

Posted 11/18/2003 11:04 PM



Pop Candy
Whitney Matheson

Enough of the mouse — what about the cat?

I have nothing against Mickey Mouse.

Even if I despised his work (which I don't), one must give the mouse credit for never developing any wrinkles, heart conditions or ear hair. At 75, he's been around as long as Burt Bacharach and Ethel Kennedy, but he still doesn't look a day over 3½.

So, hey, it's fine by me if people want to make a [big deal](#) over Mickey's big birthday — he deserves it! My only beef with the rodent is that not once have I heard him acknowledge his feline forefather, Felix the Cat.



Felix the Cat prepares for his first television close-up in the late 1920s.

Almost 10 years before Mickey surfaced in *Steamboat Willie*, [Felix](#) was charming the world through dozens of animated shorts, which usually screened before Charlie Chaplin flicks. Like the mouse, Felix bore a killer smile, wide, eager eyes and a thin black tail; unlike Mickey, he went *sans* shorts and shoes.

Felix is regarded as the world's first animated star, and rightly so: His big-screen success led to a syndicated comic strip, children's books, TV series and a smorgasbord of smiley merchandise. While his success never reached Disney-sized proportions, some folks believe animation wouldn't have become a multimillion-dollar industry if it weren't for the frisky cat.

Talk Candy

Whitney chats Wednesdays at 1 p.m. ET. Why don't you go ahead and [submit a question?](#)

And his troubled history only adds to the appeal: Even though 27-year-old animator [Otto Messmer](#) came up with Felix on his own, controlling, alcoholic studio owner Pat Sullivan took all the credit until his death in 1933.

The only thing Sullivan *did* contribute to Felix the Cat's legacy was his downfall. In the late 1920s, just as films were beginning to incorporate sound (Disney's *Willie* among them), Sullivan decided Felix should remain silent. By the time he changed his mind, it was too late, and Mickey Mouse was already gaining steam.

However, there are a few proud moments the mighty mouse can't claim:

- For instance, in 1928, the first television images transmitted were of a Felix the Cat doll. Why? Well, for one thing, he could sit under hot studio lights for hours without complaining. For another, he was black and white, which made him a perfect, clear test subject for black-and-white TV.
- During his famous trans-Atlantic flight in 1927, Charles Lindbergh carried a Felix doll with him on the plane. To this day, images of Felix appear on [U.S. naval aircraft](#).
- England's Queen Mary named her pet cat Felix, after the cartoon.
- Felix was also the first animated character to hover over [parades](#) as a gigantic balloon.

Thankfully, Felix hasn't used up all nine of his lives; every other decade or so, he becomes water-cooler conversation again. When Messmer retired in the '50s, he gave creative control to his assistant, Joe Oriolo. Oriolo modernized Felix's look (adding the conniving Professor and a "magic bag of tricks") and developed a popular animated TV series about Felix in the '60s.

When Joe retired, his son, Don Oriolo, took over the franchise. Don wrote and produced a full-length Felix movie, another TV series and helped the character's merchandising power take off once again in the '80s. Righty-O!

No matter what the year, it's hard to turn away from an exuberant, curious cat whose smile takes up more than half his head. I, for one, hope Felix's image will be lighting up the world for at least another 84 years; today, he's one of the few symbols that's recognized all over the [world](#).

Unfortunately, Felix's last television sighting was back in 1997, when the Saturday morning cartoon, *The Twisted Adventures of Felix the Cat*, aired on CBS. Aside from merchandise and a couple comic collections, the world hasn't received much new material from the cat in several years.

Before Felix, audiences never realized they could become just as emotionally invested in a cartoon character as a human being. He may be drawn in black ink, but to call this adventurer two-dimensional would be a crime.

I'd say the cat deserves at least one candle on Mickey's cake, wouldn't you?

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