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Hall of notable Californians is a few giants short

George Skelton, Capitol Journal
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Reporting from Sacramento -- One of the few fun things about Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's job these days is choosing new inductees for the California Hall of Fame. His wife, Maria Shriver, dreamed up the hall two years ago.

Actually, Schwarzenegger and Shriver both select the members, assisted by a small committee.

They don't come up with all the people that I -- and probably most historians -- would pick. It's less of a real hall of fame than a collection of the first couple's preferred prominent people.

But whatever it's called, the project is a worthy one. Notable Californians are honored and their lives displayed in the state history museum, hopefully inspiring some touring school kids.

Included in the displays are personal artifacts, such as actor Jack Nicholson's 2nd-grade report card. "He needs to show better self control," the teacher wrote.

Tonight 12 more Californians, including Nicholson, will be inducted in an annual event that smacks a bit too much of Hollywood for Sacramento. The honorees will trudge down a long red carpet that parallels some light rail tracks before entering the museum near the Capitol.

In Sacramento, a red carpet is usually a rug that has had some merlot or spaghetti sauce spilled on it.

There's only one true giant of California history in tonight's batch: Leland Stanford -- the state's first Republican governor, founder of the great university and one of "the Big Four" who built the Sierra leg of the transcontinental railroad. Included in his display will be the golden spike that connected the rail line and opened the continent.

There is a dearth of giants in the Schwarzenegger-Shriver "hall." Among the initial 13 picks in 2006, I'd count only Ronald Reagan and naturalist John Muir. Maybe farmworker union leader Cesar Chavez.

Schwarzenegger favors adding governors, but only one a year. In 2007, he chose Earl Warren, three-time governor and U.S. Supreme Court chief justice. There are only two other indisputably great governors in my book -- reformer Hiram Johnson and builder Pat Brown -- so Schwarzenegger has time to finish the "must" picks before he's termed out at the end of 2010.

(For a complete [list of past inductees](#), go to the website [californiamuseum.org](#).)

No one would argue that any of the new honorees haven't been phenomenally successful and influential and don't deserve accolades.

The list is heavy with Schwarzenegger's fellow entertainers: Jazz pianist Dave Brubeck, actor and activist Jane Fonda, composer and record producer Quincy Jones, and three-time Oscar winner Nicholson.

They're all alive, which is one of the main criteria for selection: a warm body to participate in a red-carpet show.

Likewise Schwarzenegger's personal favorite: fitness and nutrition guru Jack LaLanne, still working out every morning at 94.

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Other living inductees include sculptor and artist Robert Graham -- he designed the 1984 "Olympic Gateway" in Los Angeles -- and California Cuisine chef Alice Waters. She is a Shriver favorite.

Posthumous awards will go to children's author Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel ("The Cat in the Hat"); photographer Dorothea Lange, who documented the grim migration of Dust Bowl families during the Great Depression; Julia Morgan, California's first licensed woman architect whose work includes the Hearst Castle at San Simeon; Nobel Prize-winning scientist Linus Pauling; and Stanford.

Fine. But here are some people, besides Govs. Johnson and Brown, who should be in any California Hall of Fame and still aren't:

* Amadeo Peter Giannini. He founded the Bank of America, was the first to lend to the working stiff and bankrolled the early movie industry. "Giannini makes anyone's list of 10 most influential Californians of all time," says historian and former state librarian Kevin Starr.

* Industrialist Henry J. Kaiser. He built 1,490 ships during World War II, better than one a day. He also created steel mills and pioneered HMOs.

* The Gold Rush guys, John Sutter and James Marshall.

* Ishi, the last Native American to survive in the wild.

* Baseball immortal Joe DiMaggio, whose family name is synonymous with San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf.

* And Joltin' Joe's beloved wife, actress Marilyn Monroe. Hers is the quintessential Hollywood story: Bounced around L.A. foster homes and was discovered by a photographer who was shooting at a Southern California aircraft plant during World War II.

But they're all dead.

Want live? How about the Beach Boys? They created the California sound: "Surfin' U.S.A." "California Girls." "Fun, Fun, Fun."

Three of the original five Beach Boys are still around: Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Al Jardine. I read that they've had family feuds and gone separate ways. So what? They're iconic state assets and ambassadors. Get them in the hall while they can still walk a red carpet.

Also still with us is author Joan Didion, 74, an unexcelled chronicler of California's character. She grew up in pre-air conditioned Sacramento, a place so hot in summertime, she wrote, that "August comes on not like a month, but like an affliction." She should be in the hall.

Another warm body is Willie Brown, the longest serving Assembly speaker and later a San Francisco mayor. He was the first African American to hold either office.

If Willie were still a legislative leader, a budget deal would have been negotiated long ago, and Schwarzenegger's job would be a lot more enjoyable. But that's for another column.

This one's about a hall of fame that still needs more heavy hitters, even if they're ghosts.

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