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JERRY COLBERT  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

A CAPITOL FOURTH  
AMERICA'S INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION

**A CONVERSATION WITH JERRY COLBERT**  
**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER OF A CAPITOL FOURTH**

This year, **A CAPITOL FOURTH** celebrates 35 spectacular years on air with an all-star musical extravaganza broadcast live from the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol. America's biggest and brightest birthday party will celebrate the country's 239<sup>th</sup> birthday **Saturday, July 4, 2015 from 8:00 to 9:30 p.m. ET** on PBS (check local listings). In the following interview, founder and executive producer Jerry Colbert of Capital Concerts shares his thoughts on producing the show for over three decades.

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**Your first show was in 1980 – Jimmy Carter was president; gasoline had reached an unprecedented high of \$1/gallon and *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* had just been released. Take us back to July 4, 1980 and your very first show.**

Well, thirty-five years ago, when we first began our goal was just to get the show on television. At the time, we had a limited budget so we went to WETA, our local PBS station, and borrowed a small studio truck. When we got to the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol, we found out that unless the director hit the console with his hand it wouldn't turn on and it was all rusted out. Nobody knew where to put the cameras, so it began as a real amateur hour.

We've grown tremendously over these years, and we are usually the top rated shows on PBS. We have bigger stars and a crew I brought in from the Academy Awards, the Grammys and the Tony's so we have the top people in production. There has been an overall effort to make this into the major national Fourth of July celebration for America. With 20 HD television cameras and this great professional crew the shows have become powerful experiences for the television audience at home.

**In 35 years you have had countless guests and performances; what are a few of your personal watershed moments?**

You know we have been blessed with over 400 stars that have performed on our shows over the years. Certainly, on the Fourth of July, when Ray Charles performed "America the Beautiful" as the fireworks were going off was one of the greatest moments we ever had. Other standouts include James Earl Jones doing the "Lincoln Portrait" and stellar

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performances by Dolly Parton and George Clooney. More recently, having Tom Bergeron host "A Capitol Fourth," and the great John Williams, who composed a new arrangement of the "National Anthem" for the 200th anniversary, that he conducted with the National Symphony Orchestra...as well as The Muppets and Neil Diamond... all of these have been wonderful moments. I could go on and on...Phillip Phillips...Steve Martin...we've had so many stars. So, we've had a real richness of wonderful people who have participated over the years and great moments that I'll always remember.

**It takes perseverance, dedication and knowledge to navigate the circles in Washington, D.C. Why do you produce this show and what is your inspiration?**

I feel that on the Fourth of July to have a national Independence Day celebration at the U.S. Capitol is a natural fit for the country. I have been inspired by the audience and their joy and elation, dancing and singing. They are as much a part of it as the performers and when the West Lawn is full of 400,000 people and the orchestra is playing the "National Anthem" and everybody's on their feet it is a tremendously uplifting feeling. **A CAPITOL FOURTH** follows John Adams' vision of celebrating Independence Day with "Pomp and Parade, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more." When we've lived through 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and so many acts of violence, it's wonderful to see everybody together having a great time and being thankful for all of the blessings of this great country.

**What is the first thing you do when starting to plan this concert, when there's a blank slate in front of you, what do you and your team think of first?**

For the Fourth of July, we have a list of performers we want to book and work to get the top people that we possibly can for the broadcast. We do look at who's popular and will resonate with the audience, but the key thing is to produce a program where everybody feels celebratory. At that moment, I think the audience feels there's a oneness; for one half hours we're all Americans. There's so much divisiveness right now in the country and so much chaos, but, at this moment, everybody's happy, and having a great time. To bring this kind of unity and celebration to the country is a great moment.

**As we've come to learn, rarely is a 35th anniversary achieved. What is your secret?**

We've gotten to the 35th anniversary through perseverance but also by having live television bring this great celebration into everybody's living room. We have tried hard to improve the programs over the last number of years and we haven't let rain, bad weather, heat or the elements close us down. I think people have come to realize that this is the best Fourth of July show in the country for patriotism, music and fireworks and they tune in every year watching the program with us like members of our family.

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**What is your most-anticipated moment of A CAPITOL FOURTH this year?**

Well, every year we have this huge on-site audience on the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol of 300 to 400 thousand people which is electrifying. When the "National Anthem" is first sung, I get goose bumps, so that's what I anticipate first; that the show has started, all the trouble is over with and we're ready to go. This year, Barry Manilow is going to come back to sing "Let Freedom Ring." That will have everybody up on their feet singing with him when he does it. Also, the great pianist Lang Lang will be performing Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and we have the legendary country music band Alabama so it's going to be a great musical celebration. There is never just one moment, but a series of them. We have been blessed over the last 35 years to realize our dream of turning this event into a national Independence Day celebration for the country.

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