

You're listening to *Imaginary Worlds*, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky. And this is part one of a two-part episode about the comics page in the newspaper.

For listeners under a certain age, it might be hard to imagine how huge newspaper comic strips used to be. The comics page or the funny pages, or funnies used to be the stars of the newspapers. They drove circulation. They were read by people of all ages. They were a big part of the culture back when our culture wasn't broken up into niche demographics and information silos.

And in the mid 20th century there were a few titans of the comics page. You've probably heard of Charles Schultz, who did *Peanuts*. But there were two other artists that were huge: Al Capp and Walt Kelly. Their strips *Li'l Abner* and *Pogo* collectively reached about 100 million Americans, which was the majority of Americans at the time. And there are so many parallels between them.

Walt Kelly and Al Capp knew each other well. They ran in the same circles. Both men created strips that were set in imaginary Southern towns where fantastical things happened, even though neither one was from the South. In fact, they each went to high school in Bridgeport, Connecticut, only four years apart from each other.

They owned the IP of their own strips, which was rare at the time. And that meant they had a lot of creative freedom. So, they each broke new ground by incorporating politics and satire into their comic strips. And each of them faced a reckoning in the 1960s when the culture changed.

And even though their strips are not front and center in pop culture today, we are still feeling the ripple effects of what they accomplished.

In the next episode, we'll get to Al Capp. But let's start with Walt Kelly.

His comic strip, *Pogo*, ran from 1948 to 1975. The characters were talking animals -- alligators, porcupines, turtles, beavers, rabbits, bears and dogs. And they all lived together in a swamp called Okefenokee.

JAY: Now? First of all, you have to pronounce it, right. It's Okefenokee (o-KEE-fe-NO-key). You got to get that southernness to you. Okefenokee

Okefenokee. I'm a new Englander. So there you go.

JAY: Well, so, so was Walt Kelly!

Yeah.

JAY: So it wasn't Walt Kelly. I mean, he's from Connecticut.

That is Jay Black. He's a professor at Mercer University in Georgia, and he's written about Walt Kelly.

JAY: He'd never been to the Okefenokee, uh, before he, he made it the, the, the local swamp. It wasn't until after the comic strip was a success. When Waycross called him, uh, asked him to come down to the Okefenokee swamp and actually see a real possum. Cause he had never seen one before.

Waycross is the closest city to the Okefenokee swamp in Georgia. And the character of Pogo is a possum, although he actually kind of looks more like a furry child. And like a child, Pogo is sweet and innocent, asking lots of poignant questions of the other animal characters.

Kelly was also very playful with language. The animals spoke in a make-believe Southern dialect with a few mixed-up words and malapropisms. Their dialogue balloons were sometimes in different fonts, which reflected their personalities. And overall, the characters were living a pretty relaxed life in the swamp -- hanging out, playing music, going bird watching or fishing.

JAY: And he was such a hoot. I mean, it was silly some of the things he did was just so darn silly. And I wish I was back then, so I could get my name on the boat.

Wait, how did that work?

JAY: Yeah. Yeah. You never noticed that, that the boat, uh, that they would use to go out, they catch fish. Every boat had a different name on it, and that's how he would do shout outs to people.

That's interesting. And who are the people, who were they?

JAY: Some of them were friends. Some of them were, um, editors that he wanted to, um, pick up the strip. There was a time when he actually said goodbye to his daughter who had died, a young daughter that died, as a, I think a toddler or shortly after birth, her name was on one of the boats. Uh, some people who just wrote to them and said, can you put my name on a boat? He would do it.

That was the kind of world Kelly created. It was warm, inviting. His drawing style was very influenced by Disney because Kelly actually worked at Disney as an animator for five years. When he left the studio and moved back East, he got into comic books, where he began to develop the characters that would end up in Pogo.

Kelly also convinced the syndicate that distributed Pogo to give him full ownership. It's a complicated story how that happened, but it put him in a rare position among comic strip artists. If you didn't own your IP, a syndicate could tell you to censor your material, or they could fire you and replace you with a different artist on your own strip. Kelly never had to worry about that again.

So, by the early 1950s, his professional life was going great. His personal life, on the other hand, was very messy. His marriage was breaking up.

JAY: He had had, uh, an affair with, uh, uh, another woman. I think that he was just in a bad time. Uh, he started drinking heavily. He used to hang out at a pub that was located in the same building as the New York Herald.

Now, he had also done a brief stint as an editorial cartoonist at a different New York paper. So, a lot of his drinking buddies were reporters. He liked talking politics with them.

JAY: And I think that he just said, you know, it's my strip I'm going to do now that I know that it's my strip, I'm going to do whatever I want to do with it.

Now around this same time, the reporters were buzzing about a new executive order that was signed by President Eisenhower. The law banned gays and lesbians from being employed by the federal government, because in theory, the Soviet Union could seek those people out and threaten to expose them if they didn't give away state secrets.

Walt Kelly was outraged. And Jay says, this goes back to the way he imagined the world inside his cartoon swamp.

JAY: Everybody should be equal in the swamp as well. You know, bugs, birds, reptiles, mammals everybody's equal in the swamp. That was not happening outside of the swamp, obviously when we have the Jim Crow laws, we have, um, you know, all the other things going, uh, anti-Communist crusades, uh, things weren't equal. You know, I think that Walt Kelly really believed that if we had freedom of speech, then all people should have freedom of speech and thought. And so, uh, what I did in my book was I, I outed Churchy La Femme. I outed a turtle.

Okay, what he means by that is that when Jay started researching his book on the politics of Walt Kelly, he looked at all the strips during this time. And they

centered around a sweet character named Churchy la Femme, a turtle, who was being harassed by a judgmental muskrat, who was named Deacon Mushrat. The Deacon dressed like an old-fashioned preacher. His dialogue was in a heavy, Gothic font. And he accused Churchy of all these absurd crimes he didn't commit. The evidence at his trial was nothing but gossip and rumors.

JAY: In this storyline with Churchy La Femme, I started seeing all of this coding, uh, that I was, I was reading as a, you know, for, for homosexuality.

Although not everyone in the '50s may have gotten the subtext.

JAY: The difference between say a graphic novel or a comic book and a comic strip is that you, you pick up the book and you can read the whole story at one time and a comic strip, you're only looking at a story three or four panels at a time over the course of several weeks. And so, each panel individually might not be saying much about the politics or the culture, but if you put the whole storyline together, then you have the larger story and that wasn't done until he actually did put them together in his books.

But when it came to his next target, Kelly realized that subtly wasn't going to work. Not with this guy:

MCCARTHY: I think we have a much more serious situation now with Communist infiltration of the CIA. I'll also discussed with the committee the question of Communist infiltration of hydrogen and atomic bomb plants.

Joe McCarthy is the kind of figure that is so deeply rooted in the 1950s, it used to be hard for me to understand how scary he must have seemed. But lately, I've been able to imagine what Joe McCarthy must have seemed like to Walt Kelly.

Here was a popular demagogue who told a big lie – a lie he said was supposed to protect American democracy, but it was clearly undermining everything that makes this country a democracy. Kelly hoped there would be a chorus of people rising up against this guy. Instead, he saw people with the power speak out keeping quiet, out of fear or cynicism. And the mainstream media didn't want to appear biased. So they tried to report both sides of the story, even though one side was nothing but lies and conspiracy theories.

So, Kelly went further than he had ever in his strip. He created an evil bobcat character called Simple J. Malarkey, who looked exactly like Joe McCarthy as a bobcat. The character accused anyone who disagreed with him of treason. Adn in

a world of cute talking animals, Simple J. Malarkey was genuinely scary. But McCarthy was not offended:

JAY: Joe McCarthy liked seeing himself in his strip every day.

(Laugh)

JAY: He would send Roy Cohn out to get the newspaper every day so he could read the Pogo,

But his supporters were not so thrilled, right?

JAY: No, no, indeed a lot of editors, uh, tried, uh, would that's when they first started moving the, uh, comic strip into the editorial page.

Walt Kelly wasn't the first artist to use his strip to say something political, but he did it in a way that changed the culture of the comics pages.

For example, a decade earlier, Harold Gray, the creator of Little Orphan Annie, had a storyline where Annie exposed corruption in the war department. Gray was not a fan of FDR.

A newspaper in Louisville pulled the strip, saying that editorializing should be labeled as such and not, quote, "smuggled into the comic strips in the guise of entertainment." Harold Gray apologized and didn't publish the rest of that storyline. But he still tried to find other subversive ways to critique Roosevelt indirectly, in the strip.

So when Walt Kelly basically put Joe McCarthy into his strip, and built an entire storyline around that character, so he could mock him, that was a big deal. If this happened today, there would be an instant backlash -- complaints on Twitter that Pogo went woke, or that Kelly's out of his depth talking about politics. Stick to the cute animals!

And that happened, in an analog-style. But Kelly stood his ground.

Kerry Soper is a professor at BYU who has written about the way Kelly used politics. He says back then, there was a lot of money behind the idea that the funny pages were supposed to be a neutral zone -- an oasis of family fun in the middle of a newspaper full of politics.

KERRY: The syndicates who, you know, sold the strips across the country to daily newspapers in every small town, every big town sold them as exceptionally safe and not even bland and generic and pleasing to everyone. They were constantly testing strips.

According to popularity, polls, uh, local editors were super squeamish about introducing any comics that might rile up their readers. And so anything that was, um, off-color kind of inappropriate in terms of innuendo sexuality, things like that, that was off limits. And then anything experimental, aesthetically experimental or politically challenging, you know, satirical was also considered sort of poisonous to the medium.

So, it sounds like it's similar to where the TV networks were like when All in The Family debuted, it was so shocking because there was this unwritten rule that, you know, a TV show has got to play as well in Vermont as it does in Alabama.

KERRY: Yeah. I think of the Smuthers Brothers too, right. The way they in the '60s started to push against those strictures in the, in the TV world. But Kelly's doing it like a full decade earlier in an even more conservative, medium, right? You know, I think he's the first to do it in a way that really captured everyone's attention and sort of excited some on one side and scandalized others.

And Kelly was just getting started. He ended up turning more politicians into animal characters. He tried to be an equal opportunity offender, making fun of Democrats, Republicans, and world leaders. He even went after Communists, but his approach was lighter and more highbrow. He made fun of their thinking by having these bird characters speak in the absurd language of Soviet propaganda.

He also went after the ultra-conservative John Birch Society, and the Ku Klux Klan.

BRIAN: Where he goes after the Kluck Klams, which is the KKK.

Brian Cremins is a professor at Harper College, who has also written about Pogo.

BRIAN: There's a little kid, I don't remember what kind of animal the kid is, whose parents are making him wear a sheet and Pogo, being the wise child comforts the child. Who's not understanding the, the racism, the evil of its parents and this child lives in an old broken-down plantation house. And, um, and so Pogo has to intervene and basically save this child from these two racist Kluck Klam parents he's he has to explain to them, well, what they're trying to teach you to do is wrong. It's not morally right.

Editors were not happy, especially in The South, where Pogo was popular. And Jay says even though Kelly owned his strip, he worried about pissing too many people off. He didn't like it when newspapers would move Pogo to the editorial page. It was important for him to stay on the comics page. So, he came up with a plan.

JAY: He actually did two strips for the same day, one with the political strips and one with what we call the bunny strips, which, you know, had cute bunnies and the bunnies, it was all just like dad jokes, just silly pun humor to satisfy them so that they wouldn't stop the strip.

But then, didn't he get tired of the bunny strips after a while?

JAY: Oh, he sure did. He stopped doing them sometime in the 1960s.

And Kerry Soper says, Walt Kelly eventually regretted having ever done the bunny strips.

KERRY: Yeah. He regretted it. He felt like he'd been, um, kind of pressured into doing that. And he wished he could have just not made that accommodation, but in the end, he was willing to do it because, you know, he's like a businessman. He is trying to be professional about it, giving them options. I think he was constantly dealing with that. Like he had to do a lot of public relations work to settle editors down, but he was also really charming and a great kind of salesman or businessmen in terms of winning people over, and visiting newspaper offices, or he's drawing, you know, sketches for, for editors signing original cartoons, giving them away, courting people, you know, in person. And I think that helped keep the papers on board and it kept people in his camp.

He also had an interesting way of building his fanbase. He had a running joke every four years where Pogo would run for president. It was a way of mocking the shallowness of real campaigns. His slogan "I Go Pogo" was a parody of "I Like Ike." He had political rallies for Pogo in the real world as PR stunts. They were such a hit on college campuses, when Kelly came to speak at Harvard, 1,600 students came out, and it turned into mayhem, with many of the students getting arrested.

But that enthusiasm did not spill over to the next generation of college students.

KERRY: He got frustrated in the '60s. He was still doing the college tours, at least in the early '60s, but he expressed privately behind the scenes that he felt like he was out of touch and that he couldn't connect with them as well. He didn't understand what their interests were. So clearly, he was feeling like the counter-cultural movement was leaving him behind a little bit. Here's here was the big break. I think he was content to kind of engage in that coded indirect kind of pushback or satire. But I think by the end of the '60s, college students had an appetite for more direct rebellion or confrontation that they didn't have a taste anymore for that kind of oblique approach.

Today, when Kerry Soper teaches Pogo in college, he asks the students if they've ever heard of Pogo. And they usually look at him blankly.

KERRY: It's kind of sad, isn't it? I, as college students, none of them have ever heard of him. And I mean, when you consider that there was like basically a decade and a half of Pogo-mania where everyday newspaper readers just live with Pogo every day, it seems sad that it's faded so completely from the cultural, uh, memory.

Although not entirely. As Kelly's stardom began to fade, and his health began to decline in the early 1970s, he had one more trick up his sleeve, a second act that would become a bigger legacy than the strip itself. That's after the break.

BREAK

Pogo-mania may have gripped the country for a while, but it was no match for Peanuts-mania. Now at the start of the '60s, Peanuts and Pogo were equally famous, but where Pogo is kind of forgotten now, Peanuts lives on mostly through merchandising, TV specials and the musical *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, which is still performed around the country. Even *Little Orphan Annie* is better known today as a musical than a comic strip.

Kelly tried to make something like that happen. In 1956, put out a record of Pogo-related songs:

CLIP: POGO SONG

There was also an animated TV special in 1969, but Kelly hated the way it turned out.

CHURCHY: How come Porkypine's all fired up about Valentine's Day?

POGO: Well, you see, Porky's a n'orphan so he don't know when his birthday is (FADE UNDER)

The thing that allowed Kelly to be so gutsy with Pogo is that he owned the strip, but that also made him a bit of a control freak. He was ambivalent about merchandising and TV specials because so much of it was out of his hands.

JAY: He wanted to be in control of everything about his characters.

Again, Jay Black.

JAY: He did not allow any kind of stuffed animals or anything like that. Uh, because he did not like the ones he saw when he was in Disney, that the Mickey Mouses is didn't look like the Mickey Mouses. And we see that again, years later into the 1960s, when, uh, Proctor & Gamble put out the, uh, Pogo dolls that promoted the TV special, Walt Kelly actually did the clay, uh, versions of all of the dolls that they would give out with the products.

Although, it's not just merchandise and TV specials that gave Peanuts a long lifespan. The existential angst of Charlie Brown and his friends will always be relatable. And Peanuts is mostly free from the politics of its time. But Brian Cremins wants to make the case for the way that Pogo incorporated politics into its regular storylines.

BRIAN: Kelly shows us that there's no bifurcation there that the personal is part of that imaginative political landscape that it's all mashed together. That, that, that having only one or the other isn't enough. And I think with Kelly, there's a fullness and a richness to the life of that strip that I personally don't find in Peanuts as much as I like it. And as much as I respect that achievement of Charles Schultz, I've always, especially the older I get, the more I found Kelly to be interesting and, and vital, you know, like I feel like someone's actually telling me not only about the world that they inhabited, but they're also telling me about how they interface with that world. So, it's not just about their internal world by itself, bracket it off somewhere. And it's not only about the political world that they're trying to dismantle and critique, but it's a fusion of those two things. And I think that's a rare, I think that's a really rare accomplishment in any kind of art form.

And here is where Kelly becomes relevant again and pushes himself towards the center of conversation, where the personal and the political are deeply intertwined. It happened very late in his career. In 1970, he was asked to create a poster to promote the first Earth Day.

I remember seeing this poster as a teenager. It was hanging on the back of a classroom door. By that point in the 1980s, this poster was very old and faded. And I remember my teacher was happy to explain to me what it meant for a comic strip character to make a bold statement about the environment.

And I remember looking at that poster and seeing Pogo for the first time -- this furry little character, holding a stick, like he's trying to pick up all the litter on the

ground, but in front of him is an overwhelming, disgusting mess of garbage piled up beneath these beautiful trees and floating out in the water like landfill.

The expression on his face is at a loss. The disaster in front of him is more than he can handle. And on the poster, it says, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

That also became part of a storyline in the strip. And the phrase itself was a riff off of a famous historical quote from the War of 1812. One of the commanders on the American side said, "We have met the enemy and they are ours," which was a patriotic message of triumph against invading forces.

But Kelly knew great empires are often not toppled from the outside. They collapse from within. So, he inverted the phrase, and he had been using it since he went after Joe McCarthy.

"We have met the enemy, and he is us" was also the title of an animated special he was working on before he died in 1973, and it was the title of the last book of strips he published.

BRIAN: He tells us this in the last, in the last title of the last book, this is, it's almost like the period at the end of the sentence. This is what I was doing, because I think that that was the running theme. That we're, we're the enemy. So, if we're the enemy, what does that mean? There's collective action that's needed because if all we have is that interior world of Schultz that leaves us in our own little enclaves in our own little bubbles as, as we, as people like to say today. And so, we need to have that reaching out.

Although Brian says Kelly's interest in the environment was very personal. The strip had always been about the natural world and how much the characters enjoyed living in this beautiful swamp.

But it wasn't really a swamp. Walt Kelly spent most of his life in Connecticut. He had hardly been to the South. Brian lived in the South for a while, but he is from Connecticut and he still lives there. And when Brian first looked at Pogo, he knew right away the landscape Kelly was drawing was not the Okefenokee swamp. It was the marshlands outside Bridgeport, where Kelly grew up.

BRIAN: Those backdrops are always there. And I don't know if someone is drawing the backgrounds of a strip like that, that carefully with that much lushness and that much attention to detail. Then there must be some kind of connection to a, a sense of responsibility for that landscape, which I think is part of his cautiousness, even when he

was a child, the sense of mutual aid of responsibility in a city like Bridgeport, you know, an immigrant city, a city of migrants and immigrants. And I think that drawing that world, even if it was partly a world of his imagination in such careful detail, gave him a sense of connection, even more so with where he had come from. So that by the time he gets towards the end of his life and that industrial economy of Connecticut, that he knew of was collapsing, those, those things were no longer there. And I think that was part of his social consciousness to say, not only was this trouble for the working person, but it was also, he could see the scars that were being left behind in the state of Connecticut itself.

Pogo-mania may have been ephemeral but the spirit of Walt Kelly lives on. As a cartoonist, he was a big influence on Garry Trudeau, who created Doonesbury. In fact, after Kelly died, a lot of newspapers replaced Pogo with Doonesbury. And Doonesbury inspired a new crop of comic strips who wanted to reflect the real world.

Bill Watterson, the creator of Calvin and Hobbes, was also a huge fan of Walt Kelly. So was Jim Henson, who said that Pogo was a big influence The Muppets.

And even though Kelly worked hard to avoid being put on the editorial page, in recent years, I've seen a lot of editorial cartoons using the phrase, "we have met the enemy and he is us." In fact, sometimes they'll actually draw the character of Pogo saying that phrase in a modern context.

Now, if an artist has a similar worldview to us, we tend to reward them for speaking out. We praise them for using their fictional worlds to comment on the real world and try to make it a better place.

But what if you find yourself as the target of satire? What if someone says we have met the enemy and he is us, and the enemy they're referring to is you, or the movement you belong to?

That happened to Denis Kitchen in 1966. He opened the newspaper to look at his favorite comic strip, Li'l Abner by Al Capp:

DENIS: It was pretty obvious. He had a chip on his shoulder about students who were protesting the Vietnam War. And I was one of those students. So, I started taking it personally

In the next episode, the career of Al Capp is very similar to Walt Kelly's -- until Capp goes in a very different direction.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Kerry Soper, Brian Cremins, and Jay Black. I have links to all their books in the show notes.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook and Instagram where I put a slideshow of Pogo panels. I also tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

If you really like the show, please leave a review wherever you get your podcasts, or a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover Imaginary Worlds. And if you're interested in advertising on the show, drop us a line at contact at imaginary worlds podcast dot org, and I'll put you in touch with our ad coordinator.

By the way, the winter semester of my NYU class is starting in mid-February. If you're interested in learning how to make your own podcast, you can find more information on the NYU school of professional studies website.

The best way to support the podcast is to donate on Patreon. At different levels you can get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, a t-shirt, and a link to a Dropbox account, which has the full-length interviews of every guest in every episode. And we recently lowered the pledge for the Dropbox account, you can now access it at \$5 a month. You can learn more at imaginary worlds podcast dot org.