



Walt Disney in his studio, 1955.

MICKEY MOUSE AT 90

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Mickey Mouse at 90



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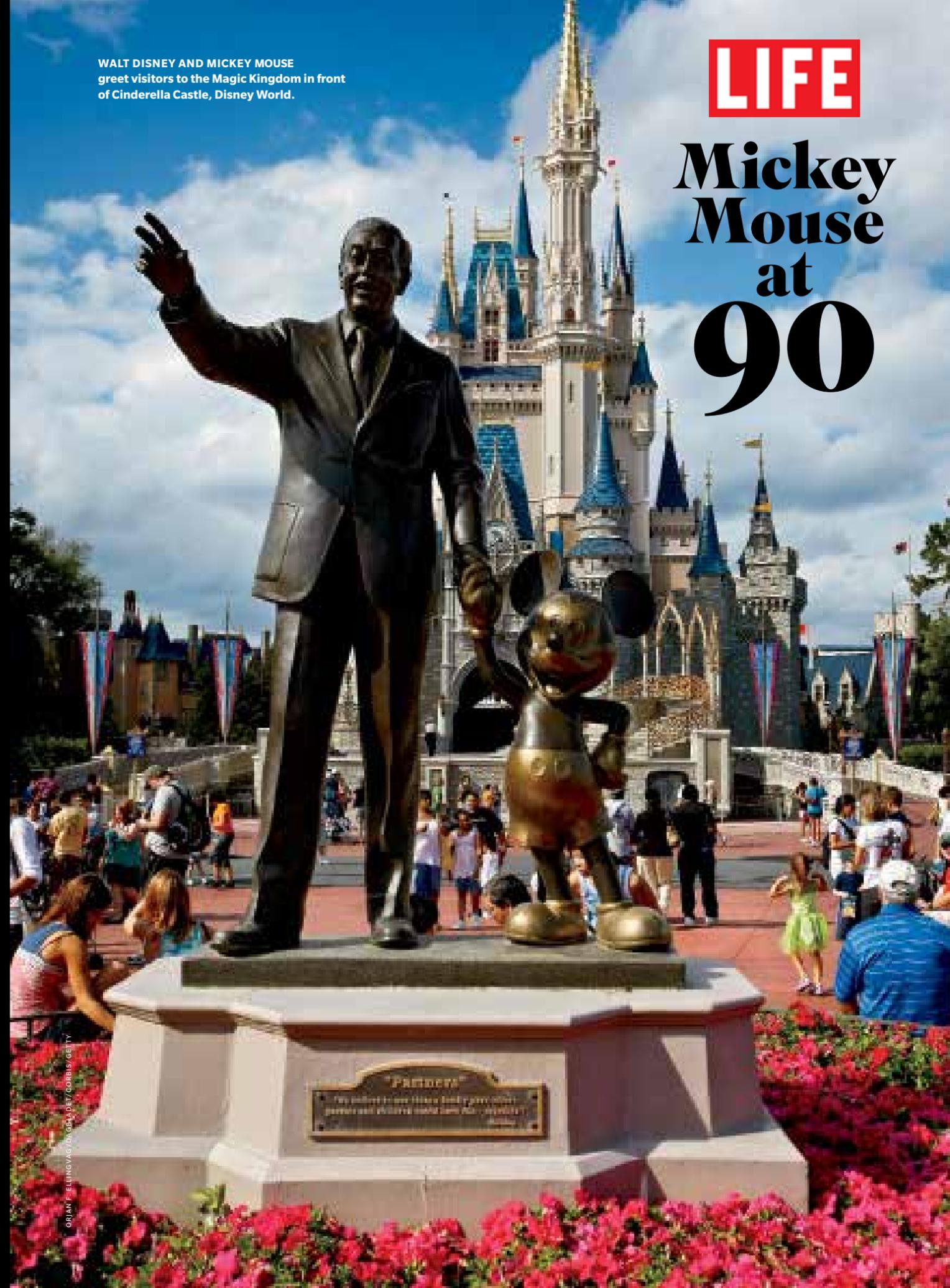


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WALT DISNEY AND MICKEY MOUSE
greet visitors to the Magic Kingdom in front
of Cinderella Castle, Disney World.

LIFE

Mickey Mouse at 90



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LIFE

Mickey Mouse at 90

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THIS PAGE: *Look Mickey*, a 1961 oil painting by Roy
 Lichtenstein.

FRONT COVER: Mickey Mouse in 2008.
 KEVIN WINTER/GETTY

BACK COVER: HULTON/ARCHIVE/GETTY

PAGES 92-93: Claes Oldenburg, *Geometric Mouse-
 Scale C*, 1971, anodized aluminum, 20 x 20 inches,
 Courtesy of Donna Leatherman LLC.

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MICKEY'S UNIVERSE

With his galactic success (yes, he has been to outer space) the Mouse has touched the brightest stars. Elvis, Queen Elizabeth, FDR, even, well, kind of, Shakespeare

On the evening of April 1, 1975, in the showroom of the Las Vegas Hilton, Elvis Presley closed the pre-encore portion of his set with a song as familiar as any of his prodigious hits. “M-I-C, K-E-Y, M-O-U-S-E,” sang the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll. “Mickey Mouse, Mickey Mouse, forever let us hold our banner high.” As adoring fans of two icons joined in, Elvis said, “I figured you’d know it.”

Who doesn’t know the “Mickey Mouse March”? Who doesn’t know Mickey Mouse? And so Elvis sang on, now in unison with a sellout crowd: “M-I-C... See you real soon! K-E-Y... Why? Because we like you! M-O-U-S-E.” And in this way, the two most famous American entertainers of the 20th century were conjoined on stage: Elvis and Mickey, Graceland and Disneyland, blue suede shoes and bright yellow brogans—if that indeed is what Mickey is wearing along with his red shorts with two white buttons to match his white gloves. Who among us cannot conjure this image instantly?

EARTH: JANNSAVY/GETTY. MERCURY, MARS: SCIEPRO/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY/GETTY (2). BACKGROUND: SOLOLOS/ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY

Known around the world, Mickey Mouse has crossed paths with nearly every other celebrated figure of the 20th century, and he has been everything they have and much they have not—orchestra conductor, train conductor, airplane captain, steamboat captain, castaway, cowboy, Arabian adventurer, football star, film star, rock star, immortal. He will live forever, though he hasn't forever (or, technically, ever) been alive. It's hard to imagine now, but Mickey Mouse didn't always exist. Someone—two people, actually—had to invent him, which they did exactly 90 years ago.

"I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing," said one of those creators, Walt Disney, on *The Disneyland Show*, which aired in October 1954, nine months before Disneyland opened to the public. "That it was all started by a mouse."

The Disney empire, even then, traversed continents, and is still personified—is still rodentified—by its universally renowned mascot. The leader of the band. Mickey's head, comprising three circles, is as recognizable in silhouette as any movie star, monarch, or religious leader has ever been in the full light of day.

No creature living or dead or never actually born has been woven into the fabric of public life quite the way Mickey Mouse has, even as he's literally woven into the carpet of Disney resorts and concealed as infinite

"Hidden Mickeys" in wallpaper patterns and masonry and tiles. He is also hidden in plain sight throughout popular culture, independent of his own countless films and songs and novelties, a background hum whose volume fluctuates over the decades but is always there, the ambient noise of American life.

Ethel Merman and Louis Armstrong, among many other giants of the age, sang his name in "You're the Top," in a lyric penned by Cole Porter, placing Mickey in a continuum of historical greatness—the Nile, the Colosseum, the Mona Lisa:

"You're a melody from a symphony by Strauss
"You're a Bendel bonnet, a Shakespeare sonnet
"You're Mickey Mouse."

And if the Fifth Avenue department store Henri Bendel isn't as famous as it once was, Mickey has proven, like Shakespeare, to be timeless, adaptable to every age—and stage. The great Shakespearean actor Sir Laurence Olivier

signed the Disneyland guest book in 1976, and, to paraphrase Olivier's Hamlet, of the Mouse who proffered him the pen that day: We shall not look upon his like again.

Gene Kelly would have danced with Mickey in 1945's *Anchors Aweigh* had Walt Disney not denied MGM permission to use his likeness. And so Kelly did a number instead with Jerry, of animated cartoon series Tom and Jerry, for MGM had felt compelled to have its own mischief-making animated mouse, forever escaping the clutches of his cat nemesis but never escaping the long shadow of Mickey.

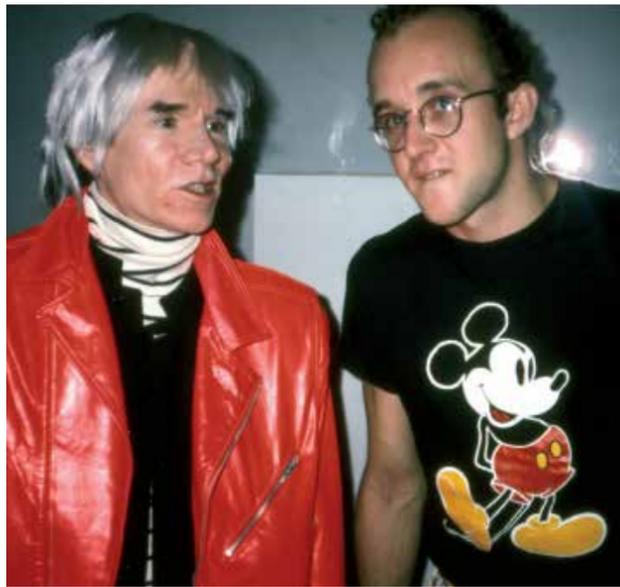
Mickey Mouse, of course, has never had feline pursuers to concern himself with. He was never a mouse at all, but a man in mouse form. "When people laugh at Mickey Mouse," Disney said, "it's because he's so human." When

someone observed that Mickey was imbued with Disney's own personality, he corrected him: "No, it's the Mouse that has the personality."

Along with such pop icons as Marilyn Monroe and Michael Jackson and the Campbell's soup can, Andy Warhol painted Mickey Mouse. The British press gave Mahatma Gandhi a nickname: Mickey Mouse, for the way his ears stuck out. When singer Eartha Kitt met Albert Einstein in his home, the foremost genius of the 20th century was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the likeness of Mickey Mouse.

Years later, as the child front man of the Jackson 5, Michael Jackson was photographed in a Mickey T-Shirt. The same kind of shirt has been worn by John Lennon of the Beatles, Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, Axl Rose of Guns N' Roses, and practically every other rock star of every era. In the offices of *Rolling Stone*, Jann Wenner, the magazine's founder, kept a framed picture of Mickey Mouse shooting heroin. Mickey had become so identified with America itself that any irreverent depiction of him became an act of political subversion, a middle finger to the establishment. Over the decades, Mickey would evolve from sharp-edged rogue to—as Disney himself acknowledged—corporate titan.

HE BEGAN LIFE AS A BARNSTORMING SCAMP AND became one of the most merchandised figures in the history of commerce. There is scarcely a major world figure of the last century who was not touched in some way by the Mouse.



Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, 1985.

BEN BUCHANAN/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Every U.S. President since Harry Truman has met Mickey Mouse, with the exception of Lyndon Johnson, who though he never made it to Disneyland did present Walt Disney with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964.

In 1965, at the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, John Kennedy Jr., son of the slain President, shook the mouse's hand: Both wore smiles that appeared permanent. Mickey's influence has long extended far beyond the nation of his birth. As a young princess, Queen Elizabeth II—the monarch of the United Kingdom, and Mickey's contemporary, born two years before him—played with Mickey

and Minnie dolls made for her by Dean's Rag Book Company, British maker of teddy bears and dolls. Like President Richard Nixon, Mickey went to China, as the centerpiece of Shanghai Disneyland. A delegation of children from Orange County, California, presented the pope with a Mickey Mouse cap on World Youth Day in 2008, when Mickey turned 80, and those ears bore the stitched inscription of his name, Benedict XVI, a mouse-eared version of the pope's zucchetto, his ecclesiastical skullcap. In Italy, Mickey Mouse is called Topolino.

You could say Mickey has been a cradle to grave obsession: Consider that the Japanese emperor Hirohito is said to have been buried in 1989 with the Mickey Mouse watch he received at Disneyland in 1975 and which served as a kind of Rosebud reminder of his own childhood, when he was considered a deity in Japan—he being Hirohito, not the Mouse, though Mickey has also been mistaken for the divine. His image has been spotted by those willing to see it in craters on the moon and even on Mercury, the ultimate Hidden Mickeys.

In fact, Mickey gets a mention in "Life on Mars?" the David Bowie song from 1971. "It's on America's tortured brow / That Mickey Mouse has grown up a cow." And while it's an opaquely unflattering reference, the lyric does serve as a reminder of what a rock 'n' roll touchstone Mickey Mouse has been, often used as a stand-in for America, his name mouse-checked by Eminem and Lil Wayne.

But then he cuts across every musical genre, from Cole Porter to They Might Be Giants. In *Fantasia*, Mickey brought Paul Dukas's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" to the masses. And music isn't even what he's best known for. It's a distant

fourth (at best) behind animated films, amusement parks, and metric tons of merchandise, most notably wristwatches and alarm clocks.

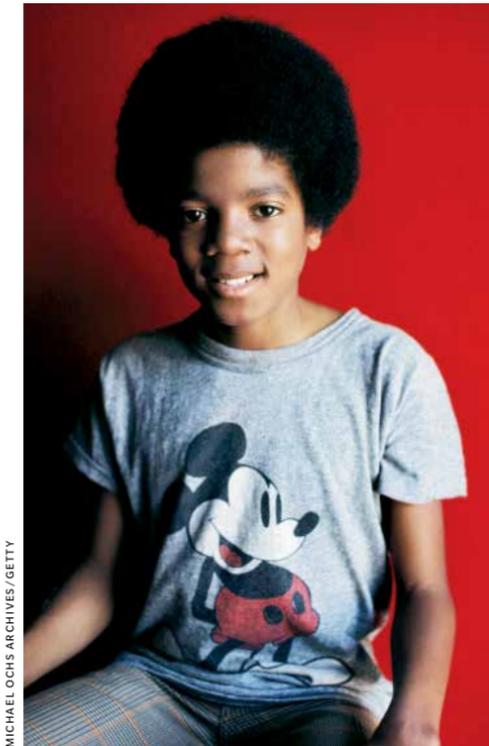
When Elvis Presley met Led Zeppelin, the story goes, the King traded his expensive wristwatch for the cheap Mickey Mouse watch worn by Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones. And so Elvis and Mickey, America's foremost entertainers, were joined at the wrist. The face on the wristwatch hasn't a wrinkle on it. The mouse on the timepiece is timeless, after all. An oversize Mickey Mouse watch hangs on Andy's bedroom wall in *Toy Story*, upraised arms forever frozen at five minutes past 12 noon.

Mickey has outlived countless contemporaries and admirers, from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (described as one of his "devotees" in a 1936 fan letter from Eleanor Roosevelt) to U.S. congressman Stewart McKinney of Connecticut (who kept a Mickey Mouse telephone on his desk, one reporter noted, as "the appropriate instrument to receive calls from the government in Washington").

The Mouse turns 90 this year, so the majority of humankind has never known a world without him, never known a time before the name Mickey Mouse became the most popular write-in vote in American elections; before Mickey Mouse was, in one poll, deemed more recognizable than Santa Claus; before Mickey Mouse opened theme parks in Anaheim, Orlando, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai: Mouse meets Mao.

Along the way "Mickey Mouse" was turned into an adjective, one famously employed by Nelson Mandela to describe a South African opposition party, and by Margaret Thatcher to describe the European Union parliament, and by Wayne Gretzky to describe the New Jersey Devils. The character of Fredo in *The Godfather: Part II* laments his lowly lot in the Corleone family, being put in charge "of some Mickey Mouse nightclub."

The adjective is a pejorative, meant to belittle something as minor, ineffectual, or rinky-dink—an ironic development, for it is the very opposite of Mickey Mouse himself. Almost since his creation he has held the world in the palm of his white-gloved, four-fingered hand. He's a sorcerer—or at least a sorcerer's apprentice—keeping an audience spellbound for nine decades and counting. |



Michael Jackson, 1971.

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY

A MOUSE IS BORN

Conceived on a cross-country train and imbued with movie star mojo, Mickey was precocious from the start

BEFORE T-SHIRTS AND TV, Mickey Mouse lived on paper as little more than a doodle. Like all of us, he's aged . . . except in his case, in reverse. Partly to appeal to kids, Mickey's features have become younger looking over time, his eyes enlarged and his smile widened—in other words, he's become cuter. We should all be so lucky.

NOAH BERGER/POLARIS



APIC/MULTON/GETTY

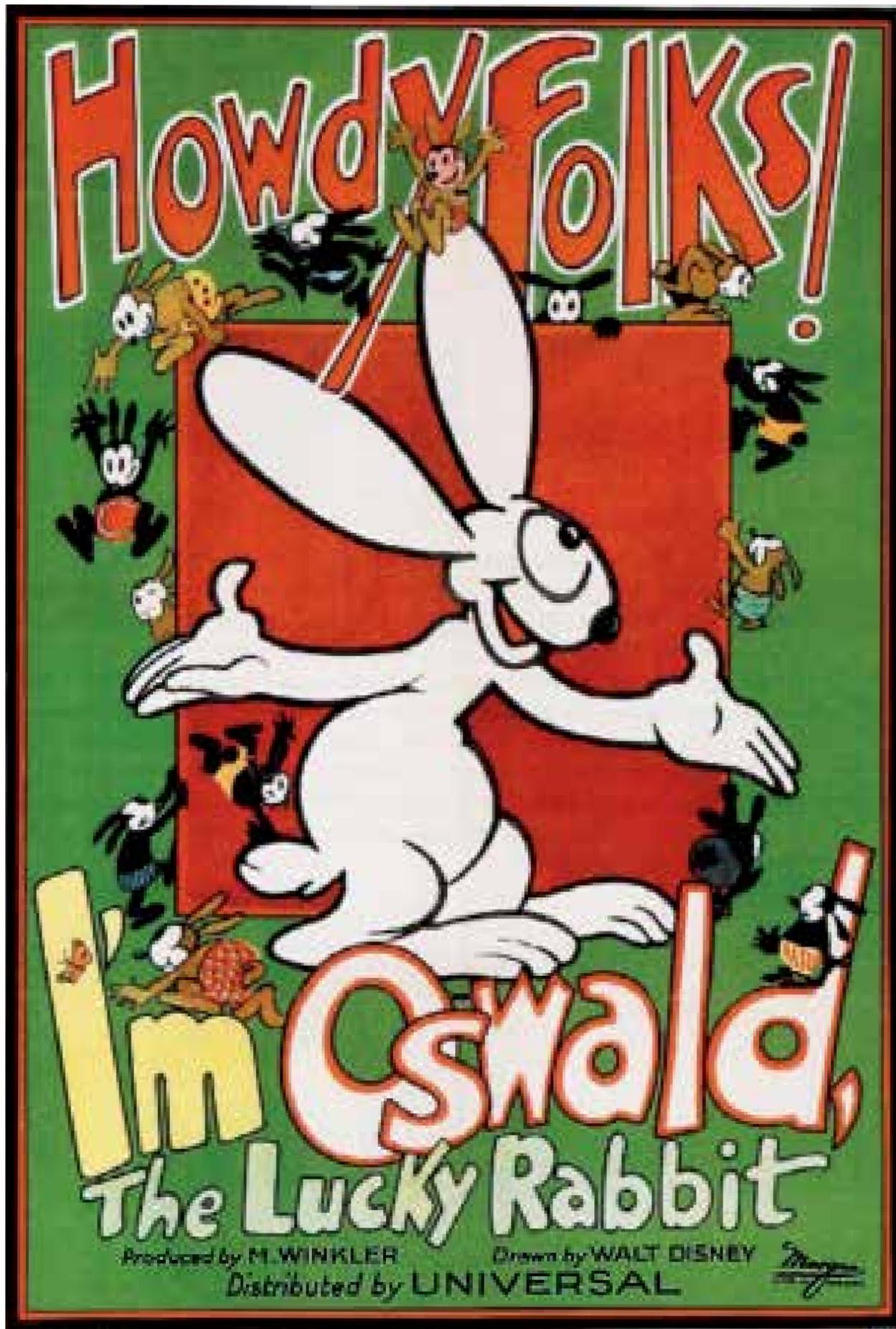
Mickey Mouse was born on a westbound train, somewhere between Chicago and Los Angeles. It was in that vast open space that his creator, Walt Disney, had grown up (in Marceline, Missouri) and gone to seek his fortune as an animator (in Kansas City, Missouri). The streets of Marceline would, four decades hence, inform Disney's vision for Main Street, U.S.A., at Disneyland. Missouri was an unending source of inspiration.

Precisely when Mickey Mouse was conceived is not a matter of historical record. As Neal Gabler wrote in *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*: "[Disney] had, variously, been sitting on a park bench when a mouse scampered by; or, while working for the [Kansas City] Film Ad Co., he had caught mice in his wastebasket, where they were feasting from scraps of lunches the office girls had thrown away, then built a box for them and kept them as pets, naming one of

BORN IN CHICAGO IN 1901, Walt Disney (left, at 1 year old) moved with his family to Marceline, Missouri, in 1906, where it's said he developed his love of drawing. Main Street, U.S.A., at the Disney parks is modeled after downtown Marceline, pictured here.



CHARLIE REBEL/AP



COURTESY EVERETT (2)



BETT MANN/GETTY



A PRECURSOR TO MICKEY BY 17 months, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit (opposite and above) was developed by Disney (top) as one of the first cartoon characters with unique mannerisms and specific personality traits—in Oswald's case, he is playful and thoughtful. Oswald's success (at Universal Studios, owner of the rights to the character) inspired Mickey's creation. Safe to say, one ended up outpacing the other.

them Mortimer; or, while bunking at the Laugh-O-Gram office, he had heard a mouse running about; or, at some undefined time, he had heard a mouse scratching at his windowsill trying to escape and put him in a coffee tin—the first of many mice he supposedly captured.”

As with the origin stories of many early film stars (Lana Turner at the soda fountain, for example) legends have attached to Mickey's birth. Whatever his conception, the Mouse was delivered onto a blank page in March of 1928 as Disney traversed the continent from New York City to his home in Los Angeles—moving east to west in the direction of dreams, like so many pioneers before him.

Walt had been in New York to negotiate a new (and he hoped more lucrative) contract with Universal Pictures, which owned the rights to Disney's popular character Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, a round-faced, four-fingered, pot-bellied bunny with a black nose, black eyes, a widow's peak, and a wardrobe consisting of a single pair of shorts.

But instead of getting a raise from

Universal, Disney was informed by the studio that it had hired away most of Walt's staff and would produce their own Oswald cartoons. Disney was invited to remain in Universal's employ, at a lower salary, but he and a lone cohort— animator Ub Iwerks—declined the offer. And so Walter Elias Disney, in the company of his wife, Lillian, boarded that westbound train, his proverbial tail between his legs. He was 26 years old.

Requiring a new meal ticket, Walt took out his sketch pad. Somewhere in the American west, he shortened and rounded Oswald's ears, diminished him in stature and thickened him around the middle. In Los Angeles, he handed the sketch to Iwerks, an old friend and sole remaining animator, who refined Walt's drawing.

And thus was born Mortimer Mouse. Lillian, according to legend, didn't care for the name, thinking it pretentious and too formal, and so Mortimer Mouse was stripped of his airs and his too-long name and became Mickey. The child actor Mickey Rooney would later claim that the Mouse was named



EARLY HOLLYWOOD STARS Douglas Fairbanks Jr. (left), Fred Astaire (center), and Charlie Chaplin (right) all helped inspire animator Ub Iwerks (opposite) in developing the Mouse. From the swashbuckling Fairbanks, graceful Astaire, and goofy Chaplin, Mickey became the sum of many refined parts.

after him, but in fact something like the opposite became true: Children would be named Mickey after the Mouse.

Of course, Mickey Mouse had not yet been infused with the breath of life. He was silent, inanimate, a prisoner of the page. That would change, with two contemporary influences. This was seven months after the release of *The Jazz Singer*, cinema's first full-length talkie, starring Al Jolson, and 12 months after 25-year-old Charles Lindbergh captivated the world by flying solo from New York to Paris in his airplane *Spirit of St. Louis*. Mickey is about the same age as the modern film

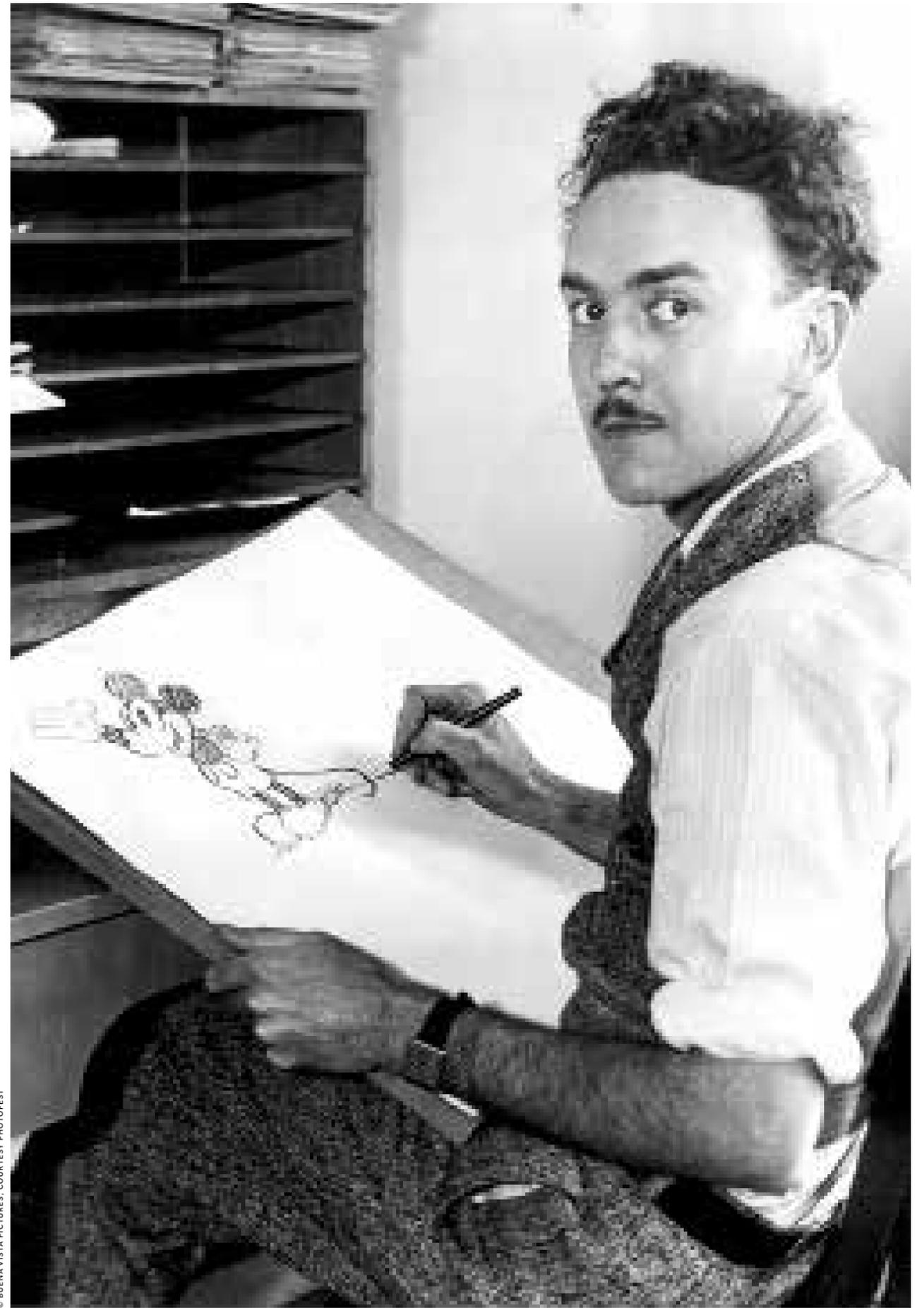
industry (Oscar turns 90 in 2019) and also the age of aviation. Both of these phenomena—cinema and commercial air travel—would quickly and dramatically shrink the world, making it small enough for one creature to wrap his arms around it.

The Mouse made his theatrical debut in a cartoon called “Plane Crazy”—introduced as “A Mickey Mouse Sound Cartoon”—that was animated by Ub Iwerks and test-screened only once, at a theater on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, on May 15, 1928. Mickey appears on-screen reading a book called *How to Fly*. He opens it to a portrait of

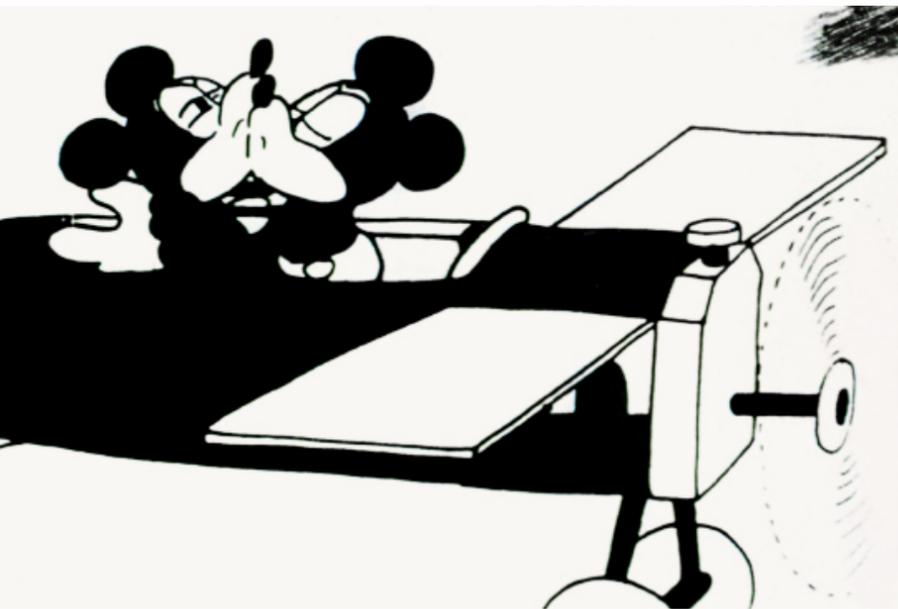
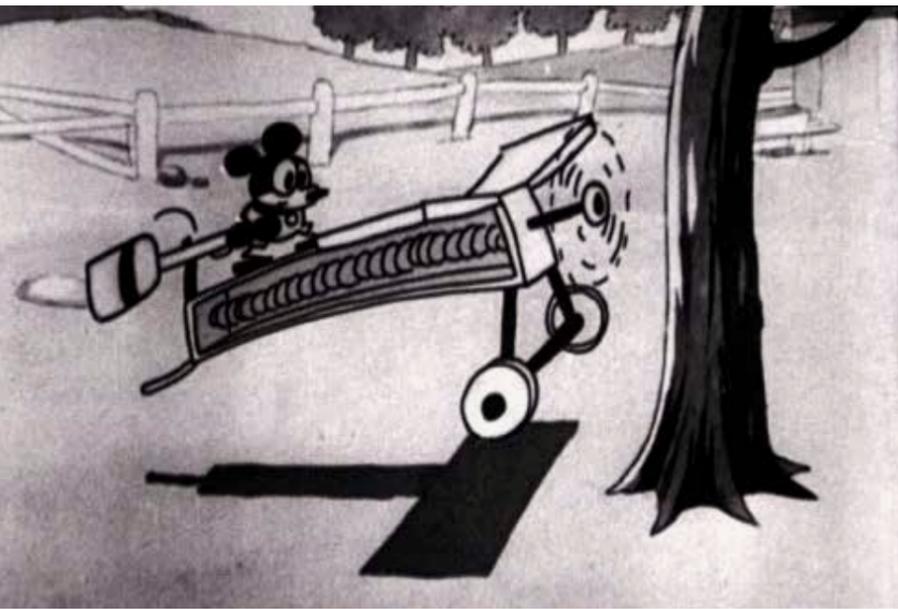
Lindbergh captioned “Lindy—Ace of Aces.” Mickey tousles his hair to resemble his hero’s and looks in the mirror, revealing a shiny set of teeth.

Mickey boards his homemade plane. He is given a horseshoe for luck by an eyelash-batting paramour—the screen debut of Minnie Mouse, whose full first name is later given as Minerva—and together they head off into the wild blue yonder, where Mickey kisses her against her will. As Minnie slaps Mickey for his impertinence, and jumps out of the plane to escape his advances (she’ll use her bloomers to softly parachute back to Earth), there

FROM LEFT: COURTESY EVERETT; BOB LANGRISH/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION; PHOTOFEST



© BUENA VISTA PICTURES. COURTESY PHOTOFEST



© WALT DISNEY PICTURES, COURTESY PHOTOEST (2)

MARY EVANS/WALT DISNEY PICTURES/RONALD GRANT/EVERETT

is a startling resonance, these nine decades later, with the #MeToo movement. In six madcap minutes, Mickey is established as a devil-may-care rogue, a jazz age personality, a character with an edge. And by today's lights, certainly, a creep. This mouse, literally and figuratively, has teeth. In the end, his plane crashes. So did his movie.

"Plane Crazy" was not a hit in its test screening and wasn't immediately released. But a second Mickey Mouse cartoon followed. "The Gallopin' Gaucho" was completed in August of 1928 as a parody of a Douglas Fairbanks adventure film called *The Gaucho*. But before "The Gallopin' Gaucho" was

"We thought of a tiny bit of a mouse that would have something of the wistfulness of Chaplin—a little fellow trying to do the best he could."

released, it was set aside so that Walt, inspired by *The Jazz Singer* could try his hand at a talkie himself, in this case a fully sound synchronized cartoon, the first of its kind. This would be "Steamboat Willie."

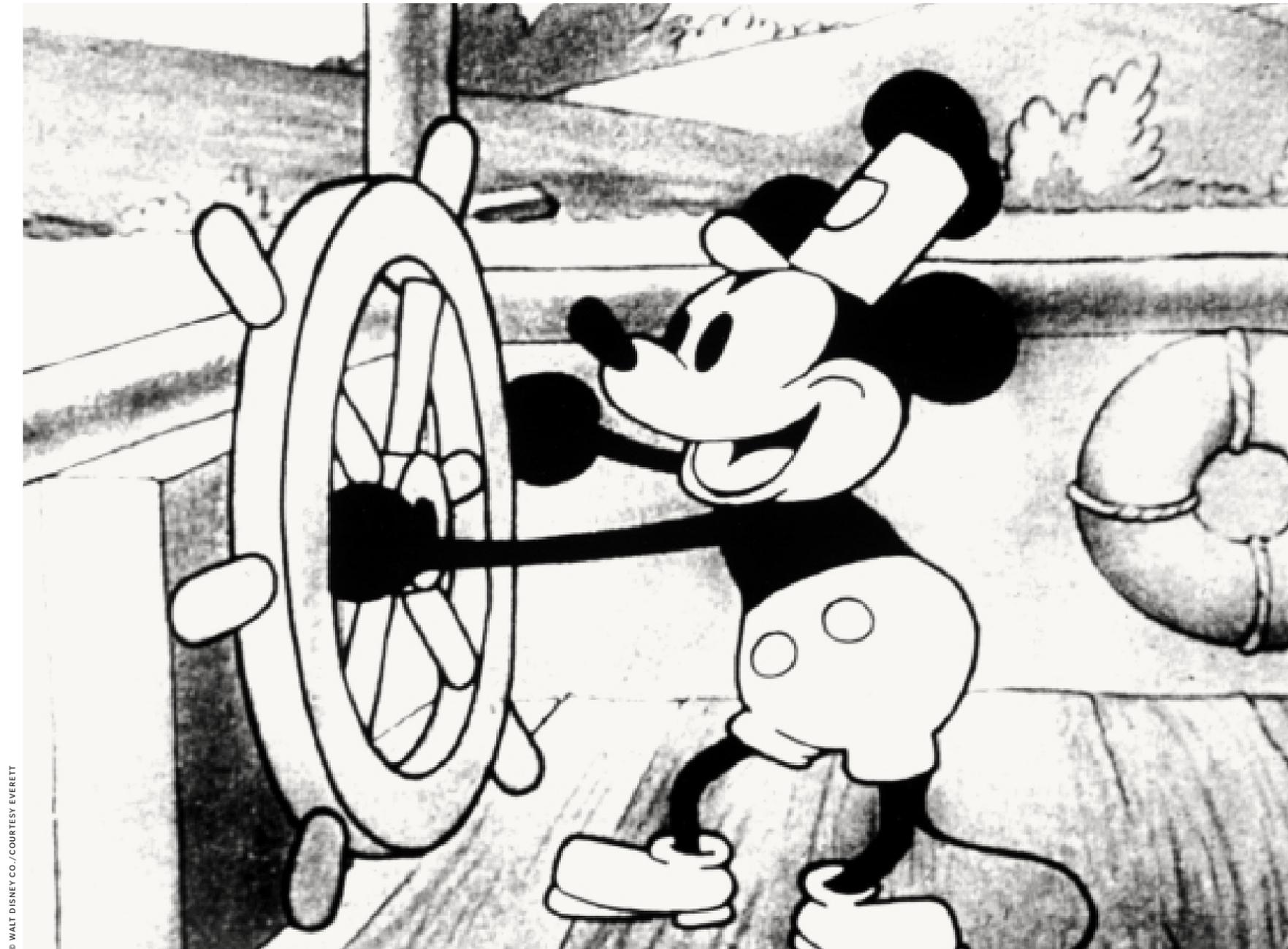
LINDBERGH HAD SHRUNK THE world, rendering it small enough—and putting it in the proper mood—for a benign conquest by a charming American hero. Jolson, in *The Jazz Singer*, had revolutionized film, though many film executives didn't yet recognize the importance of sound.

Disney did. In creating Mickey, he cited other silent film stars as inspiration, chief among them Charlie Chaplin, with his Little Tramp character. "We thought of a tiny bit of a mouse that would have something of the wistfulness of Chaplin—a little fellow trying

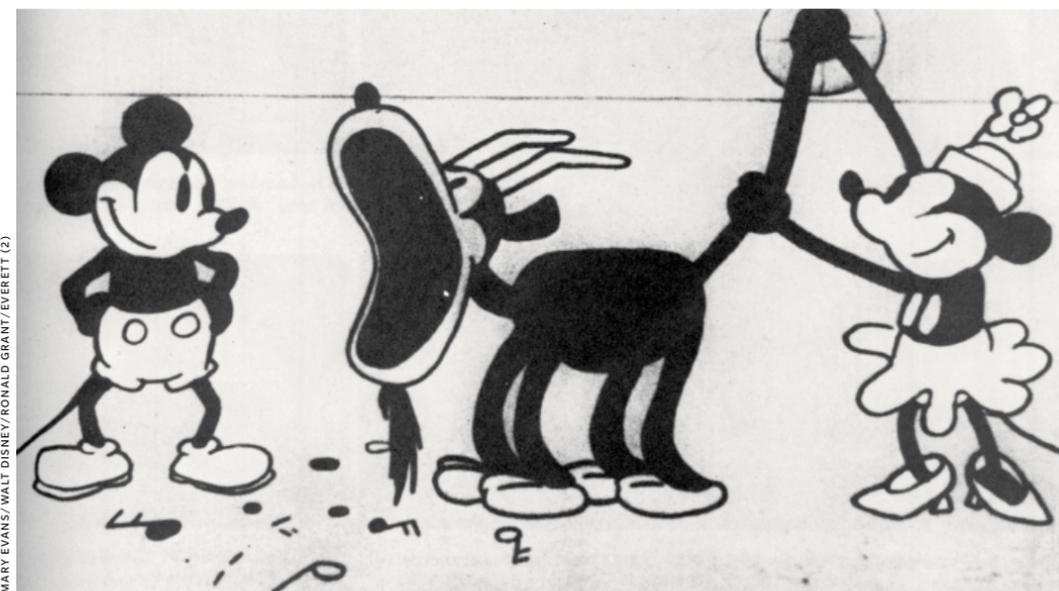
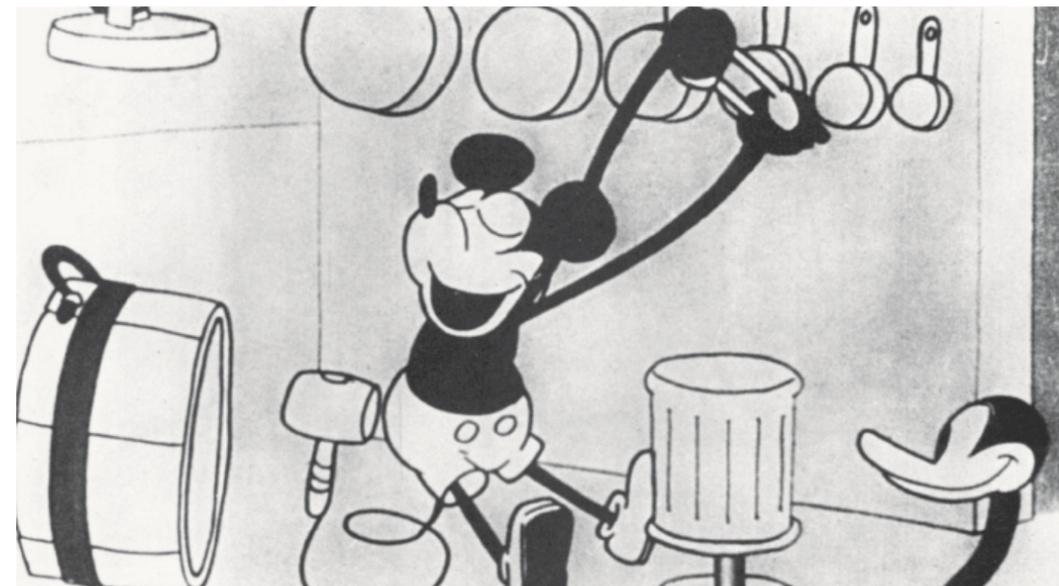


BETTMANN/GETTY

"PLANE CRAZY" (OPPOSITE), the first Mickey Mouse film shot, was actually the third to be released. Appearing in theaters in 1929, it features Mickey in his best Charles Lindbergh impression, piloting an absurd flight—at one point carrying a cow—with a resistant Minnie Mouse in tow. Lindbergh is seen here in New York in 1927, before he piloted the *Spirit of St. Louis* on the first nonstop flight from New York to Paris.



© WALT DISNEY CO./COURTESY EVERETT



MARY EVANS/WALT DISNEY/RONALD GRANT/EVERETT (2)

to do the best he could," Walt said.

Iwerks, though, had more Fairbanks than Chaplin in mind. Fairbanks "was the superhero of his day, always winning, gallant, and swashbuckling," Iwerks noted. "Mickey's action was in that vein. He was never intended to be a sissy, he was always an adventurous character. I thought of him in that respect, and I had him do naturally the sort of thing Doug Fairbanks would do.

"Some people got the idea that in 'Plane Crazy,' Mickey was patterned after Lindbergh," Iwerks continued. "Well, Lindy flew the Atlantic, but he

was no Douglas Fairbanks. He was a hero to boys because of airplanes and what he had accomplished flying the Atlantic. But Mickey wasn't Lindy—he was Doug Fairbanks."

By the time "Steamboat Willie" was completed (with Walt doing the voices, including Mickey's laugh), Mickey Mouse was poised to become the second American aviator to bewitch the world and gain lasting renown. Fairbanks's film career went into decline with the advent of sound, but in a way, through Mickey Mouse, he would remain a star forever.

"Steamboat Willie" made its debut at the Colony Theatre on Broadway at 53rd Street in Manhattan on November 18, 1928, a date that would become fixed in Disney lore as Mickey Mouse's birthday. From the very beginning—the title card, on which Mickey is tipping his hat to a smitten Minnie—he is a dashing screen star.

The film opens on Mickey, whistling at the wheel of a steamboat. As in "Plane Crazy," Mickey's costars are a menagerie of barnyard animals: A cow with a swollen udder, squawking chickens, and high-heeled Minnie, batting her lashes.

THE FIRST-EVER SOUND cartoon had Mickey behind the wheel of a riverboat in "Steamboat Willie" (1928), an eight-minute short that critics and audiences immediately adored. Mickey stars alongside Minnie as the pair turn a goat (who has eaten Minnie's sheet music) into an instrument, at one point cranking its tail and causing the goat to belt musical notes—high comedy in the late 1920s that holds up pretty well today. (Spoiler alert: Mickey's not the boat's true captain.)

Mickey has not yet put white gloves on his black mitts, but he is otherwise recognizable as the Mickey of today. He doesn't speak, but his laugh proves contagious. In the darkness of the Colony Theatre, as the audience at one of the showings howled around him, Disney watched the screen through tears.

The main feature that night—*Gang War*, starring Jack Pickford and Olive Borden—would go down in history only for its opening act. "Steamboat Willie" was instantly a smash. He was born on a train, yes, but Mickey came to life on a riverboat.

The *New York Times* review called "Steamboat Willie" "an ingenious piece of work," eight minutes that had the audience applauding. Enthusiasm radiated outward from that one theater, like ripples on a pond. Within two weeks, "Steamboat Willie" was exhibited at New York's Roxy Theatre, the world's largest theater at the time. Its reception, and the shorts that followed (including "Plane Crazy" and "The Gallopin' Gaucho," now both retrofitted with syncopated sound) accorded Mickey (and by extension Disney himself) a level of artistic



NOT YET 30 YEARS OLD, Disney began building his empire at his Hyperion Avenue offices in Los Angeles, with Mickey as his leading man. Here, man and mouse posed in front of the offices in 1929. Right: Mickey greeted passersby from atop the studio building.



prestige that transcended cartoons.

“Critics came to see in Mickey Mouse a blend of Charlie Chaplin in his championing of the underdog, Douglas Fairbanks in his rascally adventurous spirit, and Fred Astaire in his grace and freedom from gravity’s laws.” So reads the catalogue in the Museum of Modern Art, where “Steamboat Willie” is honored as an important piece in the 20th century canon, alongside Dalí’s melting clocks and Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*.

It was still in theaters a year after release, and its breakthrough in sound was hardly its only virtue. “The newest sensation in cartoons... ‘Steamboat Willie’ is perhaps the funniest cartoon ever made and it keeps the audience roaring from beginning to end” went a typical review, in the *Wilkes-Barre Record*. Such was the universal acclaim for “Steamboat Willie” that even reviewers who had never seen the film—or perhaps didn’t quite comprehend what they were seeing—praised it without reservation: “Mickey Moose! Just the mention of Mickey’s name is assurance that the theater party will be a success,” wrote the correspondent

for the *Central New Jersey Home News*. “Mickey is as adorably funny as ever in ‘Steamboat Willie,’ the Mickey Moose sound cartoon.”

By the time that review appeared, on November 24, 1929, Mickey had a true voice, and things to say. In “The Karnival Kid,” released that year, the Mouse makes a joyous exclamation—“Hot dogs!” It’s about as all-American as first words can be. Eighty-nine years later, “Hot dog, hot dog, hot diggity-dog,” is still the catchphrase for *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, on the Disney Channel, whose logo contains the outline of Mickey’s head. The years in between those “hot dogs” have been, to put it mildly, quite a run.

In 1929, when Mickey first spoke, and the stock market crashed, and the jazz age that the Mouse seemed to embody came to an end, a man approached Disney in the lobby of a New York hotel and asked for the right to put the Mouse on children’s writing tablets. Needing the money, Walt and Roy Disney (Walt’s brother, who was a cofounder and partner in their production company) agreed to a fee of \$300.

MARC WANAMAKER/BISON ARCHIVES (2)



And thus began the marketing of Mickey merchandise that would never abate. There quickly followed to Disney's door a parade of doll makers, toy makers, and clothing manufacturers. By 1930, a comic strip for King Features Syndicate was appearing in newspapers around the world. In the very first strip, drawn by Ub Iwerks, Mickey is in bed, dreaming of flight. But of course he was already soaring.

FROM A STUCCO STUDIO AT 2719 HYPERION AVENUE IN the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles, a staff of 55 artists, animators, and writers was now turning out 20-odd pictures a year, in addition to the books and comic strips and other Mickey ephemera the world craved. "It undoubtedly is the smallest studio to turn out a product of world-wide interest," wrote a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in 1930, and atop that Mission-style building was a billboard identifying the tenants within: "Walt Disney Studios Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphony Sound Cartoons." At the top of the sign, Mickey waved to passing motorists. Walt Disney was turning 29 years old and Mickey Mouse was two. The man didn't yet have any children, but it was time for the Mouse to start a family.



AFTER "STEAMBOAT WILLIE," Mickey Mouse went on to star in some 120 animated shorts, with Walt providing his voice until 1946. At left, an animator works on cels for a film. In addition to character voices, the film soundtracks included music captured in studio, shown here.

EWING GALLOWAY/ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY (2)

MUSIC AND SINGING IN EARLY films have a certain charm to them, often thanks to a live and occasionally uneven chorus providing the vocals. Here, Walt, second from left, and Ub Iwerks, to the right of Mickey, joined the choir.

Metaphorically at least, Mickey and Minnie produced their first offspring in 1930. In a cartoon called "The Chain Gang," Mickey is a fugitive, pursued by a pair of forlorn bloodhounds who escape their leashes and end up in jail with the Mouse. One of these dogs would appear again, as Minnie's pet, Rover, before getting a new name—and a lasting identity—as Mickey's faithful companion in "The Moose Hunt." This time, the dog was called Pluto, for the ninth planet, newly discovered a year before the cartoon's release, in May of 1931.

Soon after, a tall, vest-wearing canine named Dippy Dawg arrived, in "Mickey's Revue." He was quickly rechristened and reshaped. His full

Disney was 28 and Mickey Mouse was two. The man didn't yet have any children, but it was time for the Mouse to start a family.

name has been given variously as George Geef and Goofus D. Dawg, but for decades he has answered only to Goofy. And though Goofy is a rustic bumpkin whose signature exclamation is "Gawrsh," he does wear clothes and walks upright, as distinct from Pluto, who wears only a dog collar and walks on all fours. Why one dog is anthropomorphized while the other is a domesticated pet is a question long debated by metaphysicians and theologians of the Disney cosmology.

Goofy's shoes looked ill-fitting, with a hole in the sole, and his fedora was squashed—squawrshed?—so that he seemed the physical embodiment of Depression-era American make-do. It was as if Mickey Mouse, Hollywood star, was accumulating an entourage.

MARC WANAMAKER/BISON ARCHIVES





DAILY HERALD ARCHIVE/SSPL/GETTY

By 1931," notes Bob Thomas, in *Walt Disney: An American Original*, "the Mickey Mouse Club had a million members, and Mickey was known in every civilized country in the world." That fan club had branches meeting at theaters across the nation every Saturday to screen Mickey's films. The Mouse had become, among many other things, a wax figure at Madame Tussaud's in London, proof of his growing fame. And that fame was unmistakably global. In the 1931 film *Around the World in 80 Minutes*, Douglas Fairbanks, the greatest male star of the silent era, circles the globe to show life in Asia. The film contains an animated sequence in which Mickey Mouse dances to Siamese music. The Mouse that Disney had based on Fairbanks was now required by Fairbanks to reflect his glory back at him.

Mickey was bigger now than Fairbanks, but in fairness,



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THE 1929 ANIMATED FILM "THE Haunted House" found Mickey in a world of trouble—stuck, after seeking shelter from bad weather, in an abandoned house and forced to play music for its

inhabitants, who then turn the place into a party. The dialogue in the short, voiced by Disney, includes Mickey screaming out "Mammy!" like Al Jolson in 1927's *The Jazz Singer*. While

kids—like these British children watching a Mickey film in 1934, opposite—were the intended audience and enjoyed many of Disney's films, the overtones and themes were often dark, with

scary creatures and often harsh consequences. Considering many of the most popular Disney films in the following decades and those made today, it's clear that some things never change.



MICKEY WENT TO LONDON, where, in 1931, hundreds of would-be voters braved chilly temperatures to watch a Mickey Mouse short as part of a campaign stop by Sir William Ray, a conservative politician in England.

the Mouse was bigger than any star in cinema, bigger than any star cinema had ever seen. United Artists, founded by stars of the previous decade, including Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin, signed a deal with Disney to distribute 18 Mickey Mouse shorts and 13 Silly Symphony cartoons for the 1932–1933 season. “United Artists is an organization only for the biggest stars,” said studio boss Joseph Schenck. “Mickey Mouse, however, is different. Disney has created a character whose type has never been equaled in motion picture history.”

In recognition of the Mouse’s singular status in worldwide cinema, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts

Mickey was the biggest star in cinema. Indeed, said a studio boss, he was “a character whose type has never been equaled in motion picture.”

and Sciences awarded Walt Disney its first ever “special” Oscar, for the creation of Mickey Mouse. Walt also won an Oscar—this one also the first of its kind—for best animated short subject for his film “Flowers and Trees,” the first film produced in the full-color three-strip Technicolor process. At the ceremony, Academy president Conrad Nagel said “Hollywood owes more to Disney for its relief from the stress of depression than to any other cinema agency.”

And while the ensuing applause was nice, Walt and Roy Disney—constantly cash-strapped to fund their next film—were eager to capitalize financially on Mickeymania. Toward that end, they were called in 1932 by Kansas City marketing and advertising executive Herman (Kay) Kamen, who proposed

FOX PHOTOS/HULTON/GETTY



HAYNES ARCHIVE/POPPERFOTO/GETTY

IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON TO see folks in Mickey and Minnie costumes around the country, and what better time and place than while out for a stroll on the Ocean City, New Jersey, boardwalk in 1932? Indeed, the face of Disney's budding kingdom—donned by children, above, with Walt, center, in 1935—was becoming ubiquitous.

COURTESY EVERETT

merchandising the Mouse on manifold products, from wallpaper to hairbrushes. By one account, Kamen had sewn his life savings into his overcoat, taken a two-night train journey to Los Angeles, and stayed awake throughout the journey to thwart thieves. As a result, he fell asleep in his meeting with Walt and Roy.

Nevertheless, the Disney brothers struck a deal with Kamen—a 50-50 split of profits—and Kamen quickly struck a deal with the Ingersoll-Waterbury Watch Company of Waterbury, Connecticut. Ingersoll would put Mickey's likeness on wristwatches and pocket watches. The watches were introduced at the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition and sold so well and so quickly (in the depths of the Great Depression, the wristwatch went for \$2.95, and the pocket watch cost a buck and a half) that the fortunes

of the troubled watch company turned around. (Three decades later, buoyed by its success with the Mickey Mouse timepieces, Ingersoll was thriving under its new brand name: Timex.) The deal brought enormous riches to Timex, the Disneys, and to Kamen, who was killed in a plane crash in the Azores in 1949.

So swift and thorough was Mickey Mouse's conquest, that by 1934, six years after his debut at the Colony Theatre, he was an inflated colossus astride Manhattan (and astride the world)—as a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. Not every effort at extending Mickey's brand was a success, but those that were became known everywhere.

THAT SAME YEAR, 1934, IN A DISNEY Silly Symphony cartoon called "The Wise Little Hen," the title character



NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE/GETTY

IN 1934, MICKEY MOUSE MADE his debut in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, his figure floating above Manhattan's West Side from 110th Street to 34th Street.

"Parade was so large this year it took an hour to pass," wrote a photographer. (The 2017 parade took three hours.) In December 1954, Walt Disney and his characters graced the

cover of *Time* magazine, having garnered international fame. The very next year, he and the gang decided to try their luck opening a small theme park in Southern California.

YOU KNOW YOU'VE MADE IT when someone in Germany has transformed your face into a camera (right). And Mickey wasn't a selfish mouse; he brought his entourage with him—Goofy and pals rode, er, drove the merchandise wave all the way to the bank.



BRK/ALEXANDER ENGER/ULSTEIN BILD/GETTY



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

seeks help in planting her corn. First the hen asks Peter Pig, who declines, and then she asks a duck in a sailor suit. And while he also refuses to help, something in the bird's voice, and his apparent fealty to the U.S. Navy, captured the imagination of the public. As Peter Pig and the Wise Little Hen faded into obscurity, Donald Duck would join Minnie Mouse, Pluto, and Goofy as another star in Mickey's firmament.

Where Mickey wore pants and nothing else, Donald dressed in a sailor suit without the pants. The pair first appeared on-screen together in the Duck's second star turn, released

in 1934, the Mickey vehicle "Orphan's Benefit," in which Donald is introduced by Mickey onstage at a benefit for an audience of orphans. "Introducing Donald Duck," Mickey says, "reciting 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.'"

From the start, Donald had issues with anger management, impulse control, and enunciation. It would be six more years (in "Mr. Duck Steps Out") before Donald got his Daisy Duck.

As with Mickey and Minnie, Donald and Daisy are nearly identical, save for the addition of long lush lashes, and a bow in hair or feathers. As an extended animated family, Mickey, Minnie,

Donald, Daisy, Goofy, and Pluto have become known as the Sensational Six, the foundational characters of every Disney film, park, sun hat, and T-shirt, though in the early animated shorts Horace Horsecollar and Clarabelle Cow are also briefly incandescent.

Together, Donald and Daisy spawned their own extensive family tree of relatives and even forebears, most prominent among them the nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie and the parsimonious uncle Scrooge McDuck, who enjoys diving into and swimming through his vast reservoir of gold coins, something Walt Disney

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

MARK KAUFFMAN/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY



"I KEEP TIME FOR
1½ MILLION
HAPPY CHILDREN"

**MICKEY
MOUSE
WATCHES**

BY
Ingersoll

Already 1½ million children are learning punctuality with Mickey Mouse Watches—and parents are as happy about it as the children. The movements are standard Ingersoll make—dependable and sturdy. Pocket watch and fob, \$1.50 in a gift box.



MICKEY MOUSE WRIST WATCH, complete with bracelet, now only \$2.95. The demand is so heavy that there is often a scarcity. Buy for Christmas now.



MICKEY MOUSE ALARM CLOCK, \$1.50. Teaches early rising to children. Standard Ingersoll clock and alarm mechanisms.



"THREE LITTLE PIGS". As delightful as Mickey. Pocket watch and fob, \$1.50. Wrist watch, \$2.95. Alarm clock, \$1.50.

Ingersoll
on sale everywhere

THE ADVERTISING ARCHIVES/COURTESY EVERETT

was not yet able to do.

By the late 1930s, Mickey Mouse was not simply the alias of movie stars signed into hotel registries, he and Donald were a household reference in the movies themselves. Asked by the constable in *Bringing Up Baby* who his accomplice was in a robbery, Cary Grant replies: "Mickey-the-Mouse and Donald-the-Duck."

"Make note of their names," says the officer to a doctor. "Now you're beginning to talk. We're getting someplace." The policeman is an imbecile, the audience knows, because he doesn't recognize the names of the most recognizable figures on earth.

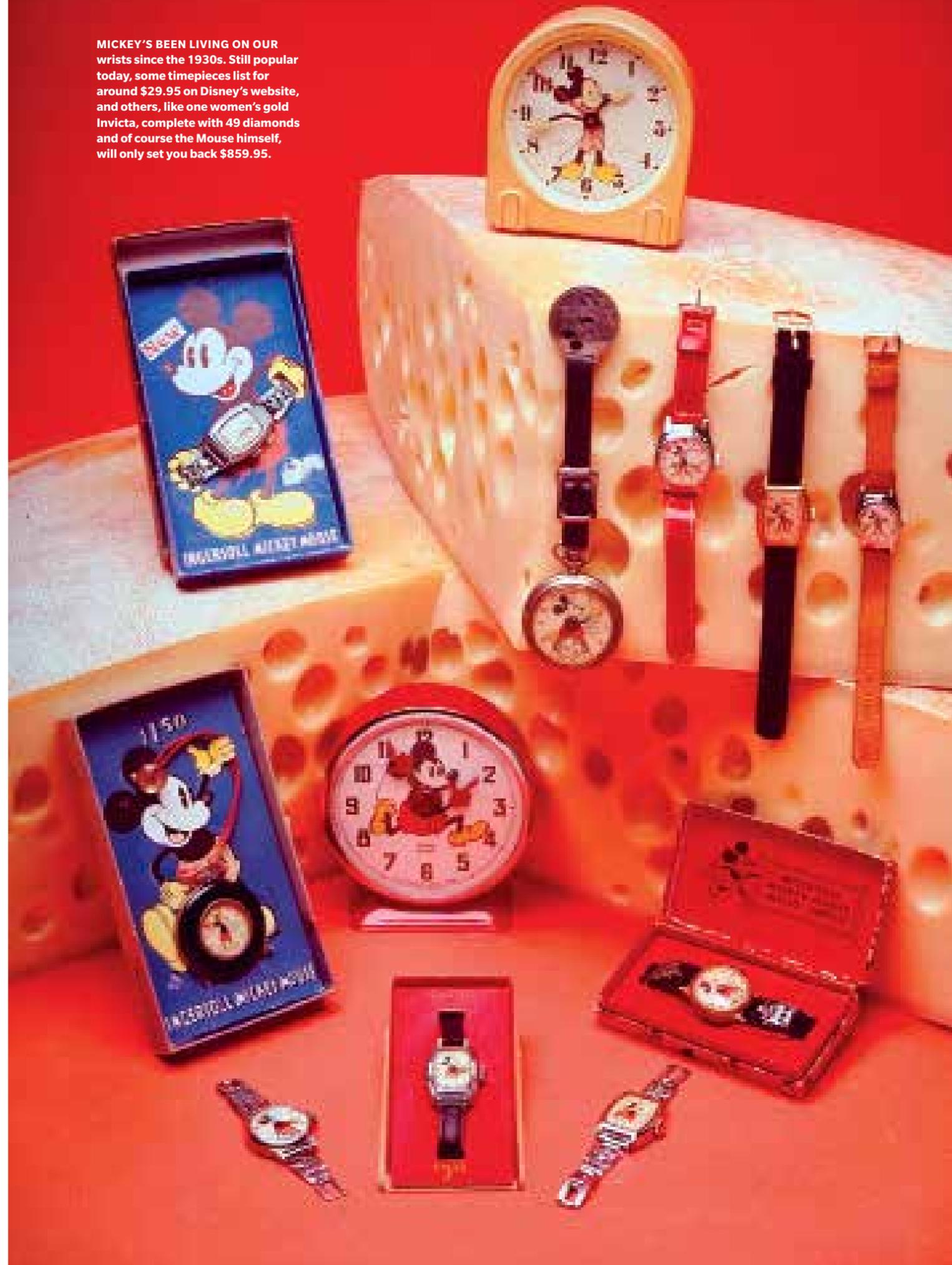
Bringing Up Baby was released in 1938, and despite Mickey's global ubiquity Walt Disney feared that Mickey's popularity on the big screen was

beginning to wane. The medium that made him famous, cinema, was by now one of dozens of platforms on which Mickey performed. Walt had for three years been consumed by the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney's first feature-length film, at a cost of nearly \$1.5 million. After it was finally released, in 1937, to popularity and acclaim—it briefly became the highest-grossing film in history—Walt turned his gaze back to Mickey.

He set about producing a cinematic comeback of sorts, originally conceived as a Silly Symphony set to classical music, before it eventually grew into a full-length feature. Disney hired British conductor Leopold Stokowski to conduct the music in the film, which aspired to finer art than Mickey's usual slapstick. Indeed, Mickey would be

MARK KAUFFMAN/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY

MICKEY'S BEEN LIVING ON OUR wrists since the 1930s. Still popular today, some timepieces list for around \$29.95 on Disney's website, and others, like one women's gold Invicta, complete with 49 diamonds and of course the Mouse himself, will only set you back \$859.95.



NOT NEARLY AS REVERED OR remembered as his younger brother Walt, Roy Disney still made plenty of hay in his day—he is credited with cofounding the Disney company and served as president and chairman of the board. It was Roy who in 1923 lent Walt \$250 to help open the Hollywood office.



the only recognizable Disney character in the film, and his scene would be based on a poem by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In it, the Mouse is apprenticed to a wizard named Yen Sid—Disney in reverse.

Like the film stars he had eclipsed, Mickey was now headlining a “major motion picture.” At the dawn of a new decade, 12 years after “Steamboat Willie,” this film too would premier at the Colony, now rechristened the Broadway Theatre: *Fantasia* was “a completely revolutionary medium of screen expression,” as the *Brooklyn Eagle* called it. The 125-minute film was made up of eight animated segments. Mickey was in only that one scene, but

The Disneys met a marketing executive who proposed merchandising the Mouse on products, from wallpaper to hairbrushes.

what a scene it was, as the sorcerer’s apprentice, enchanting a broomstick—and a hushed theater. Walt Disney’s concerns about Mickey’s dipping popularity on screen were allayed. *Fantasia* was a reminder that in little more than a single tumultuous decade, Mickey Mouse had bewitched the world.

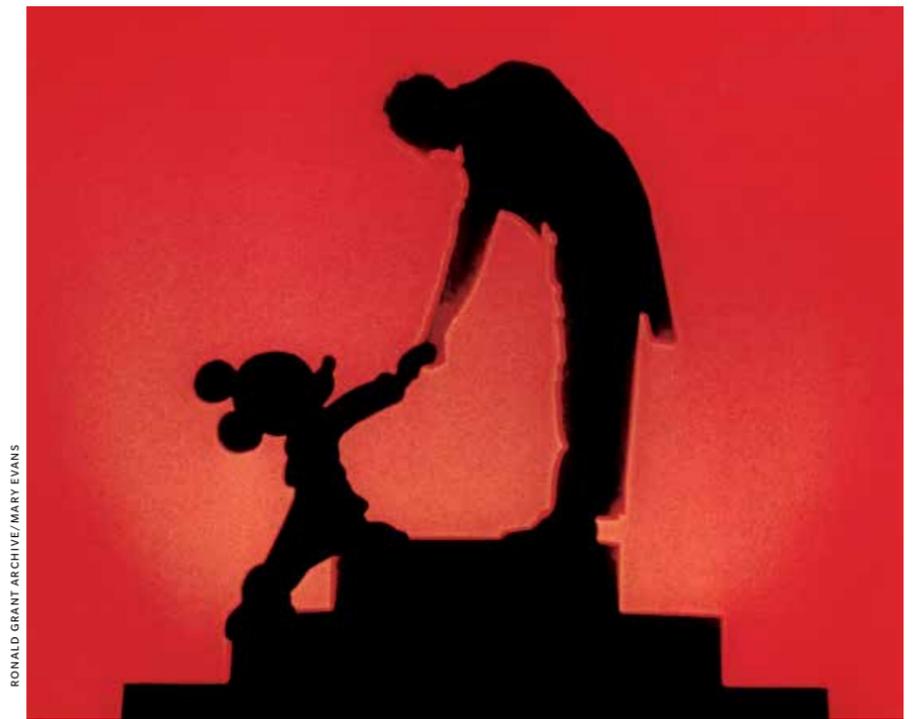
FROM THE MOMENT HE FIRST appeared on a screen, Mickey reflected the times. During the Christmas season of 1932, at the depth of the Great Depression, “Mickey’s Good Deed” found Mickey and Pluto busking for change with a stand-up bass beneath a bent street lamp. When Mickey and Pluto approach the Elite Restaurant for a meal, they find that the cup in which they thought they’d been collecting coins has been filled by passersby

ALFRED EISENSTADT/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION



FANTASIA DEBUTED IN 1940 TO critical acclaim and remains one of the highest-grossing films of all time, with estimates around \$760 million in today's dollars. Here, audiences gathered for the Brazilian premier in Rio de Janeiro in 1941. Across eight animated segments, over a thousand artists and technicians contributed to the film, along with a 100-man orchestra, led by conductor Leopold Stokowski (with Mickey, in the film), opposite.

RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE/MARY EVANS



HART PRESTON/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION

with nuts and bolts. They trudge into the snow forlorn and unfed, but not before Pluto licks the restaurant's picture window.

Earlier that year, Mickey participated in the "Barnyard Olympics," concurrent with the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. As with live-action films, animated shorts were used during the Depression to bolster hopes and boost consumer spending. In 1933's "Confidence," the Great Depression descends on a town dump in the form of an evil spirit. Our hero, Disney's prodigal son Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, abandons a run on the bank to travel to Washington, D.C., where President Franklin D. Roosevelt (in cartoon form) tells him: "Confidence can lick this whole Depression . . . Smile, grin, laugh right out loud, and watch the golden sunshine scatter every cloud." It's not hard to remember that Mickey and Oswald share a biological father. The physical resemblance of the two characters, even then, remained uncanny.

And yet the same Mickey Mouse, in another medium, had a far grimmer experience in the Great Depression. One installment of his syndicated newspaper comic strip depicted Mickey trying to take his own life, in

increasingly desperate ways: Rifle, jumping from a bridge, noose. For better and worse, in papers and on-screen—and, yes, on those wristwatches marking the passage of time—Mickey was reflecting the American experience.

And so it was only natural that Mickey Mouse was pressed into service during World War II. Mickey, Minnie, Donald, and Pluto urged Americans to buy war bonds, among many other things. Children's gas masks had Mickey's face painted on them in an effort—not altogether successful, it must be said—to make any imminent chemical gas attack look benign. Fun, even.

But Mickey's most enduring contribution to the war effort was a series of animated films in which he and his pals exhorted Americans to pull their weight during World War II. In "Out of the Frying Pan into the Firing Line," made for the Conservation Division of the U.S. War Production Board in 1942, Minnie is making bacon and eggs, and about to pour the skillet drippings into Pluto's dish, when the radio blares: "Don't throw away that bacon grease! Housewives of America, one of the most important things you can do is to save your waste kitchen fats. Bacon grease, meat drippings, frying fats . . . a



BETTANN/GETTY

skillet of bacon grease is a little munitions factory. Meat drippings sink Axis warships.”

Saving fat—glycerine—for use in explosives was something every American could do. Instead of eating it, Pluto brings the bacon grease to an Official Fat Collection Station. Mickey’s only appearance in the short was in a framed portrait that Pluto gazes upon: the Mouse in GI gear, fighting abroad with his fellow American men.

On posters, in films, in advertisements, Mickey urged the saving of scrap metal, rubber, paper, and rags. He urged constant vigilance in a series of slogans: “Keep Awake,” “Remember Pearl Harbor,” “It CAN Happen Here!” Despite his webbed feet, Donald Duck

was not classified 4-F by the U.S. Army and made the recruiting short “Donald Gets Drafted” (1942). He hectors Americans into paying their taxes in “The Spirit of ’43” (1943), costarring that captain of industry, Scrooge McDuck. “Now what are you going to do?” asks the narrator, as a profligate hoodlum blows his money on cigarettes, every puff sending up a swastika-shaped cloud of smoke. “Spend for the Axis? Or save for taxes? Just remember: Every dollar you spend for something you don’t need is a dollar spent to help the Axis.”

An animated Adolf Hitler starred in “Stop That Tank!” a Disney propaganda film that depicts the Führer as an effeminate buffoon, consigned by Canadian anti-tank rifles to a fiery hell,

WALT DISNEY HOLDS THE individual record for most Academy Awards, winning 32 gold statues between 1931 and 1968. In 1939, Shirley Temple presented Walt with one regular and seven smaller customized statues for his work on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, above. Opposite: Disney holds four of his Oscars at the awards ceremony in 1954.

GEORGE SILK/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION





EVERETT

where he weeps before the devil. Satan looks to camera and laughs, mock-pouting: "Adolf says it isn't fair."

The films paralleled the war. In "Commando Duck" (1944), Donald parachuted into Asia to fight the Japanese. Indeed, POWs held by Japanese captors at the Santo Tomas internment camp in the Philippines reported that "Mickey Mouse" was the name the locals gave to Japanese currency. "The name still puzzles me," said one, "for the Filipinos love Mickey Mouse," while they didn't love the Japanese money.

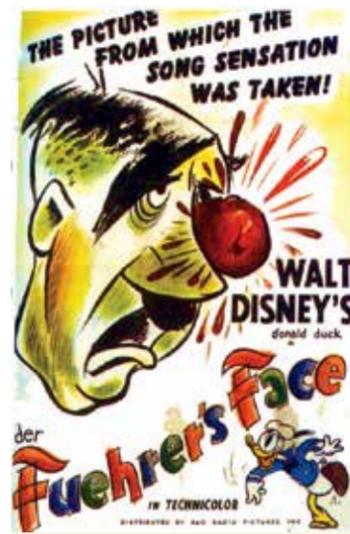
Throughout the war, Mickey Mouse was a frequent stand-in for America around the world. "As American troops invaded the Normandy beaches in France that June," wrote Neal Gabler in *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, "at Allied headquarters the code name for the operation was 'Mickey Mouse.'"

With the end of the war came the end of an era for Mickey. In 1946,

Walt stopped voicing the mouse and instructed a Disney sound-effects man named Jimmy Macdonald to take over. He would be Mickey's falsetto spokesman for the next three decades.

Of course, Mickey would also continue to speak for himself in speech bubbles in his popular comic books, during the golden age of comic books in the 1950s. In one of those, "Mickey Mouse and the Medicine Man" (1951), Mickey and Goofy are sales reps flogging an amphetamine-like wonder drug called Peppo. And indeed, despite the approaching domestic upheaval of the civil rights movement, and the continuing injustice of Jim Crow, post-war America in pop culture remained a long green fairway of Eisenhower-era prosperity, a nation made happy by some over-the-counter wonder drink—Peppo—that promised a blissful escape.

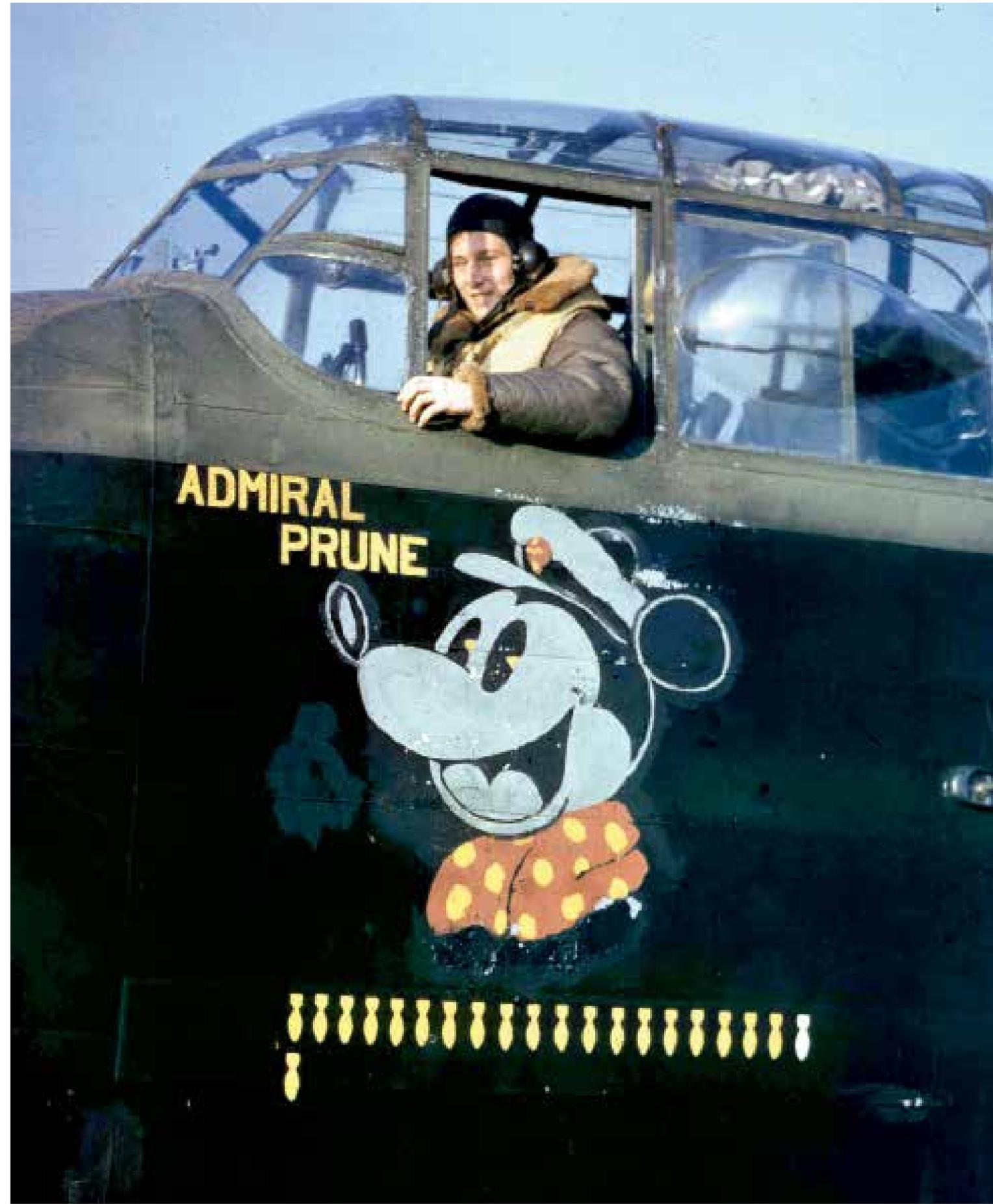
Soon, Mickey would be among the most popular stars of the small screen,



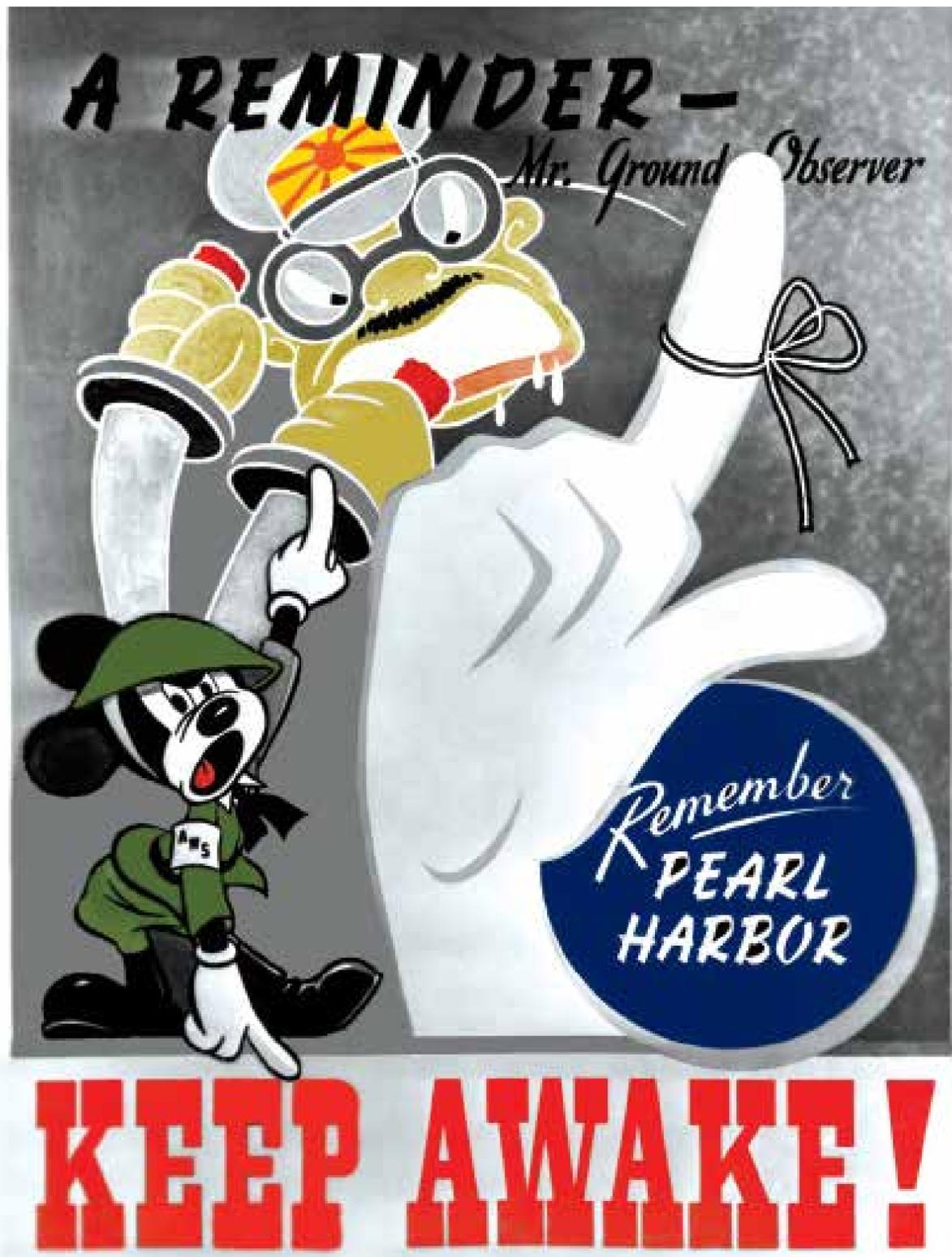
THE ADVERTISING ARCHIVES/COURTESY EVERETT

LIKE THE UNITED STATES, Mickey couldn't avoid World War II either. Walt helped design a gas mask for children, top, and the Mouse made his rounds in the sky, on missions all over Europe, opposite. His buddy Donald Duck, meanwhile, was busy messing with Adolf Hitler in "Der Fuehrer's Face."

POPPER/GETTY



CONTINUED ON PAGE 51



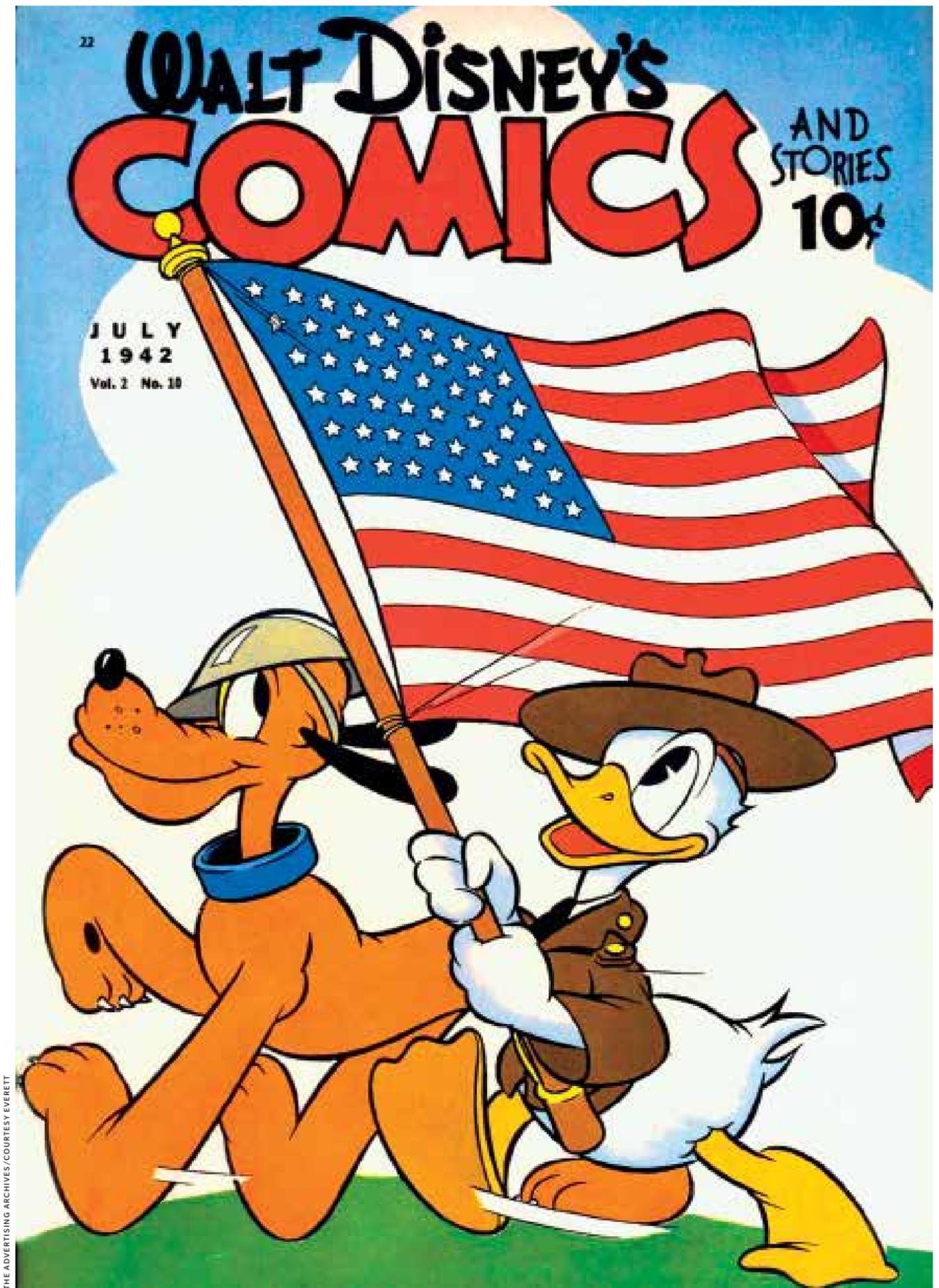
© WALT DISNEY CO. / COURTESY EVERETT

EARLY ON, WALT DISNEY'S view of World War II was akin to that of the youngest members of his worldwide audience—he didn't really have a clue what was going on. "What war?" he asked earnestly when questioned how the overseas fighting might affect the studio. After Pearl Harbor, however, Walt went all-in

to help the government however he could, mostly through propaganda posters (above), comics (opposite), and films featuring Mickey and the gang that reminded Americans there were enemies who needed to be stopped. Hitler was a frequent target, and the American flag a constant source of pride. In 1943,

Disney created the film *Victory Through Air Power*, a 65-minute Technicolor documentary that crashed at the box office. (It still earned a Oscar nomination for the film's musical score.) In all, Disney's studio reportedly made more than 400,000 feet of film—that's 68 continuous hours—to support the U.S. Army's efforts,

and nine out of every 10 of his employees contributed in some way. A price was paid. By 1945, Disney's wartime productions and their disappointing box office numbers had left the studio cash-strapped. "We're through with caviar," said a sour Walt. "From now on, it's mashed potatoes and gravy."





MARC WANAMAKER / BISON ARCHIVES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

as well. In 1955 the ABC television network debuted the Mouseketeers' own show called *The Mickey Mouse Club*. The unknown child performers of the program—Cubby, Annette, and numerous others—quickly became household names. Their theme song, written by the show's adult host, Jimmie Dodd, became an earwig for the ages—“Who’s the leader of the club that’s made for you and me? M-I-C, K-E-Y, M-O-U-S-E, Mickey Mouse.”

The closing lines were even more familiar: “M-I-C (See ya real soon), K-E-Y (Why? Because we like you), M-O-U-S-E . . .” Jerry Lewis sang the theme in his lounge act. Chicago Blackhawks fans would serenade their star player, Stan “Mouse” Mikita, with a chant of “M-I-K, I-T-A, M-O-U-S-E, Mikita Mouse.”

The Mouseketeers themselves received more fan mail than most

Hollywood luminaries. “The stars of Walt Disney’s daily ABC-TV show, *The Mickey Mouse Club*, are so popular that even monthly rumors sweep the country that they have been demolished in a car crash,” reported the United Press in 1957, noting that only Bing Crosby had been previously honored with similar rumors spread in the hope of inducing mass hysteria.

Other Hollywood stars of the time, such as James Mason and Dorothy McGuire, told the wire service that their children pined to appear on the program with their heroes and heroines. Mickey Mouse had endeared himself to American children in their own living rooms, on a medium dwarfing all others. *The Mickey Mouse Club* proved so popular that 10 million children watched it.

Along with its success, the Disney studio didn’t expect its multipart

DISNEY/KOBAL/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE MICKEY MOUSE CLUB— with its original Mouseketeers, seen above with Walt—began in October 1955 and gave rising teen stars such as Annette Funicello (opposite) a chance to jump-start their careers on a one-hour variety television show that first aired on ABC.



© WALT DISNEY CO./COURTESY EVERETT

ERNEST K. BENNETT/AP/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



LOOMIS DEAN/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION (2)

show about the adventures of American frontiersman Davy Crockett to become an instant national sensation. The show's star, Fess Parker, was elevated to fame in the span of a few weeks. By one estimate, Disney sold \$300 million dollars' worth of Davy Crockett coonskin caps, lunch boxes, and wristwatches before the end of 1955.

TV sold coonskin caps and Mickey Mouse ears, and made Mouseketeer Annette Funicello a film star, a pre-Beatles teen idol who set off a frenzy wherever she went. Checking into the Hotel Loraine in Madison, Wisconsin, Funicello received 200 phone calls, overwhelming the switchboard. Fan mail came "in five-foot stacks" for the teen from Utica, New York, who as a toddler had moved to Southern California with her mother and auto mechanic father. A 12-year-old boy in Chicago wrote to her: "This probably sounds crazy but I dream about you every night. Some nights I can't sleep for thinking about you."

Mickey Mouse had lifted Minnie and Donald and Goofy to stardom, and now he was producing living, breathing idols through *The Mickey Mouse Club*. In doing so, he further cemented Walt's stature as a captain of industry as well as an artist. And that all happened almost concurrently with perhaps the most dramatic extension of Mickey's empire, one that would symbolize so much about America in the 1950s, the self-described Happiest Place on Earth.

THE MICKEY MOUSE CLUB'S humble roots were on full display in the 1950s, with Walt often showing up on set (opposite, top) as the youngsters were just finding their footing. Among the hundreds of hopefuls in 1955, the studio chose only a few kids to join the Club. But the show wasn't a get-out-of-school-free card; California law required all juvenile performers to attend at least three hours of school per day, above. And it's tough to ignore an obvious commonality in the early *Mickey Mouse Club* years: All the Mouseketeers were white.



Mickey & the Presidents

THE WHITE HOUSE? BEEN THERE. CONNECT WITH A DOZEN DIFFERENT COMMANDERS-IN-CHIEF? DONE THAT.

Long before Disney World had a Hall of Presidents—a display featuring animatronic avatars of all 45 U.S. commanders-in-chief, orating robotically in an air-conditioned simulacrum of Independence Hall in Philadelphia—Mickey Mouse was in regular proximity to the occupant of the Oval Office.

The Mouse was born during the Coolidge administration, and almost from the moment of his debut, Mickey was proposed as a presidential candidate himself. Irving Caesar, the Broadway lyricist who wrote “Tea for Two,” had a novelty song during the Hoover administration and the Depression that went: “He’ll show us all what can be done when he’s in Washington / So let’s give the good old White House to tricky, wacky, wicky Bolsheviky Mickey Mouse.”

Instead, the White House went in 1932 to one of Mickey’s most ardent fans, Franklin Roosevelt. “Mr. Roosevelt’s favorite moving picture is ‘Mickey Mouse,’” a wire service reporter wrote from Washington, D.C., in 1933. “At the executive mansion [in] Albany [when he was governor of New York], ‘Mickey Mouse’ was always the concluding picture at the private movie show and that rule obtains at the White House.”

Roosevelt sometimes playfully called Raymond Moley, his economic adviser, “Mickey Mouse” and eagerly awaited each new Mickey release. Often an advance print was sent straight from the Disney film laboratory to the White House. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Walt Disney, calling FDR “one of the devotees of Mickey Mouse,” a creature who provided them both with “many delightful evenings.”

MICKEY AND MINNIE ALWAYS outshine any guest, no matter which commander-in-chief may be present. In 1985, President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan greeted the pair at Epcot. Ronald Reagan, of course, was no stranger to showbiz—the 40th President appeared in dozens of films before turning to politics.



BETTMANN/GETTY



USC LIBRARIES/CORBIS/GETTY

Harry Truman, FDR's successor, was a fan too, and would visit Disneyland with his wife, Bess, as a former President. Dwight D. Eisenhower likewise waited until he was out of office.

In July of 1961, as the cold war escalated—just after the Bay of Pigs and before the Cuban Missile Crisis—the newspaper of the Communist party in East Germany, *Freiheit*, alleged that Mickey Mouse was a U.S. secret agent, serving at the behest of the Kennedy administration. In this conspiracy theory, Mickey was urging communist kids to clip coupons from Mickey Mouse comics and mail them in to Disney, complete with their parents' names and addresses—ostensibly for membership in the Mickey Mouse Club but really as a census for West-loving, would-be defectors.

In truth, Mickey was present for

colossal moments on the world stage. It was at Disney World, in 1973, speaking on national TV to a convention of newspaper editors, that President Richard Nixon announced to America: "I am not a crook." Nine years later, in exile, Nixon visited the Magic Kingdom again, posing with Mickey Mouse and declaring, somewhat less famously: "You haven't seen the world until you've seen Disney World."

President Jimmy Carter hosted a 50th birthday party at the White House in 1978 for Mickey, who came skipping into the East Room holding hands with 11-year-old Amy Carter, the First Daughter, as a band played "Heigh-Ho." The President was merely returning a favor, for three months earlier, Mickey had hosted Amy for a visit to at Disney World.

Mickey Mouse was a favorite and

IN SIMPLER TIMES, THEN VICE President Richard Nixon, wife Patricia, and family members (above) took a spin in Disneyland in the summer of 1955; ten years later, John Kennedy Jr. and Mickey discussed official business at the World's Fair (opposite, top). In 1978, Mickey headed to the White House (opposite, bottom) to celebrate his 50th birthday with President Jimmy Carter, who, coincidentally, was at the time enjoying an approval rating of 50 percent.



BETTMANN/GETTY



AP/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

frequently used pejorative of the Ronald Reagan administration. The President's political strategist Lyn Nofziger often wore a Mickey Mouse tie, and Reagan retained a genuine fondness for Mickey, his former show-business colleague. The President and First Lady were greeted by Mickey and Minnie—who were decked out in Uncle Sam and Colonial regalia—for the Memorial Day parade at Disney World in 1985. Alighting from their limousine, the First Couple were embraced by the cartoon First Couple, then surrounded by reporters.

"Is this the first time you've kissed a mouse?" one journalist asked the President after he'd given Minnie a peck.

"This mouse, yes," Reagan replied. To which his wife, Nancy, said with mock consternation: "I'll see you inside."

President George H.W. Bush joined Mickey on stage at Epcot Center to

celebrate his Points of Light volunteer program in 1991. Two years later, when a reporter from Reuters posed a question in a press conference to President Bill Clinton, the President complimented the man on his Mickey Mouse necktie. "Great tie!" he said. "I wish the American people could see that tie." So the reporter removed the tie and gave it to Clinton, who put it on, knotting Mickey and the presidency together once again.

By then it was clear that Mickey—unencumbered by age or term limits—might be the historical figure to meet the most U.S. Presidents. The honor of the meetings belonged not only to him, but to the Presidents themselves. In 2012, Barack Obama visited Disney World and gazed at the statue of Walt and Mickey that greeted him. "It's great to meet a world leader," the President said, "who has bigger ears than me."

THE HOUSE THAT MOUSE BUILT

*It was time for Mickey's spiritual
reach to take physical shape.
In America, and the world*

SOME 70 MILLION PEOPLE tuned in when on July 17, 1955, Disneyland opened in Anaheim, California, a first-of-its-kind theme park that cost Walt Disney \$17 million to build. Construction took one year and one day to complete.





Much like his fan Queen Elizabeth II, Mickey Mouse required a residence commensurate with his power and reach, his exalted status in the world. It would not quite be a kingdom—well, not yet, anyway—but a \$17 million showcase for his achievements and ambitions. And so, on July 17, 1955, on 160 acres previously occupied by orange groves and walnut trees in Anaheim, California, Disneyland opened.

With the actor Ronald Reagan emceeding in the park, a nationwide television audience watched the very first Main Street Parade, featuring a brand-new troupe of child performers called the Mouseketeers. There was a Mickey Mouse Club Theater, showing 3-D cartoons, and a Mickey Mouse Club Circus, with live animals beneath a big top.

ABC's 90-minute special coverage of the big day opened with a shot of Mickey's head, rendered in flowers,

DISNEYLAND'S UNVEILING wasn't all roses—what the telecast didn't show was many of the park's rides not ready for use, *Peter Pan's Flight* and *Rocket to the Moon* among them, disappointing loads of kids. And, with the park expecting just 15,000 guests, officials weren't prepared when nearly double that number showed. Many had counterfeit tickets, and some nonpaying patrons simply jumped fences to take a spin on a teacup (above) or ride the train (right).



LOUIS DEAN/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION (2)



ALLAN GRANT/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION

in front of the Disneyland and Santa Fe railroad station. "That's Mickey Mouse," said host Art Linkletter, "the inimitable little character that started this whole story with Walt Disney, 25 years ago, perhaps the most popular motion picture star in Hollywood."

Two years after it opened, Disneyland had received 10 million visitors, nearly half of them from outside California, and had become the number-one tourist attraction in the United States. The former Ingersoll watch company—now named U.S. Time, and rebranded as Timex in 1969—presented Walt with the 25 millionth Mickey Mouse watch in production. The Mouse remained relevant, emblematic of the tumultuous times, at once part of the culture and a sometime target of the rising counterculture.

Two days before Christmas of 1963, near the height of cold war tensions

between the United States and the Soviet Union, a bit of news went out over the Associated Press wire. A 10-year-old boy in West Berlin had tried 120 times to send his Mickey Mouse comic books to his 10-year-old cousin a few miles away in East Berlin, where the books were banned. Under a new agreement that allowed families divided by the Berlin Wall to visit one another at Christmastime, Lutz Graue and Ralph Altmann were reunited for the holidays. The first thing Lutz told Ralph after two and a half years apart? "I'm sorry you didn't get the Mickey Mouse comic books I sent you."

This was a month after President Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas, and it was 16 months before John Kennedy Jr. visited Mickey at the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, delight lighting up the boy's face as he shook the Mouse's white-gloved

hand. When Princess Grace of Monaco visited that same World's Fair pavilion with her daughter Princess Caroline, the younger royal also met Mickey. It did not go unnoticed that *she* curtsied to *him*.

WALT DISNEY DIED ON DECEMBER 15, 1966, a month after having part of his left lung removed. He was 65, and the world lionized him for "having brought more pleasure to more people than any man who ever lived."

He won 32 Oscars, more than any other person in history. His most famous offspring—"the little fellow that won the world"—was Mickey Mouse, for whom Disney received his first Academy Award. Mickey, inevitably, received a still-living eulogy alongside his creator, described as "the mouse that roared" who united the world by "transcending race and nationality."

MARC WANAMAKER/BISON ARCHIVES



CONDUCTOR MICKEY TAKES WALT and others for a ride in Disneyland (opposite). And while you were always guaranteed a Mickey sighting at the park, it also wasn't that unusual to see Walt, here in 1960, driving through town.

THE ICONIC STRUCTURE OF Disney World in Orlando, Cinderella Castle, stands at 189 feet tall with 27 towers. And, wouldn't you know, its grandfather clock always reads 11:59 p.m. (Hmm, wonder why?) Opposite, Julie Andrews (you know, *Mary Poppins*) danced on Main Street as part of the park's grand opening in 1971.



NBCU PHOTO BANK/GETTY

Many obituaries acknowledged that the greatest living embodiment of the Disney empire was unmistakably Mickey Mouse. It was the royal right of primogeniture, the passing of the crown to the firstborn child. *Miami News* cartoonist Don Wright drew Mickey, a single tear falling from his left eye, surrounded by other Disney characters, including Bambi, Jiminy Cricket, Dumbo, and Donald Duck, in mourning.

Ad still, as ever, Mickey remained a symbol of America. In 1968, with the Vietnam war and its protests in newscasts every evening, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy casting a pall over the country, an animated short created by Milton Glaser and Lee Savage that looked aesthetically almost identical to "Steamboat Willie" became an underground hit. In it, Mickey Mouse enlists in the Army, is shipped to Vietnam and, seconds after disembarking his skiff, dies in combat, all in the span of little more than a minute.

That same year, Mickey turned 40, and if he was ever to suffer a malaise or

a midlife crisis, this would have seemed to be the time. Some of the coverage of his birthday celebration had the elegiac quality of Walt's obits from two years earlier. There was much use of the past tense: "Mickey Mouse was a television hit, too, with the long-running *Mickey Mouse Club* for a whole new generation," went one account. "Today, Mickey Mouse is not seen too often on theater screens nor on television. But down in Disneyland a bigger-than-life-size Mickey—a costume with a man named Paul Castle inside—cavorts to the delight and joy of small fry."

Mickey, in fact, remained far more than a man in a costume; he was more than the \$175,000 display that celebrated his birthday at Donaldson's department store in downtown Minneapolis; more than the gala celebration and giant cake and 40 character parade at Disneyland; more than the television special devoted to him on NBC; more than the 300 million books he had sold and more than the 68 million guests who had visited Disneyland by the start of the year.

Indeed, in 1968, Mickey slipped the surly bonds of Earth itself. Astronaut

Wally Schirra wore a Mickey Mouse watch on *Apollo 7* while in orbit. Goofy and Mickey also presented two Soviet cosmonauts with Mickey Mouse wristwatches at Disneyland.

When half a million people gathered at Woodstock in 1969, in a mass celebration of youth, some cultural observers would note that it was Walt Disney who started that youth culture, decades before the birth of rock 'n' roll. "Even Bob Dylan, leading troubadour of the Woodstock generation, agreed in song that the trick is not (as some radical youths of the sixties insisted) to mistrust anyone over the age of thirty, rather to remain 'forever young,'" wrote film historian Douglas Brode in *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture*.

If Disney's Peter Pan was the apotheosis of eternal youth, of forever young, it was Mickey Mouse who somehow remained ageless, even in middle age.

FOR MILLIONS OF AMERICAN children growing up in the 1970s, the gloomy prospect of returning to school on Monday morning was softened on

YALE JOEL/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION



NC COLLECTIONS/ALAMY

Sunday night by *The Wonderful World of Disney*, broadcast on NBC immediately after dinner. In the warm bath of its title sequence, *Wonderful World* opened with Tinker Bell waving her wand over everything Disney—Cinderella Castle, the spinning teacups, the monorail, the animatronic Abe Lincoln, and, of course, Mickey Mouse, wearing a straw boater and carrying a cane and tap dancing across the screen, into our living rooms, “in living color.”

On one of those Sunday nights in the fall of 1971, the program was devoted entirely to the grand opening of Disney’s new park, in Orlando, Florida. “Just a few miles away from Cape Kennedy, where men point their space vehicles toward the stars,” said host Julie Andrews, “Walt Disney decided to launch his final dream.” That dream was now Disney’s biggest attraction, rendering Disneyland tiny by comparison. Walt Disney World put Mickey on a grander scale, before a larger audience. When

Bob Hope went on the show and told jokes in the atrium of the Contemporary Resort Hotel—delivering a monologue from the monorail platform—he introduced himself in that NBC special as an “ex-Mouseketeer.”

So broad was the Disney empire—and at the same time such a self-contained world—that Hope could perform an entire act about the Disney universe. He complained that Donald Duck was his roommate at the Contemporary. “Did you ever try bathing with a duck who was playing with his rubber man?” He insinuated that his room-service waiter, Pluto, had tainted his water. And above all, he marveled, in a hotel with a train passing through its lobby, at everything that Mickey Mouse had wrought. “This is the biggest vacation complex entertainment in the world,” Hope said. “And to think it all started with a gentle mouse, a bad-tempered duck, and seven mixed-up dwarfs.”

Flanked by two young women in Disney World uniforms, Hope said,

IF ANY TENSIONS REMAINED between the Soviet and American flight crews for the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz Test Project, Mickey Mouse, complete with his own space suit, surely helped assuage any lingering awkwardness, above. In 2009, Mickey greeted over 1,000 immigrants from more than 100 countries at the park (opposite), all of whom had just been sworn in as U.S. Citizens.

wistfully: “Boy, they don’t build mice the way they used to.”

And it was true. Mickey’s role was now solidly established as a kind of elder statesman, still an enormous star—like Hope himself—but one whose most famous work was perhaps behind him.

In July of 1971, three months before Walt Disney World opened, Ub Iwerks died of a heart attack in Burbank, California. He was 70. On his death he was lauded for his many achievements, including his contributions to the design of iconic Disneyland attractions It’s a Small World, Pirates of the Caribbean, and the Haunted Mansion. But the first sentence of every obituary identified Iwerks as a creator of Mickey Mouse.

So neither Iwerks nor Walt Disney were there for Disney World’s first day. When the great park opened to the public, among the many dignitaries in attendance were Roy Disney and Walt’s widow, Lillian Disney Truysen, who was now remarried to a California real estate developer. As the *Florida Today* correspondent noted in her report, “Mrs. Truysen almost seemed overshadowed by her husband’s most famous character, Mickey Mouse.” Indeed, there were three Mickey Mouses—three Mickey Mice?—at the grand opening, not including the audio-animatronic Mickey, in a tuxedo, conducting an orchestra of Disney characters. This attraction, in Fantasyland, was called the Mickey Mouse Revue, and the orchestra played a litany of greatest hits, among them “Heigh-Ho,” “Whistle While You Work,” and “When You Wish Upon a Star.”

Mickey was literally in coattails, facing a menagerie of creatures who had ridden his to great fame, and he might have now entered a long period of resting on his laurels, as Elvis was doing in Las Vegas, playing crowd favorites.

Like Elvis, Mickey was woven into the sequined fabric of the culture. It was difficult to tell where Mickey ended and America began. In 1973, the chairman of the Republican National



RICARDO RAMIREZ BUXEDA/ORLANDO SENTINEL/POLARIS

Committee, George H.W. Bush, called the Watergate break-in that would soon bring down Richard Nixon's presidency a "Mickey Mouse" affair. Meaning, that is, not serious. Agriculture secretary Earl Butz agreed, calling Watergate "Mickey Mouse stuff," consigned to "footnotes a hundred years from now."

By the next election year, 1976, Nixon had resigned. Meanwhile America was celebrating its 200th birthday and Mickey, Donald, and Goofy played the fife and drum and carried a flag throughout the bicentennial at Disneyland and Disney World in a spectacle called "America on Parade." That same year, with the old black-and-white "Mickey Mouse Club" still rerunning in syndication throughout America, a

During his 50th birthday festivities at Disney parks, Mickey was usually seen dressed in a tuxedo, like James Bond or the Monopoly man.

new *Mickey Mouse Club* held auditions in Hollywood. The reboot debuted on January 17, 1977, with a racially diverse cast and the old familiar theme song set to a disco beat. "Everybody's movin', to the Mousekadanace," went the disco tune. "Can you feel it groovin', Do the Mousekadanace."

The new Mouseketeers were the halftime entertainment of Super Bowl XI in Pasadena, California. While the Oakland Raiders and Minnesota Vikings retreated to their locker rooms, singers wearing sweaters embroidered with Mickey's face exhorted the crowd of 103,438 to "Give me an M, give me an I, give me a C, give me a K..." And the crowd complied.

Mickey's face covered the NFL shield logo at midfield. Hundreds of red,



DAN ANDERSON/MOMENT EDITORIAL/GETTY

NOPE, NOT JULY 4TH, JUST your typical evening in Magic Kingdom Park at Disney World. The Most Magical Place in the World sits on 107 acres, nearly the size of Vatican City in Rome.



THE GLOBE-TROTTING MOUSE now has houses all over the world, opening his Tokyo Disneyland digs in 1983. By 2017 the park was Disney's third most visited, welcoming more than 16 million visitors per year. In 2012, the heart-breaker hung with some gal pals during a Coming-of-Age Day ceremony at Disneyland.

KASHIHARA KATSUMI/GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY

white, and blue balloons in the shape of Mickey's head were released into the sky and the new Mouseketeers marched off the field in their mouse ears, their hope as buoyant as the balloons now soaring off into the stratosphere.

Before the year was out, their bright new show was cancelled, a victim of high production costs. Even so, in its short run, the new *Mickey Mouse Club* had sold half a million copies of a cast album and won its afternoon time slot and demonstrated the enduring popularity of its animated star.

BY THE TIME MICKEY CELEBRATED his 50th birthday in 1978, with year-long festivities at the Disney parks, he was usually seen in a tuxedo, like James Bond or the man on Monopoly cards. He was the subject of a traveling exhibit by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, his cartoon cels—original artwork on transparent sheets, used in animation—were now considered fine art, highly collectible and valued at auction.

In New York, Mickey's image hung in the Museum of Modern Art. He was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. And that was just the start of the 50th birthday hoopla.

From Hollywood, the Mouse departed Union Station in a private Amtrak car called the Mickey Mouse Special for a transcontinental whistle-stop tour, Los Angeles to New York. He was traveling by the same mode of transportation on which he had been created a half century earlier, in the opposite direction.

It was a sentimental journey, with stops in Kansas City, Missouri, where Walt Disney's first studio was; Walt's birthplace of Chicago; the White House, where Mickey was received by the First Daughter, 11-year-old Amy Carter; and finally the Broadway Theatre in New York City, formerly the Colony, where "Steamboat Willie" had premiered a lifetime ago. There, Mickey appeared with the Broadway cast of *The Wiz* before returning to Los Angeles via Washington, D.C., where he was feted at the Library of Congress.



BEI XIN XINHUA/EVERETT/REDFUX

The trip had about it the air of a valedictory, a kind of lifetime achievement award, a victory lap of a grateful nation. Indeed, the MoMA exhibition was called a “retrospective,” as if Mickey were nearing a coda, as if he might now be put out to pasture at a retreat for retired actors. This was, of course, a running theme throughout Mickey’s middle age. Except new technology was emerging—cable TV—that would give him yet another new life, and introduce the Mouse—once again—to yet another generation.

The premium channel launched on April 18, 1983, counted down by Donny Osmond, on a headset, as Donald, Goofy, and Chip (or possibly Dale) manned the desk at Mouse Control, calling to Earth Station Mickey, a satellite in space, beaming the brand-new Disney Channel into American homes.

Once again, Mickey wore a tux, in a theater full of chanting children, as he threw an enormous switch lighting up

a studio sign that made it official: ON THE AIR. Fireworks lit up the sky and the famous three-circle silhouette that make up Mickey’s head now doubled as the Disney Channel logo.

The first program, airing at seven a.m. Eastern, was an original animated series called *Good Morning, Mickey!* Its perky theme (“Today’s gonna be great, we’ve got the world on a plate”) jump-started the day for young viewers, setting them up for *Mousercise*, a live-action aerobics program in which all the humans dressed like Olivia Newton-John in her “Physical” video, then in heavy rotation on MTV. Mickey himself wore a track suit while doing an energetic dance step. He felt the burn by doing deep knee bends. The 1980s were off and running.

Mousercise, the TV show, followed the wild success of the *Mousercise* record album, making Mickey a rival to Jane Fonda and her workout videos, or Richard Simmons’s soon-to-launch

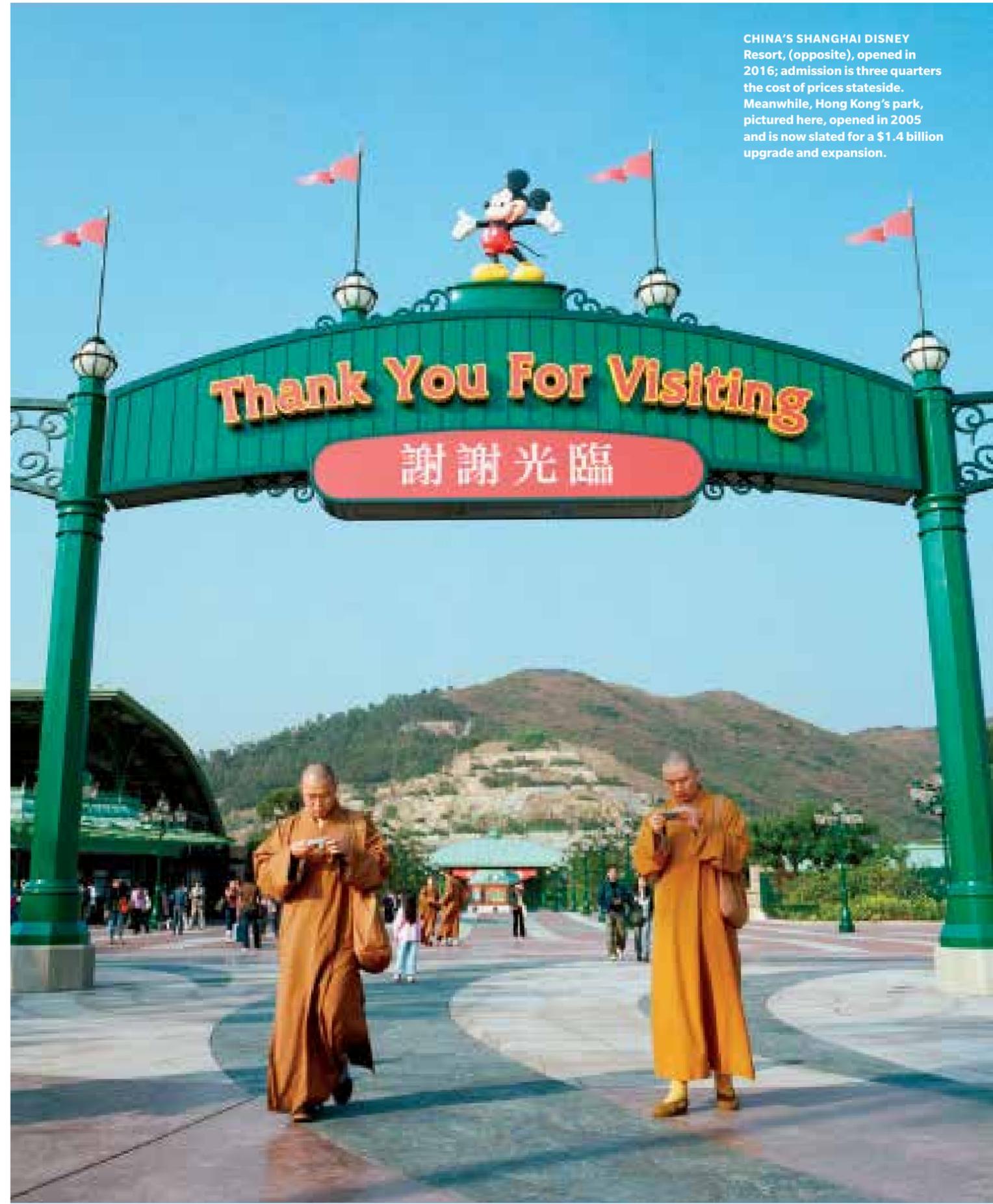
Sweatin’ to the Oldies franchise.

Mickey, it turned out, was in great shape, regardless of his age. When Tokyo Disneyland opened in 1983, as the first Disney park outside the United States, it was selling 10,000 pairs of Mickey Mouse ears every day. “They’re the most popular item,” an employee said that year. “The manufacturers can’t keep up with demand.”

In the final decade of the century, on 4,800 acres 15 miles east of Paris, the \$3.75 billion Euro Disney opened. It was soon renamed Disneyland Paris, and became the focus of picketing French farmers angered by American agriculture trade policies. As one of them told reporters: “It’s public amusers, with their big ears, that will sell expensive chemical sandwiches to the city folk.”

Disneyland Paris ensured that 24 hours a day, somewhere in the world, there is a Disney park open. Mickey Mouse never sleeps, and the sun never sets on the Disney empire.

KATJA HOFFMANN/LAIF/REDFUX



CHINA’S SHANGHAI DISNEY Resort, (opposite), opened in 2016; admission is three quarters the cost of prices stateside. Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s park, pictured here, opened in 2005 and is now slated for a \$1.4 billion upgrade and expansion.

Mickey & Sports

HIS CAREER AS A JOCK WELL ESTABLISHED, THE MOUSE HAS HOBNOBBED WITH, AND INSPIRED, SOME ELITE ATHLETES

Long before 1987, when New York Giants quarterback Phil Simms became the first Super Bowl winner to say he was going to Disney World, Mickey Mouse had been palling around with famous athletes. At the Henry Dermer clothing store in Fresno, California, in 1933, for example, you could buy, for 79 cents, a boys' sweatshirt bearing either the face of Babe Ruth or Mickey Mouse.

Mickey has posed for photographs with another Yankee great, Joe DiMaggio. In one, Joe holds a giant baseball, while Mickey wields an oversized Louisville Slugger, evidently unaware that the great DiMaggio was not a pitcher.

Young children in the 1950s—when both luminaries were at the forefront of pop culture, frequently appearing on TV—couldn't help but confuse Mickey Mouse and Mickey Mantle. (Much like the confusion engendered by the coexistence of Yogi Bear and Yogi Berra.) Mouse and Mantle finally met, in 1994, at Disneyland, and the Mouse may have known a thing or two about Mantle's game. Five years earlier, Willie Mays, Mantle's rival for center field supremacy in 1950s New York, had given the Mick—Mouse, not Mantle—some batting tips at Disneyland.

Today, of course, it's customary for World Series winners to visit Mickey in his domain—Houston Astros stars José Altuve, Carlos Correa, and George Springer did after winning in 2017. Mickey Mouse has become as much a part of professional sports championships in North America as bejeweled rings and Gatorade showers. It's a rite of passage, the trip to Disney World or Disneyland, almost always consummated by a photo with the Mouse. After the



PERHAPS THE GREATEST bonus of becoming a world champ—going to Disney World, as they say. A day after the New York Giants ruined the New England Patriots' perfect season in Super Bowl XLVI on February 5, 2012, Giants quarterback Eli Manning celebrated with Mickey at the Magic Kingdom.

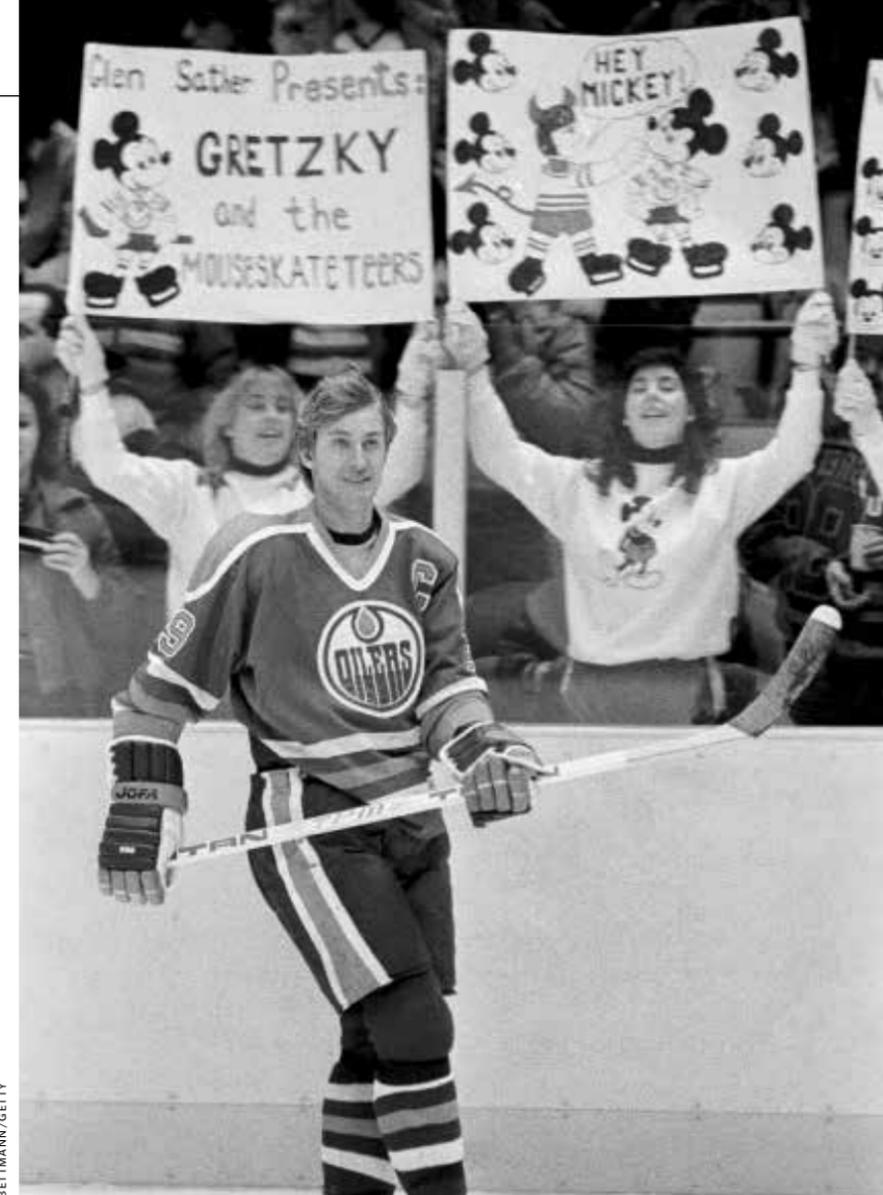
GENE DUNCAN/DISNEY PARKS/GETTY



BILL RAY/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION



IMAGNO/MARY EVANS



BETTMANN/GETTY

first of his five Super Bowl wins, in 2002, New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady rode on a Disney World parade float with Mickey, who wore his customary football helmet (it can't quite conceal his ears) and college letter sweater with a self-referential M on the front, not unlike the M of Brady's own Michigan Wolverines.

Ten years later, when the Giants defeated Brady's Patriots in the Super Bowl, Mickey wore a similar outfit riding a Disney parade route alongside Giants quarterback Eli Manning. Mickey is as front-running as a mouse can get.

He has been a frequent competitor on-screen. "Barnyard Olympics" (1932), features animated boxing (the ref gets punched in the kisser), diving (the Olympians are lined up on the ladder as if at a municipal pool), wrestling (on a filthy old mattress),

and even race-walking. But the main event is a cross-country race, a sort of quadrathlon with Mickey running, pole-vaulting, rowing, and cycling. In the end, he's carried from the finish line in the cup he's just won, congratulated by Minnie.

In "Mickey's Polo Team" (1935), a team called the Mickey Mousers (Mickey, "The Goof," Big Bad Wolf, and Donald Duck) competes against a squad of movie stars (Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Harpo Marx, and Charlie Chaplin). In the star-studded stands at the polo pitch, presumably in Beverly Hills, are W.C. Fields, Clark Gable, Harold Lloyd, Greta Garbo, and Shirley Temple.

The star power of Hollywood was a kind of model for the National Basketball Association under former commissioner David Stern, who told team owners that the league was like Disney, with Chicago

Bulls superstar Michael Jordan playing the role of Mickey Mouse. "They have characters: Mickey Mouse, Goofy. Our characters are called Magic and Michael," Stern said. Michael and Mickey posed for a photograph together on the golf course one summer, Mickey in plus fours, a tam-o'-shanter, and a golf sweater, leaning on his driver, while Michael (in panama hat) prepared to hit a low iron.

When Wayne Gretzky broke Gordie Howe's all-time National Hockey League scoring record in 1989, the 28-year-old was paraded down Main Street at Disneyland by Donald, Goofy, and Mickey, whose name Gretzky had invoked six years earlier in an attempt to disparage fans of the New Jersey Devils. All appeared forgiven.

After Tiger Woods won the 1999 Disney Classic, he and Mickey played cat and mouse, the former accepting his

THE GREEN BAY PACKERS IN 1967 before Super Bowl I called the Kansas City Chiefs a Mickey Mouse team, causing the Chiefs to embrace the name, left. (Kansas City, uh, lost, 35 to 10.) In 1932, Mickey checked out the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum (above) before the Olympic Games—no, he wasn't competing—and, like the Packers did, NHL great Wayne Gretzky called the New Jersey Devils a "Mickey Mouse operation on ice," so Devils fans let him have it.

trophy from the latter. Today's athletes wear Mickey on their sleeves (the Oklahoma City Thunder star and haute couture mannequin Russell Westbrook has rocked a Comme des Garçons shirt emblazoned with Mickey's image). And they wear him under their sleeves (At the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Jéssica Quintino of Brazil's handball squad showed off a tattoo of Minnie kissing Mickey, on the back of her left upper arm).

Minnie kissing Mickey after one of his athletic triumphs is a trope of Disney cartoons. In "Touchdown Mickey," the Mouse is a fleet-footed football hero, playing for Mickey's Manglers against the much bigger Alley Cats. It is a high-scoring affair, 96 to 96, with a minute left. While Pluto pulls a water wagon to the bench, a rooting section—"Roosting Section"—of ducks spells out Mickey's

name long before the Mouseketeers later did. And all the while Goofy calls the dramatic action from the radio box: "Mickey made a touchdown. What a game. What a game!"

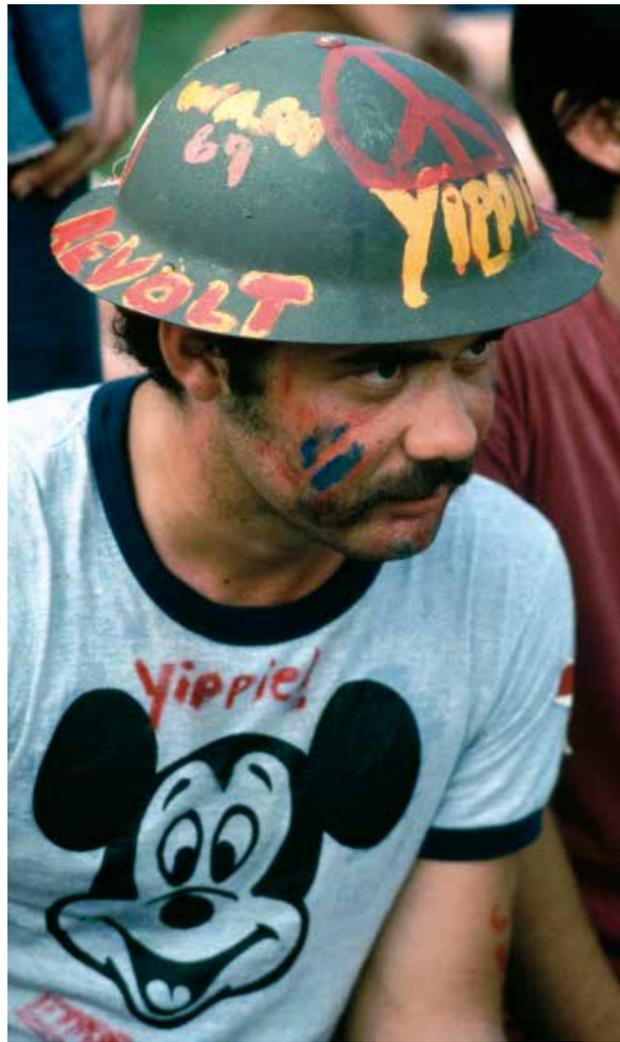
In one scene, Mickey, literally flattened by a tackler, sits up dazed and hears only cries of "Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo." This was 1932, decades before the National Football League would confront its own issues with concussions and brain trauma—"Touchdown Mickey" demonstrates how little has changed in professional sports. As a suited, cigar-chomping pig howls with laughter at the unfolding scene, Mickey scores the game-winning touchdown and is carried off the field while Minnie congratulates him with a kiss.

Watching it today, one half expects Mickey to turn to camera and announce, "I'm going to Disney World."

ALWAYS CLOSE-UP READY, Mickey's classy style has largely remained unchanged. His name, however, did—Walt Disney originally called him Mortimer Mouse until his wife, Lillian, said that Mickey was a better choice. She was right.

THOROUGHLY MODERN MICKEY

Mature in years, though ever young at heart, the Mouse adapted easily to changing times



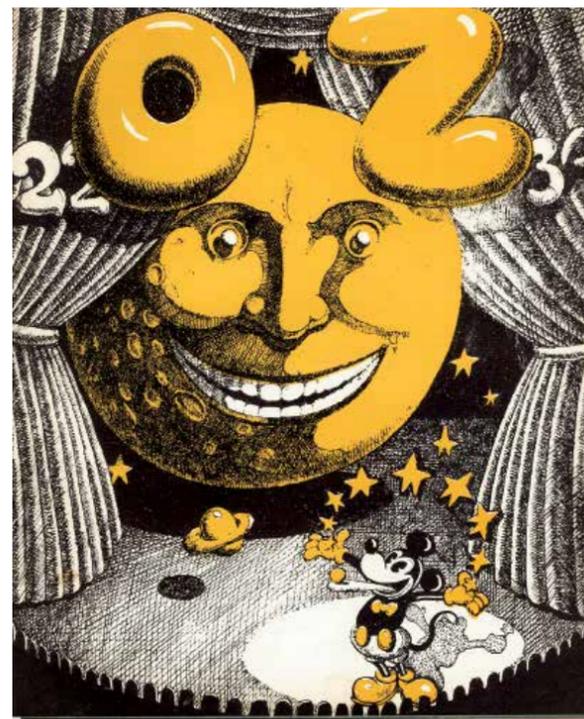
LEIF SHOOGORS/CORBIS/GETTY



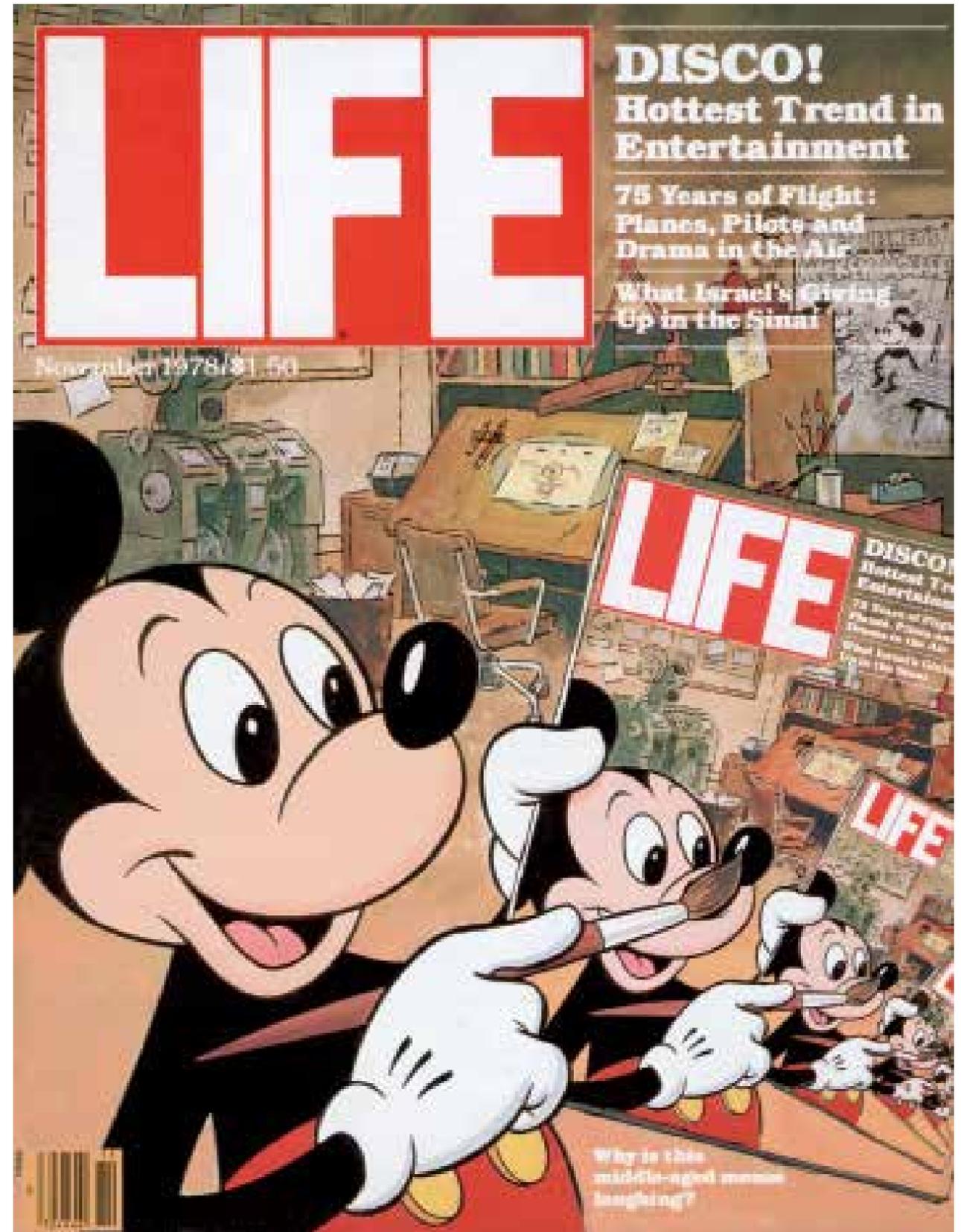
STUART LUTZ/GAODO/GETTY

As befits the world's most famous inkblot, Mickey Mouse is a Rorschach test. People from every background see something in him, whether or not it is there. Brazilian soccer star Philippe Coutinho, who plies his trade for Barcelona, one of the most famous professional clubs on earth, has a Mickey Mouse tattoo on his right rib cage. Tampa Bay Buccaneers wide receiver Mike Evans has a Mickey Mouse tattoo on his arm, in honor of his father, whose nickname was Mickey. Janet Jackson has a tattoo of Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse. Those are just some of the famous folks. Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks drew him in ink, he came to life, and he has been rendered again, as ink, on countless bodies around the world.

Mickey has remained the Disney franchise, ever adapting. This was true when the venerable *Mickey Mouse Club*



THE ADVERTISING ARCHIVES/COURTESY EVERETT



IF ALL COLLEGE MARKETING 101 courses don't trace the story of Mickey Mouse, they probably should. Because by the time he turned 50 in 1978,

Mickey wasn't just on watches and Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame, his image was being used in support of social justice by protestors of

the Vietnam War (opposite, top) and on the covers of OZ (opposite, bottom), LIFE (above), and other magazines around the world. His name

was as synonymous with America as apple pie. He was it, man, the image and name you knew the second you saw it. Then, just as today.



RALPH CRANE/LIFE/THE PICTURE COLLECTION

saw yet another incarnation, airing as *The All New Mickey Mouse Club*, from 1989 to 1994. Many of this show's child stars would become movie, TV, and recording stars for the new millennium, including Justin Timberlake, Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, Ryan Gosling, Keri Russell, and JC Chasez. Mickey was still the franchise. As in previous decades, he didn't merely star in programs on the Disney Channel, he created his own, discovering new talent.

MMC, as *The All New Mickey Mouse Club* came to be known to its legion of fans, opened with a hip-hop update of the classic theme song, replete with record scratches: Mickey remaking

When Mickey turned 80, in 2008, a delegation of children from California presented the pope with Mickey Mouse ears on World Youth Day

himself as a break-dancing, beat-boxing child of the '90s.

For many years now, in the Disney parks and properties, "Hidden Mickeys" have been embedded in wallpaper and wrought iron and wall-to-wall carpet. Hidden Mickeys have even been spotted on the moon and on Mercury in craters shaped uncannily like the Mouse, hinting at the divine and the eternal. Where you see the man in the Moon, others see the Mouse on the moon.

Indeed, when Space Mountain reopened at Disneyland for the park's 50th anniversary in 2005, Mickey Mouse—in space suit and helmet—welcomed Neil Armstrong to the ribbon-cutting. "Space travel and Disneyland were born of imagination," Armstrong said, gazing out over Tomorrowland.

JOHN RODGERS/REDFERNS/GETTY



MR PHOTO/CORBIS/CONTOUR RA/GETTY



FROM '60S ICON TWIGGY (opposite top, in 1967) to John Lennon (opposite bottom, with son Julian in 1974) to Lenny Kravitz (here, in 2000), no star on the planet is too cool for Mickey. It's just, like, a rule.



FOUR OF TODAY'S BIGGEST FILM AND music stars started their careers in *The All New Mickey Mouse Club*: Ryan Gosling (first row, left), Britney Spears (first row, right), Christina Aguilera (second row, right), and Justin Timberlake (third row, right), together in 1994. After halting production in 1996, the *Club* was revived in 2017 with a new and more diverse bunch, opposite.

STHANLEE B. MIRADOR/SIPA USA/AP



© BUENA VISTA TELEVISION/COURTESY EVERETT

Years earlier, Mickey had joined Buzz Aldrin at the Tournament of Roses Parade along with Muhammad Ali. And so the Mouse, the astronaut, and the fighter made their way at a stately rate of a few miles per hour, a brief history of the 20th century on a single parade float.

Mickey's connections to the world's major figures continued into the new millennium. In 2008, when Mickey turned 80, a delegation of children from Orange County, California, presented the pope with Mickey Mouse ears on World Youth Day, which was held in Sydney, Australia, and the ears bore the stitched inscription of his name, Benedict XVI, a kind of analog to the pope's zucchetto, his ecclesiastical skullcap. Benedict smiled when he got them. And while he didn't put them on, countless other famous men and women have happily donned the ears for the camera. Twiggy, Madonna, Marilyn Manson, Rihanna, and Lady Gaga have been photographed in

Mickey was still the franchise. He didn't merely star in programs on the Disney Channel, he created his own.

Mickey Mouse ears. John Lennon, Brian Wilson, Freddie Mercury, Axl Rose, and Dave Grohl have been photographed in their Mickey Mouse T-shirts.

Those stars were continuing a sartorial affection most zealously embodied by Dwight Stones, a three-time world-record holder in the high jump, who competed for the United States in three separate Olympic Games. Stones practically lived in his Mickey Mouse T-shirts. His apartment was festooned with Mickey Mouse memorabilia—including a clock, a telephone, place

mats, and dishes. For an athlete whose job was upward mobility, he chose the right role model; Mickey, so many decades after his birth on a train—or possibly on a steamboat—is richer than Scrooge McDuck.

MICKY IS NOW MANIFEST ON Apple watches (an update of those Mickey Mouse watches that have been worn since the Depression). There are Mickey Mouse Rolex watches as well as Timex watches. This year, Disney chairman and CEO Bob Iger presented Mickey's better half, Minnie, with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. They were joined by Mickey himself—whose own star on Hollywood Boulevard is now flanked by those of Sharon Stone and Tommy Lee Jones—and by pop star Katy Perry, who was attired like Minnie, in a red dress with white polka dots. Let's not forget that Minnie is another icon celebrating her 90th year. "And she does it with an effortless bat of her lash, don't you girl?" said Perry.



TODD ANDERSON/DISNEY/GETTY

Donald Duck has a star on the Walk of Fame too.

From 2006 to 2016, Disney produced *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, an animated show for children age two to five, that continues to air in reruns. Mickey remains the gateway to the Disney theme parks, Disney stores, and Disney cruises. On *Clubhouse*, the Sensational Six—Mickey and Minnie, Donald and Daisy, Goofy and Pluto, together for nearly 70 years when the first episode aired—solve problems by summoning their Mouseketools with the siren call “Oh Toodles!” The theme song, by alternative-rock band They Might Be Giants, is burned into the brainpans of many 21st-century parents of young children: “It’s the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, come inside, it’s fun inside.” (In 2017, the Sensational Six began starring in a spin-off, *Mickey and the Roadster Racers*.)

By 2009, Mickey Mouse was

responsible for roughly \$5 billion in merchandise sales every year, \$4 billion of which came from outside his country of birth. The following year, Disney introduced a video game, *Epic Mickey*, in which the Mouse was reimagined, an effort to jaibreak him from his benign corporate image and return him to his salad days as a mischief-making scamp. But, “people don’t like it when you mess with Mickey,” one of the game’s creators told the Associated Press, and it proved to be true. Disney closed its video-game studio in 2016, six years after *Epic Mickey*’s release, even as the Mouse remains vital and viral in analog ways. His name is still uttered by children around the United States, in the playground rhyme (a variation of eenie-meenie-minie-moe) which starts: “Mickey Mouse, built a house. Donald Duck, messed it up. Who will pay the con-se-quen-ces, Mouse or Duck?”

He is everywhere in the popular

MICKEY AND THE GANG AREN'T usually keen to change their wardrobe, but *Star Wars* visionary George Lucas was worthy of an exception in 2010, above. In early 2018, Mickey and Minnie took a walk down Hollywood Boulevard with singer Katy Perry (opposite), and they liked it.

ALBERTO E. RODRIGUEZ/GETTY



GIVEN THAT HE WAS CONCEIVED by artists, it makes sense that Mickey has found his way back. Here, *Gas Mousk*, by Sam Hayles. (Is this what Walt had in mind for kids during World War II?) Opposite, from top: musician and DJ deadmau5 in Park City, Utah, in 2012 and street art in Montreal, 2015.



BARRY BRECHEISEN/GETTY



SAM HAYLES

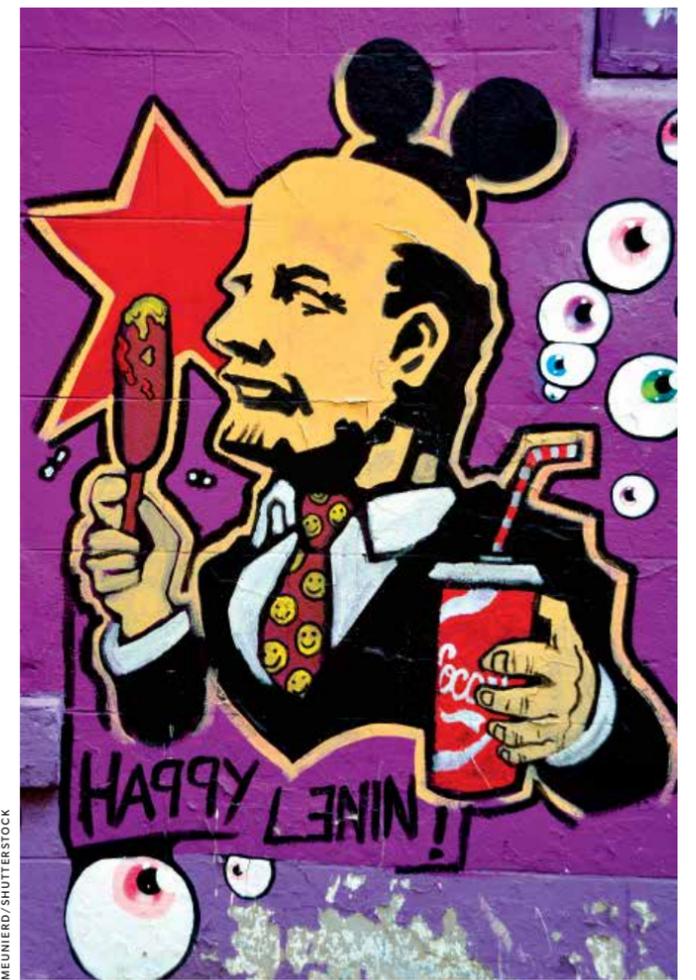
culture, in high art and low. In 1992, Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for his graphic novel *Maus*, set during the Holocaust. Spiegelman's postmodern portrayal depicts Nazis as cats and Jewish people as mice. The epigraph that opens *Maus II* is taken from a German newspaper of the 1930s. "Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed," it reads in part. "Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!"

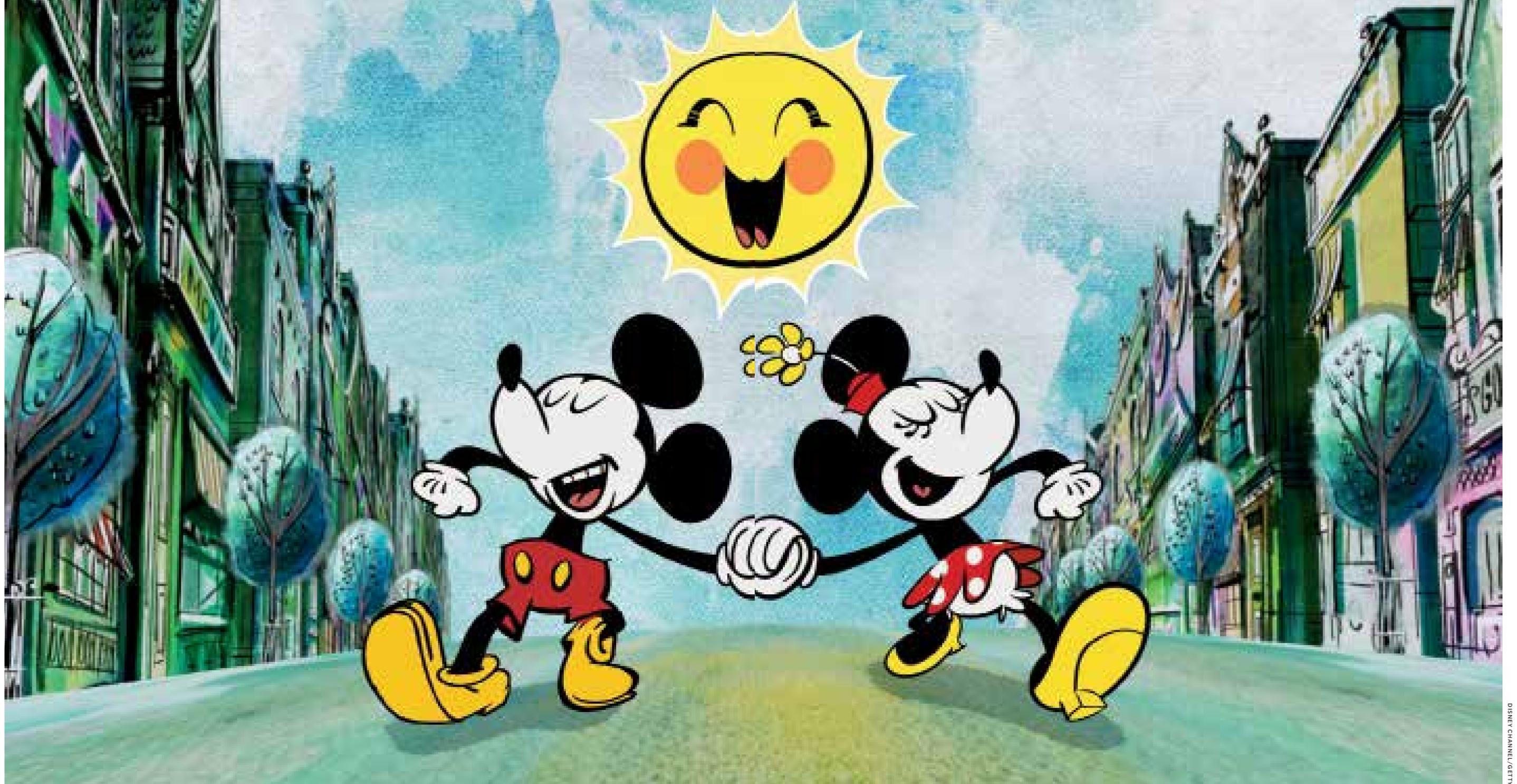
"Oh, I adored Mickey Mouse when I was a child," the late Maurice Sendak told *Newsweek* in 2009, when the film version of Sendak's classic of children's literature, *Where the Wild Things Are*, was released. "He was the emblem of happiness and funniness... When Mickey Mouse came on the screen and there was his big head, my sister said she had to hold on to me. I went berserk. I stood on the chair screaming, 'My hero! My hero!'... He was the little brother I always wanted."

The fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger had an Andy Warhol Mickey Mouse picture hanging in his house, as well as Warhol portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, and Howdy Doody.

The protagonist of Dan Brown's 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, which has sold more than 80 million copies worldwide, is the brilliant Harvard-trained symbologist Robert Langdon. "Pulling back the sleeve of his jacket," Brown writes of Langdon, "he checked his watch—a vintage, collector's-edition Mickey Mouse wristwatch that had been a gift

MEUNIERD/SHUTTERSTOCK





DISNEY CHANNEL/GETTY

from his parents on his tenth birthday. Although its juvenile dial often drew odd looks, Langdon never owned any other watch; Disney animation had been his first introduction to the magic of form and color, and Mickey now served as Langdon's daily reminder to stay young at heart."

ALL OF WHICH IS TO SAY: MICKEY Mouse built a house—did he ever build a house—and not just the replica of

his home, the Mickey Country House at Disney World, a park which now receives more than 20 million visitors a year, more than any other theme or amusement park in the world. Shanghai Disneyland, a \$5.5 billion park, opened in China in 2016. It was nearly 20 years in the making and opened 82 years after the Mickey Mouse short "Shanghaied" debuted in American movie houses in 1934.

In Mickey's 90th year, he remains

vital in many ways. Disney debuted rainbow mouse ears in 2018, in time for gay pride month. But Mickey is also mummified in history. Drawings from "Steamboat Willie" are now, along with the original star-spangled banner and Abraham Lincoln's stovepipe hat, in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

The halftime performer at 2018's Super Bowl LII, one of the most-watched TV programs in America,

HERE, MICKEY AND MINNIE MAY be trying to show Donald and Daisy how to be an "Adorable Couple," in a 2014 episode of Disney Channel's *Mickey Mouse*. And, 90 years after they first met, the Mouses remain a fine example of what a strong relationship looks like. Americans taking relationship advice from mice? It's not as goofy as it sounds.

was Justin Timberlake, who first came to the public's attention as a child performer on *The All New Mickey Mouse Club*. You'll recall that 41 years earlier, at Super Bowl XI, a previous incarnation of the *Mickey Mouse Club* performed at the halftime show. The Mouse remains, after all these years, both star and star maker.

And it may always be so. At the 1939 World's Fair in New York, a time capsule was buried full of items that might

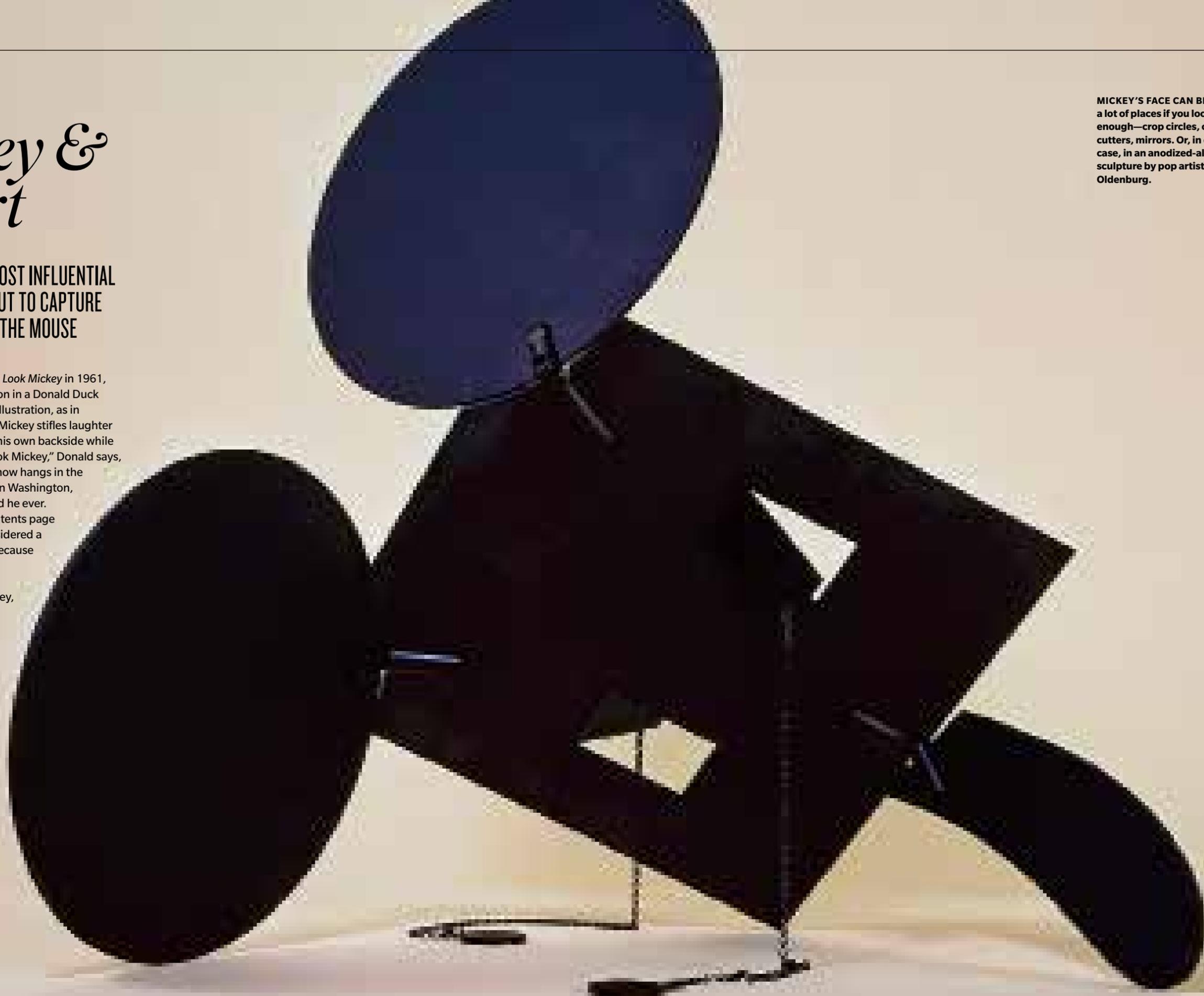
demonstrate man's ingenuity. The capsule contained instructions that it not be opened for 5,000 years. The air was drawn out of it and replaced with nitrogen in the hopes that the articles might be preserved for the civilization that finds it. In addition to an electric razor, a deck of cards, and \$2.91 in U.S. currency, a Mickey Mouse child's cup was placed inside, so that the people of 6939 will find a face that is, even to them, familiar.

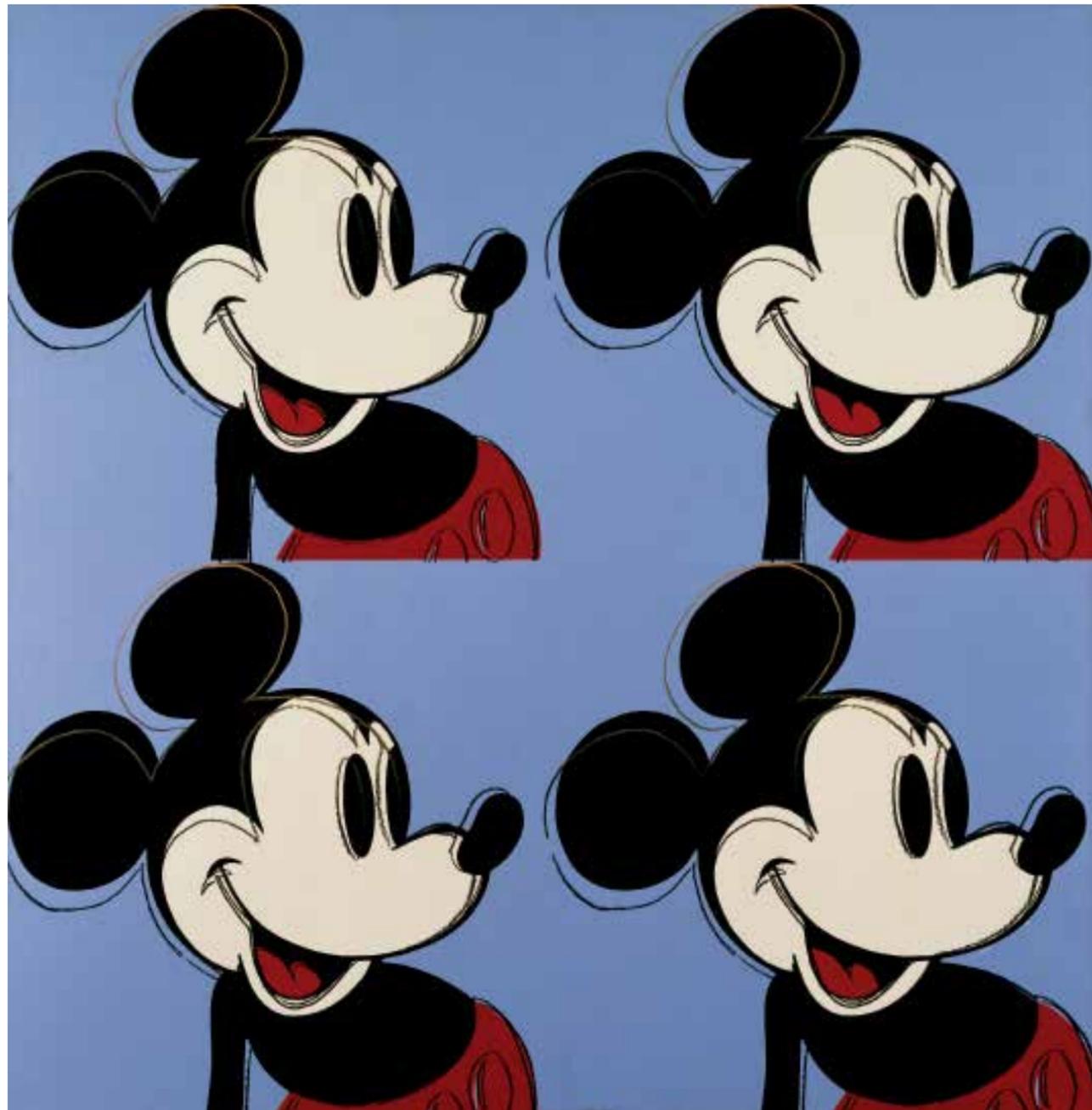
Mickey & Art

SOME OF AMERICA'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS HAVE SET OUT TO CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF THE MOUSE

Roy Lichtenstein painted *Look Mickey* in 1961, inspired by an illustration in a Donald Duck children's book. In the illustration, as in Lichtenstein's painting, Mickey stifles laughter as Donald Duck hooks his own backside while fishing from a pier: "Look Mickey," Donald says, in oil, on a canvas that now hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., "I've hooked a big one!!" Had he ever. *Look Mickey* (which graces the contents page of this special edition) is now considered a milestone in modern art, in part because Mickey himself is so fraught with meaning. "He's such an American symbol," Lichtenstein said of Mickey,

MICKEY'S FACE CAN BE SEEN a lot of places if you look long enough—crop circles, cookie cutters, mirrors. Or, in one case, in an anodized-aluminum sculpture by pop artist Claes Oldenburg.





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“and such an anti-art symbol.”

Perhaps that should be anti-Art, with a pretentious capital A, because Mickey not only began as art but became that rare prominent work of art that inspires countless other prominent works of art.

The pop artist Keith Haring cited Walt Disney and Andy Warhol as his heroes. Warhol created a screen print of Mickey Mouse in 1981, inlaid with diamond dust, in a series called Myths—Mickey being one of several characters (among them Superman,

Uncle Sam, and Santa Claus) who are instantly recognizable around the world. Five years later, Haring printed Warhol’s head on Mickey’s body, a kind of centaur of his heroes, a piece he called *Andy Mouse*. Again, Mickey represented something larger to Haring than merely the Mouse. He was, Haring said, “ultimately a symbol of America more than anything else.”

“Mickey Mouse represents happiness and the joy of being a kid,” according to the British artist Damien Hirst, who sculpted Mickey

IT WASN’T ENOUGH TO BE THE best and brightest to get the Andy Warhol treatment—you had to be fascinating, too. Mickey was an obvious choice for the famous artist’s 1981 painting (above). Warhol protégé Keith Haring paid homage to Warhol and Mickey with his 1986 work *Andy Mouse* (opposite).



KEITH HARING ARTWORK © KEITH HARING FOUNDATION

as a sunken treasure recovered from a shipwreck at the bottom of the sea and covered in coral. This notion of Mickey in decay was also illustrated by cartoonist Robert Crumb, who drew the Mouse as a wizened Hollywood actor, in a black-and-white head shot that he had autographed for a fan: “All in all it’s been a great life! Your Pal, Mickey Mouse.”

From Japanese mass-market maestro Takashi Murakami to British street artist Banksy, so many artists have painted (and weaponized) Mickey

“He’s such an American symbol,” said Roy Lichtenstein of Mickey, “and such an anti-art symbol.” Perhaps that should be anti-Art, complete with a pretentious capital A.

Mouse that it was perhaps inevitable that he would become not just art—from artists painting him, and artists painting other artists as him—but an art museum in its own right. And so sculptor Claes Oldenburg’s *Mouse Museum* was an exhibition inside a freestanding museum, built in the shape of Mickey Mouse’s noggin. Visitors could literally go inside Mickey Mouse’s head and see the treasures and ephemera within, a fitting experience for a figure that looms so large in the American imagination.

Behind the Scene



MICKEY IS IN THE BUILDING!

You can't beat the commute, but the Mouse works long hours at the Magic Kingdom in Disney World, where Land after Land is touched by his high spirit, by the great smile that remains, even when no one is watching.

RENE BURRI/MAGNUM