

JOSEPH BARBERA (1911-2006)

As this article is being written in mid-December, we are approaching the death anniversary of Joseph Barbera (December 18, 2006). So, I decided to look at another aspect of Italian-American contribution to American culture by detailing his life and work in this month's Alla Corrente.

Joseph Barbera was born at 10 Delancey Street in the Little Italy (Lower East Side) section of Manhattan, New York on March 24, 1911. His parents were Vincent Barbera and Francesca Calvacca, who were both born in Sciacca, Agrigento, Sicily, Italy. His family moved to Flatbush in Brooklyn when he was four months old. He had two younger brothers, Larry and Ted, both of whom served in World War II. As a member of the United States Army, Larry participated in the invasion of Sicily. Ted was a fighter pilot with the United States Army Air Forces and served in the Aleutian Islands Campaign. Joseph's father, Vincent, was the prosperous owner of three barbershops; however, he squandered the family fortunes on gambling. By the time Barbera was 15, his father had abandoned the family and his maternal uncle Jim became a father figure to him.



Barbera had displayed a talent for drawing as early as the first grade. He graduated from Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn in 1928. While in high school, he had won several boxing titles (he was briefly managed by World Lightweight Boxing Champion Al Singer's manager), but he soon lost interest in boxing.

During high school, he worked as a tailor's delivery boy. During the Great Depression, he tried unsuccessfully to become a cartoonist for a magazine called *The NY Hits Magazine*. He supported himself with a job at a bank, and continued to pursue publication for his cartoons. His magazine drawings of single cartoons, not comic strips, began to be published in *Redbook*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Collier's*—the magazine with which he had the most success. He also wrote to Walt Disney for advice on getting started in the animation industry. Disney wrote back, saying he would call Barbera during an upcoming trip to New York, but the call never took place.

Barbera took art classes at the Art Students League of New York and the Pratt Institute, and was hired to work in the ink and paint department of Fleischer Studios. In 1932, he joined the Van Beuren Studios as an animator and storyboard artist. He worked on cartoon series such as "Cubby Bear," "Rainbow Parades" and "Tom and Jerry." (This "Tom and Jerry" series starred two humans; it was unrelated to Barbera's later, more famous, cat-and-mouse cartoon series). When Van Beuren closed down in 1936, Barbera moved over to Paul Terry's Terrytoons studio.

In 1935, Barbera created his first solo-effort storyboard about a character named "Kiko the Kangaroo." The storyline was of Kiko in an airplane race with another character called "Dirty Dog." Terrytoons declined to produce the story. In his autobiography, Barbera said of his efforts:

I was, quite honestly, not in the least disappointed. I had proven to myself that I could do a storyboard, and that I had gained the experience of presenting it. For now, that was enough.

In 1937, lured by a substantial salary increase, Barbera left Terrytoons and New York for the new Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) cartoon unit in California. He found that Los Angeles was suffering just as much from the Great Depression as Brooklyn and he almost returned to Brooklyn.



In 1935, Barbera had married his high school sweetheart, Dorothy Earl. In school, they had always been an “item” and had been known as “Romeo and Juliet” to their friends. When he went to California in 1937, he and his wife separated for a time. They reunited later but were on the verge of another separation when they discovered that Dorothy was pregnant with their first child. (They would continue together in a less than amicable relationship until 1963, when the marriage finally ended in divorce).



At MGM, Barbera’s desk was opposite that of William Hanna. The two quickly realized they would make a good team. By 1939, they had solidified a partnership that would last over 60 years. Barbera and Hanna worked alongside animator Tex Avery, who had created Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny for Warner Bros. and went on to direct the Droopy cartoons at MGM.

In 1940, Hanna and Barbera jointly directed “Puss Gets the Boot,” which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best (Cartoon) Short Subject. The studio wanted a diversified cartoon portfolio, so despite the success of “Puss Gets the Boot,” Barbera and Hanna’s supervisor, Fred Quimby, did not want to produce more cat and mouse cartoons, believing that there were already enough cartoons like these in existence. Surprised by the success of “Puss Gets the Boot,” Barbera

and Hanna ignored Quimby’s resistance and continued developing the cat-and-mouse theme. By this time, however, Hanna wanted to return to working for the Harman and Ising animation studio, to which he felt very loyal. Barbera and Hanna met with Quimby, who discovered that although Ising had taken sole credit for producing “Puss Gets the Boot,” he never actually had worked on it. Quimby then gave Hanna and Barbera permission to pursue their cat-and-mouse idea. The result was their most famous creation, Tom and Jerry.

Modeled after the “Puss Gets the Boot” characters with slight differences, the series followed Jerry, the pesky rodent who continuously outwitted his feline foe, Tom. Hanna said they settled on the cat and mouse theme for this cartoon because “we knew we needed two characters. We thought we needed conflict, and chase and action. And a cat after a mouse seemed like a good, basic thought.” The revamped characters first appeared in 1941’s “The Midnight Snack.” Over the next 17 years, Barbera and Hanna worked exclusively on Tom and Jerry, directing more than 114 popular cartoon shorts. During World War II, they also made animated training films. Tom and Jerry relied mostly on motion instead of dialog. Despite its popularity, Tom and Jerry has often been criticized as excessively violent. Nonetheless, the series won its first Academy Award for the eleventh short, “The Yankee Doodle Mouse” (1943)—a war-time adventure. Tom and Jerry was



ultimately nominated for 14 Academy Awards, winning seven. No other character-based theatrical animated series has won more awards, nor has any other series featuring the same characters. Tom and Jerry also made guest appearances in several of MGM's live-action films, including "Anchors Aweigh" (1945), "Invitation to the Dance" (1956) with Gene Kelly, and "Dangerous When Wet" (1953) with Esther Williams.

In addition to his work in animated cartoons, Barbera and Harvey Eisenberg, the layout artist for Tom and Jerry cartoons, moonlit to run a comic book company named Dearfield Publishing. Active from 1946 to 1951, Dearfield's titles included "Red" Rabbit Comics, Foxy Fagan, and Junie Prom.

Quimby accepted each Academy Award for Tom and Jerry without inviting Barbera and Hanna onstage. The cartoons were also released with Quimby listed as the sole producer, following the same practice for which he had earlier condemned Ising. (Quimby also had once delayed a promised raise to Barbera by six months). When Quimby finally retired in late 1955, Hanna and Barbera were placed in charge of MGM's animation division. As MGM began to lose more revenue on animated cartoons due to television, the studio soon realized that re-releasing old cartoons was far more profitable than producing new ones. In 1957, MGM ordered Barbera and Hanna's business manager to close the cartoon division and lay off everyone by a phone call. Barbera and Hanna found the no-notice closing puzzling because Tom and Jerry had been such a successful cartoon series.

In 1957 Barbera made his first foray into television with collaboration with Robert D. Buchanan, producing "Colonel Bleep." The series, the first ever cartoon produced specifically for color television, would feature some of the futuristic designs and limited animation Barbera would later carry over to his other television productions. Barbera's involvement in "Colonel Bleep" (and with Buchanan) was apparently short-lived; his only known credited involvement was as a creator.

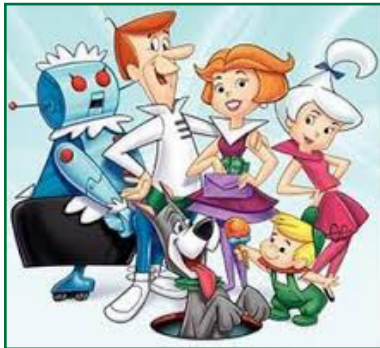
In 1957, Barbera also reteamed with his former partner Hanna to produce cartoon films for television and theatrical release. As they had at MGM, the two brought their different skills to the company: Barbera was a skilled gag writer and sketch artist, while Hanna had a gift for timing, story construction, and recruiting top artists. Major business decisions would be made together, though each year the title of president alternated between them. A coin toss determined that Hanna would have precedence in the naming of the new company, first called H-B Enterprises but soon changed to Hanna-Barbera Productions. Barbera and Hanna's MGM colleague George Sidney, the director of "Anchors Aweigh," became the third partner and business manager in the company, and arranged a deal for distribution and working capital with Screen Gems, the television division of Columbia Pictures, who took part ownership of the new studio.



The first offering from the new company was "The Ruff & Reddy Show," a series which detailed the friendship between a dog and cat. Despite a lukewarm response for their first theatrical venture, "Loopy De Loop," Hanna-Barbera soon established themselves with two successful television series: "The Huckleberry Hound Show" and "The Yogi Bear Show." A 1960 survey showed that half of the viewers of "Huckleberry Hound" were adults. This prompted the company to create a new animated series, "The Flintstones."

A parody of Jackie Gleason's "The Honeymooners," the new show followed a typical Stone Age family with

home appliances, talking animals, and celebrity guests. With an audience of both children and adults, “The Flintstones” became the first animated prime-time show to be a hit. Fred Flintstone’s signature exclamation “yabba dabba doo!” soon entered everyday usage, and the show boosted the studio to the top of the TV cartoon field. The company later produced a futuristic version of “The Flintstones,” known as “The Jetsons.” Although both shows reappeared in the 1970s and 1980s, “The Flintstones” was by far the more popular.



By the late 1960s, Hanna-Barbera Productions was the most successful television animation studio in the business. The Hanna-Barbera studio produced over 3000 animated half-hour television shows. Among the more than 100 cartoon series they produced were “The Quick Draw McGraw Show,” “Top Cat,” “Jonny Quest,” “The Magilla Gorilla Show,” “The Atom Ant/Secret Squirrel Show,” “Scooby-Doo,” “Super Friends,” and “The Smurfs.” The company also produced animated specials based on “Alice in Wonderland,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and “Cyrano de Bergerac,” as well as the feature-length films “Charlotte’s Web” and “Heidi’s Song.” [*\(Here is a 10-minute youtube review of the introductions to many of these shows.\)*](#)

As popular as their cartoons were with 1960s audiences, they were disliked by cartoon artists. Television programs had lower budgets than theatrical animation, and this economic reality caused many animation studios to go out of business in the 1950s and 1960s, putting many people in the industry out of work. Hanna-Barbera was central in the development of an animation technique known as limited animation, which allowed television animation to be more cost-effective, but often reduced quality. Hanna and Barbera had first experimented with these techniques in the early days of Tom and Jerry. To reduce the cost of each episode, shows often focused more on character dialogue than detailed animation. The number of drawings for a seven-minute cartoon decreased from 14,000 to nearly 2,000, and the company implemented innovative techniques such as rapid background changes to improve viewing. Critics criticized the change from detailed animation to repetitive movements by two-dimensional characters. Barbera once said that their choice was to adapt to the television budgets or change careers! The new style did not limit the success of their animated shows, enabling Hanna-Barbera to stay in business, providing employment to many who would otherwise have been out of work. Limited animation paved the way for future animated series such as “The Simpsons” and “South Park.”

In December 1966, Hanna-Barbera Productions was sold to Taft Broadcasting (renamed Great American Communications in 1987) for \$12 million. Barbera and Hanna remained at the head of the company until 1991. At that point, the company was sold to the Turner Broadcasting System for an estimated \$320 million. Turner began using Hanna-Barbera’s television catalog as material for its new Cartoon Network cable channel in 1992, and by the mid-1990s Hanna-Barbera was producing several original series for Cartoon Network, among them “Dexter’s Laboratory” and “The Powerpuff Girls.” In 1996, Turner merged with Time Warner, owners of Warner Bros., who would eventually absorb Hanna-Barbera into Warner Bros. Animation.



Barbera and Hanna continued to advise their former company and periodically worked on new Hanna-Barbera shows, including shorts for the series “The Cartoon Cartoon Show” and feature film versions of “The Flintstones” (1994) and “Scooby-Doo” (2002). In a new Tom and Jerry cartoon produced in 2000, “The Mansion Cat,” Barbera voiced the houseowner.



After Hanna’s death from throat cancer in March 2001, Hanna-Barbera was absorbed into Warner Bros. Animation, with the unit dedicated to the Cartoon Network original series, spun off into Cartoon Network Studios. Barbera remained active as an executive producer for Warner Bros. on direct-to-video cartoon features as well as television series such as “What’s New, Scooby-Doo?” and “Tom and Jerry Tales.” He also wrote, co-storyboarded, co-directed and co-produced “The Karate Guard” (2005), the return of Tom and Jerry to the big screen. His final animated project was the direct-to-video feature “Tom and Jerry: A Nutcracker Tale” (2007), which was dedicated to him.

Barbera died from natural causes at age 95 at his home in Studio City, Los Angeles on December 18, 2006, ending a 70-year career in animation. Shortly after his divorce, Barbera had met his second wife, Sheila Holden, at Musso & Frank’s restaurant, where she worked as bookkeeper and cashier. His first wife, Dorothy, had preferred to stay at home with the children and avoid the Hollywood social scene that Barbera often frequented; Sheila enjoyed the Hollywood social scene very much. Sheila was at his side when he died. He was also survived by two grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. In addition, he was survived by three children from his first marriage to Dorothy: Jayne (who worked for Hanna-Barbera), Lynn, and Neal. He is buried in a private section of the Great Mausoleum in Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale.

LEGACY

Most of the cartoons Barbera and Hanna created revolved around close friendship or partnership; this theme is evident with Fred and Barney, Tom & Jerry, Scooby and Shaggy, the Jetson family and Yogi & Boo-Boo. These may have been a reflection of the close business friendship and partnership that Barbera and Hanna shared for over 60 years. Professionally, they balanced each other’s strengths and weaknesses very well, but Barbera and Hanna travelled in completely different social circles. Hanna’s circle of personal friends primarily included other animators; Barbera socialized with Hollywood celebrities—Zsa Zsa Gabor was a frequent visitor to his house. Their division of work roles complemented each other, but they rarely talked outside of work since Hanna was interested in the outdoors and Barbera liked beaches and good food and drink. Nevertheless, in their long partnership, in which they worked with over 2000 animated characters, Barbera and Hanna rarely exchanged a cross word. Barbera said: “We understood each other perfectly, and each of us had deep respect for the other’s work.” Hanna once said that Barbera could “capture mood and expression in a quick sketch better than anyone I’ve ever known.”



Barbera and Hanna were also among the first animators to realize the enormous potential of television. Leonard Maltin, the film critic, says the Hanna-Barbera team “held a record for producing consistently superior cartoons using the same characters year after year—without a break or change in routine their characters are not only animated superstars, but also a very beloved part of American pop culture.” Barbera and Hanna are often considered Walt Disney’s only rivals in cartoon animation.

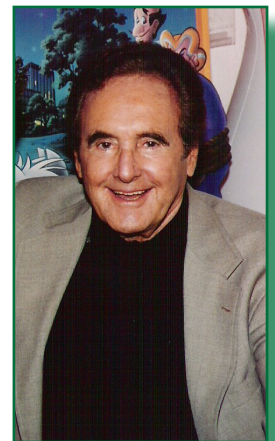
Barbera and Hanna had a lasting impact on television animation. Cartoons they created often make “greatest” lists. Many of their characters have appeared in films, books, toys, and other media. Their shows had a worldwide audience of over 300 million people in the 1960s and have been translated into more than 20 languages. The works of Barbera and Hanna have been praised not only for their animation, but for their music. “[The Cat Concerto](#)” (1946) and “[Johann Mouse](#)” (1952) have both been called “masterpieces of animation” largely because of their classical music.



In all, the Hanna–Barbera team won seven Academy Awards and eight Emmy Awards, including the 1960 award for “The Huckleberry Hound Show,” which was the first Emmy awarded to an animated series. They also won these awards: Golden Globe for Television Achievement (1960), Golden IKE Award – Pacific Pioneers in Broadcasting (1983), Pioneer Award – Broadcast Music Incorporated (1987), Iris Award – NATPE Men of the Year (1988), Licensing Industry Merchandisers’ Association award for Lifetime Achievement (1988), Governors Award of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (1988), Jackie Coogan Award for Outstanding Contribution to Youth through Entertainment Youth in Film (1988), Frederic W. Ziv Award for Outstanding Achievement in Telecommunications – Broadcasting Division College – Conservatory of Music University of Cincinnati (1989), stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (1976), several Annie Awards, several environmental awards, and were recipients of numerous other accolades prior to their induction into the Television Hall of Fame in 1994. In March 2005 the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences and Warner Bros. Animation dedicated a wall sculpture at the Television Academy’s Hall of Fame Plaza in North Hollywood to Hanna and Barbera.



In 1992, Barbera met with pop musician Michael Jackson, an avid cartoon fan, in an unsuccessful attempt to arrange for him to sing in “Tom and Jerry: The Movie.” Barbera drew five quick sketches of Tom and Jerry for Jackson and autographed them. Jackson autographed a picture for Barbera of himself and his niece, Nicole, with the words: “To my hero of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, with many thanks for all the many cartoon friends you gave me as a child. They were all I had. – Michael”



[Fred Flintstone opening \(38 seconds\)](#)

Adapted by James Boitano, PhD from Imbd.com, biography.com, Encyclopedia Britannica.com, American National Biography Online, and Wikipedia.