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"The Late Show" ends after 33 years on TV
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Stephen Colbert says farewell to "The Late Show": "We were lucky enough to be here for the last 11 years"

By [Kierra Frazier](#)

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[Stephen Colbert](#) said goodbye to "The Late Show" Thursday night in the franchise's finale after a 33-year run, saying he was "lucky enough to be here for the last 11 years" and never took the experience for granted.

"There is so much history here in the Ed Sullivan Theater, and we've been honored to have been just a small part of it," Colbert said in his opening monologue.

In the opening of the show, Colbert emphasized the "joy" the show brought him and cast members throughout his 11 years and over 1,800 episodes as host.



Stephen Colbert on the finale of "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," on May 21, 2026.

Scott Kowalchyk/CBS via Getty Images

"We call it the joy machine, because to do this many shows, it has to be a machine. But the thing is, if you choose to do it with joy, it doesn't hurt as much when your fingers get caught in the gears," Colbert said. "And I cannot adequately explain to you what the people who work here have done for each other and how much we mean to each other."

The final show, which ran 17 minutes longer than its usual hour, was packed with surprise cameos from celebrities such as "The Daily Show" host Jon Stewart, comedian Tig Notaro, actors Ryan Reynolds, Paul Rudd and Bryan Cranston, longtime friend and comedy star Tim Meadows, and astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson.

"I didn't think my show would end like this, but still grateful," Colbert told Stewart.

Fellow late-night hosts Jimmy Kimmel, Jimmy Fallon, Seth Meyers and John Oliver also joined Colbert on Thursday.

"We came to say we're gonna miss you. Late night is not gonna be the same without you," Kimmel said. In recognition of Colbert's final show, Kimmel and Fallon both aired reruns in their time slot on Thursday.



Paul McCartney and Stephen Colbert on the final episode of "The Late Show" with Stephen Colbert. May 21, 2026.

Scott Kowalchyk/CBS via Getty Images

Before the show, it was speculated that Pope Leo XIV might be Colbert's final guest, and Colbert jokingly tried to introduce him before a cast member said Leo refused to come out of his dressing room.

The show's actual final guest was none other than Paul McCartney.

McCartney performed on the same stage at the Ed Sullivan Theater with The Beatles during their American television debut on Feb. 9, 1964. He was a guest on the show in 2019 and in 2009, when David Letterman was still the host.

The show also featured Elvis Costello and Jon Batiste performing Costello's "Jump Up." Batiste's return to the Ed Sullivan Theater as a musical guest comes after he was the bandleader and musical director for "The Late Show" from 2015 until 2022.



Elvis Costello, Jon Batiste, Stephen Colbert and Louis Cato on the final episode of "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert." May 21, 2026.

Scott Kowalchyk/CBS via Getty Images

In the final moments of Thursday's finale, McCartney closed out the show with a performance of "Hello, Goodbye," as Colbert, Batiste and Costello joined in and staff members filled the stage.

In the days counting down to the franchise finale, a steady stream of star guests had appeared on the show, including actors Tom Hanks and Billy Crystal, director Steven Spielberg, Letterman, who premiered the show in 1993, and Bruce Springsteen.

CBS announced back in July that it would end "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" and retire "The Late Show" franchise at the end of this season. The company said it was "purely a financial decision against a challenging backdrop in late night."

That explanation was met with skepticism from some viewers and media critics, who questioned whether political motives were involved, given Colbert's outspoken criticism of President Trump.

It didn't take the president long to weigh in on the finale. Shortly before 2 a.m. Eastern Time, Mr. Trump posted on his Truth Social platform: "Colbert is finally finished at CBS. Amazing that he lasted so long! No talent, no ratings, no life. He was like a dead person. You could take any person off of the street and they would be better than this total jerk. Thank goodness he's finally gone!"

Colbert took a jab at the network during the show Thursday night when his band played "Linus and Lucy," the theme song from the "Peanuts" television special, as part of a bit about a copyright infringement lawsuit.

"Is the band right now playing the same music I said people are being sued for, for using without permission? ... Oh no, I hope this doesn't cost CBS any money," Colbert quipped.

Colbert, 62, took over as host of "The Late Show" in September 2015 after Letterman retired from the role he'd held for 22 years.

The entire set of "The Late Show" is being donated to the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago, a city where Colbert has deep roots. Colbert attended Northwestern University and performed in Chicago with the famous Second City improv troupe at the beginning of his comedy career.

"The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" had been the No. 1 late-night program for nine consecutive seasons, CBS said last year. In September, it won the Emmy for outstanding talk series and received a standing ovation from the Emmys crowd.