

# George Kirby

**George Kirby** (June 8, 1923 – September 30, 1995) was an American comedian, singer, and actor.

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## Career

Born in Chicago,<sup>[1]</sup> Kirby broke into show business in the 1940s at the Club DeLisa, a South Side establishment that employed a variety-show format and preferred to hire local singers, dancers, and comedians. His first recording was as a stand-up blues singer, performing "Ice Man Blues" on a Tom Archia session done in 1947 for Aristocrat Records.

He was one of the first African-American comedians to begin to appeal to white as well as black audiences during the height of the Civil Rights era, appearing between 1963 and 1972 on Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall, The Ed Sullivan Show, The Dean Martin Show, The Jackie Gleason Show, The Temptations Show, Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In, and The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson. He was an excellent impressionist — targeting, provocatively for 1960s performance venues, many white actors such as John Wayne and Walter Brennan rather than solely black stars such as Bill Cosby and Pearl Bailey — and, for a man of his ample girth, an unexpectedly agile dancer. He also did vocal impressions of such singers as Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald and Joe Williams.

In 1970, he was allowed to produce The George Kirby Show, a television special, to gauge whether he could attract an audience for a weekly series. This led to his hosting Half the George Kirby Comedy Hour, a sketch comedy and variety show, which lasted for 22 episodes in 1972; it was one of the actor-comedian Steve Martin's first credits in front of the camera. The series was in many ways an uneasy compromise between Kirby's natural gifts and what the public would accept of black actors at the time; a regular feature was a shaggy dog story segment entitled the "Funky Fable". He was also a regular in the British series The Kopykats, with other impressionists such as Rich Little, Charlie Callas, Marilyn Michaels, and Frank Gorshin.

Following the demise of his show, Kirby's career declined, especially as audiences began to look for more cutting-edge comedy. He had been an occasional drug addict; now, to make up for lost income, he took to selling drugs. In 1977 he sold heroin to an undercover police officer; he made a plea bargain to a 10-year prison term and was released after 42 months.

His career never again reached its former heights, but he did register featured guest appearances on Gimme a Break with Nell Carter, What's Happening Now!!, Crazy Like a Fox, and 227.

George Kirby



Kirby in 1964.

<b>Born</b>	June 8, 1923 <div>Chicago, Illinois, U.S.</div>
<b>Died</b>	September 30, 1995 <div>(aged 72)</div> <div>Las Vegas, Nevada, U.S.</div>
<b>Nationality</b>	American
<b>Spouse</b>	Rosemary (1960–1995)

# Death

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Diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in his later years, Kirby made his last public appearance at an all-star benefit in May 1995 given by his friends for his mounting medical bills.<sup>[2]</sup>

On September 30, 1995, Kirby died of Parkinson's Disease at a nursing home in Las Vegas. He was survived by his wife Rosemary.<sup>[2]</sup>

## References

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1. "George Kirby: Obituary" ([http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-10-03/news/9510030018\\_1\\_las-vegas-george-kirby-caesars-palace](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-10-03/news/9510030018_1_las-vegas-george-kirby-caesars-palace)). [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com). 1995-10-03. Retrieved 2 February 2012.
2. "George Kirby, 71, Comedian Who Was `Copycat' of Yesteryear's Stars" (<http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19951002&slug=2144591>). [seattletimes.nwsources.com](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com). 1995-10-02. Retrieved 2 February 2012.

## External links

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- [George Kirby \(https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0456154/\)](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0456154/) on [IMDb](#)
  - [George Kirby \(https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/3193\)](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/3193) at [Find a Grave](#)
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