

by Jamie Hecker



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*You can read more about his "hidden Disney" musings at [myhiddendisney.blogspot.com/](http://myhiddendisney.blogspot.com/)*

## Sterling Holloway

For decades, Disney fans around the world have come to know and love the characters and stories that unfold on the silver screen. There's something extraordinary about seeing Mickey Mouse, Cinderella, Mulan, or Sheriff Woody come to life right before our eyes. The animators and artists that breathe life into these characters are indeed legendary, but there's a lot more that goes into creating a memorable character. Writers, storyboard artists, colorists, editors, musicians, and countless others all play a vital role in bringing the story to the screen. However, the most memorable element just might be that of the voice actor. These men, women, and children bring depth of emotion and nuance to their role. They must become the character onscreen, heard but not seen. Guests leaving the theater may not know the face of the humans behind the animated characters, but they certainly make a lasting impression.

The Disney Legends program has honored multiple individuals who have worked as voice artists. The list includes, but is not limited to: Pinto Colvig and Clarence Nash, the original voices of Goofy and Donald Duck; Adriana Caselotti, the youthful and exuberant voice of Snow White; Cliff Edwards, eternally known for his work as Jiminy Cricket; and Tim Allen, the boisterous voice of Buzz Lightyear from the *Toy Story* trilogy. However, for his body of work, one Disney voice artist stands above the others; Sterling Holloway. His may not be a household name, but many of his characters, including Kaa, the Cheshire Cat, and the unflappable Winnie the Pooh, certainly are. Sterling Holloway brought all three to life with his highly distinctive voice.

Holloway enjoyed a fifty-year career in Hollywood that spanned radio, television, and film. Born and raised in rural Georgia, he enrolled in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City at the tender age of fifteen. He honed his craft early in the theater before heading to Los Angeles in 1926. Holloway's first film was a silent comedy, common for that era. Hollywood was in a period of transition, and soon "talkies" were literally the talk of the town. With his red pompadour and uniquely high-pitched, raspy voice, Holloway easily made the transition to sound films.

Holloway's Disney career nearly began with Walt's breakthrough feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Walt himself had been closely following Holloway's film career, and in 1934 penciled him in as the voice of Sleepy, though the role ultimately went to Pinto Colvig. Disney didn't forget him however, and Holloway made his Disney debut in a brief but memorable scene in *Dumbo*, as Mr. Stork delivering a pint-sized pachyderm to Mrs. Jumbo. Next, he voiced the adult incarnation of Flower



the skunk in *Bambi*. Although his initial roles were small, his unmistakable voice, with its gentle southern drawl still peeking through, led Disney producers and directors to cast him in a new light: he would serve as a narrator of short films. His first narration was as Professor Holloway describing the life of Pablo the penguin in Disney's second South American goodwill tour package film, *The Three Caballeros* (see *Celebrations* issue #25).

The next package film, *Make Mine Music*, featured an animated adaptation of the classic orchestral piece Peter and the Wolf. Holloway's light-hearted narration offered an effective counterweight to the frightening antagonist. Additionally, he narrated Disney classic shorts such as *The Little House*, a sweet-hearted story of a simple home that stands the test of time, and *Susie the Little Blue Coupe*, whose anthropomorphic styling of automobiles was the source of inspiration to Pixar for the *Cars* movies.

Holloway's voice work with these movies and shorts had cemented his reputation within the Disney Company, but his best work was ahead of him. The studio was ambitiously adapting Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" for its next animated feature. The film was filled with marvelous, mysterious, and fanciful characters, including the Mad Hatter, the white rabbit, the Queen of Hearts, and of course Alice. However, perhaps the most memorable character was the Cheshire Cat. Holloway's silky performance as the curiously philosophical feline is frequently lauded as the film's highlight.

*The Jungle Book*, released in 1967, is cited as the last animated feature that Walt Disney personally supervised. Holloway was cast as Kaa the python at the personal request of Walt. Holloway recalled, "Walt was a stickler for voices. He came to me and said, 'When you've finished what you're do-

ing today...see what you can do with the snake. I can't find the right voice.' So I went in and decided to make Kaa have a distinct ache in his back." Holloway's supporting work as Kaa was widely praised. Disney historian Jim Fanning noted about the performance: "Holloway not only delivered the lines with a mixture of menace and misplaced self-confidence, but also ad-libbed dialogue that sparked the imagi-

nations of the artists." Walt was so pleased with Holloway's initial work that he insisted the role of Kaa be expanded, resulting in a confrontation with the film's other antagonist, Shere Khan.

As memorable as Kaa was, Holloway, in the twilight of his Disney career, had saved his best for last. The Disney Company, between 1966 and 1974, released three whimsical featurettes based on the A. A. Milne character Winnie the Pooh and his Hundred Acre Wood companions: *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree*, *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day*, and *Winnie the Pooh and Tigger Too*. Holloway's soft and sweet raspy voice was perfect for the "bear

of very little brain," whose simple and singular goal is honey.

Holloway, for the first time in his Disney career, played a leading role instead of a supporting part, allowing him the opportunity to let his full range of acting and singing skills shine. He was the perfect embodiment of Pooh as he delicately sang, "I'm Just a Little Black Rain Cloud," the infectious Sherman brothers song that highlighted the first featurette. Holloway cited Winnie the Pooh as his favorite character, which should come as no surprise. Following the enormous success of the films, the two became synonymous with each other. Appropriately enough, Winnie the Pooh served as Sterling Holloway's escort when he was awarded the Disney Legends honor in 1991, and he was the first person to receive the award in the Voice category. 🐻

