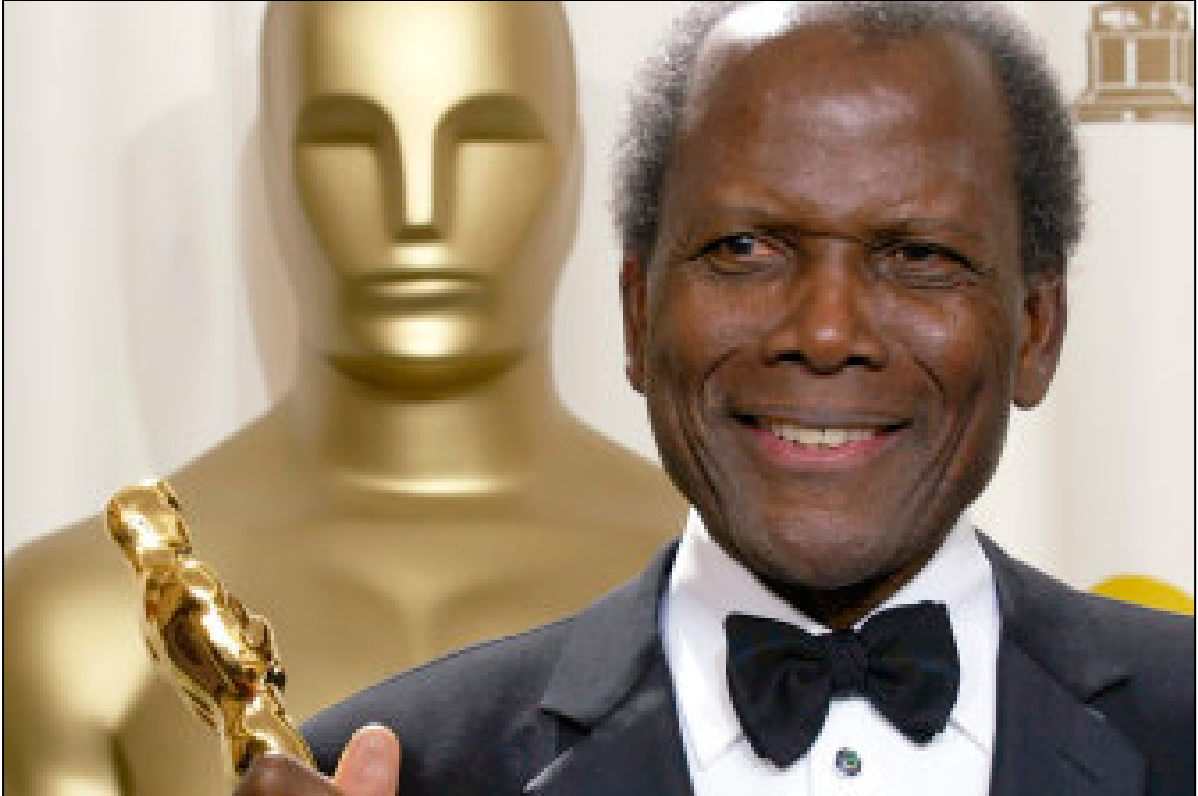

Hollywood trailblazer Sidney Poitier dead at 94



In 2002, an honorary Oscar recognised “his remarkable accomplishments as an artist and as a human being.”

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Sidney Poitier, who broke through racial barriers as the first black winner of the best actor Oscar for his role in *Lilies of the Field* and inspired a generation during the civil rights movement, has died at age 94, an official from the Bahamian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on Friday.

Eugene Torchon-Newry, acting director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirmed Poitier’s death.

Poitier created a distinguished film legacy in a single year with three 1967 films at a time when segregation prevailed in much of the United States.

In *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* he played a black man with a white fiancée and in *In the Heat of the Night* he was Virgil Tibbs, a black police officer confronting racism during a murder investigation. He also played a teacher in a tough London school that year in *To Sir, With Love*.

Poitier made history when he won the best actor Oscar for *Lilies of the Field* in 1963, playing a handyman who helps German nuns build a chapel in the desert. Five years before that, Poitier had been the first black man nominated for a lead actor Oscar for his role in *The Defiant Ones*.

His Tibbs character from *In the Heat of the Night* was immortalised in two sequels – *They Call Me Mister Tibbs!* in 1970 and *The Organisation* in 1971 – and became the basis of the television series *In the Heat of the Night* starring Carroll O'Connor and Howard Rollins.



Sidney Poitier and Richard Widmark in a scene from No Way Out.

His other classic films of that era included *A Patch of Blue* in 1965 in which his character is befriended by a blind white girl, *The Blackboard Jungle* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, which Poitier also performed on Broadway.

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Poitier was born in Miami on February 20, 1927 and raised on a tomato farm in the Bahamas, and had just one year of formal schooling. He struggled against poverty, illiteracy and prejudice to become one of the first black actors to be known and accepted in major roles by mainstream audiences.

Poitier picked his roles with care, burying the old Hollywood idea that black actors could appear only in demeaning contexts as shoeshine boys, train conductors and maids.

“I love you, I respect you, I imitate you,” Denzel Washington, another Oscar-winner, once told Poitier at a public ceremony.

As a director, Poitier worked with his friend Harry Belafonte and Bill Cosby in *Uptown Saturday Night* in 1974 and Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder in 1980's *Stir Crazy*.

A career started on stage

Poitier grew up in the small Bahamian village of Cat Island and in Nassau before he moved to New York at 16, lying about his age to sign up for a short stint in the army and then working at odd jobs, including dishwasher, while taking acting lessons.



*Sidney Poitier with his Oscar for best actor for his role in *Lilies of the Field*. He was the first black actor to win the award.*

The young actor got his first break when he met the casting director of the American Negro Theatre. He was an understudy in *Days of Our Youth* and took over when the star, Belafonte, who also would become a pioneering black actor, fell ill.

Poitier went on to success on Broadway in *Anna Lucasta* in 1948 and, two years later, got his first movie role in *No Way Out* with Richard Widmark.

In all, he acted in more than 50 films and directed nine, starting in 1972 with *Buck and the Preacher* in which he co-starred with Belafonte.

In 1992, Poitier was given the Life Achievement Award by the American Film Institute, the most prestigious honour after the Oscar, joining recipients such as Bette Davis, Alfred Hitchcock, Fred Astaire, James Cagney and Orson Welles.

“I must also pay thanks to an elderly Jewish waiter who took time to help a young black dishwasher learn to read,” Poitier told the audience. “I cannot tell you his name. I never knew it. But I read pretty good now.”

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Poitier married actress Joanna Shimkus, his second wife, in the mid-1970s. He had six daughters with his two wives and wrote three books – *This Life* (1980), *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography* (2000) and *Life Beyond Measure: Letters to My Great-Granddaughter* (2008).

“If you apply reason and logic to this career of mine, you’re not going to get very far,” he told the *Washington Post*. “The journey has been incredible from its beginning. So much of life, it seems to me, is determined by pure randomness.”

Poitier wrote three autobiographical books and in 2013 published *Montaro Caine*, a novel that was described as part mystery, part science-fiction.

Poitier was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1974 and served as the Bahamian ambassador to Japan and to UNESCO, the UN cultural agency. He also sat on Disney’s board of directors from 1994 to 2003.

In 2009, Poitier was awarded the highest US civilian honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, by President Barack Obama.

The 2014 Academy Awards ceremony marked the 50th anniversary of Poitier’s historic Oscar and he was there to present the award for best director.

Reuters