

## Bill Collins 1934 – 2019

Bespectacled with a gentle smile, speaking about the films that he presented with authority, rare insight and with great passion, Bill Collins was often called ‘Mr Movies’.

In the decades before DVDs and downloads, Bill Collins introduced aging movie classics to millions of Australia's television viewers. In over three decades of hosting *The Golden Years of Hollywood*, he showed off an adoration for and encyclopedic knowledge of the cinema.

His often-parodied image as an obsessive, uncritical movie-lover, however, was easy to understand. In 1991, he described *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* as a "terrible picture" that "deserves every brickbat it gets". The previous night, however, he had given it a characteristically wordy and positive introduction to a cinema audience of 850. "With a lot of films I present," he said, "I don't want to say nasty things because I don't think nasty things are worth saying."



Collins was actually a cineaste, with an eclectic love of cinema – admiring everything from Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989) to the Clint Eastwood western *High Plains Drifter* (1973). He called for a special cinema in Sydney to play exclusively European films, and professed his love for Australian films like *Wake in Fright* (1971), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Dad and Dave Come to Town* (1938).

His preference, however, was clear: Hollywood classics. His personal top 10 (revealed in 1977) was comprised entirely of English-language films from the 1930s and 1940s, led by two movies from 1939: *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*. "Filmmakers in those days knew how to tell a story on film," he said.

William Collins was born in Sydney on December 4, 1934, the only child of William Collins, a policeman, and his wife Rita (nee Miller), a teacher. While at school he immersed himself in culture: reading two books a day, writing a "first novel" at age 11. He hated sport, but learned music, became an opera buff and a Gershwin fan. At age five, he saw his first movie at Sutherland Picture House: *Naughty Marietta* (1935), starring Jeanette MacDonald, whom he would regard as one of his favourite female stars, along with Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Kay Francis and others. ("I find it hard to pin it down to just a handful.") He was instantly smitten – not just by the "gorgeous, glamorous, always stunningly gowned" MacDonald, but by the art of cinema itself. At age six, he knew Davis' entire filmography of the time.

He completed a Master's degree on the role of film in education.

Though he made his first television appearances on ABC's *Roundabout* in 1963 – the same time he started reviewing television films for *TV Times* magazine – he was given his own series, *The Golden Years of Hollywood*, on TCN-9 Sydney in September 1966, earning \$40 an appearance. He thought he would do well to go for six months. Instead, it would move through all three networks (and later Foxtel) for another five decades.

His lengthy introductions, followed by more commentary in the intermission, were made with no script or autocue. "Collins became a cult figure," wrote journalist Elisabeth Wynhausen. "Devotees switched on lousy films to watch his performance." Immediately after the film, he would reappear, more analytical this time, proving that he was a critic as well as a lover. *All This, and Heaven Too* (1940) was followed by his serious question: "Have you ever considered the implications of the last scene between Bette Davis and Charles Boyer?" This might have flummoxed many viewers, but it introduced others to serious critique, luring them in with his friendly, populist format.

His exhaustive film knowledge spun off into a movie service business, providing information for researchers and merchandisers. His home in the Sydney suburb of Kareela housed perhaps the world's largest private library of film books, with thousands of volumes sharing six levels with collected memorabilia.

In 1987 he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for his services to film and television.

Collins left Channel 10 in 1994, after 14 years, and lectured at the University of Sydney. The next year he resumed his duties, presenting *The Golden Years of Hollywood* again on Fox Classics. In 1996, Foxtel celebrated the series' thirtieth anniversary with a gala event, with MGM musical star Cyd Charisse as a surprise guest. "Hollywood's consulate in Australia" (as journalist Peter Luck once described him) had truly cemented his status as a living legend.

His induction into the Logie Awards Hall of Fame, in 2009, only underlined the respect with which he was held by the industry.

In October 2018, Collins handed over hosting duties on *Golden Years of Hollywood* to Graeme Blundell. "To all my fans, I want to say thank you for your support of the *Golden Years of Hollywood*," Collins said at the time. "Thank you so much – you've brought me so much pleasure."

Collins's uniform was a large pair of dark-rimmed glasses, a jacket and tie, and an intimate set adorned with movie posters from the golden age of cinema he loved so much.

Collins talked about the films he presented – from *Scarface* to *Star Wars*, from *Gone With the Wind* to *Young Frankenstein* – with the kind of wide-eyed enthusiasm you find in a child let loose in a lolly shop.

He spoke emotionally, and passionately, and personally. He had the theatrical delivery of an actor, but in truth he was simply a fan, drawn into the magic of the movie house, hypnotised by the flickering light of the projector.

"Bill's love of and passion for quality motion pictures made him formidable and a national treasure," said Brian Walsh, Foxtel's executive director of television. "He inspired generations of Australians with his extraordinary knowledge, intellect and enthusiasm. "Uniquely, Bill never read from script, nor used an autocue or teleprompter, which is commonplace in television; he spoke to his audiences from informed and detailed research and, of course, from the heart," Walsh said.

In addition to his work on television, Collins authored three books, presented radio programs and was for many years a newspaper columnist.