CHAPTER TWO

I. Biography and Film Production

II. The Disney Short Films (1919-1939)


IV. The Disney Live Action Films and Animated Cartoons (1941-1966)
Walter Elias Disney was born in Chicago on December 5th, 1901. He was the fourth son of Elias Disney, a carpenter, farmer and building contractor, and his wife, Flora Call, who had been a state school teacher. In 1906, when Walt was five, the family moved to a farm near Marceline, Missouri, a typical small Mid-Western town, which is said to have furnished the inspiration and model for the Main Street USA Disneyland. Walt began his schooling and first showed a taste and aptitude for drawing and painting with crayons and water-colours. In 1910, his restless father soon abandoned his efforts at farming and moved the family to Kansas City, where he bought a morning newspaper route and compelled his young sons to assist him in delivering papers to home subscribers. In Kansas City, Walt began to study cartooning with a correspondence school and later took classes at the Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design. In 1917, Walt moved back to Chicago, and entered McKinley High Institute, where he took photographs, made drawings for the school paper and studied cartooning on the side, for he was hopeful of eventually achieving a job as a newspaper cartoonist. But his progress was interrupted by World War I, in which he participated as a truck driver for the American Red Cross in France and Germany.
Font and Matrix (2001) allude to the supposed Walt Disney’s Spanish origin. These authors rescued Disney’s interview with Del Arco published in La Van Guardia in 1957. In 1919, Walt Disney returned to Kansas City and found occasional employment as a draftsman and inker in commercial art studios, where he met Iwerks, a young artist who was to prove perhaps the most fortunate associate after his brother Roy, who was his partner and strongest counsellor throughout his life. Disney and Iwerks started a small studio of their own and acquired a second-hand motion picture camera with which they made one-and two-minute animated advertising films shown on local movie theatre programmes, much as commercials are shown on television today.

They also did a series of animated cartoon sketches called Laugh-O-Grams and a series of seven minute animated fairy tales, which they called Alice in Cartoon land. These short films were released successfully but with costs mounting, and Disney had to close down the studio. Disney left for Hollywood and with his brother Roy as business manager, he resumed the Alice series, persuading Iwerks to join him and help with the drawings of the cartoons. They invented a character called Oswald the Rabbit, contracted for distribution of the films at $1,500 each, and propitiously launched their small enterprise.

In 1925, Disney married Lillian Bounds, who had been working as an inker and painter at his studio; their union was blessed with two daughters: Diane and Sharon. Just before the transition to sound in motion pictures in 1927, Disney and Iwerks experimented with a new character, a cheerful, energetic and mischievous mouse called Mickey. They planned two shorts, called Plane Crazy and Gallopin Gaucho, which were to introduce Mickey Mouse when the Jazz Singer, a motion picture with the popular singer Al Jolson, brought the novelty of sound to the pictures.
In 1928, Walt Disney produced a third Mickey Mouse cartoon entitled Steamboat Willie, equipped with voices and music. The following year he started a new series called Silly Symphonies with a picture, the Skeleton Dance, in which a skeleton rose from the graveyard and did a grotesque dance to the music of Saint-Saens’s Dance macabre. The growing popularity of Mickey Mouse and his girlfriend, Minnie, attested to the public’s taste for the fantasy of little creatures with the speech, skills and personality traits of human beings. Walt Disney himself provided the voice for Mickey and his popularity led to the invention of other animal characters, such as Donald Duck (created by artist Carl Barks), and the dogs Pluto and Goofy.

In the early 1930’s, Disney started the production of his most famous short films, each Oscar awarded. In 1933, ‘Three Little Pigs’, which arrived in the midst of ‘The Great Depression’, based on the fairy tale of the little pig that works hard and builds its house of brick against the huffing and puffing of a threatening wolf, suited the need for fortitude in the face of financial disaster; its song ‘Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?’ was a happy taunting of adversity. Through successive additions and advances in the animated-cartoon field, Disney shorts reached the audiences all over the world. He had gathered a staff of creative young people who were headed by Iwerks. Colour was introduced in Flowers and Trees (1932), while other animal characters appeared in short films such as, The Tortoise and the Hare (1934), Three Orphans Kittens (1935), The Country Cousin (1936), The Old Mill (1937), Ferdinand the Bull (1938), and The Ugly Duckling (1939).

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The next step for Disney and his staff was the creation of the first full-length animated feature. In 1935 he began to work on a version of the classic fairy tale Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, a project that required great organisation and coordination of the creative and technical talents in his studio, and that was released two years later. Snow White (1937) was followed by other three feature-length classics for, the video-tape The Academy Oscar Review of Walt Disney Cartoons in Technicolor contains all these children: Pinocchio (1940), Dumbo (1941), Fantasia (1941), in which cartoon figures and colour are made to move to the classical music. According to some critics, all these films belong to the ‘Golden Age of Disney Animation’ and the ‘Golden Age of Disney Music’ (The Walt Disney Company 1993). A writer, Leonard Maltin, classified the Disney films into ‘The Feature Films’ which included most of the Disney Short Feature Length Films. These films belong to the classic period (1937-1942), as they were taken out from classic tales containing classical music, and later remained as patterns to be followed in Disney studios.
During World War II, the Disney studio did a great deal of work - major films and television productions- for the military and the federal government in the course of which it perfected the methods of combined live action and cartoon: *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941), *Salado Amigos* (1943), *Victory Through Air Power* (1943), *The Three Caballeros* (1944). After the war, Disney made many films with these hybrid techniques: *Make Mine Music* (1946), *Song of the South* (1946). Later, the Disney studios began to produce a variety of entertainment films and they also turned to production of live-action fictional feature films and more full-length animation romances.

Disney also planned and built Disneyland, a huge amusement park that opened near Los Angeles in 1955, and before his death on December 15th, 1966, two months after he had been detected a lung cancer - he begun building a second theme park, ‘Walt Disney World’, near Orlando, Florida (opened 1971). Much of Disney’s disposition toward nostalgic sentiment and fantasy was evident in its design and construction. It soon became a tourist centre, a Mecca for visitors from all over the world. Disney’s achievement as a creator of entertainment for an almost unlimited public and as a highly ingenious merchandiser of his wares may be compared to that of a successful industrialist. Walt Disney won world-wide acclaim and popularity as a pioneer of animated cartoon films and as the creator of such cartoon characters as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.

The biographies written by his daughter Diane Disney Miller, Bob Thomas and Christopher Finch, picture him as a dreamer full of fantasy, a children-loving person and an efficient co-ordinator of a brilliant staff of graphic artists. Even though positive and negative evaluations come from different sources, Disney arises as a creative person, above hatred and love. In
his later years, critical estimations of Disney and his works changed considerably, and his political activities as well as his psychological behaviour were criticised by some; his detractors accused him of being an FBI confidant, an alcoholic and sexually impotent. Similar opinions were shared in Spain; in 1963, Cesar Santos Fontenla wrote a hard review on Pinocchio in the pages of ‘Nuestro Cine’; his tone was rather forceful.

An interview with Carl Barks, who drew Donald Duck comic books for three decades and died on August 25, 2000 at the age of 99, presents a quite different view on this cartoonist’s employer:

Didier Ghez: Can you tell us your favourite moment as a Disney artist?
Carl Barks: I hardly have any anecdotes because I was not around enough people to develop any. But I will tell you this about Walt who was a wonderful guy to work for and was very helpful to us on story situations. And whenever we would have him in on a story conference, he was so patient with us in our efforts to try and convince him that we had a good story. And he would let us argue story points. And in these arguments, he would always leave us the last word: “Yes, Walt!” (Laughs). (Barks 25)

Walt Disney is a historical pat of the United States and a good illustration of the ‘American Dream’. The present leading opinion about Disney is indisputably to describe him as an ‘artist’ and a supervisor until his death, of all the ideas that emerged out of his short and long films. Disney did not write or compose any lyrics but it can be said that his musical legacy started with himself. His influence upon music was as profound as his effect upon animation.
Walt Disney demanded quality and always knew how to choose the fitting musicians. He relied on his music staff of composers and lyricists who created such memorable songs and hired the most versatile and prolific popular songwriters of the time, something that the studios would continue to do until today. He has embedded the powerful magic effects into his dialogues. The evidence is supported in the rhetoric history of Disney’s greatest cinemas, where the discours is a reflection of their patron. The dialogues reflect the spirit and influence of this man who had a special ability to recognise what kind of language can best fitted in a scene or situation. It was Walt’s direction and influence that led his composers and writers to pioneer linguistic concepts and technologies that influenced both the film and music industries for decades and continued to do so these days. Walt Disney had a wonderful concept about the value of music in his films:

There is a terrific power to music. You can run away of those pictures and they’d be dragging and boring, but the minute you put music behind them, they have life and vitality they don’t get any other way. (Maltin 79)

Walt Disney’s role in the Studio is described metaphorically when a little boy asked him some questions:

Little boy: Do you draw Mickey Mouse?
Walt Disney: I have to admit I do not draw anymore.
Little boy: Then you think up the jokes and ideas?
Walt Disney: No, I don’t do that.
Little boy: Mr Disney, just what do you do?
Walt Disney: My role? Well, sometimes I think of myself as a little bee. I go from one area of the Studio to another
and gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody. I guess that’s the sort I do. (Barrier 1999)

This shows Walt Disney’s mysterious feeling for music, films and theme parks. Eric Sevareid summed it up best in his tribute to Walt on the CBS Evening News the day Disney died:

He was an original; not just an American original, but an original period. He was a happy accident; one of the happiest this century has experienced (...) People are saying we’ll never see his like again. (Sevareid 107)

It was his Mid-Western upbringing and Mid-American mainstream appreciation for music and films, or perhaps he was just ‘a happy accident’, but Walt Disney aimed to create entertainment that he himself would enjoy. Buddy Baker, a long-time Disney staff composer said that the clue to the Disney sound came from the man himself. Baker added that Walt Disney had a wonderful concept of what the music should be, it is a great clue for the composer, “If he wanted a big, symphonic score, he’d tell you that and he’d even tell you what he’d want it to sound like.” (Baker 110)

Disney music was actually a mirror image of his patron, who concentrated on melody and did not like any music that was too loud or high-pitched. In the synchronisation of humorous episodes with humorous music, he had unquestionably gave us the outstanding contribution of our time.


