

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 288

“What’s Up, Doc?”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The span of twelve years between Steamboat Willie, the first Mickey with sound, and Fantasia is the bridge between primitive and modern animated pictures. No genius built this bridge. It was built by hard work and enthusiasm, integrity of purpose, a devotion to our medium, confidence in its future, and above all, a steady day-by-day growth in which we all simply studied our trade and learned.

Walt Disney, in a speech given in 1940.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 288. What’s Up, Doc?

Walter Elias Disney was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1901. His father, Elias, was an immigrant from Canada. Walter was the youngest of four sons; he also had a younger sister.

The family was not prosperous. When Walt was four, the family moved to a farm in Missouri. When he was nine, they moved to Kansas City, Missouri. There Elias made Walt and his big brother Roy take on a paper route. They got up at 4:30 in the morning to deliver the morning Kansas City *Times* before school, then after school another round to deliver the evening Kansas City *Star*. This was the first business partnership between Roy and Walt; it would not be the last.

They kept this up for six years, and it made Walt a poor student, who often fell asleep in class. But he was also taking art classes on the side. He had shown a flair for drawing and painting from an early age, but his real love was cartooning. In 1917, the family moved back to Chicago, where Walt became the cartoonist for his high school paper. And as you may recall from episode 172, Walt Disney attempted to enlist in the US Army during the Great War, but was underage. He forged the date on his birth certificate to persuade the American Red Cross to take him on as an ambulance driver when he was just 16, but fell ill during the influenza pandemic. By the time he recovered and was shipped off to France, the war was over.

Walt spent a year in France, during which he published some cartoons in the Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. In October 1919, he returned to the United States and landed a job at a commercial art studio in Kansas City, drawing illustrations for advertisements. There he befriended another young cartoonist, the son of a German immigrant, born Ubbe Iwwerks, although he called himself Ub Iwerks.

Unfortunately for them, when the postwar economic downturn began in 1920, they were laid off. After an unsuccessful attempt to create their own studio, the two got a job at a film animation studio that was producing advertisements that were run in local movie houses. Here they learned the basics of animation. Walt left the studio in 1921 to start his own animation company, and soon landed a major client: The Newman Theater, Kansas City's biggest theater. Built in 1919, it had 2,000 seats and an orchestra pit that could accommodate 35 musicians. Disney's studio made animated shorts for the theater, which were dubbed *Newman Laugh-O-Grams*. Many of these short films were animated retellings of traditional fairy tales. A sign of things to come, perhaps.

Disney's studio grew and took on new animators, including Disney's friend Ub Iwerks. Disney built on the success of the *Laugh-O-Grams* to begin a combined live action and animation short titled *Alice's Wonderland*, in which a live-action Alice, portrayed by a four-year-old girl named Virginia Davis, interacts with cartoon characters. But Walt's studio went bankrupt shortly after *Alice's Wonderland* was completed.

After the failure of his Kansas City animation studio, Walt Disney moved to Hollywood, California. It was 1923, and Walt was 21 years old. At his time, Hollywood was the center of live-action filmmaking in the United States, but New York was still the center of animation. There were two reasons why he chose to move to Hollywood. One was that he had family there, including his brother Roy. The other was that Walt had dreams of becoming a live-action filmmaker.

He brought *Alice's Wonderland* along with him and shopped it around until it was picked up by a New York distributor named Margaret Winkler. You'll remember her name from last week. She was distributing Felix the Cat for Pat Sullivan, but then Sullivan changed distributors, leaving her suddenly in need of new material. Winkler signed a contract with Disney to produce a series of Alice shorts. Disney persuaded Ub Iwerks and some of their mutual artist friends from Kansas City to move to Hollywood and work on the series. He even persuaded the family of Virginia Davis to move to Hollywood so she could reprise her role as Alice.

In 1925, Disney hired a secretary named Lillian Bounds. A few months later, she and Walt got married in her hometown of Lewiston, Idaho. They had two children, a biological daughter named Diane and an adopted daughter named Sharon. It appears to have been a happy marriage, though Lillian was not very interested in becoming a public figure and she kept herself and her children out of the public spotlight.

By 1927, the contract for the Alice shorts had run its course. The production schedule had been demanding, and Disney wanted to return to fully animated films. He sold his distributor on a new series of 27 shorts starring an animated rabbit Disney created named Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, to be sold to Universal Pictures. To be perfectly honest, Oswald looked a whole lot like Felix the Cat. He was all black like Felix, only he lacked the long tail and sported instead long ears, though unlike Felix, he wore clothes, even if they were only a pair of short pants held up by a single suspender.

The quality of the Oswald cartoons was a cut above anything Disney, or indeed anyone, had done before. He experimented with using different camera angles on Oswald, as in a live-action film, and Oswald was designed to have a lot more personality. He was animated in a fluid style that would become a Disney trademark, and he was capable of such improbable feats as wringing himself out after becoming wet. Much of the credit for the visual humor has to go to Ub Iwerks and to some of those Kansas City artists, notably a fellow named Isadore Freleng, who went by the nickname "Friz."

Oswald represented a step forward in animation, and the series was a success. One trade newspaper hailed the new character and marveled that no one had ever thought of a cartoon rabbit before. Gee, I wonder if anyone else will ever think of one.

Roy was a partner in the studio; he handled the business end of the operation, and it was profitable. They had twenty employees, and Walt and Roy each owned a home, a car, had money in the bank, and were buying investment properties in Southern California in the 1920s. Oh, to be that lucky! The Oswald cartoons were a hit, but Disney's vision of creating more and better cartoons was running afoul of economics in the late 1920s. The market for cartoon shorts was shrinking, and distributors were paying less and less for lower quality films.

Disney's distributor, Margaret Winkler, had gotten married and her new husband, a man named Charles Mintz, was now running the distribution company. Disney's studio was getting paid \$2,250 for each Oswald cartoon. Given the success of the series and its quality and Disney's desire to make them even better, when it was time to renew the distribution agreement, Disney felt comfortable asking for an increase in the fee per film. Mintz made him a counteroffer. Disney would accept a lower fee of just \$1,800 per film, or else Mintz would hire away all of Disney's animators and produce Oswald cartoons himself, since their contract specified that Universal, not Disney, owned the rights to the character.

Disney refused to accept Mintz's proposal. He didn't believe that his animators would walk out on him like that. But they did. With the exception of his old friend, Ub Iwerks, pretty much everyone else jumped ship to work at Charles Mintz's new animation studio, which would eventually be named Screen Gems.

Disney was devastated, but he learned his lesson and vowed never again to animate a character he didn't own the rights to. On the long train ride back to Los Angeles, Disney began designing a

new cartoon character. There are multiple versions of the story of how this new character came to be, but it seems Disney and Iwerks sketched out potential characters and passed the designs back and forth for refinement. What came out of them was a mouse. This mouse looked an awful lot like Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, who looked an awful lot like Felix the Cat, except the mouse had big round ears instead of Oswald's long skinny ones, and a snout. The mouse wore shorts, just like Oswald, but didn't need the suspender, and he wore shoes. In a few years, he'd be wearing white gloves, too. Disney wanted to call the character Mortimer Mouse, but Lillian persuaded him that Mortimer was too stuffy a name. So he became Mickey Mouse.

Disney's studio produced three Mickey Mouse shorts in 1928: *Plane Crazy*, inspired by Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight, *Gallop in' Gaucho*, and *Steamboat Willie*. Walt showed off the first two cartoons after they were finished, but was unable to interest a distributor.

You know from episode 274, that this was just after Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*. You know from last week's episode that the most popular cartoon series of the time was Felix the Cat, but that the head of the studio that produced those cartoons, Pat Sullivan, resisted talk of adding sound to his cartoons. Walt Disney, by contrast, was quick to embrace the new technology. He tried a little experiment, in which he and his artists showed the still-unfinished *Steamboat Willie* to an audience of their wives and family, while they played musical instruments, including tin pans, slide whistles, and a harmonica, in time to the picture.

Disney's little test audience loved it. And when the completed film, *Steamboat Willie*, was shown in theaters, the effect was electric. Sound did even more for animation than it did for live action. It wasn't only that voices and sound effects made the images on the screen feel more real—although it certainly did that—it was also that animated characters like Mickey Mouse could move to the beat of the music, in a way that no live actor could match. Animation plus music equaled a whole new medium.

The point was driven home when Walt hired a musician to create soundtrack music for the already completed *Plane Crazy* and *Gallop in' Gaucho*. Those films had been animated with no thought for music, and in those films, the magic just wasn't there. The music seemed like an afterthought, which it was. Disney and his staff worked out a system for assigning musical beats to frames of the film, making it possible to animate the characters strictly to the rhythm of music that hadn't been composed yet.

To create those musical scores for the first two Mickey Mouse cartoons, Disney reached back to his old circle of friends in Kansas City once again and tapped a 36-year-old movie theater organist named Carl Stalling. Carl's parents were German immigrants. Carl himself was a skilled musician who landed his first job as a silent film piano accompanist in his hometown movie theater in Lexington, Missouri, when he was just twelve years old.

As an adult, Stalling played theater organs in big movie houses in Kansas City—theaters so big the sound of a piano wouldn't have been enough. Stalling had a gift for improvising film music

that incorporated quotations from popular music. If the characters in the film went for a ride in a car, Stalling might play a few bars of “In My Merry Oldsmobile,” that kind of thing. Stalling even developed a knack for using the various sounds the organ could produce to improvise sound effects for the film.

Steamboat Willie was a sensation, and it revolutionized animation. Overnight, Mickey Mouse replaced Felix the Cat as America’s animated superstar.

Meanwhile, Carl Stalling had proposed another kind of animated film, one that would start with the music track, then the animators would create a cartoon to go with the music. He even had an idea for the first entry: skeletons dancing in a graveyard.

The film that developed from that idea, *The Skeleton Dance*, marked a departure from cartoon conventions in many ways, besides the manner in which it was created. There were no familiar characters and no plot, just four human skeletons doing a creepy dance, though there is plenty of comedy, climaxing in the moment when one skeleton plays the spine of another as if it were a xylophone, using bones as hammers, the movements timed perfectly to the music of an actual xylophone.

The Skeleton Dance was the first of 75 animated short films released as part of a series titled *Silly Symphonies*, which aptly summarizes them.

Disney was always pushing for higher-quality animation, which kept raising costs. On the other hand, his cartoons were hugely popular, which made him feel entitled to ask for more money to produce them. In 1930, he again had a falling out with his new distributor. This one once again chose to allow his contract with Disney to expire and poach Disney employees. This time though, the distributor successfully poached Ub Iwerks, Disney’s most talented animator. Carl Stalling left as well, thinking that the Disney studio would not survive without Iwerks.

But it did. Although 1931 was a tough year for Walt Disney, Mickey Mouse carried him through the bad times.

Until this time, motion pictures were almost always presented in black and white. People were experimenting with color still photography in the late 19th century, and the first process to make color motion pictures was developed in Britain in 1908 under the name Kinemacolor. The second was developed in the United States in 1914 under the name Technicolor, which was the name of both the process and the company that sold it.

These early processes used a two-color system. Red and green were filmed separately, then combined when the film was projected before an audience. This produced reasonably good results, including realistic skin tones, as long as you were willing to overlook the absence of blue from the scene. In Hollywood of the 1920s, a few all-color films were made using Technicolor.

Other films incorporated color sequences into a film that was otherwise black-and-white, including 1923's *The Ten Commandments* and 1925's *The Phantom of the Opera*.

When talking pictures came in, studios embraced not only sound, but color. This was particularly true of Warner Brothers, which had advanced from a second-tier studio to a major studio after pioneering sound. In the period from 1928-31, a number of color talking films were released, still using that two-color Technicolor process. Many were ready to predict that all movies would be in color within a few years.

In 1932, Technicolor introduced a full three-color process that could produce the full range of colors onscreen. But it was expensive, and by then, the Great Depression was forcing film studios to cut back on production costs, and for the next twenty years, black-and-white feature films would remain common, with color reserved for big-budget productions. It would not be until the motion picture industry began to feel the effects of competition from television, that color feature films would become the norm.

As was the case with sound, Walt Disney was an early adopter of color animation. In fact, when the three-color Technicolor process was first made available in 1932, Disney signed a three-year exclusive contract with the company, meaning that Disney would be producing the only full-color animated films in the business, while other animation houses would be stuck with black and white or with an inferior color process.

At the fifth Academy Awards ceremony in 1932, Walt Disney would be awarded his first two Academy Awards: the first-ever Best Animated Short Film, for *Flowers and Trees*, the first Technicolor *Silly Symphony* cartoon, and a special honorary award for the creation of Mickey Mouse. Over his career, Walt Disney would be nominated for 59 Academy Awards in six categories and win the award 22 times. No one else has ever come close. In the 1930s alone, Disney would win the award for Best Animated Short Film every year for eight years straight.

In 1933, Disney released a Technicolor *Silly Symphony*, with music by Carl Stalling, titled *The Three Little Pigs*, based on an English fable. Originally, they were pixies, not pigs. Anyway, the Disney version was a huge success. The three pigs look the same, but you can tell them apart by their clothes and their behavior, making this some of the sharpest characterization to date in an animated film. But the success of the film also has to be credited to an original song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" written by Frank Churchill. The song struck a chord in the America of 1933, when the New Deal was at last turning around the US economy, and it became a hit single.

The *Silly Symphonies* cartoons did okay, but the Mickey Mouse cartoons were a phenomenal success. Mickey's popularity soared even beyond that of the now-neglected Felix the Cat. By 1932, movie theater marquees announced the exhibition of the latest Mickey Mouse cartoon above the title of the feature film it was showing with.

But Mickey's success created new problems. The early Mickey Mouse was something of a rascal. He drank, he smoked, he pulled the cat's tail. Mickey had been intended as a character to entertain general audiences, but a cartoon mouse naturally became the favorite of children. When parents took their kids along to the movies, typically the kids would like the cartoon best of all, and so concerns began to be heard that Mickey's behavior was a bad influence on children. I think this was the first time such a concern was raised over a cartoon character, but it certainly will not be the last.

Disney and his studio responded to the criticism by making Mickey a gentler fellow, less rough around the edges. But this created a new problem: one hesitates to criticize a beloved icon, but the fact is that Mickey just doesn't have much personality. To the extent he did, it was the lovable rascal who pulled the cat's tail. Take that away, and what's left?

So the studio gave Mickey a cast of supporting characters who could play off him: a girlfriend, Minnie Mouse, a dog, Pluto the Pup, an antagonist, Peg-Leg Pete, and Clarabelle Cow and Horace Horsecollar, and of course, music and Technicolor, as in Mickey's 1935 film *The Band Concert*, his first color film and one in which music plays as large a role as it does in the *Silly Symphony* series. *The Band Concert* also features Donald Duck, a character who originated in a *Silly Symphony* and transitioned into Mickey Mouse's world. Donald Duck very much has a personality: a bit of a rascal, a bit of a prankster, a voice that is only barely intelligible, but most of all, a hair-trigger temper that can result in an explosive tantrum. By the late Thirties, Donald would supplant Mickey as Disney's most popular character.

I should also note another character who began in supporting roles in Disney cartoons, an air-headed canine the animators originally called Dippy Dawg, among themselves, who would eventually be christened Goofy and become another supporting character in Mickey Mouse's world. The trio of Mickey, Donald, and Goofy would dominate cartoon shorts for the next few years, often with Pluto added in, and with Mickey often reduced to merely the straight man for his eccentric colleagues.

After Disney lost his second distributor, Columbia took on his cartoons. Later, Disney would jump to United Artists, and then to RKO Pictures. The quality of his films continued to rise, and so did the costs. In 1930, the films cost \$5,000 each. In 1932, it was approaching \$15,000. *The Three Little Pigs* cost \$60,000. By late in the decade, costs were approaching \$100,000 per short film.

Disney himself had stopped doing animation work in the late Twenties, leading to some unkind accusations that he was never much of an artist in the first place. This is not true. He was never the best artist in his own studio, but he was perfectly capable. It turned out that Walt's real talents lay in organizing the studio. He had a knack for identifying which artists were strongest in which skills and assigning them appropriately. His was the first studio to separate the development of a story from the animation process. Scripts were circulated around the studio and

everyone invited to contribute ideas. Then a storyboard would be developed, a series of pencil sketches that would summarize the plot of the film, something like a comic strip. Disney was the first animation studio to use this technique, which later became standard in the industry.

Disney was one of the first animation studios to actually train its animators. Most animators of the time were self-taught and came into the field out of a love of animated cartoons. Their comparative rarity is what made it possible for other studios to steal animators away from each other again and again, and perhaps those experiences that drove Disney to create training programs to develop new animators himself. Artists were put to work breaking down live-action films—including many old Charlie Chaplin films—to analyze the movement. Disney held drawing classes in the studio and sponsored field trips to the zoo, where the animators could practice sketching animals.

No one compares to Walt Disney in terms of his influence on the art of animation. At his peak, he defined animation, and left artists at other animation studios scratching their heads and studying his work for some clue on how to duplicate it.

Disney animation also carries the stamp of Disney's own middle-American values and perhaps also reflects his own less-than-perfect childhood. His creations are lush, lovely, wholesome, perhaps to a fault, and depict a world far more inviting than the one he grew up in as a boy: a world in which anything your heart desires may come to you, and there is always a happy ending.

Disney's influence reaches far beyond the world of animation and is in fact a powerful force in shaping the larger American culture, and more than any other American artist, shaping the image of America in the eyes of the world.

[music: Rossini, "Overture," *The Barber of Seville*]

Animated short films, shown along with feature films in movie theaters, were hugely popular in the 1930s, and would continue through the 1940s and 1950s before gradually disappearing in the 1960s. During the Thirties, Walt Disney was the absolute king of short animated films. Other animators studied his work and tried to match it, or at least put their own spin on it. Many of these competing films are largely forgotten, but there are other cartoons from other studios of this era still fondly remembered in our time.

Last time, I mentioned animator Max Fleischer, who worked for John Bray. In the Twenties, Fleischer partnered with Lee de Forest, among others, and pioneered sound in cartoons. It was Fleischer who first created sing-along films using the "follow the bouncing ball" method of coaching the audience on the lyrics. By the end of the decade, Fleischer was running his own animation studio, producing cartoons for Paramount Pictures. The most famous original character to come out of Fleischer Studios has to be Betty Boop, who starred in about 90 cartoon

shorts in the 1930s. Betty Boop is a parody of a flapper from the 1920s, a woman who combines a certain childlike innocence with a degree of sexuality clearly not intended for children.

Betty Boop cartoons were filmed in black-and-white and the series and the character suffered when other cartoons went color. Betty Boop was all but forgotten by 1950, though the character was eventually rediscovered and embraced by a new generation of fans later in the century.

From Betty Boop, Fleischer moved on to animating the Popeye comic strip character, which proved to be the most successful comic strip to film adaptation of all time. In 1941, Fleischer would make the first animated—and first motion-picture—adaptation of a comic book superhero: Superman, just three years after the character was first introduced.

I also mentioned Walter Lantz last time. He also got his start with Bray and took over the animation division when Bray moved on to instructional films. After distributor Charles Mintz took over animating the character Oswald the Lucky Rabbit from that other Walter, Lantz went to work for him. When Universal Pictures, the distributor, became unhappy with the cartoons Mintz was producing, they decided to animate the character themselves, and hired Walter Lantz to do it.

In 1935, Lantz created his own animation studio, and Universal contracted with him to produce Oswald cartoons, but by that time the character had lost popularity to Disney and other, newer, cartoons, so Lantz set to work developing new cartoon characters, including Andy Panda and a penguin named Chilly Willie, but his most famous character was spun off from an Andy Panda cartoon, a pesky bird with a signature grating laugh named Woody Woodpecker. Lantz would continue to make Woody Woodpecker cartoons for film and television until his retirement in 1972.

One last big name I have to mention in 1930s animation is Leon Schlesinger, born in 1884 in Philadelphia. From an early age, Leon took an interest in the business end of theatre. After the Great War, he opened an art studio in Hollywood. This studio produced the intertitle cards for silent films. It's worth noting that those silent film intertitles were a lot more than words on a screen. They were laid out in certain ways, with certain font choices, and often with artwork in the margins, making them a part of the storytelling and the artistry of the film.

Schlesinger developed a close business relationship with the Warner Brothers studio. He even invested some of his own money in the production of *The Jazz Singer*. In the early Thirties, he would produce six live-action Westerns for Warner Brothers, starring an up-and-coming young film actor born Marion Morrison, better known by his screen name, John Wayne.

Remember when I told you distributor Charles Mintz took the character Oswald the Lucky Rabbit away from Walt Disney and stole most of his animators to boot? That was in 1928. And remember when I told you that Universal Pictures became unhappy with Mintz's animation

studio? They brought the character in house and hired Walter Lantz to do the animation. That was in 1929. The animators who left Disney for Mintz now found themselves unemployed.

But then came *Steamboat Willie*, which demonstrated the potential of animation with sound. And here were these animators, Disney veterans, looking for work. Two of them, Hugh Harman and Rudy Ising, put together their own animation studio and created a three-minute animated film with sound and incorporating an original character, and titled it *Bosko, the Talk-Ink Kid*.

They shopped their demonstration film around Hollywood. Most of the major studios already had a cartoon series under contract, but Leon Schlesinger became interested in their project and sold it to Warner Brothers.

Now, Warner Brothers, having made their splash with *The Jazz Singer*, were quick to recognize the value in owning a music publishing business. That way, Warners would own the rights to a number of popular songs which they could easily incorporate into their pictures. They bought up several music publishers and acquired the copyrights to a substantial library of songs. In fact, Warners was soon earning millions of dollars in income every year on its music licensing business alone. They also bought a record company, Brunswick Records, but that didn't pay off so well. The one-two punch of the rise of radio and the Great Depression hit the record business hard, and Warners soon sold off their recording business.

But when Leon Schlesinger made his pitch to Warners, they saw a lucrative opportunity. They signed a deal with him to make these cartoons, but added a requirement that every cartoon include a chorus from one of the songs in the Warners library. Since Warners was using these same songs in their musical feature films, this would mean that every cartoon short would also be a commercial for both a song owned by Warner Brothers and a film released by Warner Brothers. Hollywood deal-making at its finest.

Harman and Ising came up with the name *Looney Tunes* for this new series of cartoons. The title is a blatant rip-off of Walt Disney's *Silly Symphonies*, though the contrast between "Symphonies" and "Tunes" reflects that these cartoons would be playing popular tunes while Disney's taste in music leaned more toward light classical. And even though the name *Looney Tunes* was a blatant rip-off, the name and the series became beloved in their own right, and indeed are better remembered today than are the *Silly Symphonies*. For a time, the phrase "Looney Tunes" became an American colloquialism, a synonym for "crazy," as in, "That last idea of hers was Looney Tunes."

By the way, I feel obligated to point out that in our time, cartoon characters are sometimes referred to colloquially as "toons," T-O-O-N-S, but the *tune* in *Looney Tunes* is spelled T-U-N-E. The name does not refer to the characters as loony; it is saying the tunes are interpreted in a loony way.

The first *Looney Tunes* was released in May 1930. It was called *Sinkin' in the Bathtub*, which is of course a play on "Singing in the Bathtub," a song written the previous year, copyright Warner Brothers, and was performed in Warner Brothers' 1929 musical revue film, *The Show of Shows*. The song was written as a parody of "Singin' in the Rain," also written in 1929 for the MGM musical *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*, and as you already know, it will be repurposed as the title song in a 1952 MGM musical.

The song, "Singing in the Bathtub," will also be repurposed, again and again, in Warner Brothers cartoon shorts, a total of 18 times, most often sung by Bugs Bunny or Tweety Bird, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Sinkin' in the Bathtub features Bosko, Harman and Ising's original character, and his girlfriend, Honey. Bosko takes Honey on a date, and that's about all there is for plot, but there are songs and gags along the way.

The designs for the characters of Bosko and Honey were hardly original. They were black, with big white eyes and white around the mouth to allow the artists room for facial expressions. In other words, they looked very much the same as Felix the Cat or Oswald the Lucky Rabbit or Mickey Mouse, only...what was Bosko, exactly? Or, as one African-American Warner Brothers employee asked one of the animators, "I know Mickey Mouse and Krazy Kat and Oswald the Rabbit, but...Bosko the what?"

In fact, it's hard not to conclude that Bosko is meant to be an African-American boy, and Honey an African-American girl. Bosko sometimes spoke in stereotypical African-American Vernacular English, and one of the actors who voiced him was the African-American child actor Billie Thomas, who would later play the character Buckwheat in Hal Roach's *Our Gang* comedy shorts. The presentation of Bosko and Honey can be offensive by today's standards, although it's worth noting that Bosko is the protagonist of these films. The audience is meant to like him and root for him, and he was a reasonably popular character over about three years and two dozen films. But the Bosko cartoons contained nothing very new or very original, at a time when Disney was wowing them with every new release. They are not fondly remembered today.

Still, *Looney Tunes* was successful enough that Warner Brothers wanted to buy a second cartoon series. Harman and Ising suggested a series of one-off cartoons, each based on a Warner Brothers song, similar to Disney's *Silly Symphonies*. This series would be called *Merrie Melodies*.

Leon Schlesinger was famously tight-fisted with the budgets. In 1933, Harman and Ising demanded more money per cartoon. Schlesinger refused, and they quit, taking Bosko and Honey with them. They would find a new home at MGM. MGM was one of the top film studios in the Hollywood of the time, but they had been slow to recognize the advantage of having an in-house line of cartoon shorts to go with their features. Hiring Harmon and Ising was a step meant to

kick-start MGM's own cartoon line. But I'm running out of time, so I'll have to leave that story for another day.

Meanwhile, over at Warners, Leon Schlesinger was now in the position of having solid contracts from his studio, but no one to animate for him. He solved this problem in the now traditional fashion of raiding animators from other studios. He managed to woo two away from Harman and Ising two fellows named Bob Clampett and Friz Freleng, whom we have already met. Clampett was put in charge of making *Looney Tunes*, while Freleng took over the production of *Merrie Melodies*.

The first *Merrie Melodies* cartoons were well-received, and with Disney going color, Schlesinger felt he had no choice but to follow suit. Since Disney held exclusive rights to the Technicolor three-color process, Schlesinger began making *Merrie Melodies* with the older two-color process, which wasn't as vivid, but still, it gave *Merrie Melodies* a leg up on the rest of the competition. *Looney Tunes* would not go color until 1942. These early *Merrie Melodies*, though popular in their time, are not fondly remembered today, either. Typically, they took a Warner Brothers song and animated it to dancing flowers, or dancing bugs, or dancing goods on a store shelf. It was clever and charming the first time you saw one, but it got old after the sixth or seventh time.

The turning point for Schlesinger's studio came in 1935, when an animator who worked for Walter Lantz decided to apply for a better job with Schlesinger, presenting himself as an experienced animation director. Schlesinger decided to take a chance on him. He had two units going already, one making *Looney Tunes* and the other making *Merrie Melodies*. Schlesinger offered this applicant, who was named Fred Avery, but liked to go by "Tex" Avery, the chance to head a third animation team. Schlesinger had a few animators who were restless, who weren't satisfied with what they were doing, who were getting bored, including Bob Clampett and Chuck Jones.

Avery and this crew were assigned quarters in a dilapidated bungalow on the Warners lot that the artists dubbed "Termite Terrace," and there they got together to make something special, these restless artists who weren't satisfied to crank out more and more of the same old thing. Schlesinger was tight with the budgets, but he gave his artists full creative control. As long as they delivered the cartoon on time and on budget, they were free to let their imaginations run wild.

Avery reviewed the older cartoons, and came across a *Merrie Melodies* short that included in its cast a pig with a stutter named Porky, and he made this fellow the everyman protagonist of his new line of cartoons. Porky Pig got a girlfriend, Petunia Pig, and they became the house versions of Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

What Avery brought to the animation table was speed, an element previously rare in animation. Speed as in, characters moving so fast they are visible only as a blur, or simply vanish, leaving

behind only a puff of smoke. Not only did these characters move faster, but so did the films themselves. His cartoons became famous for their rapid-fire edits, sometimes as many as ten cuts in a seven-second clip of film.

If Porky and Petunia Pig were Schlesinger's Mickey and Minnie Mouse, what was still needed was a Donald Duck. The year 1937 saw the introduction of a little black duck named Daffy Duck to fill that role. If Donald's thing was temper tantrums, Daffy's thing was, well, being daffy, zipping all over the screen in that distinctive Tex Avery way, and driving Porky crazy.

Apart from the rapid movement and quick cutting, another distinguishing feature of these Warners cartoons was their self-referential humor. These characters were aware that they were cartoons. They often faced the fourth wall and addressed the theater audience directly. They referred to themselves as stars, and sometimes argued over which of them was the most popular.

The epitome of this sort of thing has got to be the 1940 short, *You Ought to Be in Pictures*, one of the rare Warners shorts to combine animation with live action. Daffy Duck persuades Porky Pig that Porky has gotten too big for cartoons and should be in feature films, as Bette Davis' leading man. Porky goes to the boss, Leon Schlesinger, playing himself, and asks to be let out of his contract so he can pursue his dream. Schlesinger agrees, they shake hands, and Porky is off. Schlesinger turns to the camera and tells the audience knowingly, "He'll be back."

What follows is Porky's misadventures in the real-life Warner Brothers studio lot, while Daffy Duck now visits Schlesinger and makes his pitch that "I'm a better actor than he ever was! Porky never did anything; I did all the work!" Schlesinger resists Daffy's entreaties long enough for Porky to realize his mistake and come running back to *Looney Tunes*, just as Schlesinger predicted.

The late 1930s also saw the gradual introduction of a pesky rabbit character. This fellow, who was cribbed from a Disney short, made a number of appearances, beginning as an antagonist to Porky Pig, just as Daffy had.

But the early versions of this character were just Daffy Duck with ears and a cottontail. He wouldn't come into his own until the artists came up with a suitable foil for him. This character emerged from a 1940 Chuck Jones short titled *Elmer's Candid Camera*. The new character was named Elmer Fudd, with a distinctive voice provided by radio actor Arthur Q. Bryan. In this first short, Elmer merely wanted a photograph of the rabbit. He stumbles on "wabbit twacks," but the rabbit is spectacularly uncooperative and leaves Elmer in frustration.

Tex Avery followed up on this promising beginning with *A Wild Hare*, also in 1940. Elmer is now a hunter, and opens the film by addressing the audience directly, requesting them to "Be vewwy, vewwy quiet...I'm hunting wabbits!" Soon he finds his quarry, raises his shotgun, but the rabbit is nonplussed. He greets Elmer, for the first time, but hardly the last, with a calm, inquisitive, "What's up, doc?" Hijinks ensue, culminating in the rabbit playing out an elaborate

death scene: “I can’t hold out much longer...Everything’s getting dark!” which reduces Elmer to tears. Of course, it’s fake. The rabbit kicks Elmer in the rear, leaving the frustrated hunter to return home empty handed.

A wiseguy rabbit, who lives in the forest, but speaks with a Brooklyn accent, suggesting this is no country rube of a bunny; but a sophisticated city rabbit. The genius of Bugs Bunny is that he’s a loon and a prankster, like the two ducks, Donald or Daffy, but unlike them, the targets of his mischief fully deserve what they get. Bugs never kicks the butt of an innocent victim. All he wants is to be left alone in his luxuriously appointed rabbit hole. The problem is always caused by someone else, especially Elmer Fudd, trespassing onto Bugs’ turf and trying to ruin his day. Even then, Bugs often lets the first offense slide, even the second, before deciding to wreak his vengeance, a decision that is typically announced directly to the audience with the words, “Of course you realize, this means war!” The fact that Bugs is always first provoked means he always has the audience’s sympathy, no matter how over-the-top his revenge.

Bugs Bunny would become Warner Brothers’ most famous and most popular cartoon character, and perhaps the most sophisticated and well-rounded character as a character in animation history. Bugs emerged from the *Merrie Melodies* line of cartoons, and for a time, Bugs was the star of that series, and Porky and Daffy the stars of *Looney Tunes*, but soon there was spillover, and by 1944, the two series were interchangeable except for the titles and theme music. By 1937, “The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down” was established as the theme song for *Looney Tunes*, while *Merrie Melodies* were introduced with the tune “Merrily We Roll Along.”

And speaking of music, I can’t wrap this up without mentioning Carl Stalling one more time. In 1936, Stalling began composing the music scores for Schlesinger’s cartoons. Remember by this time, Schlesinger had three different teams, each producing a short film every four weeks, or 39 short films each year, and Stalling created the score for just about every one of them for 22 years, until his retirement in 1958, over 600 scores in all.

Warners wanted their music featured in the cartoons, and boy did Stalling give it to them. Rapid-fire quotations of popular tunes from the Warners library were a hallmark of Stalling’s scores, employed in a way that commented on the action, hearkening back to Stalling’s days as a movie theater organist improvising accompaniments to silent films. If the characters ran off in a hurry, the music would play “California, Here I Come.” If Bugs Bunny dressed in drag to fool Elmer Fudd, the music played “Oh, You Beautiful Gal.” If food was in any way involved, the music played “A Cup of Coffee, a Sandwich, and You.”

If the animation had quick cuts and shifted pace rapidly, so did the score. Stalling’s scores included trademark musical sound effects, such as xylophone chords when a character blinked. Warners allowed Schlesinger and Stalling the use of their fifty-piece studio orchestra, which was normally used for feature film scores, and Stalling took full advantage of it. The lush sound of the musical accompaniment became as much a part of these cartoons as Bugs chewing on a

carrot, Porky Pig's stutter, or sticks of dynamite. The musicians reported that playing one of Stalling's six-minute scores was far more demanding than performing the score for a feature film.

And I told you that Arthur Q. Bryan provided the voice for Elmer Fudd; I would be remiss if I did not mention Leon Schlesinger's principal voice actor: radio performer Mel Blanc, who was both acting and creating sound effects for a number of radio shows in the 1930s, most notably Jack Benny's radio show, on which he portrayed various characters and provided the sound effects for Benny's famously old and broken-down 1923 Maxwell automobile.

Mel Blanc began working for Leon Schlesinger in 1936. Tex Avery in particular loved his voice work and soon he was providing the voice for Porky Pig. Later he originated the voice roles of Daffy Duck and then Bugs Bunny. In 1944, Blanc became the first animated film voice actor to receive on-screen credit for his voice characterizations. He later explained that he asked for the credit after the famously tight-fisted Leon Schlesinger refused his request for a raise.

As Walt Disney drifted away from short films to focus on feature animation, Warner Brothers would rise to become the most artistically and technically advanced studio for short cartoons, though soon MGM will be nipping at their heels.

But that is a story for some other episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank David and Goran for their kind donations, and thank you to Anna for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like David and Goran and Anna help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to South America, and the biggest war of the twentieth century you never heard of. The War of Thirst, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Leon Schlesinger died in 1949, at the age of 65. In 1944, he had sold his animation business to Warner Brothers, which operated it in house as Warner Brothers Cartoons until 1964, when they shut down their animation operation. Fortunately, that decision was

temporary, and the revived studio, now called Warner Brothers Animation, is still in business in our time.

[music: Closing Theme]

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