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American Masters – Sammy Davis, Jr.: I’ve Gotta Be Me

Premieres Tuesday, February 19 at 9 p.m. on PBS (check local listings) with exclusive bonus performance footage

Available on DVD February 19 via PBS Distribution

Streams Wednesday, February 20 via pbs.org/americanmasters and PBS apps

Synopsis
American Masters – Sammy Davis, Jr.: I’ve Gotta Be Me is the first major film documentary to examine the performer’s vast career and his journey for identity through the shifting tides of civil rights and racial progress during 20th-century America. Sammy Davis, Jr., had the kind of career that was indisputably legendary, vast in scope and scale. And yet, his life was complex, complicated and contradictory. Davis strove to achieve the American Dream in a time of racial prejudice and shifting political territory. He was a veteran of increasingly outdated show business traditions and worked tirelessly to stay relevant, even as he frequently found himself bracketed by the bigotry of white America and the distaste of black America. Davis was the most public black figure to embrace Judaism, thereby yoking his identity to that of another persecuted minority. In Duke Ellington’s words, he was “beyond category.”

Featuring exclusive interviews with Billy Crystal, Norman Lear, Jerry Lewis, Whoopi Goldberg and Kim Novak, with never-before-seen photographs from Davis’ vast personal collection and rare footage from his performances in television, film and concert, American Masters explores the life and art of a uniquely-gifted entertainer whose trajectory paralleled the
major flashpoints of American society, from the Depression through the 1980s. The PBS broadcast also features 20 minutes of exclusive bonus performance footage spanning Davis’ 50-year-career after the documentary.

“American Masters is thrilled to share Sammy Davis, Jr.’s incredible story with a wide national audience on PBS,” said Michael Kantor, American Masters Executive Producer. “He was revered as the consummate entertainer, but it is not well known that he was the first African-American to be invited by a president to sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom of the White House, and shared the first interracial kiss in a Broadway play. He was a pioneer.”

Sammy Davis, Jr.: I’ve Gotta Be Me had its world premiere at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival, was shown at numerous film festivals including DOC NYC and garnered multiple awards, including the Jury Prize and Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature at the Pan African Film & Arts Festival, the Audience Award at the Nashville Film Festival 2018 and Best Documentary Feature at the Louisiana International Film Festival.

Notable Talent:
- Billy Crystal
- Whoopi Goldberg
- Quincy Jones
- Norman Lear
- Jerry Lewis
- Kim Novak

Noteworthy Facts:
- Sammy Davis, Jr., first took to the stage when he was only three years old, performing in a vaudeville act with his father and godfather, Will Mastin.
- The performer was drafted after World War II into one of the first integrated units in the Army, where he was brutally beaten and subject to racist slurs from his fellow soldiers.
- Eddie Cantor, one of the biggest stars of the 1950s, was a big fan of Sammy Davis, Jr., and had the Will Mastin Trio on his popular show, The Colgate Comedy Hour. It caused a huge stir when Cantor, who was white, wiped Davis’ brow with a handkerchief and put his arm around the performer.
- In 1954, when he was only 30, Sammy Davis, Jr., was in a horrible car accident in San Bernardino, CA, and lost his left eye. While recuperating in the hospital, he sought counsel from a rabbi and several Jewish friends. He eventually converted to Judaism.
- Sammy Davis, Jr., was a part of the famed Rat Pack, along with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, and Peter Lawford.
- “The Candy Man” was his sole No. 1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100 Charts.
- Sammy Davis, Jr., loved All in the Family and asked series creator Norman Lear if he could be a guest star. He appeared in an episode in 1972 capped by one of the most infamous kisses in television history.
Buzzworthy Moments:

- Months before his death from throat cancer, the *Sammy Davis, Jr. 60th Anniversary Celebration* primetime TV special recognized the legendary performer for his decades in show business. Eddie Murphy, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder and Whitney Houston were just some of the notable talent who participated. The documentary features one of the show’s many highlights: Gregory Hines pulling Davis onstage for an impromptu tap dance.

- The documentary features rare footage of Sammy Davis, Jr., performing the song “I Wanna Be With You,” which was featured in the Broadway musical *Golden Boy* about a black boxer who falls for his manager’s white girlfriend. Davis played the lead role opposite Paula Wayne. When they kissed onstage at the end of this song, crowds gasped and death threats ensued. In the film, the story is recounted through an exclusive interview with Wayne (now deceased) and Charles Strouse, one of the song’s composers.

Short TV Listing:
Explore the legendary performer’s search for identity amidst the unfolding civil rights movement.

Long TV Listing:
Explore the entertainer’s vast talent and journey for identity through the shifting tides of civil rights and racial progress during 20th century America.

Running Time: 2 hrs.

Series Overview:
Launched in 1986 on PBS, *American Masters* has earned 28 Emmy Awards — including 10 for Outstanding Non-Fiction Series and five for Outstanding Non-Fiction Special — 13 Peabodys, an Oscar, three Grammys, two Producers Guild Awards, and many other honors. To further explore the lives and works of masters past and present, *American Masters* offers streaming video of select films, outtakes, filmmaker interviews, the *American Masters Podcast*, educational resources and more. The series is a production of THIRTEEN PRODUCTIONS LLC for WNET and also seen on the WORLD channel.

Production Credits:
Underwriters:
Major support for *American Masters – Sammy Davis, Jr.: I've Gotta Be Me* is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional support for this film is provided by The Leslie and Roslyn Goldstein Foundation, Cheryl and Philip Milstein Family, Seton Melvin, The Philip and Janice Levin Foundation, Judith and Burton Resnick, Ellen and James S. Marcus, and Lillian Goldman Programming Endowment.

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About WNET
WNET is America’s flagship PBS station: parent company of New York’s [THIRTEEN](http://www.thirteen.org) and [WLIW21](http://www.wliw.org) and operator of NJTV, the statewide public media network in New Jersey. Through its new [ALL ARTS](http://www.absolutetv.com) multi-platform initiative, its broadcast channels, three cable services (THIRTEEN PBSKids, Create and World) and online streaming sites, WNET brings quality arts, education and public affairs programming to more than five million viewers each month. WNET produces and presents a wide range of acclaimed PBS series, including *Nature, Great Performances, American Masters, PBS NewsHour Weekend*, and the nightly interview program *Amanpour and Company*. In addition, WNET produces numerous documentaries, children’s programs, and local news and cultural offerings, as well as multi-platform initiatives addressing poverty and climate. Through THIRTEEN Passport and WLIW Passport, station members can stream new and archival THIRTEEN, WLIW and PBS programming anytime, anywhere.

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