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Comedian Jay Leno to open Marshall Artist Series

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Comedian Jay Leno will open the 78th season of the Marshall Artist Series on Thursday, Oct. 16, at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center.

Courtesy of Mitchell Haaseth
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HUNTINGTON — It's two hours after the appointed interview time and Jay Leno's publicist exhales a sigh that could push the jet stream from Los Angeles to the East Coast.

"He's a busy man and he always has been — that is how he is, he's a New Englander with that New England work ethic and he's straight forward and doesn't stop," Helga Pollock explained waiting for Leno to finish work taping "Jay Leno's Garage," one of the top YouTube vintage car shows. "Let me go find him again."

That is life with the kinetic Jay Leno.

The 62-year-old may have "retired" after 22 years of hosting NBC's "Tonight Show" in February but he's still burning up the skyway and highways like a hot-rod Lincoln whose engine is always on.

Fresh back from a USO comedy tour in Afghanistan, Leno was taping a segment of "Jay Leno's Garage," this past week before jumping back out on the road for a string of stand-up dates.

Thursday, Oct. 16, the vintage car crazy, comedy legend kicks off the 78th season of the Marshall Artists Series just days before being given the country's top award for humor.

At 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 16, Leno opens up the 78th season of the Marshall Artists Series, which has a rich history of spotlighting comedians from Bill Cosby, Erma Bombeck and Whoopi Goldberg, to Daniel Tosh, Jim Gaffigan and Aziz Ansari.

Tickets are \$85 and \$60.



The Artists Series, which has seven shows and the MU International Film Fest in the fall semester alone, tops off that blockbuster start with a show the very next night, Friday, Oct. 17 with Rock and Roll Hall of Famer, Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons In Concert at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center. Ticket prices are \$125, \$85, \$60, \$45.

Leno, who was chalking up more than 100 live appearances a year — even during his years of hosting “The Tonight Show” — said he is doing what he loves, being on the road on a stage with a mic in front of a live audience.

“I don’t really have any pre-game rituals and the stage is not a normal place to be unless you do it regularly and make it a normal place to be,” Leno said. “I try to be on stage three or four nights a week so it becomes second nature. You don’t want it to be a thing where you have to do crazy exercises and psyche yourself out to be there. It has to be natural and free-flowing and that is what you have to do.”

Leno, who once told the L.A. Times he was a stand-up comedian with a day job (hosting “The Tonight Show,”) said the best jokes are the ones you get to season over time during a stretch on the road.

“I’ve always been a stand-up comedian long before the ‘Tonight Show’ and even when I was doing the show I was out every weekend and wanted to be out on the road more,” Leno said. “I like to be a stand-up comic. I know a lot of comics want to do TV to get off the road but to me it is fun and you get to let the material breathe. On the ‘Tonight Show’ it was write the joke, deliver it and then it is gone forever, and you say I could have done it better on the road because you may have a joke on



Monday and then at the next show you do it a little bit different and then by the weekend you really flesh it out a little bit, and I enjoy that. If I had to do one or the other, I would really love to be a stand up on the road.”

Leno, who chuckled about coming to the college of Billy Crystal’s baseball fail, said performing at the Marshall Artists Series, where ages can range from about 18 to folks as mature (78) as the series itself, is a perfect place for his everyday humor.

For instance, a recent joke he slathered onto the troops in Afghanistan was this “You know competitive eating is now a sport in America,” Leno told the troops. “Only in America, can eating 300 chicken wings make you an athlete.”

“I kind of work with that broad brush kind of thing and I never work dirty,” Leno said. “I have nothing against comics who do but I just find it limiting and it lowers the percentage of your audience. I think it’s more clever to come up with a clever impression than an obscenity. It seems harder work to do a clean show, and I’m not making animal balloons for kids, I can talk about sex, and drugs it is just throwing in the occasional (expletive) you that I don’t quite get. It does work for some people George Carlin certainly and Richard Pryor certainly but most comedians are not Richard Pryor. If you’re punch line to the joke is (expletive) then after a while that loses it’s shock value.”

It has been that blue collar chin to the plow, and decades of hard work at good, clean comedy and living that has led the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., to bestow upon Leno, the 17th annual Mark Twain Prize for American Humor.

He joins those late comics, Richard Pryor (the first comic recognized in 1998) Carlin (who won the award in 2008), and such contemporaries as Bill Cosby, Billy Crystal, Ellen Degeneres, Will Ferrell and Tina Fey.

The national broadcast airing on PBS Sunday, Nov. 23 will feature a star-studded lineup including Garth Brooks, Kristin Chenoweth, Kevin Eubanks, Jimmy Fallon, Chelsea Handler, Jerry Seinfeld and Wanda Sykes in the Kennedy Center Concert Hall. The evening will pay tribute to the humor and accomplishments of Leno.

Although Leno, of course, tossed out a good joke line upon winning the award ... “What an honor! I’m a big fan of Mark Twain’s. In fact, ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ is one of my favorite books,” he truly is touched.



Although the self-effacing comic isn't about to bring an inflated sense of self worth to comedy or entertainment, he said he truly is touched by the honor.

"It is extremely flattering, and it is fun because with so many other awards you kind of have to campaign for them and the studio is sending out fliers and this is one that you just get picked," Leno said. "Nobody is up for contention, it's just a phone call and a thank you."

To have his name circled again in such company means a lot, especially in a year that has seen some fellow comic legends pass away. Both Robin Williams and Joan Rivers died recently.

"Robin was a good friend of mine and I actually liked Joan Rivers a lot too, she had some problems with me and that was OK," Leno said. "She was the first comedian that I ever got an autograph from. She was a real ground-breaker, she and Phyllis Diller. As for Robin, that was the biggest shock. It was by his hand, which was tough to take. I was with him when he auditioned at The Improv, and it's not that we were especially close but when you start out in comedy together you have a bond that stays with you your whole life. We would see each other and smile and reflect back on our days at The Improv and The Comedy Store. I'm watching Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks sitting around having fun and wouldn't that be fun to do with Jerry Seinfeld and Billy Crystal and Robin. We did that at 40, and at 50 and at 60 and now we won't be able to do that with Robin and it's sad."

Leno said more often than not comedians have each other's back when it comes to the business.

"You tend to get more work from other comedians sometimes than from agents," Leno said. "People like to say comedy is a cutthroat business and in a lot of ways it is, but comedians support one another more often than not. You can't do every job yourself. Steve Martin brought me to Johnny Carson and Bill Cosby and Johnny Carson helped me. Carson would tell me what I was doing wrong and I would get back out there and retry it."

While he no longer has that platform of the "Tonight Show," where he was the ratings leader of late night for 50 consecutive quarters, Leno who has just been gone eight months from the gig, continues to stay fresh and do the projects he enjoys.

His show "Jay Leno's Garage," is seen every week on YouTube and is the fourth biggest automotive site on the web, and the life-long car buff is going to do a bunch of car specials for CNBC as well.



A vigorous philanthropist, whose efforts include performances for those devastated by the 9/11 tragedy, the tsunami in Thailand, hurricanes in the gulf, and the annual Love Ride in California, just did the TODAY USO Comedy Tour, in which he performed for more than 1,000 troops at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan with former “Tonight Show” bandleader, Kevin Eubanks, fellow comics Craig Robinson and Iliza Shlesinger and Al Roker emceeing.

Leno said he realized just how long he had been in the business when a soldier came up and showed him a photo of Leno with what Leno thought was the soldier.

“He said ‘Mr. Leno I want to show you a picture’ and I said ‘you look great’ and then I look at the picture and my hair is black and I’m like ‘oh wait a minute when was that taken?’” Leno said. “And he said, ‘That’s my dad.’ Oh. So his dad was in Desert Storm when I was there and the father looks so similar and they had the same clothes so I assumed it was him.”

Leno said he was grateful for the experience to perform for the troops, who he feels like are often forgotten.

“I think the odd thing now is that there is one percent of the country that sends people to war and another one percent of the country protecting the country and there is this great glob in the middle that doesn’t know what is going on,” Leno said. “It’s unlike the other wars where there was rationed metal and where you grew vegetable Victory Gardens. Americans are not affected by this war unless you have a son or a daughter involved and so consequently people don’t even know this is going on and they don’t know the extent of it. You see that at the airbase, you pull in and there are 20,000 people on base and that is unbelievable. That is a city.”

Leno and his wife Mavis have been plugged into the contemporary Afghan problems as they have assisted the Gender Apartheid campaign and Feminist Majority to free Afghan women of Taliban rule, an effort for which Mavis and the Feminist Majority were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

“People say well Afghanistan has been like that for 1,000 years but it’s only been since 1996 and what happened was the Russian War killed off the young men between 29 and 50 and consequently the Taliban is made up of 18 to 29 year old boys and they came in with ridiculous rules for women that they can’t go to school, they can’t do so many things,” Leno said. “Prior to 1996, 51 percent of the professional population in Afghanistan were women. Lawyers, doctors and teachers and now they aren’t even allowed to read. You go man, all it takes is one generation for the world to change, and it’s not a political thing it is an education thing, it is for women’s rights.”



While Leno said it is self serving to say we need comedy more than ever in these troubled times, he did say for himself, being on the road with these stretches (including eight straight days in November) that he is where he belongs at home on a stage.

“I hope people there will enjoy it, it is stand-up, classic stand-up,” Leno said. “I like it because people don’t really gather any more, and it is basic communication and the microphone is the only thing between you and the audience. I just like talking to a group of people. I grew up in a small town where every month they had a town hall meeting and nothing ever got done, but you just went and hung out and said hello and somebody spoke. It’s not talking on an iPhone or texting, it’s just human interaction that you are actually doing and that is what makes it fun.”

Welcome to the discussion.

Keep it Clean. Please avoid obscene, vulgar, lewd, racist or sexually-oriented language.

PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR CAPS LOCK.

Don't Threaten. Threats of harming another person will not be tolerated.

Be Truthful. Don't knowingly lie about anyone or anything.

Be Nice. No racism, sexism or any sort of -ism that is degrading to another person.

Be Proactive. Use the 'Report' link on each comment to let us know of abusive posts.

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