An Interview with Carl Stalling

by MIKE BARRIER

Carl Stalling was the person most responsible for changing people's notions of how much could be accomplished in a seven-minute cartoon score. Stalling was born in Lexington, Missouri, on November 10, 1891. Beginning with the time he spent working with Walt Disney in Kansas City, Missouri, in the mid-1920s, Stalling would have a profound effect on the sound and style of cartoon music throughout the three-decade studio cartoon era. While he did not score *Steamboat Willie* (1928), he wrote the music for the first dozen Mickey Mouse cartoons, while simultaneously inspiring Disney's second series of shorts, the Silly Symphonies, which he also scored for a year. After spending time at Ub Iwerks' studio and doing instrumental and arranging work for Disney, he ended up at Warner Bros., where he worked as musical director for the animation division from 1936 to 1958.

When Disney's attention began shifting away from his shorts to the animated features, Warner Bros. and other studios plowed full-bore into the cartoon world. Stalling's style—already established by his work with Disney and Iwerks—became even more clearly defined in his Warner Bros. scores. He combined a pastiche approach of using melodies from every possible genre (folk, Tin Pan Alley, swing, classical) with short, original instrumental lines to create a ongoing sense of motion, deftly matching the implicit rhythmic pulse inherent in the Warner Bros. shorts. With the nonstop popularity of Bugs, Daffy, Porky, and their compatriots, the Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons have been on television for forty years on end, firmly placing Stalling's animated sounds in the ears of every aspiring composer—for animation or otherwise. His death on November 25, 1971, did nothing to increase his practically nonexistent fame as a composer; only with the release of *The Carl Stalling Project*, volumes one and two (1990 and 1995, respectively), did music fans truly begin to appreciate the music that had defined not only hundreds of Warner Bros. shorts, but countless other cartoons produced in the last seventy years. The

importance of this interview comes not just from how much Stalling describes how he approached his work—it was also the *only* extensive interview of any kind ever conducted with him, and was published only once, in 1971, years before his popularity would soar to its current heights.

It's INSTRUCTIVE TO listen to the soundtrack of a Warner Bros. Cartoon—especially one in pantomime—without watching the pictures. The music and the sound effects are mirrors of the action, so completely integrated into the whole that, for many of us, Carl Stalling's music and Treg Brown's sound effects are the common thread that holds the Warner cartoons together. Stalling's music is always as vigorous, funny and inventive as the animation. He composed the scores for more than six hundred Warner cartoons.

Milton Gray and I recorded an interview with Carl Stalling on June 4, 1969, at his home in the Hollywood Hills. Milt and Bill Spicer recorded a second interview on November 25, 1969, and those interviews have been supplemented with many letters since then. All of this material has been pulled together in the interview that follows.

—MIKE BARRIER

MILTON GRAY: How did you become a composer of music for cartoons?

CARL STALLING: As I recall, I first met Walt Disney in the early twenties. He used to come to the Isis Theater, where I played the organ and had my own orchestra. This was music to accompany silent movies, and I played the whole afternoon and evening. When I wasn't at the organ, I'd be conducting, or playing the piano and conducting. I had a pianist for a number of years, and then I just conducted. Walt was making short commercials at that time, and he'd have us run them for him. We got acquainted, and I had him make several song films. *The End of a Perfect Day,* showing a sunset . . . Victor Herbert's "A Kiss in the Dark." The words would come on one at a time, with the music. This was before sound, of course.

Walt left for Hollywood shortly after that time, and I didn't see him again until 1928. I started writing him when sound pictures came in, and in our correspondence back and forth, we just agreed that there would be a position for a musical director at his studio. He came through Kansas City on his way to New York to record the music for *Steamboat Willie* (1928). I didn't go with him, since he already had that all set up. I had nothing to do with that.[1] Walt

took a taxi to my home, and we talked principally of how sound pictures were causing a revolution in Hollywood. He had two silent pictures—*Gallopin' Gaucho* and *Plane Crazy*—already made, and he left those with me. I wrote most of the music for them at home in Kansas City. I met Walt in New York to record that music and we shared the same hotel room; we both washed out our socks in the same bathroom sink. I was with Walt when *Steamboat Willie* was previewed at the Colony Theater, down on Broadway, and we got the audience reaction. The reaction was very good. We sat on almost the last row and heard laughs and snickers all around us.[2]

Mike Barrier: I've read that while you were still in Kansas City, Walt wrote you from Hollywood to ask for a loan of two hundred and fifty dollars. Is that correct?

CS: Yes, and after joining him in Hollywood, I loaned him two thousand dollars. He repaid me in full long before 1933, but I don't remember the date.

Bill Spicer: Had you done any composing before your first cartoon work for Walt?

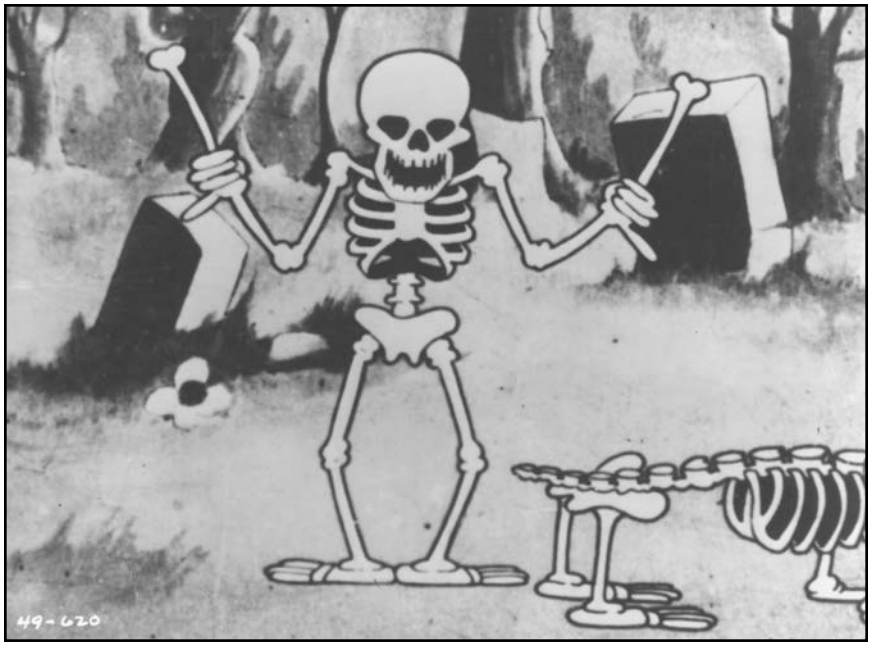
CS: No; I improvised at the theaters, and that's composing, but it's not writing it down.

BS: Could you tell us about the music you did for *The Skeleton Dance* (1929), the first of the Silly Symphonies?

CS: It was mostly original; that was forty years ago, and I can't remember if I used anything else or not. But it wasn't Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre,* although some writers have said it was.

MG: I've read that Walt wanted to use that music, but couldn't get copyright clearance, so he asked you to compose something similar.

CS: That's what he usually did when something was copyrighted, but my music wasn't similar at all to the *Danse Macabre.* It was mostly a fox trot, in a minor key.



MB: I've been told that you used some of the music from Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite* in *The Skeleton Dance.* Do you remember using that music?

CS: No. When we were working out a story, usually for the Silly Symphonies, I would sometimes use a musical number as a pattern, suggesting a certain style or mood. I would play it on the piano for the director, and then write something similar, but original, for recording.[3]

Walt never wanted to pay for music; he wanted me to just make up something. In one picture, he wanted to use the song "School Days," but he would have had to pay for it. So he said, "Carl, can't you write something that sounds like 'School Days' but isn't?"

The Skeleton Dance goes way back to my kid days. When I was eight or ten years old, I saw an ad in *The American Boy* magazine of a dancing skeleton, and I got my dad to give me a quarter so I could send for it. It turned out to be a pasteboard cut-out of a loose-jointed skeleton, slung over a six-foot cord under the arm pits. It would "dance" when kids pulled and jerked at each end of the string.

MG: So the idea for *The Skeleton Dance* was really yours. And the story, too?

CS: If you call it a story. We'd all get together on gags, in what they called a gag meeting.

MG: What did Walt say when you brought up the idea for *The Skeleton Dance*? Did he like it right away?

CS: He was interested right away. After two or three of the Mickeys had been completed and were being run in theaters, Walt talked with me on getting started on the musical series that I had in mind. He thought I meant illustrated songs, but I didn't have that in mind at all. When I told him that I was thinking of inanimate figures, like skeletons, trees, flowers, etc., coming to life and dancing and doing other animated actions fitted to music more or less in a humorous and rhythmic mood, he became very much interested. I gave him the idea of using the four seasons, and he made a cartoon on each one of those. I scored one of them [*Springtime* (1930)] before I left.

For a name or title for the series, I suggested *not* using the word "music" or "musical," as it sounded too commonplace, but to use the word "Symphony" together with a humorous word. At the next gag meeting, I don't know who suggested it, but Walt asked me: "Carl, how would 'Silly Symphony' sound to you?" I said, "Perfect!" Then I suggested the first subject, *The Skeleton Dance,* because ever since I was a kid I had wanted to *see* real skeletons dancing and had always enjoyed seeing skeleton-dancing acts in vaudeville. As kids, we all like spooky pictures and stories, I think.

That's how the Silly Symphonies got started. Of course, everyone knows that if it had not been for Walt Disney, then in all probability there would never have been a Mickey Mouse. This makes me wonder sometimes, would there ever have been a Silly Symphony or who would have suggested *The Skeleton Dance*—if?[4]

BS: What are your recollections of *The Skeleton Dance* preview?

CS: It was a late show at the Vista Theater down on Hillhurst and Sunset in Hollywood, a small theater. Walt was disappointed in it. There were very few people there, no house. We saw *Steamboat Willie* in New York at eight or nine o'clock, with a full house. But here in Hollywood, at eleven

o'clock, there were only a few stragglers. There wasn't any reaction, and Walt didn't think it went over at all. He said, "What the hell's the matter with the damned thing?" But they did ship it that night, I think, by Air Express to New York. The next we heard it was running at the Roxy, for two weeks. They liked it so well they ran it for another two weeks, a return engagement.[5]

MG: How was Walt as a boss? Was he demanding, or easy to work for?

CS: Well, he couldn't explain just what he wanted, at times. We'd go crazy trying to figure out what he wanted. But he inspired us that way. We wanted to help him, we wanted to do it, and we all worked together in that respect. That was his genius, I think, inspiring the people who worked for him to come up with new ideas.

MB: Did Walt tell you what he wanted in the way of music?

CS: He had definite ideas sometimes, and sometimes it'd be the other way around.

MG: Did you work in the same room with the animators at Disney's?

CS: Yes; everybody worked in one big room.

MB: Was that room the one called "the music room"?

CS: I only remember one big room, outside of the two business offices.[6]

MB: You invented the "tick" system of recording music for animated cartoons, didn't you? Do you recall the circumstances that led to that?

CS: The "tick" system was not really an invention, since it was not patentable. Perfect synchronization of music for cartoons was a problem, since there were so many quick changes and actions that the music had to match. The thought struck me that if each member of the orchestra had a steady beat in his ear, from a telephone receiver, this would solve the problem. I had

exposure sheets for the films, with the picture broken down frame by frame, sort of like a script, and twelve of the film frames went through the projector in a half second. That gave us a beat.

MG: . . . If you chose a twelve-frame beat. You had other beats, too.

CS: Six, eight, ten, etc., depending on the kind of music used. We made recordings of "tick" sounds at different beats—a tick every eight frames, or ten frames, or twelve frames—and played this on a phonograph connected to the recording machine and to earphones. Each member of the orchestra had a single earphone, and listened to the clicks through that. It wasn't necessary for the conductor to give a beat, but I did, because one or two of the musicians didn't like to use the earphones. We had a woman cello player at Warner's, and she didn't like to use the earphones because they hurt her head or something. She was a fine cellist, so we couldn't criticize her too much, and she didn't get off the beat much.

MG: Did you record before the animation was completed, or after?

CS: Both, but usually before. The animators and I all worked from that same exposure sheet, and I just recorded from our beat, without seeing the picture. By the time they had the picture ready, I had the recorded music ready.[7]

MB: Did you pre-score much of your music at the Disney studio—did the animators fit their actions to your music, instead of the other way around? I was reading a Disney book by Bob Thomas called *The Art of Animation* again recently, and I came across this paragraph about how the early Disney cartoons were made: "The musician put the songs and tuneful bits together and handed the score to the animator [Thomas means the director]. The animator timed the music on his yellow exposure sheet and then fashioned the action to fit the music." That seems to contradict your statement that you composed your music after the exposure sheets were prepared, and not before. Is that what happened, or is *The Art of Animation* correct?

CS: Both statements are correct. Sometimes the director made the action fit a certain piece of music, and other times I wrote music to fit certain actions.

Most of the time, the directors and animators were free to do what they thought best to make the action most effective.

MB: Do you mean that not even *The Skeleton Dance* and the other Silly Symphonies were pre-scored?

CS: No. I pre-scored the music only when it wasn't possible to animate without pre-scoring. At Iwerks' and Warner's, I worked almost entirely from exposure sheets.[8]

MB: If you wrote most of your music at the Disney studio after the exposure sheets were prepared, did you confer with Walt about the beats *before* the sheets were prepared?

CS: Yes, usually, to prevent monotony. A change of beat would mean a change of tempo or rhythm, or both.[9]

MG: When was your "tick" system first used?

CS: It must have been in 1929, at Disney's, on *The Skeleton Dance.*

MB: How did you record the music for cartoons before you started using the "tick" system?

CS: I had lines drawn on the prints of the cartoons that I used for recording. The lines would show on the screen so that the whole orchestra could see them, and that's how I got my beat when I was conducting.

When I was composing the music for *Gallopin' Gaucho* and *Plane Crazy,* the two silent pictures, I had the cartoons shown at the theater where I worked, so that I could decide what music would be appropriate. I was having trouble figuring out how to get the music synchronized with the picture, then I hit on the idea of drawing 'half-moon' lines on the film that started on the left side of one frame, then moved to the right across the following frames, and then back toward the left, with the beat occurring when the line returned to the left side of the screen. That way, the beat didn't catch the musicians by surprise when we were recording. We also used these lines when we recorded the music for *The Barn Dance* [1928] in New York.

MB: I've read that Walt drew marks on the print of *Steamboat Willie* that they used for recording in New York, so that the conductor could watch the marks as they flashed on the screen and stay on the beat.

CS: I don't think he did that, because the pictures and the music seemed out of sync at times.[10]

MB: Wilfred Jackson has said that there was another line system that Ub Iwerks worked out, based on your system. He said that Ub animated a horizontal line rising and failing, and that the line was photographed at different speeds so that the complete cycle of rising and falling took eight frames, or twelve frames, or whatever the beat happened to be. He said that these loops of film would then be projected on a screen that the orchestra could watch as they recorded the music.

CS: Yes, we did that for a while. We used the line moving up and down for the fifth and sixth Mickey Mouse cartoons, *The Op'ry House* and *When the Cat's Away* [both 1929], and then we started using the "tick" system on *The Skeleton Dance.*

MG: How long was it that you had to record everything—the voices, the music, the sound effects—in one take?

CS: That was true at Disney's and for part of the time at Iwerks. But it was just two or three years until they had built a recording machine that would record three or four tracks at once onto a master negative. This is called *dubbing*.

MG: When you were at Disney's, you must have arranged and conducted both.

CS: No, I had an arranger, but I conducted.[11]

MG: You've told me that you were the first voice of Mickey Mouse; how many cartoons were made before he spoke?

CS: Not too many. They couldn't decide whether they wanted him to speak or not. I was his voice in only one picture. I don't recall the title [probably

Wild Waves (1930)] but Mickey was a lifeguard at the beach, and saved Minnie's life. She said, "My hero," and Mickey said, "Oh, shucks, that's nothin'," in a falsetto. One of the girls in the inking department did the voice for Minnie. I left not long after that, so I don't know what they did about Mickey's voice after that.[12]

MG: How was it decided that you were to do the voice for Mickey?

CS: Walt probably told me to try it. All the animators were taking a shot at it, those who wanted to. It was just a falsetto voice.

MB: Did you ever do any other cartoon voices?

CS: Yes, I did a walrus voice [also in *Wild Waves*]. I sang "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep," but instead of using the words of the song I just sang the syllable "wa" to each note of the music. It got a lot of laughs, especially on the last note, a low, low C.

BS: How did you finally decide to leave Walt?

CS: We had different offers, from other studios. Everybody said Walt was a failure, but I realized later that it was just a trick, that they just wanted to break Walt. I went with the "Aesop's Fables Studio," but I soon gave up that contract altogether. Ub Iwerks and I left Disney at about the same time, but we went our own ways. The thing was, I wasn't going to leave unless Ub left. When Ub left I thought something was wrong. When Roy Disney told me that Ub was leaving, I told him, "Well, I guess I'll be leaving, too." It's not very pleasant to think about, because we were all good friends. But we were getting worried. Walt paid only half salary for a year or two, and I had a home and expenses. "Aesop's Fables" offered me about three times as much money.[13]

BS: How long did you stay with "Aesop's Fables"?

CS: A few months. I didn't work on any cartoons; they didn't have anything for me to do, they already had a musical director. It was all just a trick to break Walt. I couldn't live in New York, anyway. So, after freelancing for a year or

more I joined Ub's studio on Western Avenue, and was with him when he moved his studio to Beverly Hills.

MB: Was Walt upset when you decided to leave?

CS: Yes, but he wasn't as upset as Roy, his brother. That was pretty hard. We were all very good friends, Walt and Roy and Ub and I. Of course, I owe everything to Walt Disney; he gave me that first break in Hollywood.

As I remember, Walt offered me a third of the Silly Symphonies, long before Ub and I left. I never had any stock in the Disney company, but I was to receive one third of the profits of the Silly Symphonies for as long as I worked at the studio. I accepted, but leaving Walt voided the agreement.

I was with Ub for six months or so, until 1932, when I left. I did some freelance work and some arranging and piano playing for Walt. I worked on *Three Little Pigs* [1933] and about ten other cartoons. I arranged the score and played the piano during the recording on all of them. When you see one little pig playing the piano in *Three Little Pigs,* you're hearing my playing.

That was the last Disney picture I worked on. In the summer of 1933, I rejoined Ub in Beverly Hills and stayed with him until I went to Warner Bros. in 1936.

MB: I've always heard that Walt resented people leaving him—did you see any evidence of that when you worked for him on *Three Little Pigs?*

CS: None at all.

MB: Did you ever see Walt in later years?

CS: Yes, and he was always very courteous. I called him once, after Warner's closed

Carl Stalling during his years with Ub Iwerks' studio in the 1930s. Courtesy of Mike Barrier.

in 1953 for six months, and I asked him if there was any work there, and he said no, and asked me if I had any gray hairs. I said, "Yeah, what's left."

MG: Have you ever had any regrets about leaving Walt?

CS: No, except for pleasant associations. It was all very new and exciting. My leaving turned out better for Walt and it turned out better for me. At Warner Bros., I could use a lot more popular songs; they didn't mind paying for them, as they had their own music publishing firm.

MG: Was there much difference in working for Walt and working for Ub and Warner's?

CS: No, it was about the same, with the advantage of experience.

MG: You were just salaried with Iwerks, weren't you? You weren't given a share of the studio?

CS: Right.

MG: Did you have an assistant at the Iwerks Studio?

CS: No, it was all mine, including the arranging.

MB: How large an orchestra did they use at the Disney and Iwerks studios?

CS: Eight to twelve players. At Warner's we had as many as fifty or so, their main studio orchestra. We had a vocal group, too, once in a while. The chorus director wrote the music for them.

MB: Did you go from Iwerks to Warner after the Iwerks studio closed, or was it still open when you left?

CS: It was closed, but I was idle for only a few weeks before I went to Warner's.

MB: When you first came to Warner's, they had somebody else writing cartoon music, didn't they?

CS: They had a man who had had some trouble with Leon Schlesinger, who was making the cartoons at that time. I was hired to replace him, in 1936. I don't know what the trouble was about, but the inside of the music room desk was all cluttered with empty whiskey bottles.

MB: Schlesinger knew of your work already?

CS: Oh, yes. There was a director and story and gag man working for Schlesinger named Ben Hardaway—they called him "Bugs"—who had been a newspaper cartoonist back in Kansas City, and I knew him there. He was also at Ub's, when I was there, and then he went to Schlesinger's. He was there when my predecessor was laid off, and he recommended me very highly to Schlesinger.

MB: Now, after you went to work for Schlesinger, you were the only composer Warner's had until you retired?

CS: For the cartoons, yes, for twenty-two years. I retired in 1958.

MB: Did your music differ much at Warner's from what it had been at Disney's and Iwerks'?

CS: Yes, because at Warner's, I could use popular music. That opened up a new field so far as the kind of music we could use. At Disney's, we had to go back to the nineteenth century, to classical music, to "My Old Kentucky Home."

When I came out here, there was no law that cartoon music was copyrightable. That went into effect in the late forties. Then they started paying royalties retroactive from the day I started with Warner Bros. They're still paying, on the television reruns. Royalties are paid to composers whose music I used, and also to me for my original music.

MG: Apart from the increased use of popular songs, did you notice much of a change in your music over the years, as you composed it?

CS: It depended on the picture. When we had a very modern picture, I used as much music in the modern style as I could think up—augmented intervals, and so forth. But other than that, my style didn't change much.

MB: Of your music for cartoons, how much was other composers' music that you reworked and how much was original?

CS: Eighty to ninety per cent was original. It had to be, because you had to match the music to the action, unless it was singing or something like that.

MB: Were you ever ill, so that someone else had to be called in to do some cartoons for you?

CS: Yes, once. I had a brain operation in 1950. I bumped my head and a clot as big as my hand formed in between my skull and my brain. I was ill for four or five weeks. Gene Poddany, Chuck Jones' composer now, and Milt Franklyn filled in for me.

MG: They were making four cartoons every five weeks at Warner's back in the Forties, so you had to turn out almost one complete score every week. How did you turn out so much work?

CS: We had an arranger, of course. I would write the piano part—the basic, skeleton parts, you might say—and jot down all the cues and everything, then send it to the arranger, who worked at home. He arranged the music for orchestra, but whenever I wanted to feature an instrument or instruments in the orchestra, I'd make a notation. It took about a week, maybe eight days for me to prepare each score.

MB: Did you ever get really pressed for time?

CS: No, I had that schedule, and I stayed on time, although I sometimes had to do some homework in the evenings.

MB: Were there ever any cartoons that you had trouble writing music for, where the music didn't seem to suggest itself naturally?

CS: No. You see, I had played in theaters for about twenty years before sound came in. We improvised all the time, on the organ. I'd have to put music out for the orchestra, for features, but for comedies and newsreels we

just improvised at the organ. So I really was used to composing for films before I started writing for cartoons. I just imagined myself playing for a cartoon in the theater, improvising, and it came easier.

MB: Did you have certain instruments that you liked to use more than others in your cartoon scores?

CS: The bassoon . . . the trombone, the slides on the trombone . . . the violin, with the glissandos, for comic effects. The viola is very good for mysterious effects.

MG: Did you ever record your music at Warner's before the exposure sheets were completed, so that the cartoon was fitted to the music?

CS: Yes, when there was a song, usually one that Mel Blanc sang. They'd indicate so many frames for each word on the exposure sheets.[14]

BS: Did you write the music for the opening of the Warner cartoons, with the shield and the bullseye?

CS: No, I selected it, but that was a tune already owned by Warner Bros., "Merrily We Roll Along."

BS: How was the opening sound done, that "boinngg"?

CS: That was done with an electric guitar.

BS: Was the sound electronically altered?

CS: No, they just struck a chord and brought it down.

MB: Playing for a cartoon score would be hard for many musicians to get used to, wouldn't it?

CS: The musicians said they enjoyed the cartoons more than anything else. They looked forward to coming down to record the cartoons. It was screwy stuff, you know.

A cartoon score was usually made up of about ten sections. We'd run through a section once or twice—usually just once—and then record it. We had a wonderful orchestra at Warner's. It took about three hours to record a cartoon score.[15]

MG: Did the directors show you the storyboards, and you then decided from that what music would be most suitable?

CS: That's right.

MB: Did the directors tell you what they wanted in the way of music? Did they want a certain kind of music for particular scenes?

CS: As a rule, no. Sometimes they'd just want something with a twelve-beat for one sequence, and then maybe an eight-beat for the next sequence, and so on. Sometimes they'd build a whole picture around a song like "What's Up, Doc," which I wrote, but many popular songs were treated likewise, using the song title as the cartoon title.

I'd say Chuck Jones and Friz Freleng were the easiest directors to work with, because they had something there. Tex Avery was also great, and Bob Clampett was really inspiring, he really had ideas. He was a fascinating guy. I hated to see Bob go.

MB: Were there any cartoon characters that it was especially enjoyable to write scores for, or did it make any difference?

CS: Each character had a different feeling, enjoyable, and, of course, very original, but there weren't any that were especially enjoyable to work with, unless it would be Bugs Bunny. He was the standout.

BS: Did you ever get tired of doing music for cartoons with "funny animals"?

CS: No, there were several directors at Warner's, and when you got through with one there was another one waiting for you. There was plenty of variety.

MG: Many times, you used the music to tell the story. In *Catch as Cats Can* (1947), Sylvester the cat swallowed a bar of soap and was hiccupping bubbles, and the music was "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles." Did you make up those gags yourself, or did the directors help you with that?

CS: It happened both ways.

MB: You worked closely with the sound effects men, didn't you, to keep the music and sound effects coordinated?

CS: Yes; Treg Brown handled all the sound effects. Treg had thousands of sound effects on short reels, and he would make up a whole soundtrack out of these, as well as adding new ones for each cartoon. He had been there for three or four years when I came to Warner's. His room was next to mine.

MB: Did you ever actually write your music so that a sound effect came out as part of the music?

CS: Yes, and sometimes I'd just lay out altogether and let the sound effect stand alone.

MB: In some of Chuck Jones' Road Runner cartoons, there are long, involved gags for which there's no music; nothing is heard except the sound effects. Was this something Chuck wanted to do, or was this your idea?

CS: I don't remember, but I do remember that if the sound effect called for it, we'd stop the music altogether. And, of course, for a lot of the dialogue we would stop the music or we'd cut it down to just a few strings.

MG: Did you find a cartoon with lots of dialogue harder to compose for?

CS: Yes, because you don't dare drown out the voices. Sometimes on television, or in features, the music is way too loud, and you can't hear what they're saying. One trouble with cartoons today is that they do so much dialogue that the music doesn't mean much.

MB: Was it your idea to use Mendelssohn's "Fingal's Cave" for the Minah Bird's walk in Chuck Jones' Inki cartoons?

CS: Yes, and it went over so well that we had to use it every time.

MB: Did you ever suggest a cartoon idea to a director that would involve a certain kind of music? Did you, say, ever suggest to Chuck Jones that he might make a cartoon using a certain piece of classical music?

CS: It could be, but as a rule, he worked out the ideas first.

MB: Did you ever do any composing for live-action features?

CS: I did one reel of a feature for Jack Benny, *The Horn Blows at Midnight,* and it was just as bad as the picture, which was a big flop. I didn't want to do it, but Leo Forbstein, the orchestra's general musical director—he'd hire all the musicians—and head of the music department, wanted me to. I'd played with him in Kansas City theaters, the Royal and Newman Theaters. So when I came out here, I liked it much better at Warner Bros. than at Disney's, because of that association. We'd known each other and worked together for years. He played violin and I played piano, and sometimes for the morning shows, that's all we'd have for an hour or so, and then I'd go up and play the organ.

MB: When you'd written your music, and had it ready to go, did anybody else have to look at it first and approve it before you recorded it?

CS: No, no one.

MB: Was there ever a time when you'd recorded your music that somebody said something should be different, and wanted to change it?

CS: Yes, once. Ray Heindorf, director of the Warner orchestra now, took Leo Forbstein's place when Leo passed on. He said a certain four bars sounded like the tune "Chicago." I thought I knew that tune, and I couldn't hear any similarity, but he had me change it. They didn't want anything that might cause a lawsuit over copyrighted music.

MG: Before you retired, did you start training other composers to take over your job? I know that some screen credits list you and another composer, Milt Franklyn.

CS: He was my arranger, and then he took over composing after I left. He died, I think in 1962. He was a very fine musician.

MG: What was your schooling before you went to work in the theaters?

CS: I had a private teacher; I started when I was six years old. My dad was a carpenter, and he found a broken toy piano. It was all broken to pieces and had little metal keys, like xylophone keys. One of them was missing, so he had to make one himself. He gave me a little frame box, and put the keys on that, and made some little hammers, and I started picking out tunes on that. That's how they started me studying piano.

MB: So then you started formal study of the piano after that, when you were six, and really learned how to play it.

CS: Yes. I couldn't reach the pedal when I started playing; somebody had to pedal for me. I couldn't do the pedaling on the old church organs, either. I started playing them when I was eight or ten years old.

MB: How old were you when you started playing in theaters?

CS: Seventeen or eighteen. I didn't finish high school; I only went two years. My ear gave me trouble and I couldn't hear the teachers, so I had to quit.

MG: So you couldn't hear too well even while you were composing all that music for Disney and Warner Bros.?

CS: I had trouble there, but the trouble was only in talking with the boys, not with the music.

MG: What was your very first job as a musician?

CS: I played the piano at a theater about a block from former President Truman's home in Independence, Missouri, around 1910. That was my first job in the Kansas City area, but I'd played the piano in 1904 at Lexington, where I was born. Lexington is forty miles east of Independence. In those days, they just wanted a piano going while the operator was changing reels. In the cities, they had two machines, so you didn't have to wait for the next reel, but in little towns like Lexington they hadn't gotten that far yet.

MB: Do you remember when you saw your first movie?

CS: The first movie I ever saw was *The Great Train Robbery.* I saw it in a tent at a street fair in Lexington, around 1903. It made such an impression on me that from then on I had only one desire in life: to be connected with the movies in some way.

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[1] Wilfred Jackson has described the preparation of the *Steamboat Willie* music track this way: "I played the harmonica so that Walt could tell the tempo that he wanted for 'Steamboat Bill' and 'Turkey in the Straw' [two public-domain tunes used in the score for the picture]. I would set the metronome and play 'Steamboat Bill' or 'Turkey' or whatever, and when Walt heard what sounded good for the tune and his action both, then he knew that was the beat he wanted. Walt knew how fast film went, and I knew about the metronome. Putting the two together made it possible to pre-time music to animation when the music would be recorded later, just by simple mathematics.

"Walt made up the exposure sheet for *Willie*. What I worked out was a bar sheet or dope sheet, to indicate measures of music. It wasn't like a score, because it didn't have five bar lines. It had a little square for each beat in each measure, and it had an indication of the tempo; it was in twelve frames, or sixteen frames, or whatever, to the beat. Within that square, the key action and the scene number was indicated, so that the bar sheet showed that each scene began so many frames before a certain measure. That way, we were able to synchronize the scenes, which were shot separately, of course. Each individual scene would be shot from the exposure sheet, but from the bar sheet, you could tell where to lay the scene in against the music track, once you found out where the first beat of the music was. My contributions to sound cartoons were that I knew what a metronome was, and I worked out what was first called a dope sheet and later a bar sheet."

Walt later told Jackson that when he stopped at Kansas City and showed Jackson's "score" to Carl Stalling, Stalling's comment was, "This man's no musician." Jackson says that Walt enjoyed kidding him about that thereafter, and adds, "Carl was right."

2 According to David Smith of the Disney Archives, a telegram from Walt Disney to his brother Roy, dated October 24, 1928, says: "Carl arrives Friday." That would have been October 26, 1928. *Steamboat Willie* premiered on November 18, 1928 (the September date usually given is wrong).

Walt and Carl returned from New York in December 1928, and Walt mentioned in a letter that he had been there three months and had synchronized four cartoons (*Willie, Gaucho, Plane* and *The Barn Dance*). Carl Stalling recalls that they made at least one other trip to New York, in 1929, to record the music for *The Op'ry House*.

3 According to David Smith of the Disney Archives, the studio obtained a license to use "The March of the Dwarfs" from Grieg's *Lyric Suite* in *The Skeleton Dance*. The rest of the score was original music by Carl Stalling.

4 Wilfred Jackson adds his recollection of the start of the Silly Symphonies: "Walt and Carl would time the pictures in Walt's office. Timing them consisted of working out what the music would be and what the action would be." (The director—Walt, in this case—would prepare the exposure sheets after agreement had been reached on the timing. Later, the Disney directors had assistants who would transfer the timing onto the sheets.) "A lot of times Walt would want more time or less time for the action than could fit the musical phrase. So, there would be a pretty good argument going on in there. We'd sit out there, in the next room, and enjoy it. Walt could be pretty stiff when he got in an argument, and we'd be glad we weren't on the other end of it. But, finally, Walt worked out a thing with Carl. He said, 'Look, let's work it out this way. We'll make two series. On the Mickey Mouse pictures you make your music fit my action the very best you can. But we'll make another series, and they'll be musical shorts. And in them music will take precedence and we'll adjust our action the best we can to what you think is the right music.' Those were the Sillys, and that was a way of getting something done and not getting in a dog fight all of the time.

"Both of those people could be pretty obstinate when they felt like it. Carl could stand up to Walt and give him what for and when it came to the music, if you pushed him a little too far he could put up a pretty good argument."

5 Differing accounts of *The Skeleton Dance* previews have been published in two books. Diane Disney Miller, in *The Story of Walt Disney*, describes two different previews—one in the morning, before a small audience, and another at a large, important theater, with favorable reactions both times. Bob Thomas, in *The Art of Animation,* says, "At the preview, the theater was rocked with laughter." Mrs. Miller describes in considerable detail the tribulations of the cartoon before its successful run at the Roxy, saying that exhibitors refused to accept it at first.

6 Wilfred Jackson recalls that when Stalling and Walt Disney timed the pictures, they moved the piano into Walt's office, and that became the first "music room"—the room shared by the animation

director and the music director. Later, when production had become more specialized, and there was a story department, the story men would work on their stories to a certain point and then move the story boards into "the music room" (there eventually were several), where the director and the composer would work on them. Jackson says that the "one big room" that Stalling remembers was divided by partitions that were open at the top.

7 Wilfred Jackson recalls that recording the soundtrack for an early Disney cartoon was usually delayed until the cartoon was complete or production had reached the point where it was reasonably certain that no more changes would be made in it. (Even after the exposure sheets had been prepared, an animator could suggest spreading out or compressing a gag, or making other changes.) This practice continued even after the introduction of the "tick" system. Jackson believes that Stalling is "covering a broad spectrum" and referring to his career at the Warner studio as well as at Disney's.

8 Bob Clampett has said that the action and music were synchronized for the first Looney Tune, in 1929, this way: Hugh Harman and Rudy Ising decided on a beat with their musician, then timed the cartoon on the sheets of written music, indicating so many frames for each action. The action was coordinated with the bars of music. The timing was transferred from the music sheet to exposure sheets, and then the music was recorded with the tick earphones. Hugh Harman has confirmed the accuracy of this description.

9 For more on this, see footnote 4.

10 Diane Disney Miller, in her 1956 biography, *The Story of Walt Disney*, quotes her father as saying, "We drew a mark on our film every twelve frames with India ink. As that mark went through the projector, it made a white flash on the screen and if he watched for that flash and used it as a visual substitute for the tick-tock of an old-fashioned metronome, the man who was conducting our orchestra could stay on the beat."

Bob Clampett has pointed out that black India ink marks wouldn't make white flashes when projected, but rather black flashes, unless they projected the negative, which is of course extremely unlikely.

Wilfred Jackson believes that marks of some kind may have been used during the recording: "That might have been, they had to do a little work with it back in New York due to the fact that they didn't have a score that could be followed." Jackson believes there is nothing wrong with the synchronization.

11 During his tenure as the Disney studio's musical director, Carl Stalling composed the music for nineteen of the first twenty Disney sound cartoons. They are listed below in order; all are Mickey Mouse cartoons except for the Silly Symphonies, indicated by an (S).

Gallopin' Gaucho
Plane Crazy
The Barn Dance
The Op'ry House
When the Cat's Away

The Skeleton Dance (S)
The Barnyard Battle
The Plow Boy
The Carnival Kid
Mickey's Follies
El Terrible Toreador (S)
Mickey's Choo Choo
Springtime (S)
The Jazz Fool
Hell's Bells (S)
Jungle Rhythm
Merry Dwarfs (S)
The Haunted House
Wild Waves

The second series of Disney cartoons began with two Silly Symphonies, *Summertime* and *Autumn*, that continued Stalling's series based on the seasons, but Stalling doesn't believe that he scored them.

[12] Minnie's voice for most of her career was supplied by Marcellite Garner (now Mrs. Richard Wall, Sr.). However, Mrs. Wall believes she began doing Minnie's voice by singing for the soundtrack of *The Cactus Kid* (1930), which was made after Stalling had left the Disney studio. Wilfred Jackson believes that *The Cactus Kid* was the first cartoon for which the dialogue was recorded in advance, so that the animation could be tailored to the dialogue. Before that, the voices were recorded when the music was recorded, and the dialogue had to be recorded to a beat, to synchronize it with the action.

Walt Disney himself did Mickey Mouse's voice most of the time up until the middle 1930s, when Jim Macdonald, a veteran sound effects man at the studio, began doing it. Macdonald also did the voices for Gus and Jacques in *Cinderella.* On one occasion, while Walt was still doing Mickey's voice, Clarence Nash (better known as the voice of Donald Duck) filled in as Mickey while Walt was in Europe.

Mickey had spoken in cartoons before *Wild Waves*, although his dialogue was limited, and (according to Mark Kausler, who has seen the film recently) in at least one early Mickey cartoon, *The Carnival Kid*, Mickey speaks in a "most un-Mouse like voice."

[13] According to David Smith of the Disney Archives, Iwerks left the Disney studio on January 25, 1930, and Stalling left the same week.

[14] Bob Clampett has said that songs were pre-scored for the Warner cartoons this way: Mel Blanc's singing would be recorded beforehand, but not the accompaniment. Blanc would sing in time with a tick record that he listened to through his earphones. The recording of Blanc's voice would be read off onto exposure sheets by Treg Brown, and given to the director of the cartoon. Stalling then wrote the musical score from the exposure sheets, including the accompaniment for Blanc's song. Stalling agrees with Clampett's account.

[15] Bob Clampett has contributed his own memories of the recording sessions: "Many's the time that Carl, Treg [Brown] and I waited while the fifty-piece Warner Bros. orchestra would finish recording

the score for a Bogart or Bette Davis feature, and then bat out one of my Bugs Bunny or Porky shorts. When Leo Forbstein [the orchestra's director] told them to put our cartoon score on their stands, a wave of relief would spread through the entire orchestra. Suddenly, two violinists would pop up and begin dueling with their bows, or some such horseplay. Others would call out things in jest, and by the time Carl stepped to the podium, raised his baton and they broke into the unnaturally rapid tempo of our Merrie Melodies theme song ('Merrily We Roll Along'), or subtitle, or whatever, they would be in a completely different mood for Bugs than for Bogey."