

Carl 'Doc' Severinsen

By Unknown

This photograph shows twelve-year-old Carl Severinsen after winning a regional musical contest in 1939. "Doc" Severinsen went on to become an award-winning musician best known for his work as music director of television's Tonight Show.

Born on July 7, 1927, Carl Severinsen grew up in the northeastern Oregon community of Arlington. His father was the town dentist as well as an accomplished musician who played violin in the town band. Severinsen remembers his father often practicing the violin in the house, and said in a 1996 interview that "music was a natural part of my life."

Severinsen began playing the trumpet at age seven. His father wanted him to learn the violin, but Severinsen wanted to learn how to play the trombone. Since the trombone was too big for him, he started playing the trumpet, given to him by a neighbor as Arlington did not have a music store. He later said that he "took to the trumpet naturally." Just a week after getting his first trumpet Severinsen gave his first public performance at the local Methodist church. He soon became known as "Little Doc" in honor of his father's profession.

Although he won the Music Educator's National Contest at age twelve, Severinsen did not begin playing seriously until he was in the Army. He organized a band at Ft. Lewis, Washington, where he was stationed, playing in officers clubs and on radio shows. He went on tour when he was discharged from the service, playing with the Charlie Barnet, Benny Goodman, and Tommy Dorsey bands.

In 1949 he began working in New York City as a staff musician for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). His big break came in 1962 when he was hired as lead trumpet for the Tonight Show orchestra. He later said that it was "the best thing that could have happened in my life." He took over as music director for the Tonight Show in 1967, a position he held until the retirement of host Johnny Carson in 1992.

In addition to his Tonight Show work, "Doc" Severinsen has made dozens of albums, one of which won a Grammy Award in 1987, and he is the principal pops conductor for the Phoenix Symphony, the Milwaukee Symphony, the Minnesota Orchestra, and the Buffalo Philharmonic. He currently lives in Los Angeles with his wife Emily.

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