

## MEL BLANC: THE PORTLAND YEARS

In conjunction with Heather Perkins' live concert of her original Bugs Bunny composition, Oregon Cartoon Institute presents a lecture series about Mel Blanc, the voice of Bugs Bunny.

### Lecture One

#### **"Now Cut That Out!": Portland Vaudeville Theaters Educate Mel Blanc**

This lecture will introduce the world of vaudeville, a world inhabited by Mel Blanc first as a consumer and later as a working professional musician. Because Portland was on the Pantages vaudeville circuit, Mel Blanc saw all the big name acts, live and on stage-- just as if he had been growing up in New York or Los Angeles.

Guest speakers: Local theater historians Steve Stone and Gary Lacher, co-authors of *Theaters of Portland*, talk about the Portland Mel Blanc grew up in, with downtown streets lined with vaudeville theaters and movie houses, and a mayor, George Baker, who was himself in show business. Stone and Lacher will describe the Portland audiences who patronized vaudeville, and give a quick overview of the intersection between vaudeville and Hollywood.

Films: Dennis will show films of vaudeville performers (Jack Benny, Groucho Marx, Eddie Cantor) Mel Blanc would have seen perform live during his Portland years. Later Blanc would perform alongside these same stars on national radio.

### Lecture Two

#### **"I'm In The Market For You": Portland Pop Stars Inspire Mel Blanc**

This lecture will introduce the audience to three Oregon performers whose ascent to stardom Mel Blanc directly witnessed. Portland born and raised George Olsen shot to national stardom when Fanny Brice heard him play at Portland Hotel and recruited him for the Ziegfeld Follies in New York. He became a Broadway star and sold millions of records -- all in front of Mel Blanc's impressionable eyes. Lee Morse was a Portland born, Idaho raised singer who also sold tons of records, and was a big star on the radio. Del Porter was a friend of Mel Blanc's, a fellow musician, who as part of the singing group The Foursome, performed on Broadway and appeared behind Eleanor Powell in *Born To Dance* (1936). Porter was from Newburg.

Guest speakers: Erin Sutherland of the *Stolen Sweets*, a huge Lee Morse fan, and one other local 20's jazz music historian/enthusiast.

Films: Dennis will show films of Portland bandleader turned national superstar George Olsen, Oregon born singer-songwriter Lee Morse, and Del Porter, the Newberg born friend of Mel Blanc's who beat him to the Big Screen.

### Lecture Three

#### **"Cobweb & Nuts": Portland Radio Nurtures Mel Blanc**

"Today Is Yesterday & Tomorrow Is Today" was the motto for the KGW's "Honorable Order of Hoot Owls Roosting In The Oregonian Tower", the radio show which gave Mel Blanc his first paid employment as a voice artist. The Hoot Owls was a nationally syndicated weekly hour and a half long show with more than one million listeners. It had been broadcasting for four years when Mel Blanc joined the cast in 1927. He moved to KEX, a KGW affiliate in 1933 to write, produce and star in his own hour long daily (Monday through Saturday) show, "Cobweb & Nuts". After two years of this exhausting schedule, he moved to Hollywood, well prepared for everything he found there.

Guest Speaker: Portland early radio historian Craig Adams will talk about Portland's "early adopters", who created radio stations here when radio was a brand new technology/artform. He'll talk about the radio Mel Blanc grew up with, and later came to help create. Robyn Tenenbaum, producer of Live Wire, will bring the audience up to date on Portland's current creative radio scene.

Films: Dennis will show a WWII Army Navy Screen Magazine, an entertaining short made for soldiers, which features Mel Blanc, making a rare live performance as a voice artist. Also features Lucille Ball and Jerry Colonna. Dennis will also show I Wanna Singa (1936), a Warner Brothers cartoon spoofing The Jazz Singer which stars a young Owl Jolson making his radio debut.

### Lecture Four

#### **Eden's Melting Pot: South Portland Raises Mel Blanc**

Portland is a city Jewish pioneers helped found and govern. Mel Blanc's family moved here from San Francisco -- what drew them? What did it mean to be Jewish in Portland during Mel Blanc's growing years? Who else lived in South Portland? Mel Blanc ascribed his astounding ear for dialect and accent to the multi-lingual environment of South Portland. What was the neighborhood like?

Guest speakers: For this lecture we are partnering with the Oregon Jewish Museum. Judy Margles will bring to life the immigrant neighborhood in which Mel

Blanc grew up, the schools he attended, the many languages he heard spoken around him, and the Neighborhood House where he first learned to play a musical instrument and began his career as a performer.

Lecture Series Format:

Each lecture will use the following format.

1. We introduce the evening's guest speaker(s).
2. Dennis screens two or three related shorts from his archive.
3. Dennis and I begin an interview/conversation with the guest speaker(s) which uses the films as a springboard for discussion about Mel Blanc's Portland years.
4. We open the floor to questions from the audience.