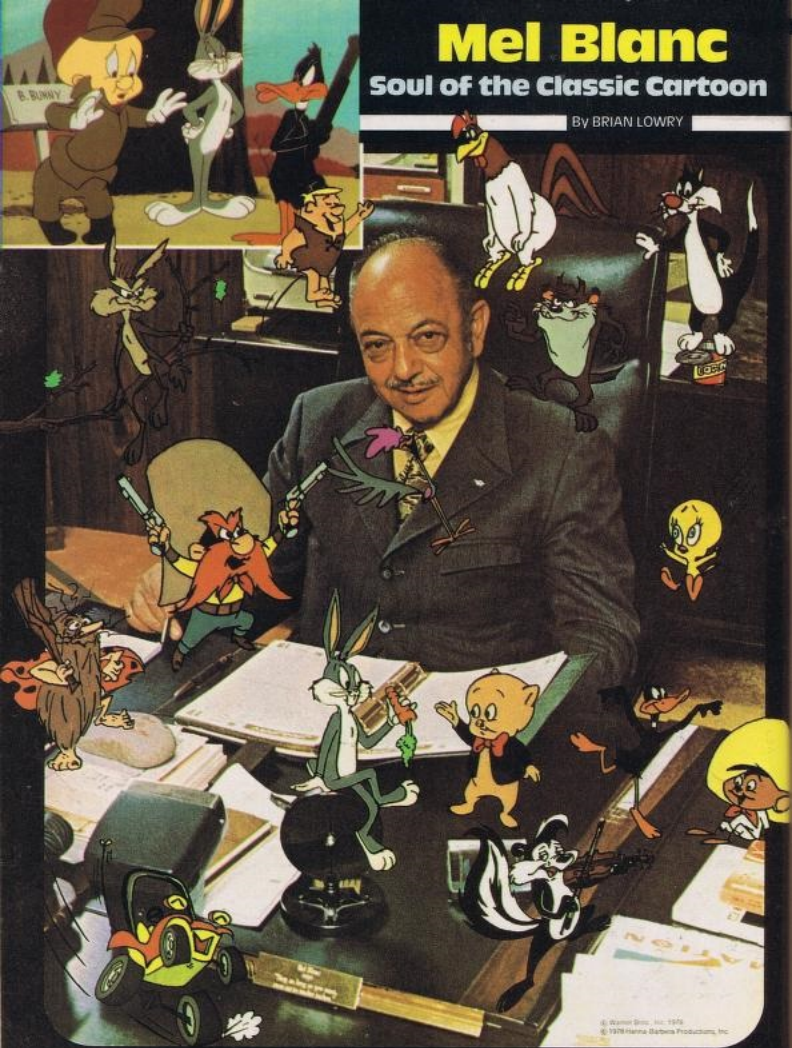


Mel Blanc

Soul of the Classic Cartoon

By BRIAN LOWRY



The vocal legend speaks out in his own tongue, celebrating the animated antics of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and all the beloved characters that his talent has given life.

The name Mel Blanc has become synonymous with the craft of voice characterization. A maestro of the mouth, a virtuoso of the vocal chords, Blanc has spent nearly 50 years making us believe that a rabbit can sneer, a pig can stammer, and a duck can make the moral judgment. "You're despicable."

And yet, for most of his career, Blanc has been spared—or denied, as the case may be—the adulation of fans or the constant recognition of stardom. While many who spend their time in front of the camera end up craving that anonymity, it's not in Mel Blanc's nature to be aloof, cold or distant.

In fact, the man with the most famous voices in America once longed to provide his face some equal time.

"It used to bother me," Blanc admits. "I could walk into a store and nobody knew who the hell I was. It made me feel bad, because I worked so hard to earn that recognition."

Blanc finally achieved widespread recognition in the late 1950s when he was among the first to do a "Do you know me?" American Express card commercial.

"That was the first time many people saw me," he recalls. "Now, when I walk into a store, they say, 'Hey, you're the guy with the American Express card.'"

Residing in Beverly Hills in a mansion once owned by Bobby Darin, the 77-year-old Blanc and his son Noel have created a small empire called Blanc Communications Corp.

Noel and a small staff manage the business, while Blanc keeps the Warner Bros. crew of characters—including Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, Porky Pig, Yosemite Sam, Foghorn Leghorn, Pepe le Pew, Sylvester the Cat and Tweety—alive with his ageless voice. On the side, Blanc manages dozens of personal appearances at colleges and many commercials and smaller entertainment ventures.

With his son, Blanc has just completed his autobiography, which they hope to publish this spring to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Blanc's favorite character, the rascally Bugs Bunny.

Blanc continues to voice new cartoons and is working on taped voices for the Warner Bros. characters who have become regulars at the nation's Six Flags theme parks.

Retirement, he says, is the furthest thing from his mind. But when it's time for the final "That's all, folks," his successor is already under contract; Warner animators will still be drawing a Blanc.

"Noel can do exactly the same voices I can," Blanc says. "When he was 16, we took a car trip to Quebec. The road was very slick, and I said [in Porky Pig's voice], 'This is the worst road I've ever driven!'

"Noel answered back—in the exact same voice—'Obi-da, yep, I've never seen one worse.'"

Blanc believes the vocal talent is genetic, proven by the fact "that many other people have tried to copy me, and they don't even come close."

In 1950, Blanc tried to prove that his was not just an average set of pipes. Betty Grable had earned the moniker "million dollar legs" due to a much-publicized insurance policy, and Blanc decided his throat should be similarly covered.

"I went to Lloyd's of London, and they said they couldn't insure me unless there was something special about my throat," he says.

"So, I had it X-rayed. The doctor came out and said, 'That's the first time I ever saw the same muscular construction in a person's throat as Enrico Caruso had.' I said I couldn't sing like that, and he said, 'No, but you could completely lose your voice and gain it back within an hour.'"

Tragically, such insurance was necessary when, in 1961, Blanc was involved in a head-on automobile collision. The accident resulted in the death of the other driver and left Blanc in a coma for 21 days with a triple-skull fracture. The happy ending, however, couldn't have been more remarkable if a screenwriter had dreamt it up.

"One doctor, a brain specialist, would come in every day and say, 'How are you, Mel?' I never answered him," says Blanc. "One day, with my wife and son in the room, he had a brilliant idea: He said, 'Hey, Bugs

Bunny, how are you?' I said [in Bugs' voice], 'Just fine, Doc. How are you?' He turned to my wife and said, 'He's going to be all right.'"

"After that, he would say hello to a different character each day, and I always answered him in that voice. That went on for 10 days.

"When I came out of the coma, I had no memory of it," he confides. "The doctor said that I thought I was dead, but my characters were still alive."

Waskally Wabbit

In a way, of course, Blanc's characters do take on lives of their own. One of the reasons is that Blanc, unlike many other voice-men, never resorts to impersonations.

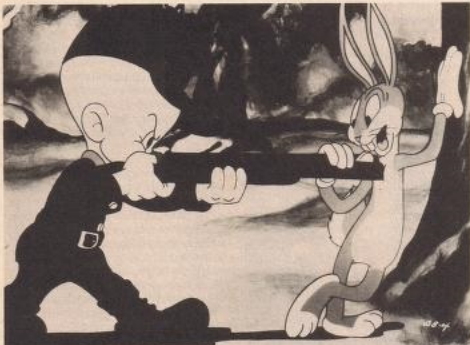
"For every character I do, I try to create the voice for them," he explains. "I was shown a picture of Bugs Bunny and told he was a tough little stinker. I thought, 'What's the toughest voice in this country? Brooklyn and the Bronx.' So, I put the two together."

Blanc does admit some of his compatriots, like Daws Butler, voice of Yogi Bear and Snagglepuss.

"Daws is a good impersonator," Blanc acknowledges. "Most of these guys are, I don't impersonate at all, although I can. To me, that's like stealing from somebody."

A classic case, Blanc recalls, was *The*

BRIAN LOWRY, veteran STARLOG correspondent and reporter for the Los Angeles bureau of Advertising Age, profiled director Hal Barwood in issue #101.



"What's up, Doc?" Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd at their best.



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PHOTO: MGC



Mel Blanc doesn't do imitations—which is why Barney Rubble of *The Flintstones* (left) didn't turn out sounding like Ed Norton. See? Blanc (center) can be seen as the Mexican Sy, so memorable in see-saw verbal byplay with his idol Jack Benny. As Buck Rogers' robot pal, Twiki (right), Blanc enunciated more than gurgling noises.

Flintstones—a primetime cartoon that emulated *The Honeymooners*, prehistoric style. "They wanted me to imitate Art Carney for the Barney Rubble voice," Blanc reveals. "I said, 'No, I won't imitate him. I'll give you similar characteristics, but I won't use his voice.'"

Blanc settled on a voice that was low and somewhat nasal, like Ed Norton's, but with a unique laugh at the end of each sentence. "They accepted it immediately," he recalls.

In fact, Blanc can only remember one instance in which one of his voices was rejected. The first talking Bugs Bunny cartoon depicted the character "with his front teeth way out, so I wanted to indicate that."

The voice Blanc developed, consequently, sounded much like Bug's present voice, but with a slurring, lisp-like sound representing his tongue thrusting off those protruding incisors.

"We did the first two cartoons that way," he notes, "and they came to me and said they couldn't understand what the hell I was saying. I told them, 'You cut down on the teeth, and I'll cut down on the speech.' They did."

Almost every characterization Blanc has ever submitted, he says proudly, was accepted by Chuck Jones, Friz Freleng and the Warner Bros. producers. He attributes that to the fact

Blanc admits that it wasn't all fun and games working with Abbott & Costello: "They hated each other."



BLANC PHOTO: COURTESY OF MEL BLANC ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY

that he carefully researches every voice he does, trying to create a blend between the animal involved and the character's personality.

For his first regular character, Porky Pig, Blanc says he went out to a farm and wallowed around with pigs for several hours. "The first thing they said when I got back was to take a shower," he laughs. "A fine thing for a nice Jewish boy to do."

The result was Porky's stammering delivery, since Blanc decided "if a pig could talk, he would talk with a grunt." While the character's look has evolved over the years, the voice has remained substantially the same.

"The cartoons made the characters cuter, but I never changed the voices," he observes. "They said Sylvester was a big, sloppy cat, so I gave him a slurpy, sloppy voice. The voice establishes the character. When you watch the old cartoons, Bugs looks different, but close your eyes and he sounds the same as he did 30 years ago."

Radio Fish

Born in 1908, Blanc realized his affinity for voices at early age. In school, he would entertain at assemblies. "The kids would all laugh," he recalls. "The teachers would laugh too, and then give me lousy grades."

Later, Blanc wrote and produced his own local radio show before graduating to national broadcasts. He soon became a fixture of the *Jack Benny Show* during the '30s and '40s in addition to performing with Abbott & Costello, Burns & Allen and others.

About the same time that Blanc started to make waves in radio, he auditioned for Warner Bros. and was flatly rejected. "We have all the voices we need" was their answer," Blanc remembers. "What they had were stock characters, who were on salary so they didn't have to pay them anything. One of them drove the animators crazy, 'cause he stuttered and would use up all the film."

When the executive who wouldn't let Blanc through the door died soon after, Leon Schlesinger gave the young actor a break. Blanc's first voice—a drunken, inarticulate bull—won him a permanent job. Soon, he was doing Porky Pig.

Blanc's next major break turned out to be a blessing in disguise. "I went to Schlesinger

and asked for a raise, and I swear, he said, 'Why do you want to make more money? You'll just have to pay more taxes.'

"I said, 'Well, how about giving me screen credit?'" He said, "Screen credit? For a voice? Who ever heard of that?"

Schlesinger finally agreed to the by-now familiar line, "Voice characterization: Mel Blanc," the first time any voice artist was credited in a cartoon.

Suddenly, Blanc—who had been receiving \$200 a week from Warner Bros.—was flooded with offers for guest spots on radio shows. "They hadn't realized it was me who was doing the cartoons. So, they would call me in to do little spots and pay \$250 for each. That was nothing for them."

Without questions, Blanc's favorite peer and collaborator was Jack Benny, an idol of Blanc's youth who he describes as "a wonderful, generous man, with absolutely fabulous comic timing."

It became an in-joke among Benny's writers to discover a voice that Blanc couldn't do. In addition to the Mexican Sy and other memorable characters, Blanc also did Benny's Maxwell (a sputtering, faltering car that gasped as if it were on its last wheels), the polar bear who guarded Benny's secret vault and an English horse at Churchill Downs.

"I would never say no," Blanc says wryly. Once, the writers listed in the script, "Mel Blanc does a goldfish." In rehearsals, Blanc walked to the microphone and made goldfish faces, but no sound at all.

When Benny's show went from radio to TV, Blanc feared he would be left behind. "But Jack always found something for me to do," he says. "There would always be a spot on the TV show for me."

Working with Abbott & Costello was far less enjoyable, as the brilliant comic duo had a tumultuous off-screen relationship.

"They hated each other," Blanc admits. "Especially Lou Costello. He kept trying to get other men to do Abbott's part, and he could never find one. But Abbott was just the best straight man around."

Crazy Fowl

Though he works alone when voicing cartoons, Blanc says he has never missed playing off other actors. In the early days at



In classic Looney Tunes, Blanc perfected the sounds of some American cartoon favorites. Bugs (above left) is a tough little stinker, so Blanc provided a tough mixture of Brooklyn and da Bronx. And Porky (right)? "If a pig could talk, he would talk with a grunt," Blanc declares. That's all folks.



Warner Bros., however, Blanc would record a six-minute cartoon straight through—what animators called "continuity form."

"That was terrible," Blanc contends. "If someone made a mistake, you would have to go back and do the whole thing over again. It took a day-and-a-half to do one cartoon."

"Finally, I went to Friz Freleng and suggested I do each voice individually all the way through, then have the technicians put it together. That was much quicker, and it saved Warner Bros. thousands of dollars."

The splicing technique freed Blanc to do more freelancing and radio work. He was also doing the voice for Woody Woodpecker, one of his favorites, Blanc says. So, why did he stop voicing this other crazy bird?

"Because Warner Bros. made me a better offer," he admits. "They said they wanted to give me enough money that I wouldn't need to do cartoons for anybody else."

Woody's creator, Walter Lantz (STARLOG #96), looked long and hard for a replacement who could do the famed Woodpecker's laugh and ended up with his wife, Gracie, who has now voiced the character for more than 40 years.

"Walter finally found a girl who could come close to the voice, and he didn't want to lose her, so he married her," Blanc quips.

Moving out of the animation field, Blanc also created the voice for Twiki, Buck Rogers' possessive robot companion on the TV series. Originally, he reveals, the producers of *Buck Rogers* wanted Twiki to remain incapable of speech and make only gurgling noises.

"They went for the sound, and I threw in [in Twiki's voice], 'Buck, you're my kind of guy.' They really liked that and decided to use it in the show."

Writing, he suggests, was not one of that SF-TV show's strengths—a problem that plagues modern cartoons as well. He is particularly offended by charges of excessive violence levelled against Warner Bros. cartoons in recent years. "Compared to today, there is no 'violence' in any cartoon I've ever made," Blanc contends. "Friz Freleng wouldn't allow it."

"Yes, Wile E. Coyote will fall off an 8,000-foot cliff, and it looks like he has been killed 1,000 times over. But in the next scene,

he's up and chasing the Road Runner.

"It's just slapstick comedy, and kids understand that. No kid is going to jump off an 8,000-foot cliff because of a cartoon."

Though Blanc does the voice for Heathcliff, he would rather avoid working for most new animated series "because of the quality of limited animation. You can save money some ways, but this is too much. It's a shame."

Blanc will tell you that he loves his work, but he does admit to some regrets. He wanted to do more film work, he says, "but never had the time." *Neptune's Daughter*, a soggy comedy starring Red Skelton and Esther Williams, was the beginning and end of his movie career.

His writing aspirations were also put aside as the demand for his vocal talents blossomed. Blanc wrote one cartoon for Warner Bros.—"just to keep myself working," he says—that turned out to be the first of the

many travelogue spoofs.

By now, Blanc has come to achieve all the recognition he could have ever wanted. He sees it meeting people in the streets, and he sees it in the faces of college students as he tours across the country—knowing, in most cases, that their parents grew up listening to his voices as well.

Blanc's favorite memory from his college appearances involves his regular question-and-answer sessions. At one, a youth asked him what was the *first* voice he had ever done. After a long pause, Blanc simply raised the microphone and let out a baby's cry.

"That got such a big laugh, I plant somebody now to ask me in case nobody else does," he chuckles.

The other frequently asked question, of course, is "What's up, Mel?" Looking back on his long career as the voice behind America's favorite menagerie, Mel Blanc can only smile and say, "Things are just fine, Doc."

Friz Freleng on Mel Blanc

Friz Freleng, the trendsetting director and producer of more than 300 endlessly popular Warner Bros./Looney Tunes cartoons and creator of such memorable characters as Porky Pig and the Pink Panther, warmly discussed his working days with the multi-voiced Mel Blanc recently. Freleng and director Chuck Jones gathered at New York's Museum of Modern Art in September to kick off a spectacular five-month Warner Bros. cartoon retrospective (Blanc was unable to attend due to illness). The 79-year-old Freleng recalled that Blanc was hired several years after the animation department had been established at the studio.

"In the early days, we used many different actors for the voices," Freleng explains. "We used people who could do characters well. Mel entered the picture a little later when I created Porky Pig. For the first Porky Pig cartoon, I used a fellow who actually stuttered. But, I didn't have any control, and he didn't either! The first thing he recited was the ride of Paul Revere and he didn't get past the first line. So, I needed somebody who could imitate and control a stutter. Somebody suggested Mel Blanc because he had been doing radio. I hired him from then on.

"At a certain point, Jack Warner said, 'Why are you using so many voices? Why don't you use just one guy?' He wouldn't let us hire anyone else and said, 'Let Mel do all the voices.' In order that Mel's voices didn't sound alike all of the time, we sped some up, slowed some down, and took some highs out. We mechanically treated them so that they wouldn't sound all the same. Mel carried it from then on."

Freleng notes that Blanc also contributed to his colorful characters by testing alternate voices. "At the time, we would already have written a script and the dialogue and designed the character. Then, we had Mel try three or four voices and we would pick the one we wanted," Freleng says. "Sometimes, we got pretty familiar with Mel's voices and we would call for a certain one."

—Anthony Timpona