

Main title of an early Fleischer filmed sing-a-long. This reel presents "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys are Marching" and "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag." Its proximity to World War I is reflected in the military aspects of the cartoons which accompany the words. It's still in use today.



The Saga of

For little more than a decade, the organ-accompanied "sing-along" captured and held the fancy of the theatre-going public in the U.S.A. Most organists relied on highly-decorated, hand-colored slides to get the words to the songs of the day onto the screen. But the more adventuresome tried their hands at playing to words on movie film linked with animated cartoons and set to a strict tempo established by the animator. The playing had to be precise, or the act "fell flat." The most prominent, and original of the film sing-alongs were those featuring "Koko the Clown." He guided and often "stood in" for the famed "bouncing ball," which beat out a steady tempo, fast or slow, depending on the speed the silent film projectionist required to get the show out by 10:30 P.M. To explore the realm of "Koko" we called upon a former theatre organist who often crossed swords with the little clown during the "Golden Era" (especially when a few frames of film had been lost and the rhythm broken) — Colonel Harry J. Jenkins.

TO SETTLE any remaining controversy as to whether the "Bouncing Ball" sing-along cartoon originated in the silent picture days or after the advent of sound films, your reporter interviewed the former animator for Max and Dave Fleischer, the brothers who originated the "bouncing ball" song "cartunes."

Those who attended the 1968 ATOE national convention in Los Angeles saw one of the first "cartunes" produced by Max and Dave Fleischer. Their chief animator then was Mr. Richard Huemer



think·ing a·bout you...

Koko and His Bouncing Ball

by Harry J. Jenkins

(pronounced "humor") who now lives in North Hollywood, California, and is associated with Walt Disney Studios.

I visited Mr. Huemer on a rainy Sunday afternoon (of course it rains in California!) and when seated comfortably in his den, after having met his gracious wife, the veteran animator told me the story of the song cartoons.

Richard Huemer had entered the motion picture cartoon field in New York as an animator for the "Mutt and Jeff" cartoons produced by Raoul Barre in 1916. About this same time Max

Fleischer was producing "Out of the Inkwell" cartoons where the clown, "Koko," first appeared. When Huemer joined the Fleischers they were located in an old brownstone building on East 45th St., New York City. From this location they moved to quarters over a store at the corner of 45th Street and Lexington, diagonally opposite the Grand Central Plaza. It was here that they produced many "Inkwell" cartoons. As business improved they moved finally to a location upstairs over the notorious "Silver Slipper" night

club, next door to the famous Roseland ballroom and across the street from Moe and Mitchell Mark's Strang Theatre. This studio was at 1600 Broadway, New York City.

The Fleischers had an idea about combining cartoons with songs in an attempt to improve on popular song presentations. They hoped to replace the static song slides used by organists by adding motion to the pictures accompanying the "sing-along." They anticipated, quite correctly, good audience acceptance and participation. Max and



KOKO often appeared as a 'stand in' for the ball. Here, dressed in prison garb, he's poised for a three-legged leap back to the start of the next line. STUFOTO

Dave Fleischer were both good "idea" men, but Dave was essentially a "story" man. He plotted the sight gags so prevalent in the cartoons.

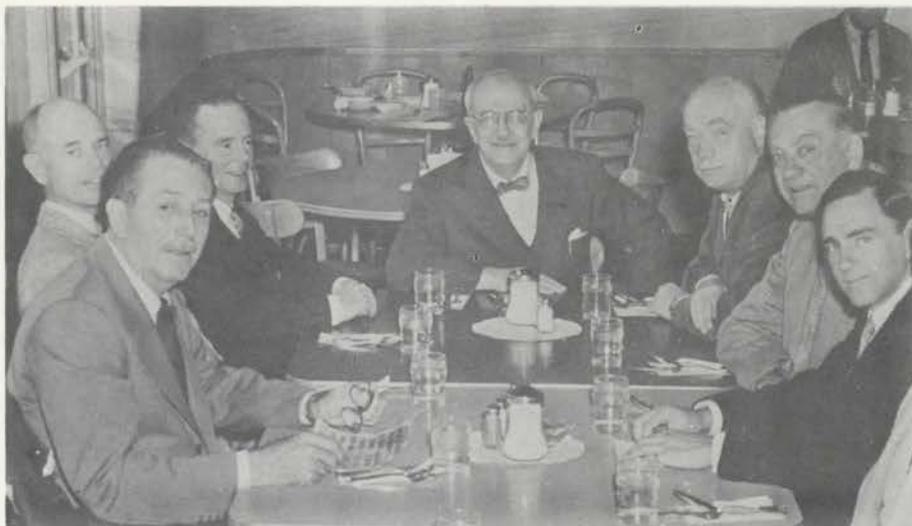
For example, the words would be introduced by having them slide onto the screen horizontally from right or left while a line drawing character, drawn white on black background, skipped from word to word in time with the music. Tricks were employed such as having a tree mentioned in the lyric "grow" out of the word, thereby dumping the cartoon figure onto the next word. Sometimes the word itself would enlarge, contract, melt and flow away, explode or turn into an animal, vegetable or mother-in-law. Always the little cartoon figure would skip, jump, or fall from word to word at the proper tempo to set the pace for the song.

After many conferences with Dick Huemer, by that time their chief animator, the first song cartoon was pro-



'KOKO's' animator, Richard Huemer, joined the Disney Studios in 1930. He says his roughest assignment was the animation he did for the 'Rite of Spring' sequence in Disney's memorable "Fantasia." He's still with the Disney Studio.

STUFOTO



In 1956, Walt Disney hosted a reunion of former Fleischer Studio staffers who at that time worked at the Disney Studio in Burbank, California. Lunching in the studio commissary are (l. to r): Walt Disney, and former Fleischer Studio employees Ben Sharpsteen (Director), Ted Sears (Story Man), Max Fleischer (center), Richard Huemer (Director), and George Stallings (Story Man). At far right is Disney staffer Richard Fleischer, Max's son and a Director.

duced. The title was "Oh Mabel" for a song which never went over too well despite the boost provided by the cartoon novelty. The year was 1924 and "Oh Mabel" was premiered at the Circle Theatre, Columbus Circle, New York City.

The Fleischers and Dick Huemer went to the Circle Theatre to check on the audience response. It was overwhelming. The crowd was actually singing — with gusto! We should state here that the premiere accompaniment was provided by the pit orchestra, although the house was equipped with a Moller organ.

After a mass tonsil-ripping rendition of "Oh Mabel," the applause was deafening and it carried over into the opening titles of the feature film. The management, alive to this new demand, shut down the projector, rewound the song cartoon and re-ran the film. Once more the audience happily joined in singing a loud "Oh Mabel." With such solid evidence of success, the Fleischers rushed back to their studio to rush more song cartoons into production.

In their ensuing crop of "cartunes," the Fleischers utilized such standards as, "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree," "After the Ball," "Chinatown, My Chinatown," "Tararra-Boom-De-Ay" and "My Darling Nellie Gray." Usually, it was one song to the reel and ran an average of 600 feet, much shorter than the standard silent 1000-foot reel of film. At the normal silent projection speed of 60 feet per minute the average song film ran ten minutes.

AROUND THE 'CIRCLE'

The Circle theatre, at Columbus Circle, New York, the "preem" house for the Fleischers' "Oh Mabel" song cartoon, opened in 1906 as a 1400-seat combination vaudeville and burlesque house. The policy was switched to movies in 1909 and circa 1912 it was taken over by Marcus Loew. He installed a 3 - manual Moller straight organ, Opus 2017, with "30 registers" about 1913. Moller always listed the number of stops (registers) on the console, never the number of sets of pipes; so 30 stop - keys, or drawknobs, wouldn't make it very large. Loew's hired about 70 organists in those days and although we have no information as to the 1924 Circle organist's identity, it's unlikely that he was one of the prominent ones; the Circle was fairly unimportant in Loew's pecking order. Loew's New York organists were forever doomed to play mostly "straight" Mollers, installed very early in the cinema era, before Marcus discovered Robert Mortons and Wurlitzers. Alas, the Circle is no more! An auto showroom occupies the site now.

—"Circle" background
courtesy of Ben Hall

In song presentations "Koko" would materialize out of the inkwell in a photo - and - cartoon composite, then would be shown in a comedy sequence in which he always contrived to finish with a ball in his hand. Koko would bounce the ball out of the picture to the right then the ball would appear from the left to hover over the first line of words of the song. The organist, or orchestra conductor was poised to start the first melody note as the ball struck the first word and from there on the bouncing ball was the conductor.

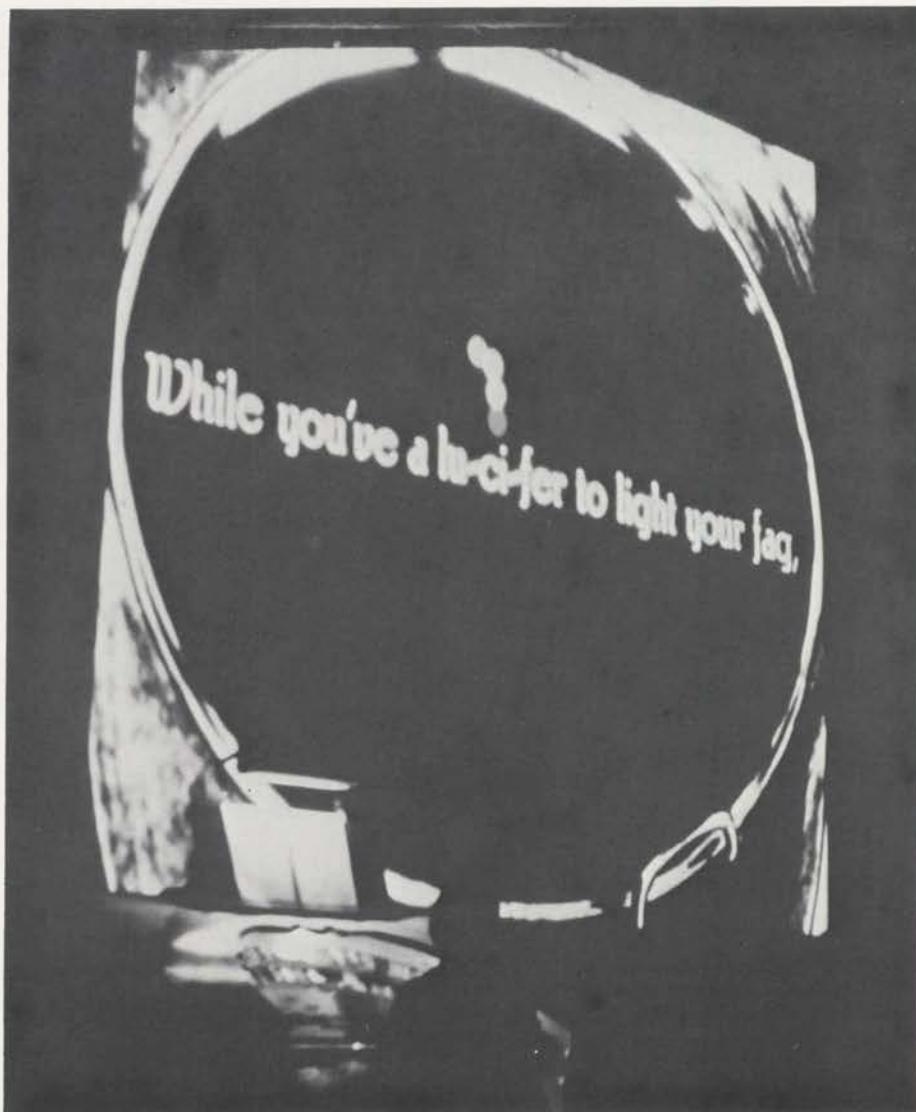
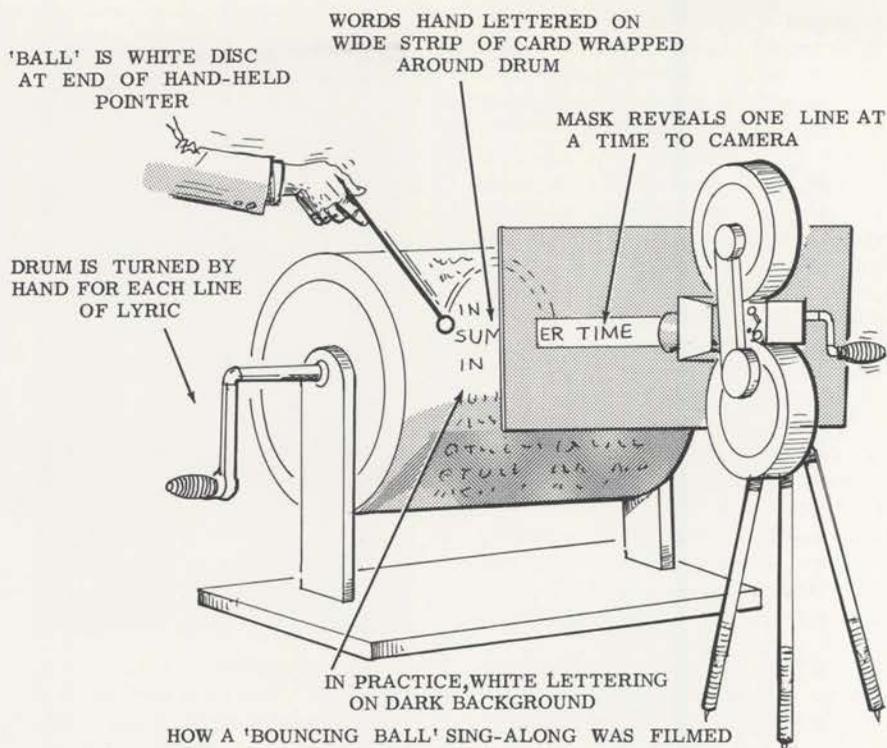
As the ball hopped to the end of a line of words, it would return to the left side in time to catch the first beat of the next line of words. These would appear from below as the first line disappeared above.

Dick Huemer explained that this was achieved by having the words of the song drawn in white letters on a black background, line by line. The flexible card with the words were wrapped around an old washing machine drum with the camera facing the front of the drum, so the words could be hand-turned up to position. A flat black card with a slit in it of sufficient width to permit the exposure of one line of words at a time was placed between the camera and the drum. The bouncing ball effect was achieved by use of a black pointer with white dot at the end. One of the animators would move the pointer over the words. Another person hummed, or played the tune. Another controlled the drum to move the next line into position in front of the slit. As



THE BALL STILL BOUNCES — Four degrees of 'bounce' are clearly visible in this photo taken by Ben Hall during a recent concert at the Beacon Theatre in N. Y. That's Lee Erwin at the console of the restored Wurlitzer, following the beat established by the ball-tipped pointer of Max Fleischer over 40 years ago.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CONCERT RECORDING



the "music" started the man with the pointer moved the ball in rhythm over the words, with a vertical motion until time to skip to the next word or syllable.

Incidentally, Max and Dave Fleischer originated the "Rotoscope" method of producing cartoons to obtain more smoothness in the actions of Koko. Dave would put on a clown suit and go through the story motions in front of a camera to obtain a silhouette or "photo-figure" film record from which the single line drawing would be copied. Thus, the cartoon characters could be drawn to walk, for example, with the same gait as a human. This method was applied in the late '30s when the Fleischers produced "Gulliver's Travels," a color cartoon feature in which the fluidity of motion given pen-and-ink characters was particularly noticeable. Today the Walt Disney studios use the Rotoscope technique to obtain smoothness of action in the majority of animated scenes with animals or humans.

So we can state that bouncing ball song cartoons came before sound — rest their nitrate bones! True, they were re-issued later with sound tracks. At that time other companies copied the idea but without the bouncing ball, which was controlled by the Fleischers. In 1924 sound was not in use in the theatres, unless some one of the theatres might have had an old Edison experimental talking picture dating from 1912, but Edison had not combined sound and a "sing-along."

I played for many bouncing ball song film in Boston theatres between 1924 and 1927. Sometimes they had been used in other theatres before coming to mine, and arrived with some frames missing — something I didn't discover until rehearsal — if we had one. It was a puzzle to follow the ball as it bounced completely past two words to a third, at the expense of a couple of measures of music. Somehow we still managed and the audience sang along. □

I first conceived the idea of the "Bouncing Ball" after World War I. In 1917 I 'enlisted' in the United States Army (as a civilian) to perform the duty of training raw recruits. This was accomplished by showing sections of cannons and other firearms on a motion picture screen. Then, with a pointer, directing the recruits attention to the different parts, one at a time, emphasizing the importance of one part in relation to another of the projected drawing. Thus, was born the "Bouncing Ball."

—Max Fleischer



Max Fleischer, pioneer in the art of the animated cartoon, is a man of many talents. Long before "Koko" made his first excursion out of the inkwell, Fleischer had produced some of the very first training films ever seen by U.S. Army recruits. Long a member of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, some fifteen of Fleischer's patents are used by the motion picture industry. His genius combines art, science, philosophy, creative ability and that all-important ingredient — humor. In later years he served as Art Editor for Popular Science Monthly, and wrote a book entitled "Noah's Shoes" which has been described as "an adventure in fantastic realities." As a film producer he often tackled difficult and controversial subjects. Once he produced a film explaining Einstein's theory

of relativity, and another dealing with Darwin's theory of evolution. But he is best remembered for the pleasure he and his brother Dave brought to generations of those who "thought young" from the early twenties through the late forties, a 25-year period when a stream of "bouncing ball," "Pop-eye" and "Betty Boop" cartoons brought laughter and song to motion picture screens. These culminated in Fleischer's two feature-length, color cartoons "Gulliver's Travels" and "Mr. Bug Goes to Town." Now retired, and in his 80's, Max Fleischer and his wife, "Essie," reside at the Motion Picture Country Home near Hollywood.



They helped the ball bounce for TO-B

The BOMBARDE is indebted to Don Malkames for frames from his "Out of the Inkwell" print which were enlarged for presentation here by Bill Lamb and Mapes Stanley. Background information was supplied by Ben Hall, Richard Huemer, Vera Coleman, and Max Fleischer. The BOMBARDE thanks them, one and all.