

Don Messick: Buffalo's Man of a Thousand Voices



PRIVATE COLLECTION

If you are over 40, you've probably heard his voice hundreds of times. And if you were like me, you heard it early on a Saturday morning, sitting in your pajamas while munching fully sugared cereal from a bowl you got by sending in box tops to Cap'n Crunch. But while you will surely recognize some of the many characters he played, you

might not recognize the name of one of Hanna-Barbera's most prolific voice actors – Don Messick.

Don Earle Messick was born in Buffalo on September 7, 1926 to parents Binford Earl and Lena (Hughes) Messick, who lived at 34 Plymouth Avenue. It seems that Binford, who went by his middle name, moved from job to job throughout his life. Thus it may have been a lack of work brought on by the Depression that found the Messicks living in Maryland with Don's grandfather by the early 1930s.

When his voice changed around age 13, Don discovered that it had a great deal of flexibility and he became adept at creating different voices. He began a ventriloquist act and eventually landed a radio program in Salisbury, MD, before a stint in the army and a move to Hollywood. His life changed forever when friend and voice actor extraordinaire, Daws Butler, recommended him to Tex Avery for a role at MGM. Bill Thompson,



Messick's parents lived in this house at 34 Plymouth Ave. in Buffalo when he was born in 1926. DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH 2014

the actor who normally voiced Tex's "Droopy the Dog" cartoons was unavailable, and so Don filled in for two episodes in the early 1950s, a stint that provided him with his entry into the cartoon business. Then, in 1957, when MGM animation directors, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, decided to strike out on their own, they asked Daws and Don to come with them. The rest, as they say, is history.

While Daws typically voiced the starring roles, Don was given more of the straight parts, often those of the sidekick and/or narrator. Messick's association with Hanna-Barbera would last for decades, during which he provided the voices for some of the studio's most memorable secondary characters, including Boo-Boo and Ranger Smith from "Yogi Bear" (Daws did Yogi), Bamm-Bamm from "The Flintstones," and even straight roles such as Dr. Benton Quest, father of Johnny Quest. Over the years,

he also "starred" in thousands of commercials, including the voice of Rice Krispies' "Snap." In 1962 he lent his talents to the voice of Astro, the bumbling Great Dane owned by George Jetson in the primetime cartoon "The Jetsons," which aired as ABC's first color program from 1962-63. Several years later, Don would give life and personality to another Great Dane, which would arguably become his most successful character – and unquestionably his favorite: Scooby-Doo. The first season of "Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!" aired in 1969, and Don provided the voice of the mystery-solving dog through several television formats and at least four television animated films into the early 1990s.

In September 1996, while working on yet another voice for Hanna-Barbera, Don suffered a stroke that would force his retirement in October of that year. On October 24, 1997, he suffered a second stroke – this one fatal. Though Don is gone, the Western New York native lives on through Scooby-Doo and the many other characters he brought to life over his career. Thanks to syndication, cable and now the Internet, new generations have the opportunity to hear – if not recognize – Buffalo's man of a thousand voices. Now where did I put that box of Cap'n Crunch? 🐕



Scooby-Doo was the most successful of Don's many characters – and his favorite. COURTESY WARNER BROTHERS