

LONG ISLAND / OBITUARIES

# Edmund Tester dies; Long Island clown known as Jazzbo was 91

As Jolly Jazzbo the Magic Clown, Tester appeared at parties, parades, the World's Fair and even a Nixon re-election rally.



Edmund Tester in 2003. Photo Credit: Newsday / Tony Jerome

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Edmund Tester, known to countless fans as Jolly Jazzbo the Magic Clown, entertained Long Island children for half a century.

From his first appearances at Century's Route 110 Drive-In Theatre in Melville in 1957 to the World's Fair and parades, Jazzbo became a prominent, colorful character.

Tester died Dec. 7 at the Nesconset Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation. A daughter, Teresa Carter, said the cause was congestive heart failure. He was 91.



Edmund Tester in costume as Jazzbo with his wife, Margie, in an undated photo. Photo Credit: Family photograph

At the Melville drive-in, Jazzbo rode a miniature train and performed simple magic tricks before the evening movie started. Families would bring children in pajamas, said Carter, of Lake Ronkonkoma. Her father's job was "to tire the children out, basically."

That gig led to others at Long Island All Weather Drive-In theaters, at hotels in the Poconos and Catskills and at affluent homes. "If a child sees a clown at someone else's party, he wants something equal at his own," Tester's wife, the former Margie Ruth Fletcher, told Newsday in a 1964 story about high-end children's parties.

Tester drove to many jobs in costume in the Jazzmobile, a converted street-legal Ford Model A with a clown horn. He later downgraded to a mini car with a lawn mower engine.

In 1961, Tester bought the former Kiddieland on Long Beach Road in his hometown of Oceanside to create Jazzboland. Jazzbo appeared there on weekends until Tester took a regular gig at the World's Fair in Queens in 1964.

By 1968, Jazzbo was a regular on what Newsday called the "playground circuit" of municipally funded appearances in Nassau County. He made at least one appearance at a rally for President Richard Nixon in 1972. He appeared at parties and parades until the early 2000s.

"I left my audience laughing. I was happy," he told Richard Woods, the author of a 2013 book, "Legendary Locals of Oceanside."

Edmund Anthony Tester II was born in Brooklyn on May 13, 1927, to Edmund Tester, a bus driver, and the former Louise Germain, a homemaker. He attended Oceanside High School and, after Army service, studied acting at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Manhattan in the late 1940s.

He married Margie Fletcher in 1946. She would later appear alongside him as Princess Pain in the Neck. Their children also appeared in the act, playing characters he invented.

Tester was a page at NBC in the early 1950s when "Howdy Doody" producers hired him to appear as Clarabell, the star clown. "He had to sign a waiver saying he'd never disclose he did personal appearances throughout the tristate area as Clarabell," Carter said.

"He was paid as a nonunion employee to cut costs," \$25 per week, she said. "Once he became his own clown" as Jazzbo, Tester commanded \$25 per performance or more.

Though not the only clown named Jazzbo, Tester got his name from being called a jazzy beau in high school, wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a bow tie and stripes over plaid, Carter said. Jazzbo's style was Tester's, amplified to ridiculousness: the bow tie grown to the size of a ceremonial check, patterns in pitched battle, his shoulder-length red wig brushed horizontal and topped with a tiny hat. Finished with greasepaint makeup, the costume took an hour to assemble.

Some of his tricks involved a succession of trained rabbits named Snowball. He would make them appear, disappear and bring his magic wand. Sometimes this worked; sometimes Snowball "would take the wand and throw it off the table." Either way, the bit killed.

Tester grew upset when the honor of his trade was besmirched, Carter said. That included the 1988 release of horror comedy "Killer Klowns from Outer Space" and the 1990 "It" miniseries, which he thought "hurt the true, real clowns."

"He claimed he was born to be a clown," she said. It meant nothing when someone "put on a colorful costume and face paint and calls himself a clown... . Your personality has to be a clown."

Besides Carter, Tester is survived by daughters Margret McKeever, of Selden, and Cindi Scibelli, of Texas, and sons Michael Tester, of Medford, and Steven Woolworth, of Los Angeles. He was predeceased by his wife, Margie, 80, in 2009 and by their son, Edmund Tester Jr., of Holtsville, in 2012.

He was buried Thursday at St. Charles Cemetery in East Farmingdale.

In the early days, Jazzbo sometimes appeared with Bozo the Clown, played then by Bill Britten. "When you think about it, it's odd to have two clowns," Carter said.

Her father, though, distinguished himself because he was "a talking magician clown. He never did any of the pie in the face tricks or trip and fall," she said. "He gave the clown some dignity. That's how he looked at it."