told me he loved me."

Although he had left Griffin's employ in 1985 and moved to Florida, Plott claimed that he was entitled to the money he was seeking because as his lover, Griffin had assured him that he would provide "solace and emotional support," and claimed that Griffin had promised to take financial care of him for the rest of his life.

Through his attorney, Griffin denied that his relationship with Plott had been sexual. "This is a shameless attempt to extort money from me," Griffin stated through his spokesperson. "This former bodyguard and horse trainer was paid \$250 a week, lived in one of two apartments underneath my former house as part of his security function, and left my payroll six or seven years ago. His charges are ridiculous and untrue."

In November 1991, the Los Angeles Superior Court dismissed Plott's case, but not before details of the palimony suit and speculation on Griffin's private life appeared in hundreds of newspapers and periodicals, as well as on television and radio news programs.

A month later, Griffin was served with another lawsuit. Deney Terrio, who had hosted the television variety

show *Dance Fever* from 1979 to 1985, and which Griffin had created, claimed that in 1978 he had been sexually harassed by Griffin, and was now seeking \$11.3 million in damages from his former employer.

In his lawsuit, Terrio claimed that Griffin "made on-going explicit homosexual advances" toward him and that "Griffin persisted in said advances often speaking of the financial gains that [Terrio] would enjoy."

Through a spokesperson, Griffin asserted that Terrio's allegations were completely false.

Again, details of the lawsuit and assumptions about Griffin's life made the rounds of media outlets.

The lawsuit was eventually dismissed by Los Angeles Federal Court in June 1992.

In his later years, Griffin retreated from public scrutiny and concentrated on his varied and successful business ventures. He nevertheless continued to be the subject of gossip and speculation.

Griffin died on August 12, 2007 of prostate cancer. He was 82 years old.

His tombstone, at his request, is engraved, "I will not be right back after this message."

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### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.