

Sunday, 21 April 2013

Frank Fontaine Became Crazy

A week ago, we mentioned how Larry Storch hosted a summer replacement variety show in Jackie Gleason's TV time slot in 1952 and 1953. But it appears Storch wasn't the first choice. It looked like Jackie had his eye on someone who later appeared as a regular on his show.

Gleason was much more than Ralph Kramden. He had a number of characters he'd trot out on his variety show in the early '60s. One of them was Joe the Bartender, who'd banter with the camera as if it were a customer named Mr. Dunahee, and then play straight man after bringing on Frank Fontaine as Crazy Guggenheim. I loved Crazy. He was like a silly, corny cartoon character. In fact, he was. Fontaine's Crazy vocal mannerisms were borrowed for cartoon characters at Warner Bros., Walter Lantz and Hanna-Barbera, most famously by Stan Freberg as Pete Puma.



It's tempting to call Fontaine an overnight success and to give credit to Jack Benny for it. Fontaine's brain-frozen character first appeared on the Benny radio show on April 9, 1950 as John L.C. Sivoney, the slow-thinking sweepstakes ticket winner. The audience howled. Benny broke up. Then Benny handed him the last third of the show to do an extremely good Winston Churchill and other impressions. Fontaine's career was on its way. Here's how Fontaine described it to a columnist for the North American Newspaper Alliance in 1950.

TV, Radio And Pictures All After Frank Fontaine

By HAROLD HEFFERNAN

HOLLYWOOD, July 18—Couple of months ago an undiscovered character actor named Frank Fontaine playing the role of a panhandler stole two successive Jack Benny radio programs by mumbling something like "I was just hanging around . . . I wasn't doing anything."

Those two brief air appearances performed one of Hollywood's minor miracles. Before going on with Benny, Fontaine actually "wasn't doing anything . . . was just hanging around," but within a matter of days he became the busiest, most sought-after fellow in the entire Hollywood amusement field—movies, radio and television. He hasn't done anything definite as yet about his future—and for a very astonishing reason.

"I haven't had time to sign up with anybody—and I mean just that," the new-found mimic grinned between scenes of "Call Me Mister," in which he is playing a comic army sergeant at 20th-Fox.

"CBS wants me to sign a 25-year optionless contract to play Amos and the Kingfish on the Amos-Andy radio show starting next year. Gosh, I haven't had time to take care of that.

"Columbia wants to star me in a picture, but I haven't had a chance to go over and check on that deal."

"This studio (20th-Fox) wants me to sign a long-term contract, but there are problems in connection with that which requires time to think over and talk about.

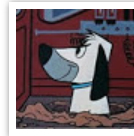
"NBC has offered me a one-hour television show of my own which would be channeled all over the country. I hope to get a few hours off this week to look into that."

Fontaine, only 30 years old, is the father of 7 children—oldest 12 and the youngest an infant. His wife and family reside in Boston—and therein lies the greatest of all his "time" problems.

"After all those offers following the Benny show, I knew I was set," Frank said, "so I wanted my family to join me here—in a hurry. But—in the 2 months since then I haven't had a chance to go out and look for a house and back yard big enough to take care of them."

This coming fall and winter Fontaine's fantastic comedy characterizations will be making their long overdue

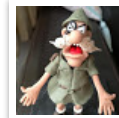
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Peter Gray's Comics and Art



Spencer Jordan's amazing work... we are hoping artists like Ian

Knox...and families of these comic artists can see these gems... - made with fimo clay I had ago and its not very easy to do...

3 hours ago

Fernando Liera Blog Cartoons

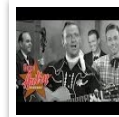


Vehicle Verification Centers of Mexico City will reopen in August with COVID

safety measures. - ©2020 fernandollercartoons.com

4 hours ago

Movies with Michael

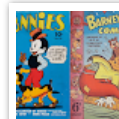


Cowboy Church #67 - Hello my friends and welcome back for another

service of cowboy church. Today's musical selection begins with Gene Autry singing "Dear Hearts and Gentle Pe...

7 hours ago

Termite Terrace headlines



Question for All You Cartoon Collectors! - OK so I've been doing some

looking around. Bosko apparently had a comic book and I'm wondering if any of you know of

appearance in one picture after another. First will be Republic's "Hit Parade of 1951," followed by "Stella," with Ann Sheridan and Victor Mature and the currently filming "Call Me Mister," supporting no less a star than Betty Grable and if radio and television don't sew him up completely there'll be other screen roles, too, and in rapid order. No longer is Mr. Sevony—his Benny radio character—"just hanging around."

But the Sivoney/sweepstakes routine wasn't something carefully concocted by Benny's writers. It was something Fontaine had been doing for some time and one Benny had likely seen or heard. In February that year, he appeared on Ed Sullivan's "Toast of the Town." The previous April, Sivoney showed up on radio's "Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour." And *Billboard's* review of Fontaine's turn in the Vaughn Monroe road show on July 5, 1947 refers to the sweepstakes routine as "standard." By the time Fontaine had appeared with Benny, he was already in theatres in the MGM film "Nancy Goes to Rio." But exposure on a top show like Benny's couldn't hurt. CBS signed him to a contract in November 1950.

In fact, the Sivoney character predates Fontaine's professional career. He talked about it to Anton Remenih of the *Chicago Tribune* in a story published August 10, 1952. This transcription is missing part of a couple of sentences, including the final one, but you can get the gist.

Frank Fontaine, a rising comedian we confidently predict will be a television hit in 1953, is the only guy in show business we've met who made more money as an amateur than as a professional. The creator of the hilarious radio, WBBM, 7 pm, Sundays, and stage character, John L.C. Silvoney, the punchy sweepstakes winner, recalled his hardtack days between appearances at the Chicago theater the other day.

"When I turned pro at 16, I dropped from \$52 a week to \$18," he chortled. Frank married his wife, Alma, when both were 16. He had no job. "I won a Major Bowes amateur show with some imitations. Every other theater in New York City held amateur nights in those days (1936). I went from one to another, winning most of the time. I averaged \$52 a week but this was a precarious living especially after our first two children were born."

When he got an offer of regular employment at \$18 a week, Frank took it.

"You could feed a family of four on \$1 a meal in those days," he said. Today CBS has Frank signed up to an exclusive seven year radio and television contract. He could, he said, go on TV regularly immediately, but he's not ready. He's playing it slow and he hopes smart. Just as he did 16 years ago on the amateur night circuit.

"As everybody knows, amateurs often win on sentiment not talent. So I appeared on the stage with holes in my shoes and elbows, and if we were especially hungry that week, with a limp. The audience took one fast look at this courageous, struggling youngster, whispered 'O. look at the poor kid,' and voted me first prize. I'm one of the few guys who ever beat a blind accordionist on an amateur night. He made the mistake of appearing well dressed and arriving in an automobile.

"Don't dress up too good," Frank advises youngsters butting their heads against one of the most competitive professions in the world.

"Love everybody in show business. And don't discuss religion or politics. Show people are sensitive or they wouldn't get in the business."

"You've got to get into the money with one gimmick," he said. "Mine is Silvoney. But how long do you think I would last on television with one character?"

Fontaine expects to appear in his own TV show by December. In the meantime he is developing more characters. One is Pop, a toothless old gent always harking back to the good old days. Another is Fred Frump, a gabby bore and corny joke teller. Everybody knows at least one Fred Frump and one Pop.

Fontaine belongs to the Red Skelton-Jackie Gleason school of comedy. All are masters of caricature, specialists in the art of molding hilarious characters from basic human types. You could get by on radio stringing one joke after another, sausage style. In radio, the talent is often reposed in the writers. In television, you need some yourself.

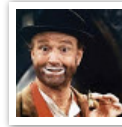
Fontaine was born with it. His father, half of a top flight vaudeville team, perched his 8 year old son on his



additional covers you could share! ...

16 hours ago

Way Too Damn Lazy To Write A Blog



Born on July 18, 1913 - Red Skelton - *Today's post commences

with the Guzzler's Gin routine ...

1 day ago

News From ME

Sorry... - As far as I know, I do not have any diseases. I just have too much to deal with right now so I won't be blogging much if at all. I'm postponing all the web...

2 days ago

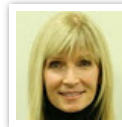
Cartoon Research

In His Own Words: H.T. Kalmus on Disney in Technicolor - Suspended Animation #276 Many references may be found regarding two-strip Technicolor. I have been guilty of discussing Walter Lantz's King of Jazz (1930)...

2 days ago

AFRTS Archive

Mary Turner 1985 - Mary Turner today Mary Turner really rocked the house.



Normally when any of the jocks got a reaction, it'd be split.

The ones that were really liked wou...

4 days ago

The World of Knight



TONIGHT, 11:54 PM. - COPYRIGHT 2020 BY MILTON KNIGHT

4 days ago

Yowp



Hanna-Barbera Birthday Did-You-Knows - 63 years ago today, some

forms were signed by George Sidney, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera creating what eventually became the biggest TV cartoon operation i...

1 week ago

Supervised By Fred Avery: Tex Avery's Warner Brothers Cartoons

Wabbit Twouble: A Small Addendum to An Outstanding Podcast -

knee and sang "Sonny Boy." He became a teachers pet not because of academic prowess but because he could mimic the principal, an irascible character unpopular with the staff.

At 15, Frank's front porch at Medford, Mass., was mecca for the neighborhood kids who came to hear Henry, a character he assumed to recite "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

Look at the accompanying picture of Silvoney [not in this post]. Henry was simply a 15 year old Silvoney. Fontaine got the idea for this character after seeing Irish sweepstakes winners recite their reactions on the newsreels in the '30s.

We've never met a showman with stronger paternal instincts than Fontaine. Let's look at the record. There are now 10 in the family. They share four baths in a big 12 room house near Hollywood. They mean to stick together.

"Movie stars love their families, don't be mistaken about that," he said. "But some of them love their careers more. When necessary, they choose in favor of their careers. Nothing like that is going to happen to us. We're sticking together.

"I could have gotten into television this summer as a replacement for Jackie Gleason. But that meant going to New York and leaving my family. I could pick up money, a lot of it, at the Palladium in London. But London is even farther away from home. We could really live it up."

Fontaine let it go at that, but we think this guy will make out all right. At 32, with the best years still ahead on television, he hasn't forgotten a sure fire formula he learned at 16.

Despite the comparisons with Gleason and Skelton, Fontaine never accomplished what they did and made a career of hosting a variety show doing a multitude of characters of his own creation. People only wanted one—the one with the wheezy laugh he developed as a teenager during the Depression. Being boxed in must have grated on him after awhile. He expanded a bit on the Gleason show by interrupting his Crazy schtick for a song in a straight baritone, popular (if not schmaltzy) with some, but oddly jarring to others.

Frank seems to have worked steadily but ran into money troubles. In 1971, he filed for bankruptcy and his 12-room house was put up for auction to pay an almost half-million-dollar tax bill. He was \$850,000 in debt. Frank Sinatra and others came to his rescue with a benefit show. His health wasn't good. He had been hospitalised in 1970 after collapsing following a lengthy performance on the Jerry Lewis telethon. In 1977, he lay unconscious in hospital after what may have been a heart attack. And then the following August, he had just finished his fourth encore before a crowd of 3,000 in Spokane and had accepted a \$25,000 cheque to be donated to heart research when he dropped to the boards backstage. A heart attack claimed Fontaine at age 58.

Here's a great clip of Fontaine with Gleason as Joe the Bartender. The best part, besides the model at the opening who doesn't seem to know when to talk, is Gleason alternating between Joe and Gleason-playing-Joe. Gleason generously acts as straight man to Fontaine, and then Fontaine stays out of the way to let Gleason's reactions get laughs.



Original animation drawing from Wabbit Twouble with color notations

for the ink and paint department. Release date: 12/20/41 Availability: Looney Tunes Gol... 3 weeks ago

Mark Kausler's CatBlog

[The Lady and the Tiger](#) - From the Cathy Hill Archive of Unpublished Comics comes "The Lady and the Tiger". This story was drawn before Cathy started the "Mad Raccoons" series. U... 4 weeks ago

What About Thad?

[Cartoon Logic Podcast](#) - And yet another distraction from this brick and mortar blog... I've entered the world of podcasting with renowned animation director and historian Bob Jaques... 10 months ago

Likely Looney, Mostly Merrie

[That's all, folks!](#) - My posts have gotten thinner over the years. I'm aware of that. I've been hopeful for a long time, that I can remain active with blogging and sharing furth... 1 year ago

Dr. Grob's Animation Review

[The Flying Man](#) - 'The Flying Man' is a very short absurdist film in which a man drops his coat to take a swim in mid air. Another man with a dog drops by, tries the same th... 2 days ago

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [08:55](#)



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

6 comments:



J Lee 21 April 2013 at 09:34

Gleason's show being New York based likely made it easier for CBS to get something out of their seven year deal there, as opposed to the west coast-based shows. I first came onto 'Crazy' during those same years when his routine would end with the musical number -- as a kid, it was kind of like the live-action version of those old Famous Studio Screen Songs, where you'd hang around to see what the gags were, but lost interest once the schmaltzy music began (though nowadays, you could only show Fontaine's schmaltzy musical numbers widely in public; the PC police would have a stroke if CBS ever aired the full Joe the Bartender sketches again).

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**Pokey** 29 April 2013 at 20:16

Fontaine's voice was also borrowed for Jay Ward cartoons (Daws Butler), Art Clokey (Dal McKennon for a monster in "Santa Witch" & the prince in "A Pigeon in a Plum Tree", both 1962), also did that voice for Walter Lantz (in the "Hickory Dickory and Doc", cartoons as Champ the Bulldog, to Frees's Doc the cat) (odd, since Butler did that voice for Lantz usually-then again that would be one too many voice actors), and H-B not only had Daws doing Fontaine's voice (all this meaning Crazy G.) but Leo De Lyon as "Brain" in "Top Cat", and the studio that shall not go named (hint: one of the unmentionables, name of studio rhymes with Dalmation) used Allan Melvin and BOTH Jackie Gleason AND Frank Fontaine in "Uncle Croc's Block""Wacky and Packy" about a brainless duo of caveman and mammoth, respectively "Gleason" Wacky and "Fontaine" Packy. Melvin did similar Fontaine voices for H-B.

[Reply](#)**rich** 26 October 2013 at 14:45

Great bio, many thanks.

Anyone who has info as to Frank's "Little Red Riding Hood," routine? I've been searching for it for half of my life. I just need the text, but would love to see the video done on Gleason's xmas special.

Richard Jacobson, M.D.
adhddoc5@yahoo.com

[Reply](#)**Sirelli** 5 January 2016 at 13:59

Looking for help here. My cousin sent me an early photo autographed by Frank addressed to my great grandmother who resided in Alymer QC. Canada. The caption reads "Mrs. LeBel who brought me up Ill never forget you All my love".

I remember as a child my grandmother telling me that the large mirror in their home came from the bar that was owned but her parents. She also remembers as a child, Frank practicing his crazy face in the mirror every chance. To be honest, I never gave it much thought until this photo appeared! Funny how we dismiss the elderly when we think they are talking crazy! I remain curious as to no mention of Frank being in Canada as a young man. If anyone has information relating to this I would welcome it

[Reply](#)**Unknown** 12 August 2016 at 08:05

I remember seeing him as a little kid when he came to our small town of Milford MA. He played at the Milford Ma town movie theatre. He was very good as I remembered, keeping the crowd laughing and his golden voice,,,that's right his golden voice was truly something to hear first hand. Those were the days!!

[Reply](#)**TV Fan** 7 February 2019 at 21:25

Eleven kids???? No wonder he declared bankruptcy!

[Reply](#)

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