

[UltimateDisney.com](#) > Interviews > Hank Jones



Part 1: The Interview

Over the course of eleven years, Hank Jones appeared in eight films for Walt Disney Studios. Beginning with *Blackbeard's Ghost* in 1968 and running through 1978's *The Cat From Outer Space*, Jones's roles could never be considered starring, yet, like many of the actors who regularly appeared in the studio's comedies, he made the most of them and his face became a familiar one. Before, during, and after his time at Disney, Jones appeared in some of television's most popular series, with guest appearances on "The Patty Duke Show", "My Three Sons", "Family Affair", "The Mod Squad", "The Love Boat", "Mork & Mindy", and "The Jeffersons." In 1981, after nearly twenty years involved in the entertainment industry, Jones moved to his other life passion - genealogy - full time.

In UltimateDisney.com's very first DVD review (back before there even was an UltimateDisney.com), we dubbed Hank "kid with half-a-face" in a caption to a particularly unsatisfying frame from the highly cropped digital presentation of *Blackbeard's Ghost*. The review and screencap inspired members of our [forum](#) to question things when a UK television broadcast showed more of the pirate comedy. To illustrate the portions missing from the Region 1 transfer (namely, the right half of Hank's face), crude drawings and Photoshop reconstructions ensued. A Region 2 UK DVD subsequently confirmed that the fullscreen presentation the US received was clearly lacking. All aforementioned graphics and discussion can be viewed [here](#).

Needless to say, Hank himself was utterly disappointed with the way his Disney film debut made its debut on DVD. It was this shoddy, thrifty and thoughtless treatment which inspired him to contact us. He vocalized his shared concern for the manner in which the studio has let its fondly-remembered live action works flounder on disc rather than pay them homage and properly bring them to a new generation of viewers. With communication opened, there was no way we could let a chance for reflection on his Disney years slip by, something that the studio itself has not sought from him or most of the other actors who regularly supplied laughs in its canon of comedies.

So without further ado, we bring you a chat with Hank Jones, genealogist, author, songwriter, repeat "Jeopardy!" champion, and 8-film Disney veteran.

UltimateDisney.com: How would you describe your run at Disney?

Hank Jones: I was the luckiest guy on the planet! The Disney Studio in the 1960s was like summer camp. Everyone smiled, really because everyone was just plain glad to be working there. The boss set the tone of the team atmosphere: he would get angry if someone ever called him "Mr. Disney" instead of "Walt." On my first day, I noticed that the security guard at the gate looked familiar - kind of like a sad-faced basset hound. Later on, I realized why I thought I knew him: the Disney animators had used his unique visage as a model for one of the characters in their *Lady and the Tramp* film - and here he was making sure I had a studio pass to get on the lot.

In the '60s and '70s, Disney liked to reuse many actors in a number of the films they made. What was the casting process like? Would you audition for specific films? Did you have a long-term contract?



Victor Sutker, Marvin Schnall, and Bill Shepherd were the casting directors on the lot at different times. I was initially cast in *Blackbeard's Ghost* after my agent, Max Arno at General Artists Corporation, suggested they look at a movie I was featured in at Universal called *Young Warriors* and some of the footage from my roles on TV's "My Three Sons." Bill Walsh, the producer, and Robert Stevenson, the director, and Walt himself then gave the final go-ahead for me to portray Gudger Larkin, the wimpy head of the track team in *Blackbeard*. From that moment on, I guess because they liked my work, I *never* ever had to audition at Disney: they just called up my manager or agent and said, "We'd like Hank for such-and-such picture." I never had an actual long-term contract.



How did you come to be a Disney regular?

I suppose I had a face that was pretty mainstream and "small-town-USA." I just fit in with their overall view of life the way they wanted it presented on screen. Someone in Hollywood once said that I had "the no-look look," whatever that means. The neat thing about Disney in those days was that once they considered you part of their actors' stock company they'd use you in whatever came along. I was blessed, that's for sure. For example, one morning I got a frantic call at home at 9:00 A.M. from the head of casting asking if I could be at the studio at 10 to be in a picture: the guy they hired didn't show up, and they really were behind the eight ball. So I took the world's fastest shower, put on my grubby jeans, and sped over to the corner of Goofy Lane and Dopey Drive. They slapped some makeup on me, shoved a script in my hand, and the next thing I knew I was spending the day throwing double-takes at an obstinate chimp and doing several scenes with Kurt Russell in *The Barefoot Executive*.

What are some of your most vivid memories from working at Disney?

Because *Blackbeard's Ghost* was my first film there, it still is my favorite. Blackbeard was portrayed by the marvelous Peter Ustinov, who, along with Robin Williams, is one of the only true geniuses I've ever worked with. How I *loved* being around Peter - he was truly one of the most amazing people I've ever known. Fluent in eight languages, he could even speak Greek and Turkish. Lord knows what dialect he would choose to greet you with when you arrived at the Disney lot each day. We sometimes would talk genealogy, and he was most interested that I had started out so early in the field. Ustinov had quite a background: he was Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, French and - get this - one quarter Ethiopian! His grandfather had been an officer in the Czar's army prior to the revolution. But I think what I really enjoyed about him most of all was his talent as a mimic. He could duplicate the sound of a car engine by year and make of the auto. ("Would you like to hear a 56 MG or a 57?" - and I'll be damned if he couldn't replicate the subtle differences.) But was I ever honored on screen in *Blackbeard's Ghost* when he actually did an imitation of me! ("Come on, Coach - we've come in last in two events already!" he whined à la Gudger.)

Because of my unusual skinny build and distinctive look at the time, it was difficult for anyone to "double" me. I had a stand-in, Dick Warlock, but he was really too stocky to actually duplicate my meager frame. So during the climactic scenes where I had to run the relay race to save the sacred honor of my Godolphin College, I did all the stunts myself. The trouble was I was running against real track stars and, even though I played a puny guy, I had to at least give the illusion that I could win the big race. One of my running competitors Bill Toomey, later famously to win the decathlon in the Olympics for the USA, was designated my coach and masseur. He showed me what to do, how to pace my run, and gave me welcome rubdowns when my legs kept cramping up. Ouch!



Do you have any stories from the filming of *Blackbeard's Ghost* to share?

One fateful day during filming, it was the heart of Peter Ustinov that made the biggest impression on me. One stunt



that I had to do as Gudger was to fly high up into the air over the stadium as the invisible ghost of Blackbeard propelled me down the track to victory. To do this, I was attached to the fabled "Mary Poppins wires," used so successfully by Julie Andrews in her flying sequences for that wonderful Disney musical (also produced by Bill Walsh and directed by Robert Stevenson). Nearly invisible piano wires came down from a moving dolly on a track high up in the flys of the soundstage and were then attached to a leather harness around my waist hidden under my tracksuit. It shouldda' worked. The Disney special effects crew thought it all out, except for one crucial thing: in *Mary Poppins*, Julie's wires were cushioned by her bulky Victorian dresses; in *Blackbeard's Ghost*, I was wearing a skimpy track suit and had no protection from the sharp wires cutting into my bare shoulders and arms. So consequently the more I flew, the more I bled. The red stuff was running down my arms trickling right into Ustinov's face below me. His red pirate costume was getting more crimson by the take.

- 

[Amazon Kindle PowerFast for Accelerated Charging](#)
Amazon Digital Ser...
New \$19.99
Best \$8.00
- 

[Kindle Fire HD 7" Dolby Audio, Dual-Camera](#)
Amazon Digital Ser...
New \$169.00
Best \$120.00
- 

[iPhone 4 / 4S Anti-Glare, Anti-Scratch Screen Protector](#)
Generic
New \$1.21
Best \$0.01
- 

[AmazonBasics High-Speed HDMI Cable](#)
AmazonBasics
New \$5.79
Best \$5.79
- 

[iPhone 5 USB Cable, Car Charger](#)
Generic
New \$3.42
Best \$0.01

And then it happened - something that supposedly had never occurred before in Disney history. Those blankety-blank wires unraveled from my harness, sending me crashing ten feet below and landing right on top of poor Peter Ustinov. I could have been killed. But typical of the great man, he didn't gripe, he didn't complain, he didn't yell at me to get the hell off of him. All he cared about was if I was hurt in any way and if he could do anything to ease my obvious pain and discomfort. His only concern was me - and I've never forgotten that.

Our producer Bill Walsh rushed over and offered to stop shooting the whole picture for the day. But "the show must go on," so I said "No, let's try it again." So we did - ten more times. And if you see that flying sequence in the movie, it looks absolutely amazing. You'd never know the real story of what actually happened. But my main memory of the whole event was not the faulty wires or the precipitous fall: it was the concern and kindness shown by Sir Peter Ustinov towards yours truly.

Some view Disney's comedies of the Ron Miller era as dated and very much a product of their times. Do you think the films hold up well today?

I do think they hold up - maybe they weren't all classics, but they reflect the skill of the Disney craftspeople, both in front and behind the camera, and their dedication and plain hard work in making entertaining family films.

Privacy Information



What do you think of the DVDs that Disney has given your Disney films? Do you own them all?

I have VHS tapes of all my Disney films, but only the *Blackbeard's Ghost* DVD. I was SO disgusted with the lack of care and respect shown as they put that DVD together, it made me reluctant to obtain any others. The visual ratio on the DVD is just plain awful: for instance, in my early scenes with Dean Jones as we drive to the inn, only half of my face shows on screen – whereas the original was carefully crafted to fill the screen with a balanced and complete picture. There are NO bonus features, nothing special at all in the DVD. For God's sake, this was Walt's last personally-produced movie from his own studio. You would think they would issue the DVD with extra special bells and whistles to show it off to its best advantage – but they sure didn't. The DVD as it is now is a great disappointment. Whatever you folks who love the Disney legacy can do to change this sort of thing would be deeply appreciated by those of us back in the stone age who survive from those Golden Days.

Would you be interested in participating in bonus features if approached? Do you think the other people who made these movies with you care for their films to be treated well?

I absolutely would love to share my memories to enhance the bonus features – and I'm sure my fellow-thespians from back then would also.

Fall colors now available at verabradley.com [SHOP NOW](#)

Could you tell me a bit about your many guest appearances on television series and work in other films?

I usually played somebody's best friend or a kind of wimp. Robert Stevenson, the great director at Disney once told me, "Nobody plays a goofy kid better than you, Hank." Well, I don't think that's true, but that's how they seemed to see me. I was on most all the sitcoms in the '60s and '70s. I played Robbie's (Don Grady's) friend Pete on the old black and white "My Three Sons" every so often, and Freddy, one of the star's classmates, on "The Patty Duke Show." I did "Petticoat Junction," "No Time For Sergeants," "Mork & Mindy," "Emergency," "Mod Squad," "Family Affair," "The Jeffersons," on and on – so many more. My most unusual role was playing Ringo Starr's twin brother in an NBC-TV version of Mark Twain's *Prince & The Pauper*. It took five hours of make-up every day to be a dead-ringer for Ringo, but hey – for a month of shooting, I got to be a Beatle! I actually started as a singer in the team of "Hank & Dean" on the old ABC-TV daytime "Tennessee Ernie Ford Show." We recorded on RCA, did "American Bandstand," and my ex-partner Dean went on to write "That's Life" for Frank Sinatra (I still record "easy-listening" CDs on a small label, Epitome Records).

My first movie was a bit part with Elvis Presley in *Girl Happy* at MGM, followed by larger roles in *Village of the Giants* with Beau Bridges and Ronny Howard (once voted one of the 50 worst movies of all time – I'm so proud!!!) and Universal's *Young Warriors*. You might remember me from 20th Century Fox's war epic *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (I'm taking my first flying lesson in a little yellow piper-cub airplane over Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 as the entire Japanese airforce surrounds my tiny plane – it's the only semi-comedy scene in this very serious picture). I probably made about 500 national TV commercials (the big McDonald's musicals, Hai Karate After Shave, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Panasonic, ad infinitum).



Which of your acting work are you most proud of?

Actually some of my commercials won awards and were "mini-movies" in their own way. Even though I played it pretty broadly in *Blackbeard's Ghost*, I am proudest of my work in that film – having to hold my own with Peter Ustinov.

What made you decide to leave acting?

After 25 years or so in front of the camera, gradually things started to change – mostly in my own head. I began thinking more about my genealogical work (which had been my hobby since I was eight years old and my "therapy" in between pictures) and climbing the family tree than I did about what movie or TV role was on the horizon. I got tired of never getting the girl in any script presented to me: in my heart I was Tom Cruise, but I had been pretty-well typecast as a bumbler in most everything I did. I even started having trouble remembering my lines of dialogue, something that had never been a problem. It was as if The Universe was sending me a message – trying to tell me something.

As I wrote later in my book [Psychic Roots: Serendipity & Intuition in Genealogy](#):

"My mid-life career crisis all seemed to crystalize and come to a head in the mid-1980s when I returned from giving a lecture in Salt Lake City at a conference of the National Genealogical Society. I must admit my talk had been well received, and I walked in the door of my home feeling terrific, thinking that perhaps I had contributed something of value to the genealogical community. After unwinding from the trip, I went to check my telephone answering machine for any important messages that might have been left in my absence. The only message on the tape was from my commercials agent, who urgently inquired, 'Can you be a dancing chicken at 3 o'clock?'

That did it. As much as I would have loved the nice residuals that my dancing chicken would have laid, I decided it was time to put away the grease paint (and feathers), move on, and concentrate fully on what had become my real love: genealogy!"

I've never regretted my decision. These days when I turn on the TV and see a rerun of one of my old shows it can get a bit spooky. Sometimes I'll be watching a particular scene and not know what I'm going to do next – even though it's me doing it. On other occasions I'll realize that the only person in a particular scene still living is yours truly: everybody else is dead! It can be rather surreal to be the "last man standing" at times.

People so often come up to me at genealogical gatherings and say, "My, what an interesting life you've led." It's true, and I'm very grateful. I guess I'm living proof of the old adage that says, "it's all about the journey, and the friends you meet along the way."

I've been SO blessed, and I appreciate it. But what's next? Bring it on!



What do you think of the types of live action films Walt Disney Pictures makes today?

Some are okay, but often it appears they pay more attention to polls and focus groups as to their appeal rather than just having plain good scripts.

In the past couple of years, there have been new installments to two franchises you were involved with, with *Herbie: Fully Loaded* and Tim Allen's *The Shaggy Dog*. Have you seen these and did you enjoy them?

No, I haven't seen them. I prefer to remember the initial versions as they were.

What are you up to today?

I write books on genealogy (eleven so far). Two of my books on *Psychic Roots: Serendipity & Intuition in Genealogy* (about some of the near-"Twilight Zone" experiences that can happen as we trace our ancestors) were dramatized on the old NBC "Unsolved Mysteries" program to good response. I go around the country giving all-day seminars on family history research. It's lots of fun: I guess whatever "hambone" is left from my acting day comes out in my talks.

Do people ever recognize you from your Disney film appearances?

Oh yes. Sometimes people will come up to me and even recite some of the lines I had in movies when I didn't even really know them well myself years before when I did them in the first place!

How often do you revisit your Disney films?

Whenever I feel nostalgic about those wonderful days. It's the PEOPLE I remember the most – my good and talented friends at Disney.

**Did your daughter take to them growing up?**

Yes, Amanda (who is now 33) enjoyed them. She especially liked it when the Disney artists drew cartoons of me as my characters in *Blackbeard* and *Cat From Outer Space*.

Have you stayed in touch with any of your fellow castmates at Disney or anyone involved with the films?

Yes, but sadly so many have passed away. I got a nice e-mail from Dean Jones a few years back, and it was good to touch bases again. His generosity and kindnesses he showed me in our scenes together helped me greatly – a very giving actor.

Many thanks, Luke, for your loving and dedicated work in preserving all things Disney!

To learn *much* more about Hank's "Disney Daze," his experiences on some of the classic sitcoms of the '60s and '70s, and his friendships and experiences working with legends like Elvis Presley, Stan Laurel, Ringo Starr, Henry Fonda, Patsy Cline, Minnie Pearl, Bob Hope, and Robin Williams, check out his brand new book "Memories – The 'Show-Biz' Part Of My Life" – now available via his website, www.hankjones.com.

[Click here for Part 2](#) in which Hank recalls working with Walter Brennan, Elsa Lanchester, Wally Cox, Kurt Russell, Goldie Hawn, Richard Deacon, Buddy Ebsen, Dean Jones, Tim Conway, Suzanne Pleshette, McLean Stevenson and more!



Related DVD Reviews - The 8 Disney Films of Hank Jones:

[Blackbeard's Ghost](#) (1968) • [The One and Only, Genuine, Original Family Band](#) (1968)
[The Barefoot Executive](#) (1971) • [The Million Dollar Duck](#) (1971)
[Herbie Rides Again](#) (1974) • [No Deposit, No Return](#) (1976)
[The Shaggy D.A.](#) (1976) • [The Cat From Outer Space](#) (1978)

Past Interviews:

[Don Grady](#), former Mouseketeer, "My Three Sons" star, and current Disney musician (November 2005)
[Don Hahn](#), veteran Disney producer (October 2006) • [Leonard Maltin](#), film critic/historian and author (December 2005)
[Michael Angarano](#), star of *Sky High* (November 2005) • [Angela Robinson](#), director of *Herbie: Fully Loaded* (October 2005)
[Priscilla Weems](#), star of "Five Mile Creek" (October 2006) • [Jim Brickman](#), *The Disney Songbook* (October 2005)
[Ilene Woods](#), the voice of Cinderella, and Disney producer [Don Hahn](#) (September 2005)
[Irene Bedard](#), the voice of Pocahontas (May 2005) • [Don Dunagan](#), the voice of Bambi (February 2005)
[Taylor Lautner](#), Sharkboy of *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl in 3-D* (September 2005)

Interview published October 24, 2006.

[UltimateDisney.com](#) | [Search UltimateDisney.com](#) | [Vintage Live Action Disney Films Page \(1943-1979\)](#)

[DVDizzy.com Home](#) • [New and Upcoming DVD & Blu-ray Release Schedule](#) • [DVD and Blu-ray Reviews](#) • [Search The Site](#)
[Upcoming Cover Art](#) • [Upcoming Disney DVDs](#) • [Discussion Forum](#) • [Recent Disney DVDs](#) • [Out-of-Print Disney DVD List](#)
Disney Listings: [Animated Classics](#) • [Other Animation](#) • [Live Action \(1980-Present\)](#) • [Live Action \(Pre-1980\)](#) • [Direct-to-Video](#) • [TV Movies](#) • [TV Shows](#)
Guides: [Coming to Theaters](#) • [Disney Blu-ray](#) • [FAQs](#) • [Winnie the Pooh](#) • [DVD Easter Eggs](#) • [Pan & Scan to Avoid](#) • [Different Release Types](#)
Countdowns: [Top Animated Classics](#) • [Top Live Action Disney Films](#) • [Top 100 Disney Songs](#) • [Top Disney Villains](#) • [Top Disney Heroes & Heroines](#)
Walt Disney Treasures • [Disney Movie Club Exclusives](#) • [Interviews](#) • [Disney CD Reviews](#) • [News Archives](#) • [Newsletter](#)
Support the Site: [Amazon.com](#) | [iTunes](#) | [Sideshow Collectibles](#) | [Amazon.co.uk](#) | [Link to Us](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

Text copyright 2011 DVDizzy.com. Unauthorized reproduction prohibited. Images copyright Disney.