

TV

How did Jerry Springer die? What he said about his legacy

The subject of Netflix's new documentary "Fights, Camera, Action" was an Emmy-winning reporter and politician before changing pop culture forever.



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By Randee Dawn

Fights. Racists. Adultery. Overall mayhem. “The Jerry Springer Show,” which aired nearly 4,000 episodes between 1991 and 2018, was home to all four. Yet at its center, host Jerry Springer (who died in 2023) was an ocean of calm wading through a sea of muck and controversy.

“Jerry was warm and charismatic and empathetic and he did care about people but you certainly wouldn’t know it from the show that bore his name,” former Chicago

media critic Robert Feder, who is interviewed in a new Netflix documentary, “Jerry Springer: Fights, Camera, Action,” tells TODAY.com. “He made it acceptable for people to watch the show and consider everything that they were being exposed to as entertainment.”

How did the lawyer, politician and Emmy-winning news reporter become the so-called King of Trash TV? Here's what we know about the man who believed he “ruined the culture” with his program.

What was Jerry Springer’s early career like?

The UK-born son of German Jewish refugees, Springer actually came into the world in a subway station while his mother sheltered from German bombs during World War II, as NBC News reported in 2023. After his family immigrated to New York City when he was young, he went on to earn a law degree and join the advisory team to Robert F. Kennedy in 1968.

Springer settled in Ohio and won a seat on the Cincinnati city council when he was just 27 in 1971. But he resigned in 1974 after paying for a sex worker with a check, which he confessed to in a public apology, as Cincinnati publication WCPO recalled.

He got elected back to city council again a year later and in 1977 became Cincinnati's mayor. After a failed run at the Ohio governor's seat, he moved into TV by reporting on the news. As an anchor, he earned 10 local Emmy Awards, Cincinnati Magazine reported in 1992.

"The Jerry Springer Show" launched in 1991 taping out of Chicago. Early on the show focused on news and issues: Oliver North and Jesse Jackson were among early guest, and as WVXU wrote, topics included "homelessness, AIDS, domestic violence, race and equality."



Jerry Springer on his show in 1998. **Getty Images**

But when ratings tumbled, the show hired former tabloid newsman Richard Dominick and the series evolved into the chair-throwing, headline-grabbing, chaotic beast that would ultimately topple “The Oprah Winfrey Show” in the ratings, running for decades.

“He was a man of enormous gifts and talents and potential, and it’s sad that he squandered it,” Feder tells TODAY.com. “He was a good guy, but he sold out and his name will forever be attached to the worst television show of all time.”

What did Jerry Springer say about his show — and its legacy?



One of the many fights of "The Jerry Springer Show." **Getty Images**

Springer spoke about "The Jerry Springer Show," its legacy and its effect on culture with a self-aware tone.

And as he noted on "The Roseanne Show," "I don't want to live in a country that watches my show, I'll tell you that."

"I don't watch the show, but it's not aimed at 66-year-old men," Springer told the Associated Press, [via TODAY](#), in 2010. "If I were in college, I would watch. I enjoy doing it. It's a lot of fun."

Once the show was over, he was somewhat more forthcoming on its long-term ramifications. On the "[Behind the Velvet Rope](#)" podcast in 2022, Springer said, jokingly, "I just apologize. I'm so sorry. What have I done? I've ruined the culture."

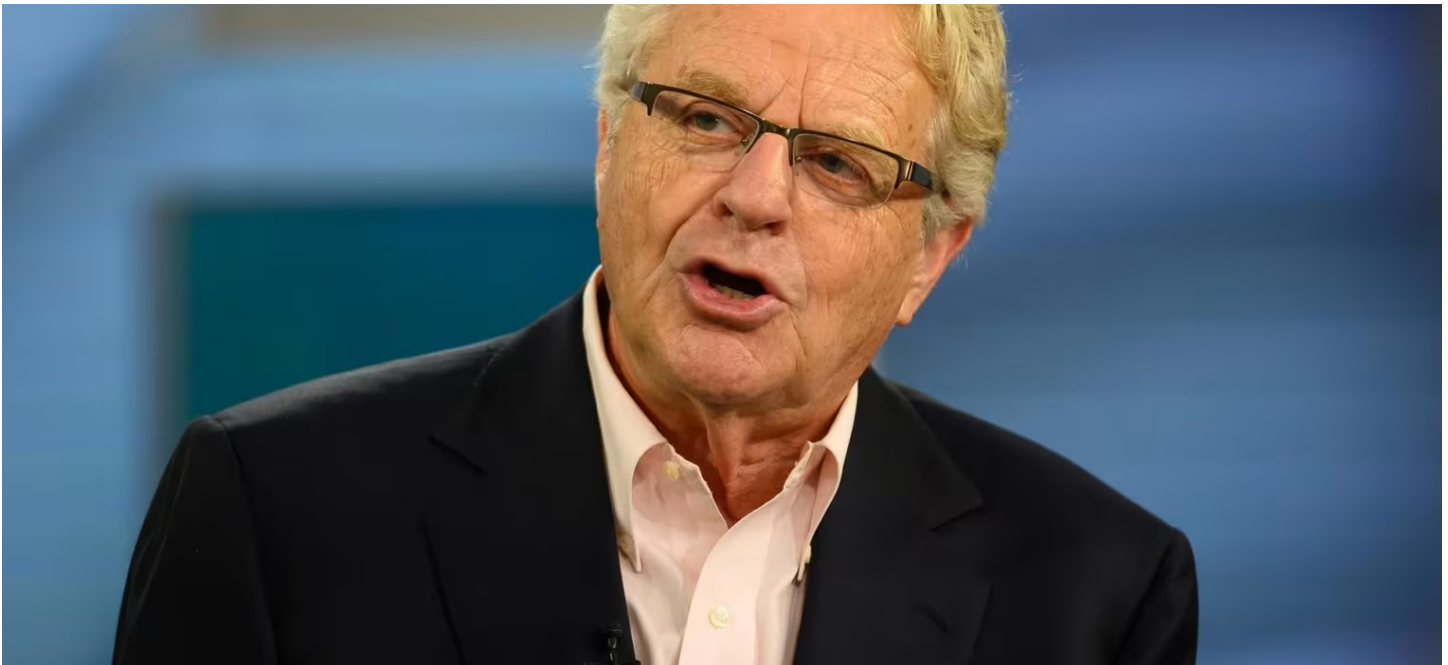
What happened to Jerry Springer?

“Jerry loved being a star,” Dominick says in the documentary.

After his show went off the air in 2018, Springer made efforts to remain in the public eye. He launched a courtroom show in 2019 called “[Judge Jerry](#)” that lasted for three seasons. He continued to host shows like “America’s Got Talent,” “WWE Raw” and a dating program called “Baggage.” He also dipped his toe into acting, including starring in a 1998 film called “Ringmaster” playing a character loosely based on himself.

Jerry Springer’s final thoughts on his TV show: ‘We’re all alike’

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He also competed on “The Masked Singer” in 2022 and danced on “Dancing with the Stars” in 2006 — in part so he could learn to waltz for his daughter’s wedding.

Springer died in April, 2023 at age 79, [TODAY reported](#). A family spokesperson said he had a [recent diagnosis of pancreatic cancer](#).

“Jerry’s ability to connect with people was at the heart of his success in everything he tried, whether that was politics, broadcasting or just joking with people on the street who wanted a photo or a word,” family spokesperson and his longtime friend Jean Galvin said.ruin

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