

WORKING OUT THE BUGS



By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Eh — What's up, classic animation lovers?

Everyone's favorite wascally wabbit made his debut on the big screen on July 27, 1940 — 85 years ago.

THE ORIGIN OF BUGS BUNNY

Disney had Mickey Mouse. Fleischer Studios had Betty Boop.

Warner Bros. Cartoon studio had Porky Pig and Daffy Duck and a handful of other characters. But not one around which a savvy marketing operation could build a memorable identity.

That would change in 1940, when animation director Tex Avery took a recurring — and still evolving — rabbit who had appeared in four animated shorts and built a story

around him: "A Wild Hare."

"That's just Daffy Duck in a rabbit suit," animation director Fritz Freleng said about the crudely drawn rabbit that had appeared in "Porky's Hare Hunt" in 1938. But the bunny's antics — at one point, ripping off Groucho Marx's "Of course, you realize: This means war" line from "A Night at the Opera" — delighted audiences, which resulted in theater owners asking studio officials when the next rabbit cartoon was coming.

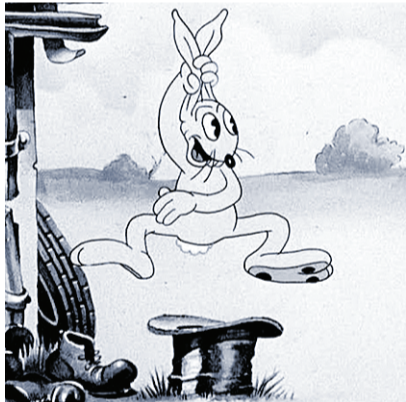
A rabbit appeared as a foil for a magician in a short a year later. But when it came time to make what became "Hare-um Scare-um" in 1939, animator Charles Thorson developed a new bunny character from scratch.

For reasons that have never been fully explained, another animator's name — Bugs Hardaway — was used on the model sheets for the still-unnamed characters: "Bugs' bunny." In fact, a third animator, Bob Givens, also claims ownership of the design of the rabbit.

It was then that Avery was assigned the task of creating yet another "hunter foiled by wacky prey" cartoon with the evolving rabbit. "I did Bugs and Elmer," Givens said. "Tex gave it the personality and Mel gave it the voice, and that was it."

"When we saw that on the screen, we knew we had a hit character," Freleng said. "The whole gimmick was a rabbit so cocky that he wasn't afraid of a guy with a gun who was hunting him."

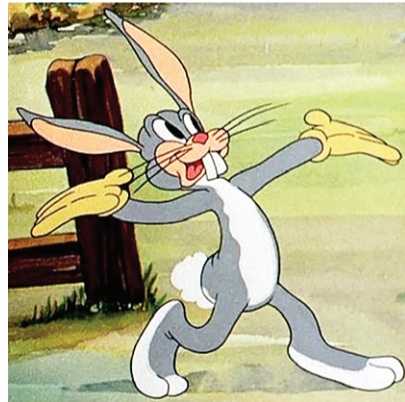
WARNER BROTHERS' RABBITS MADE FOUR APPEARANCES BEFORE 'A WILD HARE'



RELEASED April 30, 1938
"Porky's Hare Hunt"



RELEASED March 25, 1939
"Prest-O Change-O"



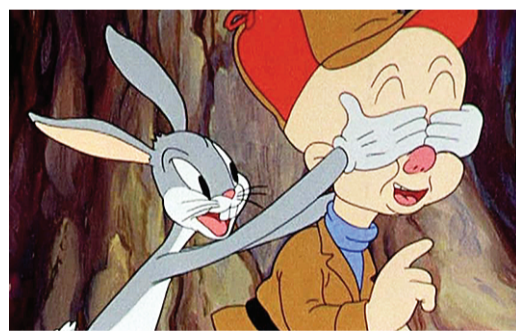
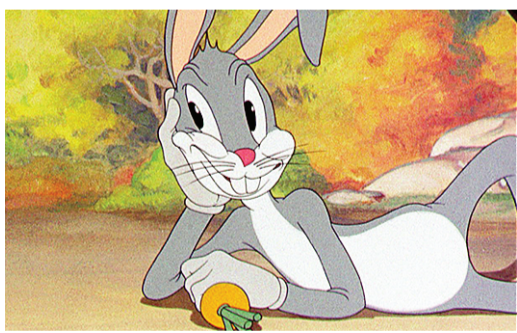
RELEASED Aug. 12, 1939
"Hare-um Scare-um"



RELEASED March 2, 1940
"Elmer's Candid Camera"

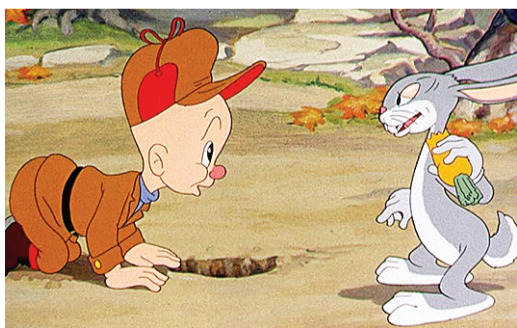
BUGS MAKES HIS DEBUT IN 'A WILD HARE'

Avery claimed he was inspired by friends from Texas when he came up with Bugs' line, "What's up, Doc?" But voice actor Mel Blanc said he ab-libbed the line during the recording session for the short. The line was so popular with audiences that producers decided to make it a running gag in all Bugs' subsequent appearances.



Bugs' design was refined quite a bit for "A Wild Hare." In addition, Avery asked Blanc to use a cross between a Bronx and a Brooklyn accent for this cartoon. Bugs was not named in "A Wild Hare," but at the start of his next appearance, "Elmer's Pet Rabbit," in January 1941, he'd receive a "featuring Bugs Bunny" — minus the apostrophe — credit.

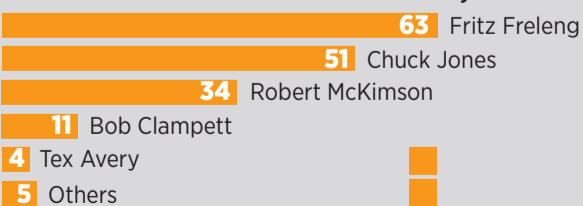
Bugs' habit of eating a carrot too quickly was a parody of a Clark Gable bit in the famed 1934 Frank Capra film "It Happened One Night" in which Gable chews a carrot and sends chunks flying as he talks with Claudette Colbert as she tries to hitchhike. While that might seem obscure today, most moviegoers in 1940 got the reference.



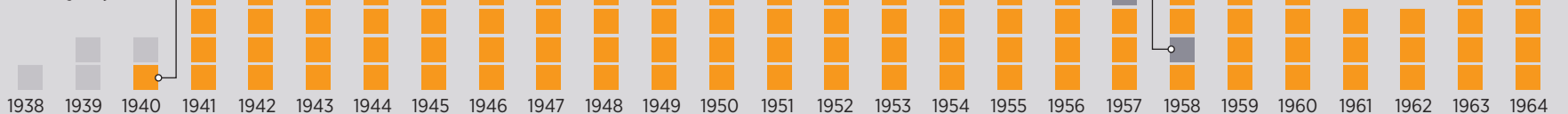
"A Wild Hare" would be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Short Subject: Cartoons. Also nominated that year would be the first Tom and Jerry cartoon, "Puss Gets the Boot." Another short by MGM studios — "The Milky Way," about the three little kittens who lost their mittens, would win the Oscar.

A QUARTER-CENTURY OF BUGS BUNNY CARTOONS

EH — WHO WAS THE DIRECTOR, DOC?



"A Wild Hare"
RELEASED
July 27, 1940



"What's Opera, Doc?"

RELEASED July 6, 1957
Placed in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress in 1992.

"Knighty Knight Bugs"

RELEASED Aug. 23, 1958
Won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 1959.

Warners closed its studio in 1963 and farmed out animation work to Freleng's DePatie-Freleng Enterprises studio.

TOTAL BUGS BUNNY SHORTS: 168