

The Cartoons That Time Forgot - The Life, Works and Death of Van Beuren Studios

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DES130 The World of Animation

The internet has, to its credit, provided us with easy access to a wealth of knowledge and information gathered throughout human history.

However for that information to exist on the internet, it must first be written, cataloged and uploaded to the ever expanding database of information that makes up the internet as we know it. As such, information is lost, edited or simply omitted for the sake of time, disinterest in the topic or due to technological restrictions.

In it's own way, the internet has and will continue to have a similar effect that the mysterious Library of Alexandria left upon the world. With much of the information from the library lost, distributed or missing, the information gathered within this once great library is almost as elusive as the fate of the library itself. Similarly, information that may once have existed on the internet, is missing. Lost to the realms of error 404, page not found.

The fate of Van Beuren Studios, a moderately successful studio in its prime and an important piece in the history of animation, has been relegated to snippets of information spread around the internet.

This document shall act as a brief history of Van Beuren Studios using as much gathered information as possible to ensure that the history of this important piece of animation history is not lost.

In 1917, a former news photographer and cartoonist, Paul Terry, formed the studio Paul Terry Productions. Throughout 1917, Paul Terry Productions produced nine films before it was closed and the founder, Paul Terry, went on to join the US army to fight in World War One.

After being discharged in 1919, Paul Terry went on to found Fables Studios in 1920. With the Keit-Albee organization and former salesman, Amadee J. Van Beuren, with the goal of producing a cartoon series named Aesop's Fables (later renamed to Aesop's Sound Fables) that were loosely based on the collection of fables written by a slave in Ancient Greece named Aesop. Walt Disney himself would later credit Paul Terry and Aesop's Films as a huge inspiration for his own works.

The production of Aesop's Fables lasted from 1920 to 1933 with a total of 726 films made, including what could be considered to be the first animated film with synchronized sound, predating Walt Disney's Steamboat Willie by one month named Dinner Time released in October 1928. Whether Dinner Time can be considered the first synchronized sound cartoon is debatable however, as between 1924 and 1926, Fleischer Studios (which was situated

across the street from Van Beuren Studios) created 36 cartoons under the name Song Car-Tunes, 19 of which contained sound-on-film.

In 1929, studio founder Paul Terry left Fables Studios after a disagreement with Van Beuren. Van Beuren wanted to move the studio's focus to creating cartoons using sound-on-film technology (as seen in Fables Studio's Dinner Time and Walt Disney's Steamboat Willie) while Paul Terry wished to continue producing silent cartoons.

Paul Terry went on to create Terrytoons Studios where he continued to produce cartoons until 1956 when he retired and sold the studio to CBS. The studio continued until 1972 when Viacom International (a spin off of CBS) closed its doors.

During the early years of Terrytoons, Paul Terry hired soon to be famous animator Arthur Harold Babitsky (aka Art Babbit) who later went on to work at Walt Disney Studios and later in life taught famous animator and animation teacher, Richard Williams (author of The Animator's Survival Kit).

With the departure of Paul Terry, Van Beuren took over Fables Studios and renamed it to Van Beuren Studios, appointing John Foster to the head of the animation department. Van Beuren also retained the rights to Fables Films (renamed to Fables Sound Films during this time) and continued producing the series until 1933, creating a further 279 films bringing the series total to 726 films.

In 1930, Van Beuren Studios released an Aesop's Fables animated short named Circus Capers featuring the characters, Milton and Rita. The short was well received but would ultimately be the last short these characters would appear in due to a lawsuit by Walt Disney who claimed that the characters had far too many similarities to Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Disney won the lawsuit and Van Beuren agreed not to use the characters again.

In 1931, Van Beuren Studios released their first short in their Tom and Jerry series (which was later renamed to Dick and Larry after being acquired by Official Films Inc. in the 1940s to avoid confusion with MGM's Tom and Jerry). The characters were based off of two characters from the studios other series Aesop's Fables, Waffles the Cat and Don Dog.

These characters were created after Paul Terry left the studio, taking with him much of the creative talent the studio had, by John Foster. Originally the characters John Foster created were a pair of mice, however Van Beuren thought the characters were too close to Disney's Mickey Mouse and so they were redesigned to a cat and dog duo named Mutt and Jeff. The final character designs for Tom and Jerry came to be when Paul Terry was joined by artists George Stallings and George Ruffle.

In the same year that the series was cancelled, Van Beuren fired John Foster and appointed George Stallings to head of the animation department.

Animation historian, David Gerstein, criticised this change in directorial management of the Tom and Jerry shorts in his post about Van Beuren's Tom and Jerry shorts on cartoonresearch.com saying, "Under Stallings, the Tom and Jerry series seemed to lose much of its earlier charm." (Gerstein, n.d.)

George Stallings directed three shorts for the show before being replaced by Frank Sherman, who directed the final three shorts for the show alongside George Ruffle with the final episode premiering on July 28th, 1933.

The studio would continue until 1936, receiving some success from their endeavours such as in 1932 when Van Beuren bought the rights to 12 of Charlie Chaplin's Mutual Film Company's films and rereleasing them through the distribution company, RKO as well as a series named Rainbow Parade which featured former prominent characters that Van Beuren was able to obtain the rights to such as Felix the Cat.

Despite the success of the Rainbow Parade, Van Beuren's distributor RKO Radio Pictures dropped the studio and began distributing the works of the Walt Disney Studio instead. Van Beuren, being unable to find another distributor, closed the studio.

In 1938, Van Beuren suffered a stroke and passed away, aged 59, thus ending the legacy of Van Beuren Studios.

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