Disney Icon Mickey Mouse Turns 75

By MIKE SCHNEIDER, Associated Press Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. - Mickey Mouse arrived on the world's cultural stage 75 years ago Tuesday as a scrawny but buoyant black-and-white product of the Jazz Age. He was a symbol of American pluck in his screen debut, "Steamboat Willie," on Nov. 18, 1928. The film at New York's Colony Theatre showed an irreverent rodent who takes Captain Pete's steamboat on a joyride and woos Minnie Mouse by making music on the bodies of various farm animals.

The years have dulled Mickey's personality, a result of him becoming the corporate face of a multibillion-dollar entertainment empire. In the process, Mickey also has become a cultural Rorschach test — a symbol of American optimism, resourcefulness and energy or an icon of cultural commodification and corporate imperialism.

"There are a number of qualities Mickey represents on which people like to stick their particular view of the world," said Janet Wasko, a University of Oregon professor and author of "Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy.

For Roy E. Disney, whose uncle, Walt Disney, created the character, Mickey Mouse is "this friendly little guy,' which were Walt's words for describing him.

For Penn State professor Henry Giroux, however, Mickey Mouse represents the vast reach of American cultural power, symbolizing a company that has turned childhood into a function of consumerism as children feel obligated to purchase the latest "Finding Nemo" DVD or Mickey Mouse watch.

"Mickey Mouse offers up a ... symbol of innocence while hiding the role it plays in commodifying children's dreams and extending the logic of the market into all aspects of their lives," said Giroux, author of "The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence," a cultural critique of the company.

Mickey wasn't always so complex.

Walt Disney started his animation career in Kansas City, Mo., producing films that were a combination of cartoon and live action and starring an inquisitive little girl named Alice. Hoping for greater success, he moved to Los Angeles in 1923, joining his brother, Roy. Once the creative possibilities with the Alice series were exhausted, Disney started producing films for a new animated character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, in 1927.

Mickey Mouse was conceived the next year during a cross-country train ride, according to the "official" company history. Walt Disney had just been forced to give up the Oswald rights to his ruthless New York distributor, who had exercised copyright control over the character.

On the ride back home to Los Angeles, Disney conjured up a little mouse named Mortimer. His wife, Lillian, thought the name too pompous and suggested Mickey.

But others have argued that Mickey's creation was more likely a collaboration between Disney and his chief animator, Ub Iwerks, with Disney taking the credit. Mickey Mouse was first drawn by Iwerks' hand.
Disney and Iwerks initially produced two silent cartoons for Mickey Mouse, "Plane Crazy" and "The Gallopin' Gaucho." But in the wake of the success of the nation's first "talkie," Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer" in 1927, Disney decided to produce a cartoon that would be synchronized to songs, music and sound effects.

"Steamboat Willie" was an instant hit, arriving at a time when technological advances in motion pictures, radio and the phonograph were transforming mass culture. By the end of the 1930s, Mickey had starred in more than 100 cartoons.

Mickey gradually transformed both physically and spiritually. His face was rounded out and his eyes went from black ovals to white eyes with pupils in the late 1930s. His face became friendlier, less rat-like.

"Round things seem to be less belligerent than the angles," said John Hench, a 95-year-old animator who has been with the Disney company since 1939.

Mickey Mouse became the face that launched a thousand merchandise products. Watches. Pencils. Bedsheets. Alarm clocks. Telephones. He is one of the most merchandised faces ever — about $4.5 billion a year in sales — even though he's currently second to Winnie the Pooh for the Disney company.

Mickey's personality became less edgy, duller and less subversive. Toward the end of the 1930s and the start of the 1940s, Disney animators found it harder to create story lines around Mickey as the character become the face of the company.

"Donald (Duck) became easier to write stories around because his personality was more varied. Often in that period, they would start a cartoon with Mickey and it wouldn't work and someone would say 'Use Donald,'" said David Smith, archives director for the Walt Disney Co. "You didn't want to do naughty things with your corporate logo. He suddenly became sacrosanct."

Mickey's popularity may have waned in the 1940s, but he gained new life in the 1950s with the airing of TV's "Mickey Mouse Club" and the opening of Disneyland in Anaheim, Calif.

"Mickey got a double shot of invigoration," said Marty Sklar, vice chairman and principal creative executive at Walt Disney Imagineering. "The characters live in our park. Mickey is the king of our characters."

In the succeeding decades, Mickey has been used in less than a dozen theatrical releases, but is a regular presence on television in "House of the Mouse" on the Disney Channel and is photographed daily alongside thousands of tourists at theme parks in California, Florida, France and Japan.

"Mickey Mouse speaks an international language," Sklar said. "When I go to Tokyo and see how kids react to Mickey Mouse the same way they do in Paris. It's reassuring that there are some things that cross international boundaries."

For others, Mickey Mouse speaks an international language of commerce and cultural imperialism. That sentiment is embodied in protesters in Buenos Aires who left behind anti-war graffiti last February that depicted President Bush as Mickey Mouse. It's also found in the performance artist Reverend Bill of the Church of Stop Shopping, who visits Disney Stores in New York and tells shoppers "Mickey Mouse is the Antichrist."

All from a simple cartoon. Said author Wasko: "Mickey represents a fascinating interweaving of culture, politics and economics."

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Associated Press Writer Bob Thomas in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

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