

Mel Blanc
by Mark Evanier
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When Mel Blanc passed away, the folks at Warner Brothers ran a touching double-truck color ad showing Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Foghorn Leghorn, Tweety, Sylvester, Yosemite Sam and a few others, all with heads bowed and voices stilled. They, along with the Flintstones' Barney Rubble, were the most famous of his much publicized "thousand voices."

In truth, Mel probably didn't have a thousand voices or even a hundred. But he had plenty and an amazing percentage of them gave breath to classic cartoon characters in very funny films. The great skill of Mel Blanc was as an actor: It is one

thing to affect a funny voice — quite another to mold a coherent, believable characterization with it and to wring every drop of humor out of every line.

He had to be good. When he wasn't doing cartoons, he was dashing from mike to mike in the studios that broadcast the top network comedy radio programs. Appearing on The Jack Benny Program, as Mel did for a couple of decades, was like playing second for the Yankees at their prime.

Mel was the first great cartoon voice actor and, in many ways, the best. Daws Butler perhaps had superior technique, and Paul Frees may have been more versatile — but Mel was the guy who made it an art. He showed everyone how it should be done, back when nobody knew how it should be done. There are around fifty good reasons why those classic WB cartoons will live forever, and Mel Blanc is at least a dozen of those reasons.

Over the years, I met him several times, never for a longer time than it takes to tell someone you've always loved their work. Finally though, in 1986, I needed to hire and (gulp!) direct him for a TV special I was producing.

The show included inserts of Bugs Bunny cartoon clips, redubbed with new dialogue to fit our storyline. The folks at Warners gave us the clips, the phone number to call to hire Mel Blanc for the redubbing...and a warning that he didn't come cheap. Mel was, after all, a star — and stars cost.

Our business folks went through a week of haggling, politely talking Mel's representative down from an initially ridiculous opening demand to a price that our budget could (barely) afford. The deal was finally made and I was informed that Mel was doing a Heathcliff recording session the next day, expected to wrap at around 2:00. To save him driving someplace just to record our few lines, we booked that studio for fifteen minutes after Mel's other session. I got there at 1:30, waited until the other actors left, and took over.

The studio was a tiny rathole on a side street in Hollywood. Half was a cramped audio-recording set-up; the other side was a rehearsal hall. I remember thinking, as I waited for "Heathcliff" to wrap, that if I were picking a place to record, I'd never ask the great Mel Blanc to work in a dump like this.

I introduced myself again to Mel and handed him the copy we were going to record. His eye fell on the first line: "Ehhh...What's up, doc?"

I said, "You want to rehearse it for about an hour?"

He chuckled. "I think I know the part."

He went into the studio and I took my place as director, next to the engineer. Over the speakers came the voice of Bugs Bunny, getting into character. That was when the thought hit me: This is Mel "Bugs Bunny" Blanc and I'm directing him.

Quick mental flashback:

There I was, sprawled on the living room floor before our 17" Packard Bell console, bringing me Sheriff John's Lunch Brigade on channel 11 in glorious black-and-white. I was seven, wolfing down a lunch of tuna salad that I hoped to have completely digested by the time I was eight. Sheriff John hawked Maggio-brand carrots, Fizzies tablets, Flav-R straws, Nestle's Quik and the latest in Remco toys, all equally edible. I could stir for an hour and not get the Quik to dissolve in my milk.

The Good Sheriff had a whole mess of old Warner Brothers cartoons — those not shown, ad nauseam, by Skipper Frank over on channel 5 — which he ran, over and over and over again. One, which I now know to have the title of "Slightly Daffy" was darn near a daily event.

I would lie there, scribble pad at the ready, shattering Crayolas as I raced to draw what I saw on the screen, whether I understood it or not. Most of these were wartime-issue cartoons, filled with caricatures of Hitler, and I once innocently doodled out some Nazi soldiers, complete with swastikas, and displayed them proudly to my parents. This does not go over big in a Jewish household.

And then, an eyeblink later, there I was in a state-of-the-art Roach Motel, telling Mel Blanc we were ready to roll. It was one of these moments when my entire life seems to have transpired in about eleven minutes.

Tape rolled and Mel did the lines. We didn't have the cartoon clip we were redubbing here but I'd seen it enough to know that Mel was doing "What's up, doc?" way too fast to fit. I hit the talkback switch so I could be heard in the studio.

"Mel," I said, momentarily wondering if I should have said Mr. Blanc. "The first line is going over a clip and needs to be a bit slower."

There have been many moments when I have felt like the biggest jerk who walks the planet. And by no means the worst but certainly among them was when I realized that I was telling Mel Blanc how to deliver the line, "What's up, doc?" (What's next, Evanier? Giving Arnold Palmer advice on how to putt?)

But Blanc didn't object, not a peep. He did it again and then the other lines. I looked up at the studio clock. We had thirteen minutes left. Since he seemed so cooperative, I asked him to run the lines again a few times.

In the adjoining rehearsal hall, some sort of dance practice was in progress. A young woman in perspiration-soaked dancer garb was passing our door and she heard a voice she'd known all her life. Within seconds, she was waving to co-workers to come hear who was recording.

As I finished with Mel, I heard bodies massing behind me. I turned and it looked like the road company of A Chorus Line, except they all had glazed expressions — like they'd just seen Glinda the Good-Witch descend in a shimmering light.

A young man of about nineteen gasped, "Is that...Bugs Bunny?"

"That's Mel Blanc," I said.

The young man began jumping up and down, excitedly. "That's Bugs Bunny! That's Bugs Bunny!"

I hit the talkback: "Mel, you seem to have a fan club gathering out here." Mel looked through the glass and I'm sure it wasn't the first time he'd seen those expressions. He turned back to his microphone and launched into a dialogue of Porky and Yosemite Sam having an argument. Then came Sylvester announcing he was going to eat Tweety, then Tweety saying he tawt he taw a puddy tat, then Daffy, then Foghorn....

As he wound up a three-minute impromptu concert, the spectators broke into wild, loving applause. Mel came out of the booth with a fistful of color photo handouts of himself and signed one for each of them. As each dancer said his or her name, "Mel greeted them in the voice of Porky or Daffy, while scribbling out, "To [name], Best wishes, Mel Blanc" on a picture. The dancers scampered back to their rehearsal with their treasures and I walked Mel out to his car.

Out in the parking lot, we got to talking about the problems of doing cartoons the way they now did them. After a few minutes, I glanced down at his cane and suddenly remember that this man was almost eighty. And I remembered something else:

It was 1961. I was nine but I knew who Mel Blanc was. So when they announced on the news that he was near death, I knew what that meant: No more Bugs Bunny.

Mel had been driving up on Sunset Boulevard, not far from where we lived, when a car crossed the center divider and hit him head-on, breaking every bone in his body.

I watched the news reports, sitting there with my little glass of milk, into which my Quik was still refusing to dissolve. They carefully avoided saying he was certain to die, but, even at age nine, I knew that was what they meant. Fortunately, by then, I also knew that grown-ups are often wrong.

Mel was then the voice of Barney Rubble on The Flintstones, Friday nights on ABC. The official story was that Mel never missed an episode; that recording equipment was hauled into the room where he lay in a full-body cast and he recorded the role of Barney from that position. In truth, Mel missed five episodes, his part played instead by Daws Butler. Daws did a reasonable simulation but I could tell the difference.

And I remember the day when finally I heard a new Flintstones episode in which Barney was unmistakably performed again by Mel Blanc. That was how I knew he was going to make it. (He never missed a Bugs Bunny cartoon, either. Another great voice magician, Paul Frees, recorded the track for one short when it was believed Mel would never work again. When that proved happily not to

be the case, Frees's imitation was discarded.)

Now, standing in that parking lot, talking cartoons and old radio shows, I kept saying to Mr. Blanc, "Well, I've taken up enough of your time..." I wanted to keep on chatting with him, of course, but I didn't want to make him stand there in the hot sun. Not after all he'd been through.

He wouldn't let me take him someplace for a beverage, either. For at least an hour, maybe longer, we stood there and talked about his work and my work and about our mutual friend, Daws, the only man (Mel said) he regarded as "competition."

Boy, do I wish I'd had a tape recorder running that day. I'd especially enjoy rehearsing the story about Jack Benny and the Pussycat Theater. Benny, at age eighty-something, wanted to go see the XXX-rated Deep Throat but he didn't want to be spotted doing so. His manager, the legendary Irving Fein, arranged an outing with unparalleled secrecy. The president's advance men do not do such elaborate planning of split-second entrances and exits via rear alleys and side doors.

As Benny arrived, wearing a coat with turned-up lapels to conceal his identity, he had to wait for the previous screening to let out. He paused, turning away from the departing filmgoers, confident that he was going unrecognized. Just then Mel, who was among those exiting, yelled out, "Hi, Jack! You'll love it!" And Benny instantly found himself surrounded by adoring fans with autograph books. "Jack turned beet red," Blanc recalled. "He was thoroughly embarrassed but, at the same time, he was a comedian and he realized what a perfect punch line it was."

Mel summoned up anecdote after anecdote. Finally, around the eighth time I tried to suggest he stop talking to me and get off his feet, he grabbed me by the wrist and said, "You don't understand. I am so damn thrilled that there are young kids like you" — I was 34 at the time — "who got inspired by what I did, who got in the business because of it...this is an honor for me."

And I dissolved...just like Nestle's Quik, only faster.

In Mel's last decade, the story was that he had trained his son Noel to take over voicing his many characters. Noel is a smart fellow, and he can sound amazingly like his father, but he prefers not to make his living as a voice actor. Once in a while, he'll do a voice — for a short spot but instead, a number of others have been called upon to replicate Mel. Their ranks include Greg Burson, Jeff Bergman, Joe Alaskey, Billy West, Bill Farmer, Frank Welker, Neil Ross, Mindy Segal, Bob Bergen, Jim Cummings, Maurice LaMarche and Frank Gorshin.

(Briefly: Burson most often does Bugs these days, although West did him in Space Jam and Segal does most of the singing jobs. Alaskey usually speaks for Daffy, and that's him doing both Tweety and the Puddy Tat on The Sylvester and Tweety Mysteries on the WB network, although Farmer did Sylvester in Space Jam. Bergen most often does Porky, Cummings usually does the Tasmanian Devil, and Yosemite Sam has been voiced by Burson, Alaskey, LaMarche, Gorshin, and Bergman. Burson does most Foghorn Leghorn jobs, but Gorshin speaks for the rooster in a newly-released cartoon short. The voice of Barney Rubble is usually done by Bergman in commercials, and Welker on programs.)

These men are all very talented. When given good dialogue and direction — most can sound incredibly like Mel Blanc, to the point where experts have been fooled.

However, with due respect to my friends with the amazing vocal chords, none of them is Mel Blanc. Even collectively, they are not Mel Blanc.

These days, no one is. Sadly.