

# James Earl Jones

Jones, James Earl



## Record Information

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### Description:

Actor James Earl Jones was born in 1931, in Arkabutla, Mississippi, the son of a semiprofessional boxer and farmer. Known for his distinctive speaking voice, Jones made his Broadway debut in 1957. He performed with the New York Shakespeare Festival in plays such as *Othello* and *King Lear*, among many others. After his role in the play *The Great White Hope* (1968), he moved on to be one of the first African Americans to be cast as a regular on a soap opera, earning a part on *The Guiding Light*. In 1977 Jones was the voice of Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* saga and in 1994, he was the voice of Mufasa in the Disney cartoon *The Lion King*. Jones has also used his successful career as a commercial actor to support charitable causes. Through his role as a spokesperson for the Bell Atlantic Yellow Pages,

One of the most distinguished living African-American actors, **James Earl Jones** is as well known for his rich, rumbling baritone as his imposing physical presence.

He was born on January 17, 1931, in Arkabutla, Mississippi. His father, Robert **Earl Jones**, was a prizefighter who turned to acting. His mother, Ruth, was a maid and former schoolteacher. Robert **Jones** left his family not long after **Jones's** birth, and the child was adopted and raised on a Michigan farm by his maternal grandparents. **Jones** developed a strong stutter as a youth and, out of embarrassment, rarely talked until he was 15. A high school English teacher took an interest in him when he learned that **Jones** wrote poetry. He helped him overcome his stutter and win a scholarship to the University of Michigan, where he went in 1949. **Jones** started as a premed student and then switched to drama. He graduated magna cum laude in 1953 and served a stint in the army.

After his service time, **Jones** moved to New York City to pursue an acting career and for a time was reunited with his father, another struggling actor. Together they waxed floors for money to live on while auditioning for plays. **Jones** began getting small parts in Off-Broadway shows but did not land his first role on Broadway until 1957. His career got a big boost when he was invited to join the New York Shakespeare Festival, which performed Shakespeare's plays each summer in Central Park. **Jones** was impressive in such leading Shakespearean roles as *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Oberon*, the

king of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. During this time he made his film debut as a member of the flying squad that dropped a nuclear bomb on Russia in Stanley Kubrick's black comedy *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Two years later he made his television debut on the daytime soap opera *As The World Turns*.

That same year **Jones** became a Broadway star when he was cast as a troubled black heavyweight boxer based on fighter Jack Johnson in the drama *The Great White Hope* (1966). His powerful performance earned him a Tony Award for best actor in a play. He later earned an Academy Award nomination for best actor when he reprised the role in the 1970 film version.

**Jones** gave strong performances in a handful of films in the 1970s. He played an eccentric psychiatrist in *The End of the Road* (1972), the first black president in *The Man* (1972) written by Rod Serling, and a black baseball player in *The Bingo Long Travelling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976). **Jones** gave a riveting performance as the great actor and human rights activist Paul Robeson in a controversial, one-man show on Broadway. He portrayed writer Alex Haley in television's *Roots: The Next Generation* (1979), the sequel to the blockbuster miniseries *Roots*, based on Haley's best-selling book.

**Jones**'s most popular and probably best-known film role is one in which he was never seen. He was the threatening, mysterious voice of arch villain Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (1977) and its two sequels. The actor made a triumphant return to Broadway in 1985 as a defiant former baseball player in August Wilson's play *Fences*, which earned him his second Tony as best actor. He played another former baseball player and reclusive writer in the fantasy film *Field of Dreams* (1989), generally considered one of his finest screen roles.

In the 1990s, **Jones**, who had played an African chieftain on the 1960s TV series *Tarzan*, returned to series television as the excon and former cop Gabriel Bird in the dramatic series *Gabriel's Fire*. Despite generally good reviews, the series, retitled *Pros and Cons* in its second season, did not last. He has won three Emmys for his television work and has been nominated six other times most recently in 2004. **Jones** has found few good screen roles in recent years but has played many solid supporting roles. He was Admiral **James** Greer, Harrison Ford's mentor in *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), who reappears in *Patriot Games* (1992) and *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), all based on the techno-thrillers of novelist Tom Clancy. Younger viewers may know **Jones** best for his popular television commercials for American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) and other companies, where his rich voice has been a strong selling tool.

In 2010, **Jones** starred in a Broadway production of *Driving Miss Daisy* at the Golden Theater. He played the same role in 2011 in the London West End production. In 2012, his appearance in Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* on Broadway earned him a Tony nomination for Best Performance in a Lead Role in a Play.

**James Earl Jones** received a Life Achievement Award from the Screen Actors Guild in January 2009. On November 12, 2011, **Jones** was awarded an Honorary Academy

Award. Regarding acting he has said, "It's important to say something that's from your heart."

## References and Further Information

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*The Great White Hope* (1970). Fox Video, DVD, 2005.

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