

The Comedians:



Spotlight on The Three Stooges

Philadelphia-Born Larry Fine teams up with
three Brooklyn brothers to create
a classic comedy team.

By Len Canter

The List

Could a nice, talented (a trained classical violinist) Jewish kid, indeed a favorite son of the City of Brotherly Love, become the raucous middleman of one of the legendary, and violent, comedy acts of all time? Why “soitenly,” especially when teamed with three weird looking “numskulls” from the Brooklyn streets who would decades later collaborate with him to punch, poke, slap and insult each other on their way to everlasting celluloid fame.

Louis Fineberg (later known to all as the frizzy haired Stoooge, Larry Fine) was born in 1902 on the south side of Philadelphia to Jewish immigrant parents, owners of a jewelry shop at the corner of 3rd and South Streets. To rehabilitate his arm after a childhood accident, Louis took up and became quite proficient at the violin, a talent he would later exhibit often onscreen while the other Stooges could only pantomime. While a student at Central High (located at the time at Broad and Green) Fine augmented the family income by singing along with movie slides at Nixon’s Grand and other now defunct Philadelphia theaters of the day. As Kid Roth he fended off jabs during a brief boxing career as a lightweight, which probably served him well as he absorbed countless wallops in his Stoooge career. By 1925 Larry’s Jewish dialect one-liners, dancing and fiddling had him well on his way to a successful career in vaudeville.

In the audience one evening was hard drinking but brilliant comic Ted Healy and his “second bananas” two brothers, Moses and Schmool (Samuel) Horowitz. Healy convinced Fine to ditch the fiddle and join his troupe for the then princely sum of \$90 a week, the beginning of Ted Healy and His Three Stooges. Their bizarre antics soon played to packed houses and it wasn’t long before they signed to make the first of several feature films, *Soup To Nuts* in 1930. Louis became Larry, the goofy, rubber-faced, man-in-the-middle; Moses became Moe, the bowl coiffed, bossy leader; and the mugging, gruff Schmool, hereafter known as Shemp and looking to expand his solo career soon dropped out and was replaced by Moe’s little brother Jerome, who became the lovable and innocent breakout star of the trio, Curly (nyuk, nyuk, nyuk). Disputes over pay and bookings led the boys to split from Healy, and—“Hello, hello, hello”—the Three Stooges were born. The trio quickly developed an iconic identity, often a jazzy “Three Blind Mice” theme preluding their trademark madcap film plots punctuated by violent physical slapstick (the fingers in the



Caption /credit to go here

nostril pull and the two-fingered eye poke) and acrobatic sight gags.

The Three Stooges made 190 shorts and at least 20 features in their various incarnations; *Men In Black* where the boys work as medical interns even received an Academy Award nomination. Everyone has a particular favorite—some of my mine are *Dizzy Doctors*

where the boys are selling a product called “Brighto” a medicine mistaken for polish and *Disorder In The Court* with a hilarious scene with Curly trying to subdue a parrot with a rubber mallet. Shemp returned in 1946 after Curly suffered a catastrophic stroke, and Shemp in turn was replaced upon his passing in 1955 by comedian Joe Besser. When Curly returned for a brief cameo in *Hold That Lion*, it was the only time that all four Stooges appeared together.

Not many fans alive today actually saw Stoooge films in the theater; most of us experienced them on television during their syndication heyday in the late ‘50s and ‘60s. If you grew up in Jersey, you may remember “Officer” Joe Bolton, the former Philadelphia sportscaster who hosted the daily *Three Stooges Funhouse* and his admonishment cautioning kids not to attempt the Stooges’ well rehearsed stunts “on little brothers and sisters!” Of course in Philadelphia, kids ran home from school to catch the cowgirl clad Sally Starr on Channel 6’s *Popeye Theatre* where Sally introduced a whole generation to Stoooge shorts, often accompanied by appearances by the Stooges themselves. In fact their pal Sally had a role as Belle Starr in the Stoooge feature *The Outlaws Is Coming*.

Although the Stooges were all products of Jewish upbringing, religion was not very relevant to their careers outside of the occasional sprinkling of Yiddish in their dialogue. Anti-semitism probably hit a little closer to home when they considered their pre-war roles in *You Natzy Spy* (often considered one of their best works with Moe cast as a Hitler-like character) and the sequel *I’ll Never Heil Again*. The films supposedly outraged the fuhrer so that he had the Stooges placed on a death list!

Of course for any Three Stooges fan, the ultimate pilgrimage is to the world’s only Stooges museum, Philadelphia’s free Stooogeum, where you can browse among over 100,000 pieces of Stooageabilia, including many rare and unusual items. The NY Times gave rave reviews and Philadelphia Magazine lists the Stooogeum on their “Best Of Philly” Visit their website at www.stooogeum.com. For stoooge merchandise visit www.shopknuckleheads.com ©