

by Steve Fritz

### CHUCK McCANN PT 3 – DOIN' HIS THING IN THE WEST COAST

Unlike some people, when hard working voice actor and kids host Chuck McCann decided it was time to leave his native New York City, he did it because he was already getting a ton of work waiting for him. His last decade-plus of improvisatory TV had set up some very solid underpinnings for a successful Hollywood career, both behind the camera and in front.

“When I first did my own show, I wrote so much stuff that it looked like *Gone With The Wind*,” McCann said, “and we only did about 10% of it. What I learned was you had to have a free-thinking attitude so you don’t box yourself in. You just have to come up with ideas, more than anything else. Then, once you get into it, you improvise and ad lib. From there it opens up and blossoms. So, what I learned was to come up with a beginning, a middle and an end, and the rest would take care of itself. All those sketches and shows I did were like that.



“The other thing is I never played down to kids. I never thumbed my nose at them. I always talked on my level to them. I never assumed kids were mental midgets. I believe I wound up with a bigger audience because of that.

“And you know what? You don’t have that nowadays. They just aren’t developing what I had the opportunity of doing. The only exception is on late night TV like Adult Swim or Steve Colbert, and unfortunately that’s when all the kids have gone to bed.”

As it was, one of the first persons to greet McCann with steady work were the Krofft Brothers, who were old friends of his at the Big Apple.

“When I first came out to the coast, Marty called me up and asked if I would do some work for him. I said, ‘of course,’ said McCann. “I first met Sid when I did a New Year’s Eve show when I was working for Channel 9 WOR in New York around 1957-8. We did a whole three hours of puppet stuff. It was quite an event. First of all, we did *Puffnstuff*. I also worked on *Lost Worlds* and then *Sigmund and the Sea Monster*.”

Then disaster would strike the Krofft Brothers. One that would eventually turn into an opportunity for McCann.

“They had a tremendous fire that started with all the foam they used on the puppets,” says McCann. “They had this cave that they had built for Sigmund. It literally exploded due to some lights in it. The explosion was so disastrous that Billy Barty, who worked with us at the time, said it sucked all the air out of the studio. Anyway, they asked me if I could create some new stuff for them. After having written on *Sigmund* I knew what they wanted and I didn’t mind helping.”

The first thing McCann came up with turned out to be one of the few true highlights of 1970s Saturday morning TV. It was called *Far Out Space Nuts*, which not only starred McCann and Bob Denver, McCann also wrote.

“Fred Silverman, who was in charge of CBS Saturday mornings at the time, said he wanted us to do an outer space show,” said McCann. “He and I had met when I was still working at WPIX. One day I was painting my set and he was next door painting Bozo’s set. So I put down my brush and introduced myself, he did the same and said ‘I’m Fred Silverman, your new program manager at ‘PIX.’ That’s just how broke we were in those days!

“So Freddy said ‘I want to do something like Bing Crosby and Bob Hope in outer space.’ That became *Space Nuts*. Then Marty brought in Bob Denver, and I knew an opportunity when I saw it. So I made it more like *Gilligan’s Island* in space. So we played very similar to those characters, with a little Laurel and Hardy thrown in. The only thing we had a difference with Fred with is he wanted to make the aliens the villains and I didn’t.”

Making its debut in 1975, the Krofft would produce 16 episodes that season. CBS would then run the same 16 episodes for the rest of the year. While there was talk about doing a new season, it never happened because CBS was too slow to renew. By the time the network did, the Krofft had already torn the set down.

Not that this was the only thing McCann had going for him. By this time he was also working for another major 70s studio of the day, Hanna-Barbera.

“I wound up at Hanna-Barbera doing just about everything,” says McCann. “I worked on Yogi, the Drac Pack, CB Bears, Scooby Doo, all of those shows. What was even better is I was standing right next to Stan Frieberg, Daws Butler, Hans Conreid and being directed by the best directors in town for the day. It was just thrilling for me.

“They were the best. I mean you talk about regular people? They were it. I also met Walt Disney and all these guys were very nice guys. If you met Walt it was like meeting the regular guy down the street. There was no ego involved with any of them.

Now Bill and his wife used to come to the Sportsman’s Lodge, and that was my hangout. So we used to meet every morning and just plain chat. Then we’d go into the studio to do our things. Working for them was very creative yet very laid back. What I also liked was the door was always open with both Bill and Joe. If you had a problem, you could see them and they’d help you figure it out.”

During this relationship with Hanna-Barbera, McCann also kept in touch with another friend he had made in New York, Stan Lee. Through this connection he would eventually land the roll of Ben Grimm, a.k.a. the ever-loving Thing. Hanna-Barbera had done a syndicated version of the series back in the 1960s, but McCann wasn’t involved with that one as he was still in New York and H-B preferred California talent.

“Stan Lee called me up,” said McCann. “At the time, he had just sold Marvel and was putting together this new outfit. They never even played the original actors version of the Thing for me. Now I was already familiar with the Fantastic Four because I had done a reading for Stan at Carnegie Hall. We did that in the early 70s. We were literally reading the comics at Carnegie Hall. I did the Hulk. So I came up with my own idea about that I thought Ben Grimm would sound like. It’s basically my own voice but a little lower and more, shall we say, gravelly. I also gave him a Lower Manhattan accent, being that was where he was from.”

He would not only voice The Thing in Marvel’s version of the F4, but also do crossovers on such shows as *The Silver Surfer* and other Marvel productions of the day. He was also working with them on their version of *GI Joe*, primarily in the role of Leatherneck.

If that wasn’t enough, his abilities caught the eye of one other major studio, Disney. But they initially had very different plans for him.

"The first thing I did for Disney was not animation," he said. "I did a part in *Herbie Rides Again*. Then they created this ride and I did the voice of The Dreamfinder (with Billy Barty) in Florida in the Kodak Pavilion, which ran for 20 years."

But the voice work was also coming. He would soon be cast in the roles of not only Duckworth, but the Beagle Boys in *DuckTales*.

"Well, *Duck Tales* was the first show that Disney used to launch their Disney Afternoon shows. They treated it like a really big series, so to get the job was a really big catch. From there, they put me on *Winnie The Pooh*.

"But what was interesting is while the voice artists were all these vets like myself, Alan Young and June Foray, you had all these young guys working in the background. There was also a younger generation of voice artists too, like Hamilton Camp and Luci Taylor."

His work on the Beagle Boys paid off in another interesting way. It caught the attention of a young up-and-comer named Craig McCracken, who had just started his own first series, *The PowerPuff Girls*.

"One reason *The PowerPuff Girls* was so special is they got real voice actors for the main roles. They're sensational actors," says McCann. "A voice actor knows, right? They know the animator works off of the track. He just doesn't draw the mouth and expect the voice actor to hit it. He uses the tracks to create his attitudes for his characters. That's how he gets the nuances into those characters. They come from the voice actor.

"Another thing about what made *PowerPuffs* so great is we all worked in an ensemble. Nowadays most times they work with the individual voice actors in isolation. This especially happens with a name actor. That means usually all the star does is run the lines. The voice director will say 'Do line #495' and they'll do it, and it sounds like it.

"Now when you get an ensemble piece it's like doing a radio show. The voice actors are like jazz musicians. We are literally sitting there with our music stands and our scripts and doing radio acting. What you end up with is the difference between interacting and just reading your lines. That's so important. You don't want to lose that. That's what made *PowerPuff Girls*. Everybody interacted. Of course, you had great directors on that show, too. Craig McCracken is one of the best."

And, for the record, this document doesn't even cover the live action work McCann would put over these three decades, ranging anywhere from *Little House On The Prairie* to making a very strong cameo in the film *The Aristocrats*. That will have to wait for someone else to do.

*In the past we pretty much ran through the entire career of this legendary voice actor and kids show creator. So how is he doing today? As it turns out, pretty darn good. Read on.*

## **LIVING LARGE IN L.A.**

So how does an animation legend spend his later years? Well, if you Chuck McCann, you enjoy them.

Looking pretty hale and fit for a man of 73, McCann states that while he doesn't work the way he used to, that doesn't mean he's completely out of the business.

"That's one area I never really left," he says. "I admit I'm really a lucky guy. Today, if somebody comes around, like recently I did a role in a movie called *Sasquatch* for a buddy of mine, I might do it. I don't have to. I've reached the point where I don't have to bust my ass for jobs. I can relax and help other people. For instance, last night I had a lunch with a bunch of young actors."

He also admitted he's been doing "a lot of voices," for the upcoming Spider-Man video game. Of course, when McCann says young, it's should be taken in context. For him 'young,' means v.o. vets like Yeardley Smith, the voice of Lisa Simpson and McCann's next door neighbor, puppeteer Leslie Carrera or the ever busy Wally Wingert.

"He's the new Chuck McCann," he says of Wingert. "He does work on *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and all those shows. It's guys like him who should replace the old soldiers that have fallen down, like Blanc, Daws and the rest."

Fun for McCann means every Thursday hooking up with another great friend, the queen herself June Foray, where they jam with a 17-piece big band in Southern California. The man is also knee deep in charitable work. His continues his love of all things Laurel and Hardy by being one of the founding members of The Sons of the Dessert. He was also a founder of the actor's relief crew called Yarmy's Army.

"I'm enjoying the fall of my years," says McCann. "Mentally I'm still 19 although I'm really 73. That's not that old. I mean I started radio when I was six. I'm sitting talking to you from a theatre that I built in my home. It's a public theatre and can seat about 40 people, but I usually only allow 20. I have a full editing bay. So whenever I get an idea I take my cameras and shoot it, then I go here and play. I edit it, cut it and project it on the screen. In all, I have a lot of fun."

And, of course, when he does make the rare public appearance in New York City, any Big Apple boomer who bumps into him can't help but pour the love on. But that's the way it should be, shouldn't it?

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