

by Steve Fritz

CHUCK MCCANN – PT. 1

Talking With a New York Legend, and, As Always, a Lot More.

New Yorkers are a simple people. When they don't like you, and you're in their city, you'll be the loneliest person in the universe. In a town that hosts about ten million (counting illegals), that's saying something.

But if they love you...Well, ask Chuck McCann.

"I just recently went back to New York, to the Blue Note," the portly comic told me over the phone recently. "I was there to see some old friends of mine, the Manhattan Transfer."

What McCann didn't expect was the fans to recognize him. Before he knew it, the fans were making him stand up at his table to accept the locals' thunderous applause.

"I couldn't believe how everyone treated me!," McCann acknowledged. "I went out of my mind."

That's because we New Yorkers, especially those of us who could best be described as that aging bracket called the Baby Boomers, love him. As one firmly in that bracket, I should know and from that city, I should know.

"I forget!," McCann retorts. "I'm not an egomaniac. I was just stupefied."

In a way, McCann shouldn't be. A New York native (born in 1933 in Queens), he was the son of big band leader Val McCann, who was lucky enough to have a regular gig at CBS Radio. The elder McCann also supplemented his income by gigging regularly around the city. Among the competition was another band leader who would have an incredible influence on the younger man, Sid Caesar.

As it was, it seems the always large kid was doomed to become a comic. In his childhood he would entertain his school mates by creating all manner of voices and characters. This precocious behavior caught the attention of one of the elder McCann's colleagues at CBS. By the age of six, Chuck was earning his family an additional steady income as a voice actor on a number of radio dramas and comedies. Considering this was the tail end of the Depression, the additional income wasn't a bad thing.

Otherwise, from the sounds of things Chuck would lead an otherwise fairly normal life, at least for one growing up in the Big Apple.

"When I was a kid I was a complete comic book nut," said McCann. "I used to go around town and collect bottles so I could trade them in for comics. I was also one of those kids back in the day who used to go around to all my friends and say 'you wanna trade comic books?' Trade Comics? Sure. We all did that when I was a kid."

He also used to run home to listen to Mayor LaGuardia read the Sunday Funnies on the radio, root for the then Brooklyn Dodgers, and still manage to go to school, where he soon built a reputation as the class clown.



Still, the acting bug had bit into him deep. It wasn't long before he parlayed his experience at CBS to steady work at the then very young DuMont TV network, where he parlayed his now well-known love for Laurel and Hardy into his first TV gig.



"I remember walking around the DuMont complex as a kid," McCann recalls. "In fact, I remember walking the halls and often seeing Dr. Allen B. DuMont, the father of modern television, walking the halls in those days. I would go by and say (in a kids voice) 'Uh. Hello Dr. DuMont' and he would then say (in a much lower voice) 'Why hello Charles!' There were also guys like Big Bob Emery and Bishop Sheen walking the halls.

"Everybody was my influence, but Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy were first," says McCann. "Then Jackie Gleason, Sid Caesar, Ernie Kovacs. Dick Van Dyke and Jonathan Winter were pals of mine. We were all fast on our feet, especially when it came to running to the nearest saloons. We would go on each other's shows all the time. In fact, my first appearance on television ever was with Dick Van Dyke where we would do imitations of Laurel and Hardy. I was 18 at the time. We did the Gary Moore morning show. When Van Dyke moved on, he was replaced by Art Carney. Finally, I met up with Jim McGeorge, who captured the soul of Laurel, and we wound up doing Laurel and Hardy for the next 40 years."

McCann also developed another incredible passion during these years, for puppetry. As a kid he would create his own puppets to put on small performances.

"People ask me if they wanted to get a start in show business, what should they do. I tell them to learn about puppetry," said McCann. "The best acting class for a kid is to buy them some puppets and let their imaginations go. Let the kid create shows in their own mind. Through the puppets he will create all kinds of different characters. He will create all kinds of sets. He will create his own scripts, direct them and learn every phase of the industry. That's because it involves everything."

In the early 1950's, McCann made his first attempt at Hollywood, where he truly started to make a name for himself on stage. But within two years he was back in New York, doing stand-up, and again working for DuMont. It was at that time he would meet another major New York legend, Sandy Becker.

For those who don't remember Becker, consider this. If Buffalo Bob Smith was the first true TV kids' host, Becker could have probably laid serious claim as the second. A slim, intense man with an incredible talent for mime and puppetry, Becker insured his immortality by creating the show *Wonderama*. To help him on that show, Becker hired McCann as a regular cast member.

“Sandy Becker! That was a name I don’t hear enough,” McCann said. “Sandy Becker gave me my start. I wound up subbing for him.”

If that wasn’t enough, McCann also picked up a regular gig for another kids show, CBS’s *Captain Kangaroo*. That didn’t last too long though as the Captain’s creator, Bob Keeshan, had a very different philosophy on how to entertain the kiddies.

“Bob always believed that you should approach the kids with quiet, hushed tones,” said McCann. “I always felt different. I thought kids liked to be surprised and not talked down to, so that only lasted for about a couple years.”

So by the mid-50s, McCann was now a hard-working young actor and comic. Still, Becker would have one huge surprise waiting for his pal. By this time, the two had left *Wonderama* to set up shop again at the main DuMont channel, Channel 5 (then going under the call letters WABD).

“Now when I went back there, I had started working with the puppets, and that’s when I hooked up with Sandy. In those days it used to be a six to nine-hour show and it was LIVE,” McCann said. “One day he called me over and said he was going and he wanted me to take over the show. At first I couldn’t believe he was talking to me. I said ‘Me?’ and he said ‘Yeah.’ Then I started to think about it. So I said ‘When do I start?’ He said ‘Well today’s Friday. So you start Monday.’ I said ‘Well where are you going?’ and he turned around and said ‘South America. You start at 7:00 in the morning. So long!’ The elevator doors close and off he went. That was my baptism by fire. The first day was just disastrous. It was Hell on Earth. It was also fun. It was really fun.”

If you were to ask McCann though, what also saved him was Becker introduced the former to a perfect counterpart, Paul Ashley. Ashley was also a master puppeteer, and wherever McCann went, the other would be with him for the next three decades.

“Paul actually was a genius,” says McCann. “He was like one of those great Italian artisans. He created these marvelous, marvelous figures and we’d breathe life in them.”

Then it was time for McCann and Ashley to make their own opportunity. Across the river in Newark, New Jersey, the then independent channel 13 needed a kids’ host. They hired McCann and Ashley to create their own show, *Puppet Hotel*. From there, the two parlayed that to the **New York Daily News**-owned WPIX (Channel 11) under the new title *Let’s Have Fun*.

And a new New York legend was born.

Backed by Ashley’s incredible puppets, McCann managed to mix his love of stand-up, radio, comics and, of course, puppets, into one the wildest kid shows to ever hit the small screen. It was not an uncommon sight for McCann to dress up anywhere like Dick Tracy, Dondi and even Little Orphan Annie, and read the Sunday funnies to us half-pints. He also would put on incredible puppet skits, host his share of special guests and, naturally, introduce cartoons—primarily from the King Syndicate.

The show had a rough’n ready look that TV just doesn’t have any more.

“Absolutely,” McCann concurs. “I used to do a four hour morning show called *Let’s Have Fun* against *Wonderama*, the show I helped create. There was no money for props. We used to scour the garbage between Fifth and Park Avenue every Thursday night. They had the best junk. To compete, I used to do Gilbert & Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore* with the puppets, a 2 ½-3 hour version no less, with just five puppeteers. We did elaborate, elaborate stuff. I was doing it seven days a week, plus specials. I never got to bed. I also did an hourly afternoon show and was a regular performer on the Clay Cole variety show. If that wasn’t enough, I also did a dance show for teenagers, but that was great for Dick Clark but I was a comic.”

Kids still loved him. In fact, a weekday afternoon was a constant battle between McCann, the then Sonny Fox-hosted *Wonderama*, Becker (who now had his own show on Channel 5) and the ever controversial Soupy Sales. Throw in the beloved "Officer" Joe Bolton and his *Three Stooges* broadcasts, and it was probably the greatest period of kids TV, ever.

But the times were changing. Fortunately for McCann, he was smart enough to move with them. By the mid-60s shows such as the syndicated *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer* were bringing in a new era for kids TV. Programming Directors started realizing they could still bring in the audiences but without springing the money for sets, guests and, most importantly, kid show hosts.

Luckily for McCann, being King Syndicate and WPIX were owned by the same company, he had contact with some very major players in the animation field. One of them, Al Brodax, knew what he saw in the guy who was introducing a number of cartoons Brodax was producing.

The next phase of McCann's career was about to begin in the form of a NBC Saturday morning show named *Cool McCool*.

ANIMATED SHORTS: CHUCK McCANN Part 1

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We start Part 2 of our interview with animation legend Chuck McCann in next Tuesday's column.