Latinx Actors Who Made History in Film and Television

Representation matters more than ever.

Although Hollywood has a way to go in truly leveling the playing field, Latinx actors and actresses have come a long way in breaking down barriers and shattering the stereotypes that have plagued the entertainment industry.

To celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, check out some of the Latinx stars who made history in film and television.

Rita Moreno

Moreno is a child star success story. A native of Puerto Rico, the acting legend grew up in New York City and landed her first role on Broadway at age 13.

In 1962, Moreno became the first Latina, Hispanic and first Puerto Rican actress to take home an Oscar, which she won for her role as Anita in West Side Story. The two-time Emmy winner is the first (and only) Hispanic star to earn the coveted EGOT (Emmy, GRAMMY, Oscar and Tony) status. In 2019, Moreno added a Peabody Award to her roster of accolades, making her the the first Latina PEGOT recipient.
Jose Ferrer

Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1912, Ferrer was raised in New York City and earned a bachelor's degree from Princeton University at 16 years old. Ferrer, who was the ex-husband of singer and actress Rosemary Clooney (and George Clooney's uncle) and father to late actor Miguel Ferrer, is widely regarded as one of the first major Hispanic film stars.

Ferrer made his theater debut in 1934, before landing on Broadway the following year. His first film, 1948’s Joan of Arc, earned Ferrer an Oscar nod for Best Supporting Actor. In 1951, he won the Oscar for his leading role in the adventure drama Cyrano de Bergerac, becoming the first Latin actor to win an Academy Award, and the only Hispanic Best Actor Oscar winner. He later donated the award to the University of Puerto Rico, but the statue went missing in 2000, more than a decade after his death. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences refused to replace the Oscar because Ferrer had already died at the time of its disappearance.
Jennifer Lopez

Perhaps one of the biggest stars to hail from the Bronx, New York, Lopez is the first Latina actress to be paid $1 million for a film, which she scored for her breakout role in Selena. Portraying the late Tejano icon Selena Quintanilla sent Lopez down the fast track, and her career hasn’t slowed down since.

In 2001, Lopez made history again, becoming the first Latina to top the box office (The Wedding Planner) and the Billboard album charts (J.Lo) at the same time. In 2020, the Hustlers star will co-headline the Super Bowl halftime show alongside Shakira, marking the first time that two Latina artists will share the big stage.
Jerome’s unforgettable performance in Ava DuVernay’s When They See Us, earned him an Emmy Award, and a spot in Hollywood history. The 21-year-old actor became the first Afro-Latino to win an acting Emmy, as well as the youngest person to take home an award for Outstanding Lead Actor.

During his Emmy’s acceptance speech, Jerome gave an emotional shout-out to DuVernay, his mother, and the men chronicled in the Netflix miniseries, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Korey Wise and Yusef Salaam, now known as the Exonerated Five.
The sitcom George Lopez, which premiered in 2002 and aired for six seasons, was the first primetime series led by a Mexican-American. In 2009, the comedian became the first Mexican-American to host an English-language late-night show by way of Lopez Tonight. The talk show was canceled two years later.

In 2015, Lopez opened up about the struggles of being a Latino late-night host and the show’s cancellation. “I just don’t think that we’re able to fail like white people fail,” he explained on HuffPost Live. “Our failures are heavier. When you’ll just leave a guy to get good and just leave him on to get good and we just get judged and criticized every day.”
Desi Arnaz

At a time when representation for Hispanics was mostly non-existent, Arnaz was a trailblazer in his own right. Through *I Love Lucy*, Arnaz became the first Latino actor to star in a national English-language primetime TV show, and a successful producer to boot. Born in Santiago, Cuba, in 1917, Arnaz migrated to the U.S. with his family as a teenager and kicked off his acting career with the 1939 Broadway musical *Too Many Girls*. The following year, Arnaz moved to Hollywood, where he met and later married his first wife, Lucille Ball. Ball and Arnaz premiered *I Love Lucy* in 1951. The sitcom was the first to be filmed in front of a live studio audience. Arnaz, who was also a producer on the show, is credited with pioneering the multi-camera technique popular in sitcom comedies.

In 1976, Arnaz became the first Latino host of *Saturday Night Live*, helming episode 14 of the sketch comedy show's inaugural season. Arnaz was also the first to double as an SNL host and musical guest.
Yalitza Aparicio

Aparicio hit it big with her very first film, Roma. For her portrayal of Cleo, a live-in domestic worker for a family in Mexico City, Aparicio landed an Academy Award nomination, making her the first Indigenous Mexican performer to receive a Best Actress Oscar nod, and the second Mexican actress to be nominated in a leading role.

Before auditioning for Roma, Aparicio completed college to become a preschool teacher. While her newfound acting career has taken her in a different direction, the 25-year-old actress hasn't lost focus. In October, Aparicio was named a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for Indigenous Peoples. As a “proud Indigenous woman,” she plans to use her platform to advocate for indigenous peoples across the globe.
The film Frida marked a turning point in Hayek’s career. Her depiction of the famed artist made film history in 2003 when Hayek became the first Latina and first Mexican actress to be nominated for a Best Actress Oscar.

Hayek’s Academy Award nod came nearly 50 years after Katy Jurado became the first Mexican actress to be nominated for an Oscar, although it was in the Supporting Actress category.
Gina Torres

Torres became the first Afro-Latina actress to create, produce and star in her own TV series with the debut of her USA Network drama, Pearson. The Suits spinoff, which premiered in July, finds Torres continuing her role as high-powered attorney Jessica Pearson.

“As women of color, it’s important to be impeccable in our words and in our work since we’re held to a higher standard,” Torres told NBC News over the summer. “But we must also be unapologetic about our excellence and not apologize for being awesome.”

The Cuban-American actress, whose credits include Hercules: The Legendary Journey, Westworld, The Shield, I Think I Love My Wife, Alias and seven seasons on Suits, has appeared in hit shows and films for more than 25 years.
America Ferrera

Ugly Betty turned Ferrera into more than a sitcom star.

In 2002, Ferrera became the first and only (as of 2019) Latina actress to win a Best Actress Emmy for starring in a TV series.

In 2016, the Emmy winner reflected on the “surreal” moment, although she admitted that, at the time, she had no idea that she was the first Latina actress to win the category. “I wasn’t even aware of it until after the fact, until other people brought it to my attention, that I was the first Latina to win the Emmy, which was not a big part of the story and I certainly didn’t even think of it that way,” Ferrera told Variety. “Looking back and thinking, ‘Oh wow, that barrier was broken when I won,’ that’s really special and regardless of what happens that can never be undone. I was so in a bubble that I wasn’t even aware of what that moment meant in a larger context for women like me in the industry.”
Adrienne Bailon

After finding success as an actress and a member of the singing groups 3LW and the Cheetah Girls, Bailon took on the world of daytime talk. Upon joining The Real in 2013, Bailon became the first Latina to co-host an English-language daytime talk show. Since then, The View’s Sunny Hostin and the show’s former co-host, Rosie Perez, have been added to the short list of Latin talk show hosts on TV.