

# Why did the mainstream media ignore Al Capp's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday?

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The 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of cartoonist Al Capp, has come and gone, ignored by the hundreds of newspapers that used to carry his satirical daily comic strip “Li'l Abner,”

In today's politically correct environment, Capp's centennial didn't rate mention since he was a conservative who mercilessly made fun of such liberal heroes as Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and Teddy Kennedy.

His comic strip began in 1934, when the 25-year-old cartoonist had an idea for a daily comic strip featuring hillbillies. He'd just spent several years ghostwriting “Joe Palooka,” a popular strip by cartoonist Ham Fisher, who hired Capp when he ran out of ideas.

## Capp's new strip starred Li'l Abner Yokum

Abner was the simple and muscular, poor but lazy, uneducated but good-natured hero of Dogpatch. He lived with Mammy and Pappy Yokum and devoted much of his energy into avoiding matrimony with the beautiful, intelligent and industrious Daisy Mae, his devoted and faithful girlfriend. During the 1950s, Capp surrendered to pressure from the strip's millions of daily fans and let the couple marry.

Their wedding was such a national event that the happy couple made the cover of *Life* magazine.

When it debuted, Li'l Abner was picked up by only eight newspapers. However in the midst of the Great Depression, the poor but always hopeful Dogpatchers were a nationwide hit. Within three years, their daily adventures had an audience of 15 million readers. At the peak of their popularity, the strip appeared in over 500 newspapers with a combined circulation over 60 million – when the entire population of the United States was about 180 million.

Capp created hilarious cartoon characters based on his travels in the mountains of Appalachia. “Li'l Abner” grew into one of the most imaginative, popular and well-drawn strips of the 20th century.

“It featured wildly outlandish characters, bizarre situations and equal parts suspense,” writes Stefan Kanfer, in *City Journal*, one of the few national media outlets to recognize Capp's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Filled with “slapstick, irony, satire, black humor and biting social commentary, Li'l Abner is considered a classic of the genre,” writes Kanfer.

## **'Yokum' was a combination of yokel and hokum**

Capp apparently did not know that "Yocum" was actually a common surname in the rural Ozarks, an area that embraced the characters as and eventually hosted a theme park at a rural Arkansas town that officially changed its name from "Marble Falls" to "Dogpatch."

The Yokums lived in what would be described as "an average stone-age community" which mostly consisted of hopelessly ramshackle log cabins, pine trees, "tarnip" fields and "hawg" wallows.

"Capp filled his comic strip with an assortment of memorable characters, including Marryin' Sam, Hairless Joe, Lonesome Polecat, Evil-Eye Fleegle, General Bullmoose, Lena the Hyena, Senator Jack S. Phogbound, Washable Jones, Nightmare Alice, Earthquake McGoon, and a cast of women like Daisy Mae, Wolf Gal, Stupefyin' Jones and Moonbeam McSwine, who preferred the company of pigs to men," recalls Kanfer.

## **They were a part of American society**

Cap's women found their way onto the painted noses of bomber planes during World War II and the Korean War.

"Among Capp's most popular creations were the Shmoos, creatures whose incredible usefulness and generous nature made them a threat to civilization," writes Kanfer.

It was in the summer of 1948, that Li'l Abner ventured into the Valley of the Shmoos. There the armless, harmless, pear-shaped creatures lived and died to please humanity. Shmoos happily immolated themselves for the hungry by leaping into a frying pan. After half an hour on the heat, they tasted like chicken. If broiled, they tasted like steak. Their pelts made perfect boot leather or house timber, depending on how thick they were sliced.

Unfortunately, the generous animals wreaked havoc on business. After all, who would pay for food or shelter when Shmoos were around?

So they were annihilated by "Shmoocide Squads" funded by J. Roaringham Fatback, the gluttonous Pork King.

The satire caught on nationally, but was denounced by liberals, remembers comic-book publisher Denis Kitchen. "They thought Capp was making fun of socialism and Marxism."

## **'If the Shmoo fits,' Capp retorted, 'wear it'**

"Another famous character was Joe Btfsplk, who wanted to be a loving friend but was 'the world's worst jinx,' bringing bad luck to all those nearby. Btfsplk (his name was 'pronounced' by simply making the rude noise of a Bronx cheer) always had an iconic dark cloud over his head.

"Dogpatch residents regularly combatted the likes of city slickers, business tycoons, government officials, and intellectuals with their homespun stupidity.

"Situations often took the characters to other destinations, including New York City, Washington, D.C., Hollywood, tropical islands, the moon, Mars and some purely fanciful worlds of Capp's invention.

"The latter included El Passionato, Kigmyland, the Republic of Crumbumbo, Skonk Hollow, the Valley of the Shmoos, planets Pincus Number 2 and 7 and a miserable frozen wasteland known as Lower Slobbovia."

The latter entered the American vocabulary. In his book *The American Language*, H.L. Mencken also credited Capp with inventing the terms “double whammy,” “skunk works,” “Sadie Hawkins Day,” “druthers,” “schmooze” and “nogoodnik.”

Mammy Yokum was a pipe-smoking, feisty, senior citizen who could outbox and outfox men twice her size. She and everyone else in Dogpatch avidly read the comic page misadventures of bumbling detective Fearless Fosdick, who looked remarkably like the popular Dick Tracy, star of a competing comic strip written by one of Capp’s arch-rivals, Chester Gould.

## **But it was all in good fun**

Fellow cartoonist Milton Caniff, creator of the Steve Canyon comic strip once told an interviewer that Capp was “far more an intellectual than he allowed the public to see. Li’l Abner was his joke on the dismal world around him. His humor welled-up from the melancholy pits of a strapping kid made an amputee at age nine.”

Indeed, nine-year-old Alfred Gerald Caplan lost his left leg in a trolley accident that shaped a worldview that was certainly darker and more cynical than that of the average newspaper cartoonist.

“I was indignant as heck about that leg,” he revealed in a November 1950 interview in *Time* magazine.

“The secret of how to live without resentment or embarrassment in a world in which I was different from everyone else was to be indifferent to that difference,” Capp told *Life* magazine in 1960.

Although the comic strip ended in the 1970s, Capp’s legacy lives on. In 1937 Dogpatch was the scene of the annual Sadie Hawkins Day race. Single women were allowed to chase down and marry the man of their dreams. That quickly inspired real-life girl-asks-boy dances across America and Sadie Hawkins Day became a national institution.

Capp won the National Cartoonists Society’s Reuben Award in 1947 for Cartoonist of the Year and their 1979 Elzie Segar Award for his “unique and outstanding contribution to the profession of cartooning.”

A voracious reader who had read all the works of Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw by the time he turned 13, Capp was born on September 28, 1909. He told an interviewer that his childhood heroes were authors Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Booth Tarkington, Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman.

However, Capp spent five years at Bridgeport High School in Bridgeport, Connecticut, without ever receiving a diploma. In later life, he would joke about how he failed geometry for nine straight terms.

“When Li’l Abner made its debut in 1934,” remembers historian Coulton Waugh, “the vast majority of comic strips were designed chiefly to amuse or thrill their readers. Capp turned that world upside-down by routinely injecting politics and social commentary into Li’l Abner. The strip was the first to regularly introduce characters and story lines having nothing to do with the nominal stars of the strip.

## **Compared to Twain, Dostoyevski and Swift**

Capp “called society absurd, not just silly,” wrote Marschall in his book *America’s Great Comic Strip Artists*, “human nature not simply misguided, but irredeemably and irreducibly

corrupt. Unlike any other strip, and indeed unlike many other pieces of literature, Li'l Abner was more than a satire of the human condition. It was a commentary on human nature itself."

The comic strip was adapted to radio, animated cartoons, stage production, motion pictures and television. Capp was compared to such masters as Mark Twain, Dostoyev-ski, and Jonathan Swift

Novelist John Steinbeck called Capp "the best writer in the world" in 1953 and "earnestly recommended him for the Nobel Prize in literature," writes Marschall.

Capp made fun of everybody, including Frank Sinatra ("Hal Fascinatra") in 1944, Elvis Presley ("Hawg McCall") in 1957, Liberace ("Loverboynik") in 1956, the Beatles ("the Beasties") in 1964, Johnny Carson ("Tommy Wholesome") in 1970, Paul Newman (Paul Newleft) in 1970 and Joan Baez ("Joanie Phoanie") in 1967.

"I remember my news syndicate was so worried about what Sinatra's reaction might be," Capp told an interviewer, "and we were all surprised when he telephoned and told me how thrilled he was with it."

During World War II, Capp worked tirelessly going to hospitals to entertain wounded servicemen, especially to cheer up recent amputees and explain to them that the loss of a limb did not mean an end to a happy and productive life.

## **The covers of *Newsweek* and *Time***

In 1947, Capp earned a *Newsweek* cover story. That same year the *New Yorker's* profile on him was so long that it ran in consecutive issues.

Li'l Abner was censored for the first, but not the last time in September 1947, pulled from papers of the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain.

The controversy, as reported in *Time*, centered around Capp's portrayal of the United States Senate. According to spokesman Edward Leech of the newspaper chain, "We don't think it is good editing or sound citizenship to picture the Senate as an assemblage of freaks and crooks, boobs and undesirables."

He appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1950, then on NBC's "The Tonight Show," interviewed over the years by Steve Allen, Jack Paar and Johnny Carson.

One memorable story, as recounted to Johnny Carson, was about his meeting with then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower. As Capp was ushered into the Oval Office, his prosthetic leg suddenly collapsed into a pile of disengaged parts and hinges on the floor.

The President immediately turned to an aide and said, "Call Walter Reed Hospital," to which Capp replied, "Hey, no, just call a good local mechanic!"

He was a media favorite. He portrayed himself in a cameo role in the Bob Hope film *Certain Feeling* and was a guest on the "Ed Sullivan Show," Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows," "The Red Skelton Show," "The Merv Griffin Show," "The Mike Douglas Show," and Ralph Edwards' "This Is Your Life."

## **Doris Day played in reverse**

Among his more memorable lines on the talk shows: "Anyone who can walk to the welfare office can walk to work," "Abstract art is a product of the untalented, sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered," and "I have never actually seen a French New Wave movie, because of my conviction that they are all Doris Day scripts filmed backward."

He resumed visiting war amputees in veterans hospitals during the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. But he was contrary and contentious by nature – and a maverick politically. He was a liberal during the conservative 1950s, only to switch to being an adamant conservative during the liberal, hippie-era 1960s.

Capp became a popular public speaker on college campuses, where he reportedly relished hecklers.

He attacked militant antiwar demonstrators, both in his personal appearances and in his strip. The Youth International Party (YIP) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) showed up in Li'l Abner as “Students Wildly Indignant about Nearly Everything!” (SWINE).

In *Time* magazine, Capp insisted, “The students I blast are not the dissenters, but the destroyers – the less than 4 percent who lock up deans in washrooms, who burn manuscripts of unpublished books, who make pigpens and playpens of their universities.

“The remaining 96 percent detest them as heartily as I do.”

Capp’s increasingly controversial remarks at his campus speeches and during TV appearances cost him his regular spot on the Tonight Show.

The media refused to make a hero of him as a conservative.

He released a hilarious vinyl LP album in the late 1960s that featured his interaction with students at California State University in Fresno, debating hilariously with them on such topics as sensitivity training, humanitarianism and abstract art, which Capp detested. The cover features a cartoon drawn by Capp of wildly dressed, angry hippies carrying protest signs with slogans like “End Capp Brutality,” “Abner and Daisy Mae Smoke Pot,” “Capp Is Over the Hill!!” and “If You Like %&@!, You’ll Like Capp!”

The cartoonist showed up at Beatles singer’s John Lennon “Bed-In for Peace,” in Toronto, introducing himself with the words “I’m a dreadful Neanderthal fascist. How do you do?”

On the Dick Cavett Show, Capp taunted musician Frank Zappa about his long hair, asking Zappa if he thought he was a girl. Zappa gestured toward Capp’s wooden leg and asked if he thought he was a table.

Vice President Spiro Agnew urged Capp to run in the Democratic Party Massachusetts primary in 1970 against Ted Kennedy for Kennedy’s U.S. Senate seat, but Capp ultimately declined to run.

He did, however, donate his services as a speaker at a fundraiser for Republican Congressman Jack Kemp.

“From beginning to end, Capp was acid-tongued toward the targets of his wit, intolerant of hypocrisy, and always wickedly funny,” according to biographer Don Markstein.

Capp’s final years were marked by advancing illness. He died in 1979.

However, he had so antagonized liberals that he was vilified rather than praised. Leftists complained in 1995 when Li'l Abner was honored with a United States Postal Service commemorative postage stamp.

## **He loved a good debate**

He had spent his final years facing down college students on campuses across the country.

“Today’s younger generation is no worse than my own,” he would begin amiably. Then came the punch line: “We were just as ignorant and repulsive as they are, but nobody listened to us.”

“When I began to mock the liberals,” he observed, “there came a deluge of hate mail which never ended.”

Al explained that the students he blasted were “not the dissenters, but the destroyers.”

In a memorial poem, novelist John Updike remembered meeting Capp in “one of those Cambridge parties where his anti-Ho politics were wrong, so wrong” to the liberals.

“The left eventually broke his heart,” wrote Updike.

*I recalled this to him,  
he looked to me, how tired  
with his peg-legged limp  
and rich man's blue suit  
and Li'l Abner shock of hair.  
He laughed and said to me,  
'And if the plane had crashed,  
...everyone would be so relieved!*

And so it is at his centennial that the media has yawned in disinterest.  
In death, he remains in exile, a sinner who broke from the leftist fold.