

classic cartoon

He is what he is, and that's all that he is. You may know that phrase in the first person, uttered by a rail-thin, but forearm-thick sailor with a hankering for an even skinnier girl and a penchant for canned greens.

I first met Popeye the Sailor when I was a lad of seven watching Saturday morning cartoons in Davenport, Iowa. While I was not the graduate school-trained aesthete that I became, I was instantly attracted to the under-the-breath mumblings of Popeye, his brute strength and the way he always got the best of Bluto the bully.

I was particularly attracted to one particular cartoon, "Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba's Forty Thieves," a 17-minute epic that featured Popeye, Olive Oyl and Wimpy stranded in the desert, only to meet and battle with Bluto as Abu Hassan. I found a copy of a junky old VHS with the cartoon on it, and I showed the episode to my friends repeatedly. They didn't seem to share my love, though they did crack up when I slipped the tape into a VCR during World History class, surprising Mrs. Jarvis, who thought we would be learning about British Kings.

It's exactly that spirit of impishness that gave birth to Popeye. He first appeared in a 1929 comic strip called

DEPRESSION-ERA HERO OF THE WORKING CLASS STILL RESONATES TODAY

BY MARK LUCE

"Thimble Theatre," which was penned by E.C. Segar. Popeye caught on quickly, and eventually grabbed the eye of cartoon innovators Max and Dave Fleischer. In 1915, Max had invented the rotoscope, which allowed animators to trace drawings over live action, giving a much more fluid feel to animation. Through the 1920s, the pair kept atop of the animation field, providing plenty of inspiration for Walt Disney. But it was the sultry Betty Boop that propelled the duo into the stratosphere, and a guest appearance by Popeye in a Boop short not only brought the brothers more success, it also delivered Popeye his own reels.

Those Fleischer Studio-produced Popeyes (now available on gorgeous, restored DVDs) have a significantly different feel than the innocent whimsy of early Disney. The troubled economic times of the 1930s had audiences clamoring for a working-class hero in a rough-and-tumble urban environment, and Popeye fill the bill beautifully. He wasn't educated, but he was street smart. He wasn't good-looking, but he was a charmer. And most of all, he wasn't afraid of anything or anyone.

The Fleischers eventually lost con-



trol of the franchise, and the Popeyes of the 1940s and 1950s don't have the bite of those first cartoons, trading the grit of life with suburban barbecues and far-less sophisticated animation.

Sharing these cartoons with my sons has been an unmitigated treat. They sing along to the trademark opening and cackle at the sight gags that recall the best of Buster Keaton. Even better, they will constantly say, "Dad, Dad, Dad, this is the best part," as Popeye one-ups Bluto once again.

Whether you watch them with the kiddies or not, you will find that the four-disc set, "Popeye the Sailor: 1933-1938," will be strong to the finish.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he has become addicted to old cartoons.

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