

# Mitzi Gaynor

## biography

Who, with 17 films to her credit, became one of the top singing & dancing motion picture stars of all time? Who conquered television with 9 showstopping spectacles garnering 17 Emmy nominations and blockbuster ratings? Whose dazzling triple-threat talents made her arguably the top female nightclub and concert attraction of the era? The answer to all these questions is simply Miss Mitzi Gaynor.

The road that led Mitzi Gaynor to international superstardom began in her native Chicago where she was virtually born into the theater. Her mother was a talented dancer and her father a virtuoso musician. Family members and teachers alike were quick to notice and nurture the natural born performing talent of young Mitzi who relished the hours of dance & performance training she was receiving. Her instructor, the acclaimed ballerina Madame Kathryn Etienne, knew from an early age that the young performer was destined for stardom and encouraged the child's family to seek that stardom in Hollywood.

The family moved west on a dream, and she was soon discovered by legendary theatrical producer Edwin Lester who selected 12 year old Mitzi for the *corps de ballet* of the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera. Mitzi honed her craft in countless productions in Los Angeles, San Francisco and on Broadway including *Song Without Words* and *The Fortune Teller* and graduated from featured dancer to featured star with *The Great Waltz*. Mitzi's vibrant performances were capturing the attention of composers including Cole Porter and Irving Berlin when noted film director Henry Koster and producer Sol Siegel signed her to a contract at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

She made her motion picture debut costarring with her childhood idols Betty Grable and Dan Dailey in *My Blue Heaven*. The studio, quick to capitalize on the vivacious talent that would later propel Mitzi to the top ranks of showbusiness, cast her in a succession of audience pleasing comedies & musicals including *Golden Girl*, *Bloodhounds of Broadway*, *We're Not Married* and *The I Don't Care Girl*.

Following this period, Mitzi met the man who would not only become the guiding force of her professional life but also the great love of her personal life, influential agent and marketing genius Jack Bean. Thus began a more than fifty year marriage and career partnership that would result in the motion picture classics, dazzling television spectacles and legendary nightclub and concert appearances that led the Los Angeles Times to deem her "the nation's #1 female song and dance star."

Encouraged by Bean, Mitzi delivered a star-making performance alongside Ethel Merman, Dan Dailey, Donald O'Connor and newcomer Marilyn Monroe in *There's No Business Like Showbusiness*. Following that film's success, she was signed to a

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lucrative Paramount contract, negotiated by Bean, which would yield three film hits, *The Birds and the Bees* with George Gobel and David Niven, *Anything Goes* with Bing Crosby & Donald O'Connor and a praiseworthy dramatic turn in *The Joker Is Wild* alongside Frank Sinatra.

Now an established box-office star, Mitzi was cast alongside Gene Kelly in the lavish, globe-trotting MGM musical *Les Girls*, but perhaps her greatest film success lie just on the horizon. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox was preparing the film adaptation of one of Rodgers & Hammerstein's most lauded and successful musicals, *South Pacific*, and nearly every motion picture actress in Hollywood was vying for the role of Ensign Nellie Forbush.

The film's director, the legendary Joshua Logan, had remembered catching a glimpse of Mitzi during a theatrical audition earlier in the decade. Convinced he had found his "Nellie", Logan championed her for the part. The composers concurred and Mitzi won the coveted role in a whirlwind of worldwide publicity.

The film opened in 1958 to critical acclaim and international box-office success. The soundtrack, featuring Mitzi's performances of "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair" and "A Wonderful Guy" amongst others has never gone out of print and remains to this day a perennial seller. For her performance, Mitzi was nominated for a prestigious Golden Globe Award as Best Actress in a Musical.

Following that success, she returned to the big screen in *Happy Anniversary*, once again with David Niven, *Surprise Package* with Yul Brynner and Noel Coward and *For Love of Money* with Kirk Douglas and also ushered in a new era of acclaim as a live performer.

In 1961, once again with Jack Bean's encouragement, Mitzi made her nightclub debut in Las Vegas. An instant sensation, she smashed all records at the famed Flamingo Hotel where more than a thousand customers were turned away nightly. *LIFE* magazine noted "Mitzi fractures Las Vegas...she began at the top and climbed even higher" and *The Hollywood Reporter* proclaimed her "flawless and devastating." Great success followed in each city she appeared from Miami Beach to Philadelphia, Reno and Lake Tahoe and for the next four decades Mitzi would tour the U.S. and Canada with a high-energy concert act that would solidify her reputation as one of the greatest live performers of the era.

A highly-sought after guest on the nation's top television programs, Mitzi made several memorable appearances in the medium. In a 1964 appearance on the *Ed*

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*Sullivan Show*, in which she had top billing over no less than The Beatles, Mitzi's sizzling song and dance numbers made headlines. She also performed to great acclaim on the Academy Awards broadcasts where her showstopping 1967 rendition of Best Song nominee *Georgy Girl*, before a TV audience of 65 million, was met by wildly enthusiastic applause. Around this time, she began her long association with noted costume designer Bob Mackie. Mitzi was his first important client and he would continue to design the lavish, razzle-dazzle costumes that would remain a staple throughout her performing career.

Mitzi's successful Academy Awards appearance and an equally popular holiday installment of television's *Kraft Musical Hall* titled *The Mitzi Gaynor Christmas Show*, led to an avalanche of inquiries from virtually every network offering the dynamic performer television specials of her own.

In October of 1968 she fulfilled those requests with the premiere of the aptly titled *Mitzi*. The special debuted to blockbuster ratings and unanimous critical acclaim. The Los Angeles Times called it "glittering perfection...a kind of ultimate statement of that particular TV format." Over the next ten years, she would continue to showcase her magical brand of dazzling showmanship in eight spectacular hours of non-stop entertainment including *Mitzi...and a 100 Guys*, *Mitzi...Roarin' in the 20's* and *Mitzi...Zings Into Spring*.

Each special was a lavish blend of song, dance and sparkling comedy with guests drawn from the top ranks of showbusiness including Bob Hope, Michael Landon, Carl Reiner, George Hamilton and Suzanne Pleshette. Renowned for their technical and creative achievements, the specials were awarded with 17 Emmy nominations and 6 Emmy Awards..

Throughout the 80's and 90's, Mitzi continued to entertain sold-out audiences at top concert venues and performing arts centers across the United States and Canada. She also added a new dimension to her career as a witty chronicler of Hollywood history in a popular series of columns for the influential trade paper the *Hollywood Reporter*.

In 2007, she was honored by the Museum of Television & Radio in Los Angeles with a special evening celebrating her acclaimed work in the medium. In conjunction with the event, the Museum also hosted a month-long gallery exhibit, *Mitzi By Mackie*, featuring Bob Mackie's Emmy-winning costumes from her specials along

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with a selection of costumes from her legendary stage shows and concert appearances.

Mitzi is actively involved in various charitable initiatives including The Professional Dancers Society, where she serves as president. The organization helps both active and inactive professional dancers and works with the Actors Fund of America to provide low income housing, retirement and nursing facilities for entertainment professionals.

Despite a career marked by extraordinary achievement, Mitzi remains in search of new horizons to conquer. A public television documentary special, titled *Mitzi Gaynor Razzle Dazzle: The Special Years*, celebrating her television specials and live performing career is currently in production and will be broadcast this fall and winter with a deluxe DVD release of the project set for November 18. The documentary features new interviews with Miss Gaynor and friends and colleagues including Bob Mackie, Carl Reiner, Kristin Chenoweth and Rex Reed.

She is currently rehearsing her new one-woman song and dance extravaganza, *Razzle Dazzle: My Life Behind the Sequins* which will tour the U.S. and Canada throughout 2009. The premiere engagement is scheduled for January 10, 2009 in San Francisco.

For more information please visit: [www.missmitzigaynor.com](http://www.missmitzigaynor.com)