First Major Documentary on Notorious Entertainment Icon Mae West World Premieres June 16 on PBS

Executive Produced by Bette Midler, American Masters — Mae West: Dirty Blonde features new interviews with Candice Bergen, Lady Bunny, Margaret Cho, Natasha Lyonne, Ringo Starr, Dita Von Teese and more

Premiere Date: Tuesday, June 16 at 8 p.m. on PBS (check local listings), pbs.org/maewest and the PBS Video app as part of PBS’ summer-long celebration of women trailblazers.

Synopsis: American Masters — Mae West: Dirty Blonde is the first major documentary film to explore Mae West’s life and career as she “climbed the ladder of success wrong by wrong” to become a writer, performer and subversive agitator for social change. West achieved great acclaim in every entertainment medium that existed during her lifetime, spanning eight decades of the 20th century. A full-time actress at seven, a vaudevillian at 14, a dancing sensation at 25, a Broadway playwright at 33, a silver screen ingénue at 40, a Vegas nightclub act at 62, a recording artist at 73, a camp icon at 85 – West left no format unconquered. She possessed creative and economic powers unheard of for a female entertainer in the 1930s and still rare today. Though she was a comedian, West grappled with some of the more complex social issues of the 20th century, including race and class tensions, and imbued even her most salacious plotlines with
commentary about gender conformity, societal restrictions and what she perceived as moral hypocrisy.

"I've loved Mae West since the moment I saw her sashay across the screen in Night After Night, a movie in which she stole everything but the cameras. She created a persona she completely believed in, and never wavered from publicly or privately. One of the funniest women who ever lived, she made fun of sex at a time when the word was never uttered in polite society, and wrote plays that were so scandalous, she was arrested and sent to jail. A breath of fresh air on the Broadway stage, she singlehandedly saved Paramount Studios from bankruptcy, had legions of fans, and still does. A woman who believed she was the equal of any man, if not their superior, she continues to inspire with her humor, her glamour, and her brassy, sassy ways,” said executive producer Bette Midler.

Notable Film Interviewees:

- Ringo Starr
- Natasha Lyonne
- André Leon Talley
- Dita Von Teese
- Mario Cantone
- Margaret Cho
- Molly Haskell
- Margo Jefferson
- Lady Bunny
- Kathy Najimy
- Emily Nussbaum
- Claudia Roth Pierpont

Notable Facts:

Early life

- West’s unique style was evident even at her first amateur show: a seven-year-old-girl in a sweet pink satin dress and large picture hat, wriggling suggestively while growling men’s vaudeville songs in a deep, rough voice.

- Doted on by her mother, a onetime corset model from Bavaria, hardened by her father, a former bare-knuckles brawler, “Baby Mae,” as she billed herself, soon left school to join a local theater troupe, playing nightly on the 10-cent stages that dotted working-class Brooklyn.

Rise to fame
• West garnered attention as one of the best known performers of the shimmy dance, a sexually charged dance craze where she would “shake her chemise” to the delight of the audience.

• When West started performing on Broadway she rewrote the dialogue in her small roles to be funnier, sexier, bawdier – truer to the persona she had been cultivating.

• West’s 1926 play “Sex” resulted in the arrest of her and 20 other cast members. Following a highly publicized trial, she was convicted of “corrupting the morals of youth and others,” and was sentenced to 10 days in jail. West recognized the value of the publicity, commenting to a reporter, “I expect this will be the making of me.”

• After the success of her critical and commercial hit play “Diamond Lil,” Paramount Pictures offered West a contract and she became a movie star at age 39.

• West was given her own production unit, with wide leeway to rewrite her lines, redefine her roles and cast her leading men – an unheard-of degree of power at a time when female stars had little say in what parts they played or how their image was molded.

• West made five films in four years. Her screenplay heroines were all essentially a variation of Diamond Lil, the former prostitute made good. These movies set attendance records at theaters across the country and made her one of the most famous women in America.

• When the Motion Picture Production Code began to be enforced in 1934, censors edited her screenplays, removing saucy dialogue and rendering jokes senseless. The films grew dull and her popularity waned.

Late career

• In 1954, West became a Vegas act at the Sahara Hotel. She sang her old songs, recited her old lines and some new, raunchier ones with a coterie of oiled-up bodybuilders in loincloths as her backup men.

• After a hiatus, West made two more films, “Myra Breckinridge” (1970) and “Sextette” (1978), under the condition that she have creative control and could rewrite her lines as she saw fit. Both films flopped.

Short TV listing:
Dive into the life and career of groundbreaking writer, performer and subversive star Mae West.

Long TV listing:
Dive into the life and career of groundbreaking writer, performer and subversive star Mae West. Over a career spanning eight decades, she broke boundaries and possessed creative and economic powers unheard of for a female entertainer in the 1930s.

Series Overview:
Launched in 1986 on PBS, *American Masters* set the standard for documentary film profiles, accruing widespread critical acclaim and earning 28 Emmy Awards — including 10 for Outstanding Non-Fiction Series and five for Outstanding Non-Fiction Special — 14 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, the *American Masters* website offers streaming video of select films, outtakes, filmmaker interviews, the American Masters Podcast, educational resources and more. The series is available for streaming simultaneously on all station-branded PBS platforms, including PBS.org and the PBS Video app, which is available on iOS, Android, Roku, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV and Chromecast. PBS station members can view episodes via Passport (contact your local PBS station for details). *American Masters* is a production of THIRTEEN PRODUCTIONS LLC for WNET.

**Production Credits:**

*American Masters – Mae West: Dirty Blonde* is a production of THIRTEEN Productions LLC’s *American Masters* for WNET. Directed and produced by Sally Rosenthal and Julia Marchesi. Bette Midler and Michael Kantor are executive producers.

**Underwriters:**


Major support for *American Masters* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Rosalind P. Walter, Judith and Burton Resnick, Cheryl & Philip Milstein Family Foundation, The Vital Projects Fund, Lillian Goldman Programming Endowment, The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, Seton J. Melvin, Philip and Janice Levin Foundation, Ellen and James S. Marcus, and The André and Elizabeth Kertész Foundation.

**Websites:**


**Hashtags:**

#MaeWestPBS
#TrailblazersPBS

**About PBS Trailblazers**

In the summer of 2020, PBS is celebrating the women’s vote centennial with a slate of multiplatform content honoring and commemorating U.S. women’s suffrage, the feminist movement and modern-day changemakers. *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE “The Vote”* tells the story of the campaign to grant women the right to vote, a transformative cultural and political movement that resulted in the largest expansion of voting rights in U.S. history. *AMERICAN MASTERS “Unladylike2020”* is
a multimedia series featuring courageous, little-known and diverse female trailblazers from the turn of the 20th century. “And She Could Be Next” (w.t.), a POV miniseries, follows women of color as political candidates and organizers who seek to expand the electorate, asking whether democracy itself can be preserved — and made stronger — by those most marginalized. And a two-part FIRING LINE WITH MARGARET HOOVER special documents what motivated several conservative women to run for office. Two fan-favorite PBS series will salute female changemakers: AMERICAN MASTERS with “Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am” and “Mae West: Dirty Blonde;” and GREAT PERFORMANCES with “Gloria: A Life,” about Gloria Steinem, and “Ann,” about Texas governor Ann Richards. ANTIQUES ROADSHOW spotlights outstanding contributions from female athletes, artists, activists and more in the all-new special “Women’s Work.” The lineup also features two new miniseries: PREHISTORIC ROAD TRIP, hosted by the Field Museum’s Emily Graslie, who embarks on an epic adventure through America’s fossil country; and BBC co-production ROYAL HISTORY’S MYTHS AND SECRETS WITH LUCY WORSLEY, who investigates notable women and their roles in historical events. In addition, PBS will encore the critically acclaimed and award-winning FRONTLINE documentary “For Sama,” an intimate yet epic journey of one woman’s experience of the Syrian war.

About WNET

WNET is America’s flagship PBS station; parent company of New York’s THIRTEEN and WLIW21 and operator of NJTV, the statewide public media network in New Jersey. Through its new ALL ARTS 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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