

Famous New Yorkers

Horwitz Brothers

In show business, “stooges” can become stars. Slapstick comedy made three brothers from Brooklyn – Moe, Curly and Shemp Howard – into American legends.

The Howards began as the Horwitz brothers, the youngest sons of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. Samuel, born on March 11, 1895, was nicknamed “Shemp” for the way his mother pronounced the name “Sam.” Moses, born on June 19, 1897, was nicknamed “Moe” but sometimes called himself “Harry.” As the youngest, born on October 22, 1903, Jerome was nicknamed “Babe.” All three dropped out of high school to become entertainers. Moe was the most ambitious and the first to become a performer. He persuaded Shemp to join him in a comedy act that performed in vaudeville theaters across the country. On his own, Moe performed in theatrical stock companies and in early silent movies.

One of Moe’s early show-business friends was Lee Nash. By 1922 Nash had changed his name to Ted Healy and needed a new stooge for his comedy act. A stooge usually pretended to be an audience member, heckling the comic from his seat or wandering on stage to annoy him. Healy’s previous stooges were acrobats who took comical falls when hit. Moe was no acrobat, but audiences laughed when Healy hit him. They invited Shemp to attend a performance and join the action. Shemp then became one of Healy’s regular stooges, along with frizzy-haired Larry Fine.

Healy and his stooges made their first movie in 1930. When Shemp quit the act to become a solo comedian, Moe suggested Jerome, then a comedy orchestra conductor, as Healy’s newest stooge. When “Babe” learned that Healy disliked his moustache and bushy hair, he shaved himself bald, earning the ironic nickname, “Curly.” The revamped team made movies for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, with Healy usually playing the stooges’ boss. Moe finally tired of Healy keeping most of their salary for himself and signed himself, Curly and Larry Fine to a Columbia Pictures contract in 1934.

In their new two-reel comedies, Moe’s character acted like the leader but remained a stooge. The Three Stooges were poor men who failed at nearly everything they tried, childishly hitting each other all the while. Despite the Stooges’ stupidity, audiences identified with their clumsiness, their tantrums and their occasional triumphs. Curly had never acted before joining the act, but his frantic energy and improvised mannerisms soon made him the most popular Stooge.

The Three Stooges became Columbia’s most popular comedians. They made nearly 200 two-reelers between 1934 and 1958. When a stroke forced Curly to retire in 1946 (he died on January 18, 1952), Moe asked Shemp to rejoin the act. Shemp set aside his solo career to help his brother. He remained a Stooge until his death on November 22, 1955. Moe and Larry continued with Joe Besser until Columbia ended the series. Just when the Stooges seemed finished, they gained a new generation of fans when their movies appeared on television. Moe, Larry and Curly Joe DeRita starred in six feature films between 1959 and 1965. The act finally broke up when Larry Fine suffered a stroke in 1970, but Moe Howard carried on the Stooges’ legacy until his death on May 4, 1975. Since then, the Three Stooges have become part of American folklore. They’ve been impersonated by other actors, but the originals will never be matched.



Curly, Shemp and Moe in a Columbia Pictures publicity photo



Brooklyn is one of New York City’s five boroughs and has the same boundaries as Kings County. It is located on western end of Long Island.

To see a Three Stooges’ movie check your local TV or cable listings or search YouTube online. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.