



Send in the Clones

Chaplin Imitators from Stage to Screen, from Circus to Cartoon

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The Chaplin craze of the teens is often cited as one of the main indicators of the unprecedented popularity of Chaplin's little tramp. Chaplin imitators, cartoons, songs were abound. While Chaplin may indeed qualify as the most imitated character in film history, this "sincerest form of flattery" was not limited to him. Indeed, one of the historically most remarkable Chaplin imitations, that of former Chaplin understudy Stan Laurel, was part of a *Keystone Trio* stage act, which also included likenesses of Mabel Normand and Chester Conklin. Nor does the phenomenon of comic clones end there. Throughout film history, we find carbon copies of then-popular film clowns, sometimes unidentified today, often though probably quite justly forgotten.¹

¹ The *Museum of Modern Art*, for example, holds footage of an unidentified Snub Pollard imitator; imitations of Harold Lloyd's glasses character have been reported, and Wolfram Tichy's 1979 *Harold Lloyd* biography presents an unidentified photo of what might have been such an imitator. Europe had their own, unique comedy success in the 20s and 30s, in the Danish comedy tramp duo of *Fy og Bi / Long and Short / Pat & Patachon*, and this author's research into this team (easily rivaling in popularity Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd in countries like Germany and Russia) has so far confirmed at least four imitators, or "parodists," appearing well into the 1950s. The *Three Stooges* are unique in this regard as their likenesses can claim a certain degree of legitimacy, either having gone through the same school as the original trio, Stooze inventor Ted Healy's act, that is, or in a couple instances even having the privilege of featuring former original *Stooges*. Thus, in 1944 Shemp Howard teamed with Max Rosenblum and *The Great Dictator's* "Herring," Billy Gilbert, as "a new, daffy, dizzy trio," and in the 1970s, "Curly Joe" DeRita, the last "original" third Stooze, briefly toured the stages with two fresh partners as *The New Three Stooges*.

Other imitation double acts include Duke Mitchell and Sammy Petrillo, the Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis clones around when *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla* in the 1952 film of the same title; and Paul Smith and Michael Toby, virtual twins of the 60s/70s Italian spaghetti-western-and-beyond comedy duo Bud Spencer and Terence Hill.

What does distinguish the Chaplin case though is the talent of some of the artists engaged in these impersonations. Billy West, the most famous and successful of the imitators, was undeniably a capable mime, and some scholars have staunchly defended his impersonation of the Little Tramp. Not only Stan Laurel, but also Bert Wheeler,² another comedian later to find fame as half of a duo, essentially started his solo career by means of Chaplin impersonations on the stage. Two of the most notable and influential, yet often neglected derivatives of the little tramp, though, are the cartoons made by the father of *Felix the Cat*, and a Chaplin impersonation which essentially began the success of possibly the most famous circus clown in history.

Like their equivalents on the screen and on the vaudeville stages, Chaplin imitations by circus clowns apparently were far from rare. For example, it was only the competition by fellow imitators that prompted famous Russian clown Karandasch (Michail Nikolajewitsch Rumjanzew, 1901- 1983) to depart from his Chaplin routine³.

Charlie Rivel (José Andreu Lasserre, 1896 - 1983) was born into a family of circus artists in April 1896. Rivel already appeared on the stage at age 3. Eventually a successful circus performer appearing in places like Paris, Berlin and London, Lasserre actually met Chaplin as early as 1910. In 1916, inspired by the former stage colleague's film successes, Lasserre not only adapted the film comedian's first name, combined with the name Rivel derived from the group he worked in at the time, *The Rivals*. 1916 is also the year of Rivel's first Chaplin imitation, which developed into one of his main attractions, a "trapeze act with Charlot parody," as he called it. The culmination of the career of this fake trapeze tramp, however, dates to 1927. As Rivel relates in his autobiography, "when, in 1927, I returned to the Olympia Circus in London, there was a contest on who could do the best Chaplin imitation. The contest was to take place in the famous Albert Hall, and the first price was to be

² Wheeler revived his Chaplin impersonation in the Wheeler & Woolsey last film, *High Flyers* (1937).

³ Karandasch had launched his career in the late twenties in Moscow, substituting for a Chaplin imitator by the name of Hesselbard. Separating the moustache in two parts and replacing the bamboo cane and the bowler, he eventually created his own character, yet the costume and make-up which he maintained for the remainder of his career, still betrayed its origin.

given to the one resembling Chaplin the closest. I put up my mask and introduced myself with the Chaplin costume from my trapeze act, and I dressed [daughter] Paulina, now six years old, up as Jackie Coogan in THE KID, the very popular film on Chaplin and his foster child, and this is how we appeared for the contest. Afterwards, it was disclosed that the real Charlie Chaplin himself had been among the thirty contestants." (Rivel, *Stakkels Klovner*⁴). "Is it me imitating you or you imitating me," the real Chaplin is claimed to have commented, but Rivel had to abandon his act the same year since United Artists intervened (*Charlie Rivel, El geni del Gest*). When Rivel integrated the trapeze act in the 1943 German film *Akrobat Schööön!*, the Chaplin costume was replaced by Rivel's clown makeup, a sausage-shaped red costume, fake curly clown hair and a red cubic nose – not that a Chaplin costume would have made it into a Nazi era production anyhow.

Fortunately, a seasoned Rivel apparently revisited his take on the tramp in a skit preserved for posterity in the 1978 Danish documentary *Charlie Rivel – En Film om en Klovner*. To this day, Rivel, alongside with Swiss music hall genius Grock, is often cited as one of the greatest clowns ever, but his first name, and the act so crucial to his career, remain a powerful reminder of Chaplin's impact beyond the comedy on the silver screen.

Where imitations and impersonations, regardless how well done, often leave the aftertaste of a rip-off rather than "parody" or homage, the medium of comics and animated cartoons indeed offers a chance for, quite literally, caricature. Again, by no means was Chaplin's fictional alter ego the only one to make this leap from comedy to an animated cartoon series, as anyone who has suffered through *Larry Harmon's Laurel and Hardy* or the animated versions of *The Three Stooges* or *Abbott & Costello* can confirm. The Chaplin cartoons, though, not only provide the possibly earliest examples of this type of adaptation; they also had an often neglected, but nonetheless major impact on the history of animated cartoons. The first example of a Chaplin cartoon series is apparently that of the "Charlie Cartoons" from 1916, produced by Movca Film Service. A sample, *Charlie's White Elephant*⁵, has been

⁴ Translated by the author.

⁵ Crafton incorrectly (no doubt due to the unavailability of the film at the time of publication) credits the film to Messmer. Crafton also provides some interesting details regarding legal action concerning the cartoons and the *Charlot* trademark, p. 219.

restored by Lobster Films and, available on DVD⁶, attests to the comparatively crude quality of the series. Artistically far superior, though, is the subsequent "Charlie" series released by Nestor / Universal in 1918/19. Directed by Pat Sullivan and animated by Otto Messmer, these cartoons are the direct forerunner of the famous *Felix the Cat* series of the 1920s. In John Canemaker's documentary *Otto Messmer and Felix the Cat*⁷, the genesis of the series, and its effect on its feline follow-up, are recounted first-hand: "Chaplin sent a least thirty or forty photographs of himself in different poses, he was delighted, of course this helped the propagation of his pictures, you see, and he encouraged us . . . we copied every little movement that he did . . . later on that rubbed off and we used a lot of that kind of action in Felix Chaplin had a great influence on us." Incidentally, Felix met his animated cartoon predecessor in the 1923 *Felix in Hollywood*. Few samples of the "Charlie" series appear to survive,⁸ although home movie versions⁹ and compilations¹⁰ may provide some impression of the films. *Felix the Cat*, of course, is often rightly cited as the first true animated series "character" in film history, a major influence on Walt Disney, certainly extending beyond his *Alice in Cartoonland* series (which is literally inhabited by plenty of Felix clones) to his animated characters *Oswald* and *Mickey Mouse*.

Chaplin's impact beyond the world of slapstick film comedy can hardly be overestimated. Charlie Rivel practically embodied the influence of the film comedian on the traditional word of circus clowns. And with Messmer's variation of the tramp, a virtual lineage from Chaplin to *Felix* and, by extension, *Mickey Mouse* can be

⁶ *Charlie Chaplin Volume 4 – The Mutual Comedies*, DVD, GCTHV (France), Icestorm (Germany).

⁷ Available on the Milestone Collection DVD *John Canemaker - Marching to a Different Toon*, Image Entertainment 2001. Ironically, part the interview is illustrated with footage from what appears to be a clip from one of the Movca films.

⁸ Three titles, *On the Wind Mill*, *My Boy's Kid* and *Charley's African Quest*, are held in FIAF archives. Oddly, none of these titles appears in Gifford's filmography.

⁹ Comedy scholar Steve Rydzewski listed the following 100' 16mm toy films from a 1943 catalog by Garden Film services, NYC, NY: *Charlie at the Circus*, *Charlie's African Quest*, *Charlie in Russia*, *Charlie in the West*, *Charlie at the Beach*, *Charlie on the Farm* (posting on the alt.movies.silent newsgroup, 3/30/2004). Whether any of these films are extant is unknown at this point. *Charlie at the Circus* was later available in the S8 mm format in the 1980s, in a print likely derived from the vintage 16mm toy film.

¹⁰ *The Funniest Man in the World* (Vernon P. Becker, US 1967) contains a brief snippet of the cartoon Charlie with an ostrich. The video compilation *Behind the Scenes with Charlie Chaplin* contains a longer version of *Charlie at the Circus*.

established, linking two of the most recognizable icons of 20th century popular culture.

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