



TV on DVD!



by **Billy Ingram**

It was my pleasure to speak recently (May 8, 2007) with the legendary Chuck McCann, a true television pioneer who starred in a number of memorable kid shows, commercials, sitcoms and motion pictures and who is today one of the most sought after voice actors and supporting players in the business.

"My show was gas driven."

- Chuck McCann

Turn on WPIX or any of the other major stations in New York City in the morning and early evening hours and you'll find multi-million dollar local operations with numerous on-air anchors and elaborate sets; programs staffed by dozens of writers and production personnel.

Not so back in the 1950s and '60s. What makes Chuck McCann so special, so unique, is that he is one of only a handful of people who toiled in the wild and woolly early days of live local TV, a time when performers filled hours of daytime by their wits alone, often expected to be on the air 7 days a week. Christmas day as well.



After a decade appearing on network shows like *Rootie Kazootie*, *The Gumby Show* and *Captain Kangaroo*, as



It is what it is!

CHUCK McCANN



VISIT: Chuckmccann.net

New York City shows starring Chuck McCann include: *The Puppet Hotel*, *Let's Have Fun*, *The Great Bombo's Magic Cartoon Circus*, *Chuck McCann's Laurel & Hardy Show*, and *The Chuck McCann Show*.

Chuck and puppeteer Paul Ashley began working together on TV in 1950 as puppeteers on the *Rootie Kazootie Show*, one of the most inventive and fondly remembered network children's shows of the time.

They made a huge splash on New York City local TV when they performed an elaborate puppet version of *HMS Pinafore* on Sandy Becker's version of WABD channel 5's *Wonderama* on Sunday afternoon September 25, 1955. It proved so popular it was performed again as a 90 minute special on WABD in April of 1956.

[More on Chuck McCann's NYC kid shows here.](#)



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well as successful stints on Sandy Becker's *Wonderama* and other NYC locals, Chuck McCann along with Paul Ashley began starring in one version or another of *The Chuck McCann Show* (starting out with *Puppet Hotel* and *Let's Have Fun*) from 1960-1967.

Daytime television hadn't yet become the massive money generator it is today, which is why most local programming pre-1970s was aimed at children. Multi-faceted performers like Chuck McCann were expected to go out there with no scripts, very little budget and scant support behind the camera.



"I would get up in the morning and just walk from 49th street to 42nd street. And that's where I created what I was going to do. You can not sit and write like, four hours of television," Chuck told *TVparty*. "I could never

have done that show if I had to have it written. You know, today you have to have every word written. It was just such a massive amount of comedy that I just depended upon my instincts to take me. Not that I didn't plan. I'd get an idea for a sketch and I had a beginning and a middle and an end. But how I got from point A to point B to point C... my instincts took me there."

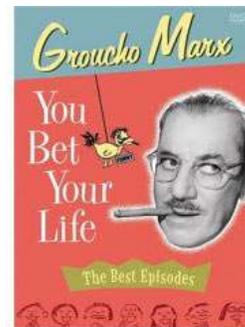
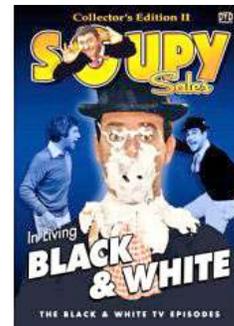
Like fellow broadcasters Sandy Becker and Soupy Sales, Chuck McCann was a bit different as he had a substantial adult audience.



Here's a closing from a *Chuck McCann Show* in the mid-1960s that will give you some idea why his brilliant, absurdist program was enjoyed by kids and adults alike.



Chuck and Paul became known for their riotously funny character bits and colorful puppetry that included the



Laurel & Hardy characters on *Let's Have Fun*, *The Puppet Hotel*, *The Great Bombo's Magic Cartoon Circus*, *The Clay Cole Show*, *Chuck McCann's Laurel & Hardy Show*, and *The Chuck McCann Show* (1963-1967).

In 1966, McCann provided voices for the popular Saturday morning cartoon *Cool McCool* which is now available on DVD. He's also famous for one of the hottest catch phrases of the 1960s as the man in the Right Guard commercials that pops up on the other side of a fellow's bathroom cabinet and cheerfully exclaims, "Hi Guy!"

Among the hundreds of animated commercials he's done, boomers may know him best as the voice of both Sonny the Cuckoo Bird and Gramps in those unforgettable 1960's Cocoa Puffs commercials.

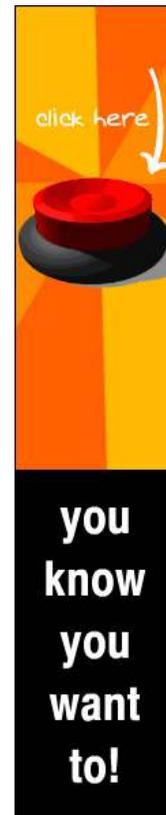


In 1975, Chuck McCann co-starred with *Gilligan's Island's* Bob Denver in the CBS live-action Saturday morning sci-fi comedy *Far Out Space Nuts* (he was also co-producer and writer). He even made a brief return to daily kid's television with *Chuck McCann's Fun Stuff*, seen weekday mornings on KHJ (KCAL) 9 in Los Angeles in the fall of 1989.



Aside from television, Chuck McCann earned critical acclaim for his dramatic roles in *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* with Alan Arkin and for starring in *The Projectionist*, a genuine cult favorite.

You can also spot Chuck in *Silent Movie*, *Foul Play* and numerous family movies like *Herbie Rides Again*; his [imdb.com listing](http://www.imdb.com) is a stunning roundup of famous sitcoms (*The Bob Newhart Show*, *Happy Days*, *The Facts of Life*), dramas (*Bonanza*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Knots Landing*) and cartoons (*The Jetsons*, *Pac-Man*, *Ducktails*) he lent his talents to. Kids today know him as the voice of Ben Grimm (The Thing) on *Fantastic Four*, Leatherneck on *G.I. Joe*, and Blizzard on *Iron Man*. He's acted in everything from *Little House on the Prairie* to *Linda Lovelace for President* and even provides voices for video games like *Gothic 3* and *True Crime: New York City*.

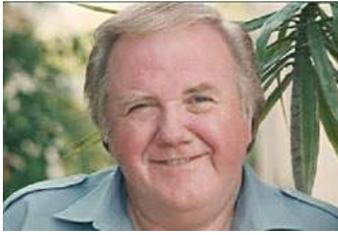


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Though we were scheduled to talk for a half hour, Chuck was kind enough to speak with me for over 45 minutes and it was a joy to hear his fascinating stories about working in New

York and Hollywood.

(Photo from Chuckmccann.net)

I'm sharing our telephone conversation with you here - hopefully you can forgive the occasional audio artifacts that turned up on the tape (and the trains that pass my home) but I think it's important to preserve the memories of those working in the adolescent days of television because, like it's said, they just don't make 'em like that anymore.

I'll be sharing other telephone conversations with TV notables in the near future.

PART ONE - Real Player / Quicktime

Chuck talks about his early days performing on stage and on live TV. He details how his show was done, talks about Sandy Becker giving him his big break and about working with his mentor, legendary puppeteer Paul Ashley. Chuck has some great advice in this interview for performers.



PART TWO - Real Player / Quicktime

Chuck talks about the time he was performing the role of Sailor Clyde on the *Captain Kangaroo* show in 1959 and about living and working (and becoming friends with Jason Robards) in New York in the 1960s. Stories about working on *Cool McCool*, *Turn On* (the notorious TV flop that lasted one episode, produced by *Laugh-In's* George Schlatter), and the Steve Allen *Tonight Show*. I asked Chuck about playing W. C. Fields in the TV movie *Mae West* (as far as I'm concerned no one has inhabited the role of Fields better than Chuck did in that film).

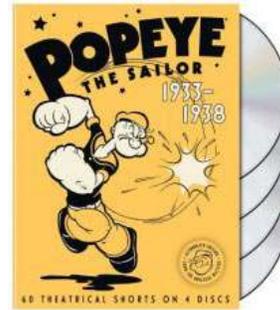
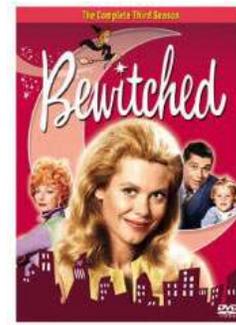


PART THREE - Real Player / Quicktime

Turns out Chuck and his wife were friends with Mae West and he shares stories of the immortal comedienne and how she had a mini-comeback in the 1970s thanks to his wife Betty, a former agent at the William Morris Agency. He also talks about Stan Laurel and his

Brown Paper Pete Film Festival that highlights short subjects produced by young filmmakers. If you live in the L.A. area, look for this monthly event at the Fine Arts, a wonderful theater near downtown - if you haven't been it's a deco-licious place not to be missed. There's nothing like watching films in old movie theaters, a rare treat that is rapidly becoming an anachronism.

You can watch Chuck McCann as W.C. Fields in *Mae West* thanks to You Tube:



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