

by Jamie Hecker



Jamie Hecker has been a lifelong fan of Disney, and is passing on his love to his sons. He and his family visit Orlando annually and always look forward to their next trip. When not in Orlando, he resides in northern Virginia with his beautiful wife Suzanne, two boys and four cats. You can read more about his "hidden Disney" musings at myhiddendisney.blogspot.com/

George Bruns

The Disney experience. It's something Disney fans around the globe know intimately. It's the tingling sensation one gets when seeing the iconic castle or the Pixar lamp before a Disney film. It's hearing the goosebump-inducing whistle from the "Roger E. Broggie" at the Magic Kingdom. It's the scent of fresh citrus that triggers a memory of a fanciful flight aboard Soarin'. It's the rich texture of the various bells in the Expedition Everest queue and the unique chimes they produce. The Disney experience plays upon all the senses. Sound is a major factor, ranging from songs known by heart, to film and television scores, and background music in the parks. Disney songwriters Richard and Robert Sherman are household names, but many other individuals have contributed to the vast array of the Disney sound. George Bruns may not be a recognized name to the casual Disney fan, but his wide body of music is. During his eighteen year career with The Walt Disney Company, he composed and arranged music for animation, live-action, television and the parks. His work spans generations and has a timeless appeal.

George Bruns was destined to be a musician. As a child, he was a prodigy on the piano and soon after mastered the trombone and tuba. He enrolled at Oregon State Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) in 1932 to study engineering. However, he repeatedly fell back on his love of music, when he performed with the campus ROTC band and a local orchestra. "That's what I really enjoyed doing," he later recalled. He dropped out of college to pursue music full time in the Portland area. As his musical talent grew, so too did his ambition. He left for the shining lights of Los Angeles in 1949, performing in jazz bands and nightclubs. Within these circles, he met fellow trombonist Ward Kimball, an animator for Disney. In 1953, Kimball recommended Bruns to UPA, another animation company, who was looking for a jazz tuba performer for its animated short, *Little Boy with a Big Horn*. With this move, Bruns successfully transitioned to Hollywood.

At this time, Disney was working on its latest animated fairy tale, *Sleeping Beauty*. For Walt, it was to be a masterpiece, driven by the collective talents of the famed Nine Old Men. The art direction was striking and articulate, especially when compared to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella*. The score for *Sleeping Beauty*, based on the ballet of the same name by famed Russian composer Tchaikovsky, was to elevate the film as well. On the strength of Kimball's recommendation, Bruns, in 1953, was brought in to compose the soundtrack. His film peers were equally impressed; Bruns was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Scoring of a Musical Picture in 1959, when the long-developing film was released.

Bruns remained with Disney as a musical director and skillfully aided the company as it entered the new arena of television. Disney had an instant hit in 1954 with "Davy Crockett," and the studio quickly worked to maximize its potential. While editing the filmed material, it was discovered there wasn't enough footage for full television episodes. Walt suggested some filler material be produced, along with an accompanying song. Serendipity struck, as Bruns' song "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" became a hit beyond all expectation. It was written in short order on a tight production schedule, but curiously, the show producer, Bill Walsh, wasn't happy with it. Fortunately, Walt gave the song his blessing, proving once again his unique talent of understanding the American public. The hit single sold over ten million copies.

Disney had another successful television live-action show with "Zorro," which aired from 1957 to 1959. Bruns created a swashbuckling theme song that crackled with energy. Disney's entry into the variety show field was with the groundbreaking Mickey Mouse Club show, which ran from 1955 to 1958. Bruns contributed a number of songs to the show, including the Friday show theme Talent Round-Up, a Western hoe-down that would make Woody and Jessie proud.

Film scores for shorts and feature length films were Bruns' strong suit. Following his success with *Sleeping Beauty*, he composed a wide variety of music that reflected the subject at hand. His notable work includes the patriotic theme for *Johnny Tremain* and the lighthearted fare for *The Absent-Minded Professor* and its sequel, *Son of Flubber*. His jazz roots shined through on his compositions for *101 Dalmatians* and *The Aristocats*. His scores for *The Love Bug* and *Herbie Rides Again* were nimble and mod, befitting the impish title character. His hypnotic score for *The Jungle Book* was silky smooth; the soft vibrato of the overture's bass flute perfectly setting the scene for mystery and intrigue. Disney historians with a keen ear will note that the overture is a repurposing of Bruns' earlier work for the 1964 New York World's Fair, from the WED-designed attraction Ford's Magic Skyway.

In addition to his score for *Sleeping Beauty*, Bruns received three additional Academy Award nominations: his arrangements for *Babes in Toyland*, *The Sword in the Stone*, and the song "Love" from *Robin Hood*. Additionally, he wrote the music for a number of animated shorts, most notably the swinging Humphrey Hop from *In the Bag*, featuring Humphrey the Bear.

Brun's influence isn't just limited to television and film. Disneyland and Walt Disney World fans can thank him for his lasting contributions to the parks. Pirates of the Caribbean, which opened at Disneyland in 1967 and in the Magic Kingdom in 1973, remains an iconic Disney attraction to this day. A significant reason for its popularity is its timeless

theme song, "Yo Ho (A Pirate's Life for Me)." Imagineer Xavier Atencio, the show writer for the attraction, composed the song lyrics to the score that Bruns composed. Bruns and Atencio collaborated again on "Bear Band Serenade," the opening number to the Country Bear Jamboree. Bruns also wrote the music for the closing song "Come Again (Come On In)."

Brun's music is also a part of the Magic Kingdom's past. Adventureland's original counter service restaurant was the Adventureland Verandah, which offered a unique blend of Caribbean, Asian, African, and Polynesian styles and cuisine. The restaurant closed in 1994, but the building remains available for character meet and greets and other special

events. When it was in operation, its background music loop included a few tracks from Bruns' Moonlight Time in Old Hawaii album. The soothing, island-inspired songs were a welcome treat to park Guests weary from crisscrossing the Magic Kingdom.

Like many Disney veterans of the 1950s and 60s, Bruns had the opportunity to work directly with Walt. He later recalled, "Walt was always very good to me personally. He pretty much let me go my own way,

trusting my own musical sense of what was right. The one thing about him that really impressed me was his fantastic memory for detail." It seems fitting that Bruns participated in the last project Walt did – the EPCOT film he completed just one month before his untimely death. The twenty-four minute film outlined Walt's ambition for an experimental prototype city of tomorrow. The background music for the film was created by Bruns and his musical Disney colleague, Buddy Baker. Together, their score highlighted many recurring musical themes from Disney's work at the 1964 New York World's Fair and the Disneyland television show.

Brun retired from The Walt Disney Company in 1976 and returned to his native Oregon. He passed away in 1983 and was posthumously named a Disney Legend in 2001. 🍷

