

Hugh Downs, Perennial Small-Screen Fixture, Is Dead at 99

A longtime host of both “Today” and “20/20,” for many years he held the Guinness-certified record for most total hours on commercial network television.

By Richard Severo

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Hugh Downs, whose honeyed delivery and low-key but erudite manner helped make him a familiar face and voice on television for half a century, and whose career included long stints as host of both “Today” on NBC and “20/20” on ABC, died on Wednesday at his home in Scottsdale, Ariz. He was 99.

His family announced the death in a statement.

Mr. Downs was a man of many parts, with numerous interests unrelated to broadcasting — in his own self-effacing words, he was “a champion dilettante” who dabbled in music, art and science. But he was best known as a perennial television fixture, beloved for what The New York Times’s John J. O’Connor called his “reassuring, warmly upbeat presence” and renowned for his longevity.

Mr. Downs’s 1986 memoir was called “On Camera: My 10,000 Hours on Television,” and that number was no idle boast: For years he held the Guinness-certified record for most total hours on commercial network television. (Regis Philbin eventually passed him.)

His television career began in the medium’s earliest days, when he was already a radio veteran. His smooth baritone was heard on shows like “Kukla, Fran and Ollie,” “Caesar’s Hour” and, most notably, “The Tonight Show,” where he was cast as Jack Paar’s foil (Mr. Paar referred to him as “my Sancho Panza”) and where he briefly found himself, much to his surprise, thrust into the spotlight.

In February 1960, Mr. Paar, no stranger to volatility, became furious after NBC removed a joke from the show for reasons of taste. (The joke, tame by today’s standards, involved the use of the term “water closet,” meaning bathroom.) He decided that the best way to teach NBC a lesson was to walk off the next night’s show as it was being taped, leaving Mr. Downs in charge. Mr. Downs assumed the host’s chair immediately, if not confidently: at one point he looked into the camera and plaintively said, “Jack, come back.” The show aired as scheduled, walk-off and all.



Mr. Downs sat down as host after the star of "The Tonight Show," Jack Paar, walked off the set during a taping in 1960. NBC/NBCU Photo Bank, via Getty Images

Mr. Paar did come back, to the surprise of nobody, but not until 25 days later. In his absence Mr. Downs — who years later would diplomatically remember his former boss as “quite a bundle” — ably assumed his duties as “Tonight Show” host. The Times critic Jack Gould saluted Mr. Downs for having “in most trying circumstances carried off the situation with dignity.”

It was Mr. Downs’s first taste of center stage. It would not be his last.

Hugh Malcolm Downs was born in Akron, Ohio, on Feb. 14, 1921, the son of Milton and Edith (Hick) Downs. His father was a machinist and battery salesman, and the family moved to Lima, Ohio, when he was 2, and 10 years later to a farm outside Lima, where Milton Downs worked part time to supplement his Depression-era wages.

Milton’s circumstances were dire when his son graduated from Shawnee High School in Lima and accepted a scholarship to attend Bluffton College in Bluffton, Ohio. After a year, Hugh had to drop out to help support his family. He was hired as an announcer at WLOK, a radio station located not far from the farm, for \$12.50 a week. Within a year he was promoted to program director at twice the salary.

He moved to WWJ in Detroit in 1940 and, after serving briefly in the Army and receiving a medical discharge, joined the staff of WMAQ, the NBC station in Chicago. Later in the decade he made the transition to television, working on “Kukla, Fran and Ollie,” a popular puppet show that began in Chicago and soon went national.

While in Chicago he met Dave Garroway, whose easygoing manner as the first host of NBC’s “Today” show would make him one of television’s earliest stars. He later recalled that he “learned from Dave how to ad-lib in a very casual way.”

In those days being on the air was rewarding but frightening for Mr. Downs. Although he projected the image of a quietly confident performer in the manner of Mr. Garroway, he suffered from a bad case of mic fright. Mr. Downs recalled those days in “On Camera,” his memoir:

“At the end of a piece of music, when I was supposed to say something, my knees would shake uncontrollably. My pulse and respiration went up. Fortunately, the fear never showed in my delivery, but it did in my hands. If I had to hold copy, the paper would rattle. As a defense, I learned to lay copy out flat on the desk, or, if standing, to grab my lapels along with the copy, so the paper didn’t move with my hands.” His fright did not diminish until after he had been in the business a good 10 years.

Despite his fears, he came to New York in 1954 and was soon working as an announcer for Arlene Francis on “Home” and Sid Caesar on “Caesar’s Hour.” He joined “The Tonight Show” when Mr. Paar did, in 1957, and remained until Mr. Paar left in 1962.



Mr. Downs in 1960. He was host of the morning question-and-answer show “Concentration” on NBC from 1958 to 1969.
Associated Press

During those years he was also host of the popular daytime game show “Concentration,” a job he held from 1958 until 1969. And in 1962 he began his most high-profile and prestigious assignment to date, the one that would establish him as not just an announcer but also a respected television journalist: Mr. Garroway’s old job as host of “Today.” He remained there for a decade.

In June 1978, after seven years of freelancing, Mr. Downs received a call from Roone Arledge, the president of ABC News, asking him to take over the newsmagazine “20/20.” Its debut just a week earlier had been a disaster, with critics deriding its haphazard format and theatrical flourishes and Mr. Arledge himself acknowledging that “a lot of it made no sense.”

“Hugh Downs knows how to lead into a news piece and put it into perspective,” Mr. Arledge said. “I think it will all start to settle down now.” It did, and it has been a staple of the ABC prime-time lineup ever since.

Mr. Downs was the sole host until 1984, when his former “Today” colleague Barbara Walters, who had been contributing to “20/20” for a few years, became his co-host. He remained with the program until retiring in 1999.



Mr. Downs worked with Barbara Walters on "Today" in the 1960s and '70s ... NBC



...and again on the ABC program "20/20." Steve Fenn/ABC

Mr. Downs married Ruth Shaheen in 1944; she died in 2017. He is survived by their children, Hugh Raymond and Deirdre Lynn Downs; a brother, Wallace; two grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

In addition to his television work, Mr. Downs was a composer (he wrote a prelude that was performed by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra); an amateur guitarist (he played for Andrés Segovia and said he was pleased that Segovia did not leave the room) and painter (when he had the time); the author of numerous books; an advocate for the elderly (he wrote books and articles about the aging process and was the host of a PBS series on aging called "Over Easy") and for family planning (including abortion rights); a science buff (he was once NBC's resident expert on science programming); an audiophile (he built his own stereo equipment from scratch); an environmentalist; and an unabashed adventurer who piloted a 65-foot ketch across the Pacific, went to the South Pole and rode a killer whale at Sea World.

Mr. Downs, who often said he thought viewers regarded him as bland, assiduously avoided the appearance of controversy. He could not escape it late in life, however, when he was widely criticized for appearing in infomercials for a book called “The World’s Greatest Treasury of Health Secrets” and other products whose value many people questioned.

Until then the closest he had come to controversy was in 1997, when he declared that neither he nor Ms. Walters would interview Marv Albert, the sportscaster who had been indicted on assault and sodomy charges. When Ms. Walters decided to go ahead with the interview, Mr. Downs refused to appear on that installment of “20/20,” saying that to do so would be “hypocritical.”

After watching her interview, however, Mr. Downs said: “I thought Barbara did an outstanding job. I remain very proud of ‘20/20’ and of my long association with Barbara Walters. I look forward to resuming my duties on the broadcast next week.”

He did, and he did not say another public word on the subject.

Peter Keepnews contributed reporting.