

**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 the second of a two-part episode about the politics of the funny pages.**

**In the last episode, we looked at the career of Walt Kelly, who created the strip Pogo. This time, we're looking at the comic strip Li'l Abner by Al Capp. There are a lot of similarities between Pogo and Li'l Abner, but Abner had many more readers than Pogo, and the characters went way beyond the comics page.**

*TRAILER: From the creative genius of cartoonist Al Capp, the fabulous characters of his world-famous comic strip....*

***By the way, did you read Lil Abner when you were a kid?***

DENIS: Absolutely. It was my favorite.

**Denis Kitchen is a legend in the comics field. His company has published artists from R. Crumb to Art Spiegelman. And he wrote a biography of Al Capp.**

DENIS: This was a strip that at its height was read by 80, 90 million people every day, or at least that was the newspaper circulation.

**The characters from Li'l Abner also appeared in animated shorts.**

*This statue of Hairless Joe and Lonesome Polecat is almost done, I hope it pleases them!*

**A live action movie from 1940.**

*Howdy, fellers!  
Howday, L'il Abner!*

**Another one from 1959.**

*Abner, let's stop and talk for a while.  
This ain't time to do any talkin'  
But Abner, don't you realize what you done? You finally ask me to marry you!*

**And that movie was based on a Broadway musical**

**SONG: THE MATRIMONIAL STOMP**

**When the characters Li'l Abner and Daisy Mae finally got married in the strip, after almost two decades of courtship, the story was so big it was on the cover of Life Magazine. Al Capp himself was also on the cover of Time and Newsweek.**

DENIS: He was also a regular on The Tonight Show and Jack Paar and, um, Merv Griffin and so on. And so on. He had his own radio show. He had for a while, his own TV game shows.

**He was on other game shows too, like Password in 1965:**

*HOST: Al, how long has Li'l Abner been a comic strip?*

*AL: Actually, Li'l Abner been running 34 years, he's 18 years old.*

*(Applause)*

DENIS: He had his own amusement park. He was the only cartoonist besides Walt Disney who had that. He was everywhere. He was huge in the culture. And now if you're under 50, you probably don't know who he is.

**In looking at the career of Al Capp, it's hard not to compare him to Walt Kelly.**

**Both strips are mostly forgotten today but they were titans of the comics page. And like Walt Kelly, Al Capp was one of the few cartoonists that were able to fight for the rights to their own strip, which meant he had a lot of creative freedom. He didn't have to worry about being censored or replaced. So, both he and Walt Kelly broke new ground incorporating satire into story-driven entertainment**

**Both men were from the Northeast but set their strips in fictional Southern towns where fantastical things happened. But the characters in Pogo were talking animals, while the characters in Li'l Abner were mostly human, specifically white Appalachian stereotypes with names like Mammy Yokum and Hairless Joe.**

**Kerry Soper teaches comics and literature at BYU. He says the main characters of Pogo and Li'l Abner also had a lot in common, even though Pogo is a cute little possum, and Abner is a very buff young man with a pompadour.**

KERRY: They're both fools, Pogo and Lil Abner, but Pogo was sort of like a wise fool in the Shakespearean tradition. And then, and then with, with Li'l Abner, he's like a hapless fool, and it's almost like Capp has contempt for him and uses him sort of as a, just a stand in for a foundational American type that's uneducated, easily manipulated

kind of like a sad version of a Huckleberry Finn, right. If he grew up to be this kind of tall foolish guy.

**Their drawing styles were also pretty different. Before he created Pogo, Walt Kelly had been an animator at Disney, so his characters looked Disney-esque. Al Capp was more of a caricaturist. The people in his strip looked a little grotesque, but funny at the same time, and that reflected their different outlooks on life.**

**Kelly was gentle and indirect in his satire. Most of the characters in his imaginary swamp were good at heart. Li'l Abner himself was good at heart. And so were many of the characters in Dogpatch – the fictional town where Abner lived. But the world around them was more of a dog-eat-dog kind of place.**

**And Al Capp's worldview partly came from his childhood. When he was 9-year-old, he lost his leg in a trolley car accident. His coping mechanisms were learning how to draw and developing a dark sense of humor.**

DENIS: In his candid moments Capp would talk about how he thought cruelty was at the base of all humor.

**Again, Denis Kitchen.**

DENIS: But I think it was a way to show man's inhumanity to man in the most obvious way, because these were the neglected citizens who always got dumped on by government bureaucrats or rich people of one kind or another who were there to exploit the, whatever Dogpatch had, which wasn't much. And if it wasn't a bureaucrats or rich people, it would be the turnip termites who would destroy the only crop they had. Like every year with his, uh, Sadie Hawkins Day race, when these desperate, old maids would have to chase these, you know, mostly scrawny hopeless guys.

**Yep, Al Capp invented the idea of Sadie Hawkins Day, where girls ask boys to a formal dance instead of the other way around. In the real world, that became an all-American tradition. But in the strip, the storylines were not as wholesome.**

DENIS: There was a scene where these bachelors are running from the women on Sadie Hawkins and they hide in a glue factory and they get rolled together in a ball of glue, like a handful of bachelors. And then they get set on fire and they're squealing in pain. There's like a fireball of humans burning to death. And he made it funny because of the way he drew it.

**One of my favorite recurring bits that Al Capp did was a hilarious takedown of Dick Tracy which exists as a comic strip in the world of Li'l Abner. The Dick Tracy character is called Fearless Fosdick. And he fights ridiculous villains that were parodies of the already ridiculous villains in Dick Tracy. And we even get to see the creator of Fearless Fosdick. His name is Lester Gooch, and he's depicted a deranged comic strip artist who fetishizes violence and mayhem. The creator of Dick Tracy -- Chester Gould -- was a good sport about all this, and he thanked Capp for the free publicity.**

**One more fascinating thing about Fearless Fosdick. The character may have been a parody of Dick Tracy, but he became so popular -- in the real world -- he got his own TV show, starring marionette puppets.**

## **CLIP**

**But I think the best example of how Al Capp used comics to convey his world view came from a totally bonkers storyline about these creatures called Shmoos.**

**Now eventually, Hanna-Barbera got the rights to the Shmoos, so you may have seen the Shmoo cartoons in the '70s and '80s, but the characters were originally created by Al Capp in 1948. They were these white creatures with bulbous bottoms and then their bodies shot up into long, curved shapes with a smiling head on top.**

DENIS: They're, they're phallic symbols, without question, if you look at some of the panels where he draws the Shmoo, sitting on Li'l Abner's lap, stretching its neck, and it's like, oh my God, there is an erection in a newspaper today read by 90 million people. Am I the only one who sees this? And Capp got away with it. So on another level, take away the sexual element. I think what he was saying is even if humanity had a panacea for all of its ills, it would find a way to fuck it up. When people got a Shmoo, and it would lay eggs and Grade A milk and turn into a steak. If you looked hungry, its whiskers were toothpicks. All of that stuff, it was basically a way for a family to be self-contained. And so, people would, wouldn't work and society fell apart. And basically, the strip was indicating you'd have anarchy unless the government came in and with their shmooicide squad, literally exterminate the shmoos because it was too much of a good thing.

**The Shmoos were apparently not too much of a good thing in the real world. They became a merchandising bonanza. The Shmoos were on every kind of toy or consumer product you could imagine. And in the 1948 election, Thomas Dewey said that Harry Truman was promising everything to the American people**

**including the Shmoos. After Truman won, the President appeared alongside Al Capp to promote a savings bond with the Shmoos on it.**

**With that much cultural power, Al Capp liked to push things. He didn't depict real politicians in his strip, as Walt Kelly did. But Capp created original characters that were inspired by real people. Like General Bullmoose, a ruthless businessman who had too much influence over elected politicians. And then there was the character of Senator Phogbound.**

DENIS: So, you had this Southern Senator who was incompetent and corrupt. And so, uh, periodically editors would complain to the syndicate and say, hey, we're going to drop the script because you're making fun of, uh, of senators. That's not something we like, and Capp would scoff at it because, you know, the guy had anywhere from 800 to 1000 newspapers and if one or two threatened to quit to him, any publicity was good publicity.

**And where Walt Kelly used his strip to go after the KKK, Al Capp used his strip to promote Civil Rights. And he did it in a way that could get into Southern papers.**

DENIS: After Rosa Parks' incident on the bus and, uh, in Alabama within I think six weeks of that happening, he had rushed into print a Sunday sequence of three or four episodes where Mammy is, uh, involved with the Dogpatch society, women society. Sass-society, she said, and they were upset to see that a new family moved into Dogpatch and they had square eyes and they were all indignant. Then they said, there ain't going to be no square eyed people in this town. And so they started making it very difficult for those people to live in that town. And then the next week it's like, Mammy looks out her window and she sees a little square eyed boy like trips and skins, his knee and the square ride mother runs over and caresses him and tries to make him feel better. And Mammy starts tearing up and she says, well, that mommy's treating her boy, just like I've been treating mine. She loves that little boy and basically comes to realize them people has square eyes, but these people just like us.

**And Kerry Soper says in the '40s and '50s, Al Capp's politics were more progressive than Walt Kelly.**

KERRY: We're achieving Walt Kelly for achieving real clout as an artist, you know owning his copyright, but he was actually against advocating for a union, you know, that cartoons could belong to, or helping out younger cartoonists with artists right issues. Whereas Al Capp was more about, you know, unionizing, giving fair kind of compensation to female artists.

**In fact, when the first woman applied to join the National Cartoonists Society -- an artist named Hilda Terry -- she faced fierce resistance.**

DENIS: It was an all-male club and they liked it that way. And Capp stood up and said, it's time to let women in. She's a professional. And I won't be a member of an organization that won't admit her. And when they voted her down, Al Capp quit. Now that was a principled stance.

**By 1960, Capp and Kelly were both seen as heroes on the left for different reasons. They were using their cultural power to break an unwritten rule that the comics page was supposed to be a neutral zone, free from politics or satire. And despite the pushback, they were getting away with it. Their strips were more popular than ever.**

**And that is when their careers went in very different directions. There's a lot more about Al Capp after the break.**

BREAK

**Denis Kitchen had been a lifelong fan of Li'l Abner. And in 1966, he was in college. He opened up the funny pages and he was shocked to see that Capp had introduced a new group of characters to the strip – an unruly mob of student agitators called SWINE, which stood for Students Wildly Indignant About Nearly Everything.**

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

**Afterward, Capp introduced a new character called Joanie Phony who was an unflattering caricature of Joan Baez, the folk singer. And this really stood out because Al Capp didn't usually do caricatures of real people in the strip.**

DENIS: Somebody chased down Joan Baez. And they said, are you aware of what Al Capp is doing in his strip? And she said, I certainly am. I have my lawyer's looking into it. And then of course, they went back to Capp who was waiting for them. He anticipated this. And I, as much as I was not happy with him at the time, I thought what he said to the reporters was so spot on, because first he said, uh, you said, well, Joanie Phony in my strip is a hideous looking, has no talent, never bathes, rips off her fans, is a

hypocrite and so on. Uh, I can't imagine why Miss Baez sees a similarity with herself. But then he said, gentlemen, she protests for living. Am I also not allowed to protest? And that got me because I realized the, The Left and the counterculture, I was a part of, you know, we didn't, we didn't own satire (laughs.)

**In many interviews, Al Capp was asked what made him turn to the political right. He said, he didn't go anywhere. It was the left that changed.**

DENIS: He lived in Cambridge and so he was right next door to Harvard, and he saw in his view, overprivileged kids, uh, with mostly, you know, rich parents sending them to the best schools. And in his view, instead of getting an education, like he would have loved to have had, you know, he wanted to go to college, he couldn't afford it. So, he saw them squandering their parents' money and in his jaded view, you know, not bathing and all that other sidebar stuff.

**He wasn't just offended by the long hair, and beards -- although that did bother him. Capp would often mention this one incident from 1966.**

**Robert McNamara was the Secretary of Defense -- and the architect of the Vietnam War. McNamara came to speak at Harvard, not far from where Capp lived. A hundred students swarmed his car, preventing him from leaving. McNamara tried to have a dialogue with them, but the students shouted him down. The police had to intervene and get McNamara out of there.**

**Capp was furious. He said the students were denying McNamara's freedom of speech and putting him in physical danger. He was also mad that the university didn't punish the students.**

**Capp thought he was doing what he always did -- using his artistic platform to speak out against something he thought was outrageous. But it also brings up a question people are wrestling with today when it comes to entertainment. There's an old rule in comedy and satire that you need to make fun of people that are more powerful than you -- politicians, industry leaders, people who have the power to send teenagers off to war. It's called punching up. You're not supposed to punch down and make fun of people who don't have the same platform that you do.**

**But from Capp's point of view, the counterculture was a swarm, an unstoppable movement that was taking over the culture at large. In his mind, they had more power collectively than any single person with power. So, when he aimed his**

**satire not just at celebrities like Joan Baez, but college students and hippies, he turned the idea of punching up, upside-down – which was groundbreaking in its own way.**

**Now that Denis is older than Al Capp was at that time, he's tried to understand where Capp was coming from.**

DENIS: Yeah. I've tried my best to put myself in his shoes. It would be easy to say it was cynical, but, but the fact that I think it was genuine. I think you have to take into account. Now that said, you know, I still can't forgive that he became close friends with scoundrels, like Nixon and Agnew and, and was literally among the handful of friends. Nixon had. I interviewed, um, Al's grandson.

**His grandson Willie lived in the same house as Al Capp. He told Denis, The White House often called in the late '60s and early '70s.**

DENIS: A number of other times he would be in the room, and it would be like one time Nixon gave a speech and right after the speech, he called Al and he said, what did you think of my performance? And Al critiqued his performance and said, you should have done this. You should have known that this is the kind of confidant he was in a, in a way that certainly, I don't think any other cartoonist was ever that close to a president.

**And here's another big difference between Al Capp and Walt Kelly. For Kelly, the strip was everything. He was such a perfectionist, he lost opportunities to push his characters beyond the strip into merchandising and other types of media.**

**Al Capp went in the opposite direction. At this time in his life, he became less hands on creating the strip. He went on speaking tours around the country. And instead of appearing on game shows, he was now appearing on political talk shows.**

DENIS: I also think you have to put his political change in the context of a guy who had been the king of the hill in his profession for many years. By the time, and I have can't remember exactly. There was a point when Peanuts by Charles Schultz was beginning to catch up and basically pass him. And Peanuts became the most popular strip. And I think there was something about Capp where he had to be king of the hill. And so, he was getting suddenly a lot of attention from the conservative side of the fence, which he never did before, because he had been a liberal darling for decades, but I think he enjoyed the new attention from a new audience. And as he was losing his old crowd, I



think he thought, consciously or unconsciously, here's a new area. And they liked me a lot.

**But he may have met his match when John Lennon invited him to John and Yoko's bed-in for peace.**

**Now the first thing that amazes me about this video is that here is a comic strip artist, walking into a room with rock stars -- actual rock stars -- and people are star struck by him. Someone says, oh, you're the Al Capp!**

*ONO: Oh, you're the Al Capp*

*CAPP: Yes, the dreadful, Neanderthal, fascist, how do you do?*

**It starts out kind of friendly but soon he and Lennon are going at it.**

*CAPP: I could make a lot more drawing people like you than confronting you, and I can say it's much more appetizing drawing them because I can leave.*

*LENNON: I much prefer singing to doing this.*

DENIS: That was a publicity stunt that both sides knew that what they were doing. And John and Yoko knew when they invited him that there would be a confrontation and that's what they wanted. They wanted press. And so, Capp was there to be the villain. He certainly was the villain.

**Here's the problem for Capp. That moment happened over 50 years ago and people are still talking about John and Yoko. But until I began to research this episode, that was the only video I had ever seen of Al Capp because it was in a John Lennon documentary that I saw in high school. I actually remember thinking at the time, who is this guy?!**

**Denis says behind-the-scenes, behind this public persona, Capp's feelings were a little bit more complicated.**

DENIS: And in talking to his grandchildren, uh, they saw a very different man than, you know, I saw in press accounts. They saw a very loving grandfather who, uh, in fact, one of them who is about my age said that she was also one of those students. And when he talked to her privately and she stated her position, why she was protesting, he looked at her and he said, you know what, maybe you're right. And he could privately say that to her. He could not publicly change his stance because he was already very steadfast in what he was doing.

***But I've read that you think that the strip itself kind of suffered during that period. It wasn't as good.***

DENIS: It's not just my opinion. He said that himself, when he retired in 1977, in his last interview, he said, the strip hasn't been funny for years.

**He didn't retire just because the strip wasn't funny anymore. His health was failing. But also, Al Capp was a womanizer. He went after much younger women – including a young Goldie Hawn. The accusations of sexual harassment, indecent exposure and other charges piled up, until newspapers started to pulling Li'l Abner from their comics pages. Way before cancel culture became a thing, he was literally being canceled. So he quit.**

**Denis may feel disgust and disappointment towards Al Capp, but he still has a lot of respect for him as an artist. In fact, Denis went out of his way to preserve Li'l Abner, which he thinks was brilliant in its heyday, even if he felt stung as the subject of its satire.**

DENIS: I can tell you, in terms of a, of reprints, my own series, kitchen sink press published 27 volumes, a Li'l Abner. And I only got halfway before my, my company went under, or I would have finished. We had planned to do 54 volumes, which was truly encyclopedic. Another company tried doing it, uh, not very long ago. And they got up to about eight volumes and they had to cancel it because there just wasn't enough of an audience for it to be even marginally profitable. And that tells you everything, a strip that was read by 80 or 90 million people, as recently as the '70s now can't even sell a few thousand book collections. It's staggering.

**Also, the comics page does not have a lot of cultural weight anymore either. I mean of course, there are still comic strips -- and web comics are really popular -- but their audiences are limited. It's hard to imagine today several panels of cartoon characters, printed in a newspaper, having that much influence over the imaginations of millions of Americans.**

**Although in pushing the boundaries of what this supposedly non-political art form could do, Al Capp and Walt Kelly helped create the process that led to our culture breaking up into subdivisions and echo chambers.**

**And the questions that they began to ask through their comic strips -- What is political? What is fair game? When should storytellers use their fantasy worlds to comment on the real world, and can they do it in a way that doesn't lose sight of the storytelling itself? – we are mired in those questions today.**

**There are no easy answers. Every storyteller and every fan have to make those choices for themselves.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Denis Kitchen and Kerry Soper. I have links to 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 Li'l Abner panels. I also tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.**

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