

Sure Bet: Justin Sullivan pays tribute to Kenny Rogers during An Evening with the Gambler

By Melanie Cortes/Entertainer Editor – Mojave Valley News, Feb 4, 2026

Kenny Rogers played a fine hand with the cards he was dealt, coming from humble beginnings, but using his talent to cash in on great success in life.

As the fourth of eight children living in the housing projects of Houston, Rogers may not have imagined he'd ever find fortune. But with a strong work ethic and a natural musical ability, Rogers carved his path.

He began recording in the mid-'50s and became a hitmaker after forming the First Edition a decade later. The group made waves with songs such as "Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)," "But You Know I Love You" and "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town."

In 1976 Rogers began his solo career and over the next 40 years, he became one of the most beloved artists in the business. Some of his unforgettable solo hits include "Lucille," "The Gambler," "She Believes in Me," "Coward of the County," "Lady" and "Love Will Turn You Around."

His duets were also incredibly popular. He teamed up with Dottie West in the '70s to produce a host of hits, including the No. 1 singles, "Every Time Two Fools Collide," "What Are We Doin' in Love" and "All I Ever Need Is You." He had successful pairings with Kim Carnes, Sheena Easton, and of course, Dolly Parton. "Islands in the Stream" was a huge No. 1 crossover hit for both Rogers and Parton, and has been certified triple platinum by the RIAA.

Rogers passed away in 2020 after some health struggles, but he left a lasting imprint with his cherished body of work. Fans can relive the memories through *An Evening with The Gambler* starring Justin Sullivan, an acclaimed tribute straight from Nashville.

Sullivan had been mistaken for Rogers in public on a number of occasions, so when the opportunity struck to start a tribute, it just made sense.

“About 20 years ago, my wife and I were on a cruise and folks on that cruise noticed I looked like Kenny Rogers,” Sullivan said. “A guy on there was doing a gameshow with the radio and he said, ‘Kenny Rogers is on the cruise, would ya’ll pass our card to him?’ I had a stack of those things and people wanting pictures. I asked my wife then, ‘Wouldn’t this be a trip to go on cruises and things to sing and get paid to do it?’ She said, ‘Yeah, right.’ Sure enough, the opportunity did come and it came at a very interesting time in our life.”

Sullivan was a gospel singer, leading music at church. He was approached to record a few songs to appear at the end of shows that were featured on a faith-based television station. From these recordings, again his look drew some attention.

“There was a gentleman who had a syndicated show on the Daystar Channel,” Sullivan said. “He said, ‘I’ve got a couple of shows that are a little short and I’d love to have some old gospel hymns sung on there to close out some of my shows.’ So I brought my guitar and sat down and did a few songs and he recorded those. During COVID, he put those shows on loop and an agent in California saw me. He contacted the show and said, ‘How do you get ahold of this Kenny Rogers-looking guy?’ He said, ‘Can you put a band together?’ I said, ‘This is Nashville, Tennessee, I can shake a tree limb and three bass players fall off.’ So I made a call or two and next thing I knew, we had a band. My wife and I had been wondering what we were going to do in our retirement now that our kids were gone. For everything to just fall in line, I thought, ‘There’s something to this.’”

Sullivan has performed all across the country in the past five years, bringing “The Gambler’s” hits back to the live stage. He will stop at the Avi on Saturday, Feb. 7.

“It’s an honor to be able to step into such big shoes,” Sullivan said. “Automatically, whether you earned it or not, you have the affection, appreciation and admiration of people in the room. He had such a wonderful repertoire of music — love song after love song. The duets he did with Dottie West, Kim Carnes, Sheena Easton and Dolly Parton — those are always fun and great crowd participation songs. I try to have fun with the crowd, because without them, we wouldn’t be having a show.”

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