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'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood' had its debut 50 years ago. PHOTOFEST

*By*

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In a [classic moment](#) in Senate subcommittee history, Fred Rogers in 1969 helped secure funding for public television by describing his show, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” and reciting the lyrics from one of its songs, [“What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel?”](#)

When he finished, Sen. John Pastore, who was leading the hearing and had bristled at earlier testimony mostly consisting of statements being read, was visibly moved.

“I think it’s wonderful. I think it’s wonderful,” he said. “Looks like you just earned the \$20 million.”

The scene is featured in a new documentary, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?,” directed by Morgan Neville, that drew tears from many critics at the Sundance Film Festival in January. The film opens in theaters in June, part of a series of events celebrating the 50th

anniversary of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” a series that in an unfailingly gentle tone taught children about everything from how to make friends and what factories are like to heavier topics like divorce and war.

“We had a director that once said to me, ‘If you take all the elements that make good television, and do the exact opposite, you have “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” ’ ” Margaret Whitmer, who worked on the original series, recalls in the documentary. “Low production values, simple sets, an unlikely star—yet it worked because he was saying something important.”

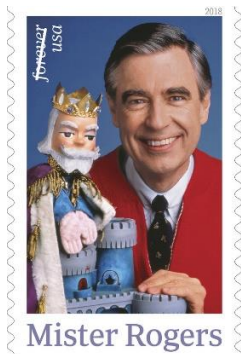
Rogers-mania gets rolling on Tuesday when TV quiz show “Jeopardy!” devotes one of its categories to Mr. Rogers, who died of cancer in 2003. Later this month, PBS plans to air classic episodes of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” which began in 1968 and ran until 2001. On March 6, PBS stations air their own hourlong documentary special, “Mister Rogers: It’s You I Like,” featuring interviews with Judd Apatow, Whoopi Goldberg and Sarah Silverman and hosted by Michael Keaton, who worked on the show at Pittsburgh station WQED as a stagehand and young actor.



Comedian Sarah Silverman appears in PBS’s special, ‘Mister Rogers: It’s You I Like.’ PHOTO: VINCE BUCCI

The example Mr. Rogers set “was the bar of how I would like to behave,” says Mr. Apatow, the comedy director whose movies include “Knocked Up” and “The 40-Year-Old Virgin.” “He was pure love.”

In the spring, the U.S. Postal Service plans to issue a Fred Rogers stamp, and the toy company Funko is adding Mr. Rogers to its universe of collectible vinyl figurines that includes Harry Potter, Wonder Woman, and “Walking Dead” zombies. Tom Hanks is attached to portray Mr. Rogers in the biopic “You Are My Friend,” with production scheduled to begin later this year.



The U.S. Postal Service is featuring Mr. Rogers on a postage stamp this year. PHOTO: USPS

Every weekday for decades, Mr. Rogers would enter his TV house, singing “Won’t You Be My Neighbor.” He swapped his jacket [for a zip-up cardigan](#) (his mother made his sweaters), then sat to change his shoes. He might have a guest demonstrate how a machine or a musical instrument worked. He spoke without irony, understanding how children can take words literally.

Soon the trolley would swing by and transport viewers to a world of make-believe, where puppets, voiced by Mr. Rogers, played out scenes reflecting early-childhood dilemmas. There was bossy King Friday XIII, who in an early episode built a wall to prevent things from changing, and timid Daniel Tiger, who often needed to be reassured. Mr. Rogers’ songs, released on more than a dozen albums, helped the smallest children process their feelings.



Watch a scene from 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood.'

“He turned big ideas into very simple messages,” says Ellen Doherty, head of production and creative development for the Fred Rogers Co., which continues to produce programming [such as “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood”](#) for PBS.



A scene from 'Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood'

Born in Latrobe, Pa., in 1928, Fred Rogers studied music composition and theology and worked with child psychologist Margaret McFarland at the University of Pittsburgh. He was already married with two sons when he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1963. But he was enthralled by the potential of TV and went to work at NBC in New

York, not long after FCC chairman Newton Minow had called television a “vast wasteland.”

“He never had a church. He had TV,” says Ms. Whitmer, now director of video production and special events at the Fred Rogers Co.

Ron Simon, curator of television and radio at the Paley Center for Media in New York, which is planning its own Mr. Rogers events later this year, calls him “one of the great television auteurs.”

Without fanfare, Mr. Rogers’ program addressed topics like birth (one episode showed a kitten being born), death and physical handicaps. He showed himself struggling to learn and making mistakes. He revealed how he controlled the puppets and told children they could invent their own make-believes.

It is tempting to say that a program like his couldn’t thrive in today’s culture. But the show had its debut at a turbulent time. In June 1968, Mr. Rogers wrote a [special episode](#) in which Daniel Tiger meekly asks Lady Aberlin: “What does assassination mean?”

The addition of a Funko toy seems like an outlier to the heartwarming sentiment, but it reflects Mr. Rogers’ multigenerational impact on pop culture.

“We’re always looking for licenses that resonate with fans and collectors,” says Mark Robben, Funko’s director of marketing. “Sometimes they’re real people. We just announced a set of RuPaul figures. It’s obvious that Mr. Rogers really holds a special place in the heart of just about everybody.”

Paul Siefken, chief executive at the Fred Rogers Co., says the company hasn’t done many projects like this.

“I think Fred was always a little hesitant to do bobbleheads,” Mr. Siefken says. “He thought they might scare children.”

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/mister-rogers-fans-plan-for-a-few-beautiful-days-back-in-his-neighborhood-1517659129>