

Sammy Davis Jr.'s 60th Anniversary Celebration

Date confirmed on [Getty Images' "Ron Galella Collection" \(archived\)](#) ("Sammy Davis, Jr. 60th Anniversary Celebration" Television Special on November 13, 1989 at Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, California.") / Aired February 4, 1990

Buz Kohan, 2013 interview

Buz Kohan: Mike, George, and I went out to the studio where Michael was recording - Michael hated television by the way, he hated to do television.

Interviewer: You know why?

Buz: Yes, I do, but I'm not gonna bring it up here. He just didn't feel he had the control that he has when he's just by himself on the stage, or in a recording studio. Anyway, he was out at the studio, he was recording, and I said, "We're coming out to talk to you".

I said, "Michael, we're doing the 60th Anniversary of Sammy Davis. You owe Sammy Davis more than you can ever imagine. I want you to do this show... This time, you mustn't say no."

He said, "Buz, I'm in pain, I'm in real pain."

I said, "Well, we're all in pain, Michael."

He said, "No, come with me"

We went back and he took us into this little shower room in the studio, and he said, "Feel this", and he took my hand and he put it on top of his head, and he said "Run your hand along my scalp here" and inside, under the scalp, were two inflated balloons that were sewn into his scalp, as a result of the fire from the Pepsi commercial, where his scalp was burned so bad that they took the scar tissue and removed the scar tissue from his scalp, put this in under the scalp so that the skin would grow around it, and then they would remove the balloons and sew the scalp together. And he said, "Buz I'm in pain. This is [real] pain. I'm on painkillers."

I said, "Michael, I've asked you for a lot of things, and I never say 'you must do this'. This one you gotta do. You owe it to this man. If you can stand and you can open your mouth. I've written a song for you, it's called 'You Were There'. You come and you do that, it's one chorus, you go to to see Sammy, you shake his hand, you give him a hug. Everybody will be there..."

He said, "Well, let me see if I can do it."

Sure enough, the day before the show, Michael pulls up to the Shrine [Auditorium], comes backstage, it's 11:30 at night, and I said, "Michael, come with me".

There's a big area there, the Convention Center, where they have the banquets and things, and it was completely empty except for a grand piano over in the corner, and completely dark except for one light at the piano.

I said, "Come here, Michael. I'm gonna show you the song".

So he sits down at the bench, and I play "You Were There". And he says, "Ah Buz, that's lovely."

I said, "Nevermind that it's lovely, it's the message you wanna say."

He said, "Ah, I'm just gonna change a few-"

And he changed a few notes and a couple of words. And there was an arranger standing by [laughs] and at midnight we handed him the lead sheet and he made the orchestration that night. Now Michael takes a year to make an album, and he never goes on unless he's completely rehearsed and prepared and knows every inch and every note.

This was the day of the show, he comes in that afternoon for the first rehearsal to hear the band, to hear the orchestra. And he goes over it and he says, "I want a [zen?] and light shining down and I'm gonna wear this red shirt and the t-shirt and the thing on the fingers. And he knew exactly how he wanted to be presented. And I said, "One chorus is all you have to do. Then go over, and just give Sammy a hug, he's in a box right on the edge of the stage." And he did the rehearsal, came back that night, did "You Were There", and it was so meaningful, the last line is "I am here, because you were there", and that says everything that needed to be said about 60 years of a career. And it was a wonderful moment, it was a heart tugger.

Mike Smallcombe. Making Michael

In early November Michael received a visit at the studio from a long-time friend, Buz Kohan, who was trying to persuade him to perform at an all-star tribute to Sammy Davis Jr's 60 years in show business. Kohan was co-producing and writing the show, which was being taped for broadcast on November 13 at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. Kohan was joined on his studio visit by the show's executive producer, George Schlatter.

"George had promised the network four big stars to actually sell them the special and one of them was Michael," Kohan said. "I don't think we discussed what he would do that night we visited him at the studio, but Michael did commit to make every effort to appear and we would discuss what he was to do later. At the time, Michael was in extreme pain from the Pepsi commercial accident when his hair caught on fire."

Kohan and Schlatter hadn't realised just how much distress Michael was in. "He took us into a back bathroom at the studio and asked us to feel his head," Kohan recalls. "He told me he was in constant pain and on painkillers. Because of this, he truly didn't know whether he would be able to perform at all."

Kohan went home and began thinking of the easiest, most gentle way of accommodating Michael's needs and those of Sammy Davis and the show. "Suddenly this phrase popped into my head, 'You Were There'," Kohan said. "It applied so perfectly to Sammy and what he meant to so many young performers like Michael who were spared some of the pain and torment he went through to make things happen."

'You Were There' was originally just a poem, but could easily be turned into a lyric if music were added. Shortly after, Kohan wrote Michael a letter to tell him about the piece he had written. "I told Michael, 'If the words strike a resonant chord in you; if they express how you feel about Sammy, and if you think you would like to spend an hour with me putting a melody to it before the show then give me a call'. And I said to him, 'If you feel you just want to say the words without actually singing them I can arrange to have some lovely underscore under your voice'. Knowing how busy he was, I took it upon myself to write a tune to it and make a song out of it." At around midnight the night before the show, Michael showed up at the Shrine Auditorium. Together with Kohan he went into the adjacent Shrine Exposition Hall, which was completely empty except for a grand piano and one light in the far corner. The producer, the arranger and a number of others involved in the show all stood outside – the arranger would have to do a chart by the next morning if Michael agreed to perform the song.

“So Michael sat on the piano bench next to me,” Kohan said. “He used to call me ‘Buzzie Wuzzie’. I played the song for him on the grand piano, and Michael said, ‘Buzzie that’s beautiful’. We sat there for a while and made some adjustments to the melody line and changed a few words and chords, but Michael still wasn’t sure if he would be able to learn the song, agree to the arrangement, set his lighting and feel physically up to performing it. So I said to Michael, ‘This man, whether you are aware of it or not, has done so much for you, and if you pass up this last chance to say thank you, you will never forgive yourself’.”

Michael told Kohan he understood and that he would try, so at least the producers finally had a commitment of sorts. Everything then went into gear to prepare for the dress rehearsal, which by then was less than 12 hours away. “I knew Michael... he was such a perfectionist, he would spend days and weeks honing a performance or a song,” Kohan said. “But here he was, going on stage before an audience of millions to perform a song he had never sung before, which had an orchestration he would hear for the first time on the afternoon of the show. It was so out of character for him, but to his everlasting credit, he set the wheels in motion and went home with a piano track I made on a small cassette recorder to learn the song.”

After rehearsing the song on the afternoon of the show, Michael went to his dressing room to rest and prepare. That evening he performed ‘You Were There’ for the first and only time, joining other stars such as Clint Eastwood, Mike Tyson, Whitney Houston, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Stevie Wonder in honouring Davis. Michael’s tribute brought tears to Davis, who was battling throat cancer. After Michael finished performing, he walked over to his idol and hugged him warmly. “Michael was brilliant, simple, eloquent and so powerful,” Kohan said. “The connection was made, the debt was paid, and it was one of the most memorable moments in a night that was overflowing with exceptional performances.”