

by Steve Fritz

PT 2. – Getting Animated.

In the first part of this interview, Chuck McCann had worked his way up from stand-up and second banana to his own shows on various New York City television channels. His incredible ability to improvise, use of puppetry and general ability to keep kids and parents in stitches made him a local star. Now it's the mid-1960s, and the best was yet to come.

As far back as *Howdy Doody* or *Mickey Mouse Club*, kid shows relied on cartoons. Whether it was reruns of classic Looney Tunes, Disney or Van Buren shorts or originals from studios such as UPA, Jay Ward or Hanna-Barbera, these shorts provided needed breaks to change sets, grab one's breath and, in general, buy time. Chuck McCann was no different.

"Before every show I would go through all of them just so I could be familiar when I introduced them," McCann recalled. "Doing this I soon started to idolize voice artists like Daws Butler, Mel Blanc and Hans Conreid. When I would later get to work with them that was really a thrill."

McCann's ability for creative anarchy and army of voices also got him noticed, particularly by one producer in particular, Al Brodax.

In the mid-60s, Brodax was a particularly big name. He had just scored huge on ABC as the producer/director of *The Beatles* animated series, which was the top show of the year, which was produced by King Features. Now it was time for his next project, and McCann would have a heavy role. It was called *Cool McCool*.

"That was it. That was the baby," McCann said. "It was amazing because it was only just three of us, Carol Corbett, a wonderful actress, Bob McFadden and myself and we did all those voices. What really did it was while the man behind it all was Bob Kane, but Al Brodax was the real brains. He was already considered a great producer for doing *The Beatles* animated series. He would also later go on to do their film *Yellow Submarine*. In fact, we were going to do a sequel called *Strawberry Fields*--I was going to do the Walrus and other characters--but that fell apart. There's completed footage of that somewhere."

McCool capitalized on another huge trend of the day, superspies. In his yellow trench coat and flying car, the series titular hero took on villains such as The Rattler, Hurricane Harry, The Owl and more, usually blowing up a lot of real estate, himself and his friends in the process. The show not only capitalized on anything it could steal from 007, though. It also raided another hit series, Mel Brook and Buck Henry's *Get Smart!*. As it was, both shows wound up on NBC. *McCool* just was on Saturday mornings.

"Yeah. It was," McCann concurs. "So what we were doing was satirizing a satire. *Get Smart* was satirizing 007 and we were satirizing them with the wonderful characters Bob Kane created. I did about 90% of the voices. Bob McFadden, who was a very talented and wonderful guy, would do the other males. Oddly enough, he could any voice I could do, sometimes better. For instance, with *McCool*, Cool was supposed to sound like Jack Benny. Bob did Benny. I did Benny. We just thought he did Benny better. From there, we would toss up who would do most of the other characters, and I generally did most of them."

The show would also become a smash. Although NBC would never order more than its initial run of 40 half-hours, they would then go on and run them for three solid years. Even then, *Cool* enjoyed a long half-life in syndicated reruns. The series has just recently been released as a nicely priced box set by BCI. A quick viewing would tell you why it's now so well beloved.

"I never quite figured out who did the animation, but if you look at *Cool* and Jay Ward's stuff, they're both very similar," says McCann. "I got a feeling they used the same studio as Jay. Whoever they were, they knew how to add the right edge to the humor, especially the designs. They were so skillfully done and they really pulled the money out for the day. Now that it's out again, you can see just how on top of it they were. It's no wonder it lasted."

McCann's reputation also got the attention of others besides Brodax, too. He got a call from General Mills, who advertised their kids cereals on his shows. There were some very mercantile reasons for this, too. General Mills used a lot of Jay Ward characters such as Bullwinkle to sell their product, but their ad studio was based in New York. McCann's ability to mimic the likes of Stan Frieberg and Hans Conreid soon made the studios realize it was easier to hire him than fly Ward and company from the left coast.

"The great thing though is I did get to meet Jay, June Foray, Stan Frieberg and all that other incredible talent because I could also do Bullwinkle," McCann admits. "They were all wonderful people and very supportive."

But then GM had a new product it wanted to sell. It was a chocolate-based sugary confection it called Cocoa Puffs. The geniuses in advertising also came up with a cartoon character to push it named Sonny The KooKoo Bird. The first person they called to voice him was McCann.

"In fact, I did Koo Koo for the next 17 years," McCann said. "All they did was show me a sketch and the voice, right down to his line 'I'm Koo Koo for Cocoa Puffs!' came right out. I also did Gramps, who would always give him his Cocoa Puffs."

As one can now imagine, between his live show and calls for voice work, McCann wasn't just a busy man, he was starting to lose his mind.

"I knew I was in trouble when I walked into a bar and ordered Bosco on the rocks," he laughed.

The television industry would also have its own effect, as production was moving more and more to Hollywood than stay in New York. McCann was starting to find more work over in California than he was on the East Coast.

"I was flying back and forth so many times I wound up meeting myself at Kennedy Airport," he joked.

It was time to make the move. In the early 70s, McCann would follow the industry and move to Cali himself.

But McCann's love for comics and puppets would soon strike again, this time thanks in part to Marvel Comics, Hanna-Barbera and the Krofts.

ANIMATED SHORTS: CHUCK McCANN Part 2

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The New York period of McCann's life may be over, but that doesn't mean the legend's career was. Hardly. We learn more about that next Thursday..