

Desi Arnaz – a Brief Biography



Desi Arnaz

The man who would revolutionize the face of early television was born in Santiago, Cuba. Desiderio Alberto Arnaz y de Acha III would become known to the world by two names: Desi Arnaz and Ricky Ricardo, one of the most recognized faces in entertainment history.

Desi was born March 2, 1917, into a wealthy Cuban family. His father was not only a wealthy property owner but also the youngest mayor in the history of Santiago. His mother, Dolores de Acha, was the daughter of one of the founders of the Bacardi Rum Company. Desi enjoyed a privileged childhood on his family's many properties, which included a cattle ranch, two dairy farms, and a villa on a private island in Santiago Bay. The advantaged young man was expected to attend college for law and eventually politics. However, the political turmoil that took place in Cuba would change all of that.

In 1933 Desi's life was turned upside down. His family's home was burned and ransacked as part of the overthrow of government by Fulgencio Batista. Desi and his mother escaped to safety, but his father was captured and thrown into prison. When Batista agreed to set him free if he would leave Cuba, Desi's father fled to Miami, promising to send for his wife and son.



Fulgencio Batista

At age 17 Desi arrived in Miami to join his father, who had established an import/export business. There were very few Cubans in Florida at that time. Desi and his father were extremely poor, and Desi took a job cleaning canary cages to earn some extra money. Father and son were forced to live in the company's run-down warehouse, eating canned beans and chasing away rats.

Young Desi was charming, good-looking, and possessed strong musical abilities. A girlfriend recommended him to Latin bandleader Xavier Cugat, and Desi became an overnight musical success. All of his life Desi was grateful for the opportunities the United States afforded him, and he remained very patriotic to his new country.

In 1937 Desi broke away from Cugat and established his own band, featuring Latin music. He popularized the Conga line dance craze. This success led to an invitation to audition for the Broadway show *Too Many Girls*, where he won the role of a Hispanic football player. It was in 1940, while reprising this role for the film of the same name, that he met – and fell in love with – Lucille Ball.



Conga line

Desi also experienced success as a movie star, making ten films in his career. He was a noted recording artist and had very popular nightclub tours.



Desi and his orchestra

Desi Arnaz is best known for his role as Ricky Ricardo on the beloved television show “*I Love Lucy*”. In addition to his acting and comedic skills, he was a pioneer in developing new methods and techniques that had a major impact on the television industry. One of these was filming the show with three camera in front of a live studio audience – a practice that became the industry standard for the industry.



The “*I Love Lucy*” TV set

In 1950 Desi co-founded Desilu Productions with his wife, Lucille Ball. The studio, which was named after their ranch in Chatsworth, California, was home to the extremely popular “*I Love Lucy*” and eventually produced several other very popular TV series including *Star Trek*, *Mission Impossible*, *Hogan’s Heroes*, and the *Andy Griffith Show*. At one time it was the largest production studio in Hollywood.

After Desi’s marriage to Lucille Ball ended in 1960, he remarried and retired from Desilu Productions, selling his half of the business to Lucille. Desi remained in the entertainment industry, as executive producer of the comedy series *The Mothers-In-Law* and with appearances on that show and several other popular TV series including *The Virginian*, *Ironsides*, and *Alice*. In 1970, he hosted the popular variety show *The Kraft Music Hall*. Desi continued to enjoy his passion for horse breeding, which may have come from his childhood days on his father’s ranches.

Desi Arnaz died of lung cancer in Del Mar, California, on December 2, 1986.