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Hi, Randy

Rodney Dangerfield still gets respect and laughs on what would be his 100th birthday

Rodney Dangerfield's name is ubiquitous with laughter. Philadelphia attorney Randy Maniloff takes a look at his legacy at what would have been his centennial birthday.

Randy Maniloff Opinion contributor
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Following the popularity of the 1969 novel “The Godfather,” people spoke of the importance of being treated with respect. At the time, as an introduction to some jokes, Rodney Dangerfield had been complaining that “nothing goes right.” Dangerfield saw an opportunity.

He recast his setup, now saying: “I don’t get no respect.”

He tried it out for the first time at a club in Greenwich Village: “When I was a kid, I played hide-and-seek. They wouldn’t even look for me,” he writes in his memoir, "It's Not Easy Bein' Me."

Afterward, patrons at Upstairs at the Duplex approached the comedian and said things like, “Hey, Rodney, me, too – no respect.”

Dangerfield, who would have turned 100 on Monday, knew he had struck a chord.

“No respect is all about being mistreated,” his widow, Joan Dangerfield, 68, told me in a phone interview in late October. “Rodney believed that everyone, regardless of their age or circumstances, ends up getting hurt, betrayed or taken advantage of.”

Dangerfield has always been my favorite stand-up comic. When I decided to try it myself 10 years ago, I borrowed his style of rapid-fire jokes and self-deprecation. Doing a set a few years ago at his New York City club, Dangerfield’s, which closed in 2020, was a dream come true.

When I learned that Rodney was turning 100 (posthumously) I wanted to pay tribute to him. Rodney taught me a great life lesson. It’s important to take things seriously – but it doesn’t always have to be yourself.



Rodney Dangerfield would have turned 100 on Nov. 22, 2021. George Rose/Getty Images

A place in pop culture

Indeed, Dangerfield received thousands of letters from people who wanted to share their own instances of getting no respect, Joan Dangerfield told me.

He wrote over 500 “no respect” jokes. The phrase has a secure place in the lexicon of pop culture.

Born Jacob Cohen in Babylon, New York, Dangerfield grew up in a humorless home. His father, a vaudeville performer, abandoned the family when Dangerfield was a young child. His mother showed him no love.

In his late teens, Dangerfield set out to become a professional comic. He traveled the country, taking any stand-up job he could get, including working as a singing waiter to tell jokes between songs. But he didn’t make it. He quit at age 28 and began businesses as a paint salesman and a house painter. More than a dozen years later, he tried again.

Dangerfield’s lack of attention and affection as a child came through in the comic’s material. Joan Dangerfield shared some jokes that her late husband never told: “I got no respect as a kid. ... The doctor wouldn’t give me a shot for the measles. He said, ‘How else can I find out if it’s going around?’ I was an ugly kid too. When I was a baby, politicians used to shake my hand.”



Rodney Dangerfield is Al Czervik in the movie "Caddyshack." Handout

The Rodney Dangerfield of ...

Dangerfield is now a synonym for the unappreciated, which are sometimes referred to as “the Rodney Dangerfield of (fill in the blank).” A 2016 headline in The Hill described the Washington, D.C., primary as “the Rodney Dangerfield of politics.” Fox Business, in 2019, declared small business “the Rodney Dangerfield of the American economy.” Oenophiles can’t seem to agree on what’s “the Rodney Dangerfield of wine.” In 2011, The Wine Economist made the case that it’s Petite Sirah. Six years later, Naples Illustrated gave the nod to Lambrusco.

“Rodney identified with the working man,” Joan Dangerfield said to me, “due to his earlier jobs.” He worked at a magazine stand before school to earn money for breakfast. He bagged groceries, was a pin boy at a bowling alley, a barker at a theatre, drove a laundry truck, moved furniture and sold aluminum siding.

In 1981, Dangerfield performed for President Ronald Reagan at the Ford's Theater in Washington. He had no interest in schmoozing with the political bigwigs at the post-show reception, he recounted in his memoir. So he “went outside and hung out with the limo drivers.”

As for Dangerfield getting no respect, the Smithsonian saw it differently.

In the 1980s, the National Museum of American History displayed his trademark red tie. “Right next to Lindbergh’s plane,” Dangerfield quipped in his autobiography.

Dangerfield’s appeal endures long after his death in 2004. In conjunction with his centennial birthday, Joan Dangerfield, along with Rick Rubin, the music visionary, who Time magazine once called one of the 100 most influential people in the world, is producing a documentary series about the comedian.

By coining a phrase to describe a universal emotion, Dangerfield’s legacy will endure long after his last joke has been forgotten.

Mrs. Dangerfield made sure that her late husband would never stop making people laugh. For his tombstone, she chose “There Goes The Neighborhood.”

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