Mickey Rooney, popular film star of the 1930s and 1940s, dies

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Longtime film, television and stage actor Mickey Rooney died on Sunday at the age of 93. Rooney was one of the most popular American movie stars in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He is perhaps best known for the films he made with Judy Garland, including *Babes in Arms* (1939), *Strike Up the Band* (1940) and *Girl Crazy* (1943), all directed by Busby Berkeley, and the Andy Hardy series of 16 films from 1937 to 1958 (three of which also featured Garland).

Rooney was born Joseph Yule, Jr. in 1920. His father was from Glasgow and his mother from Kansas City. Both were in vaudeville, and the future Rooney was born while his parents were appearing in a musical comedy in Brooklyn. He began performing at the age of 17 months in his parents' act, which means that his show business career lasted more than 90 years (he had three films still in production when he died).

Rooney's first film appearance came in 1926. The following year he made the first of 78 black-and-white short comedies in the role of Mickey McGuire, based on Fontaine Fox's *Toonerville Trolley* comic strip.

By the mid-1930s, before he was 15, Rooney was already performing in some interesting films, including *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934, directed by W.S. Van Dyke), with Clark Gable, Myrna Loy and William Powell, a film in which, oddly enough, Leon Trotsky makes an appearance as a character; *Hide-Out* (1934, Van Dyke again), a comic-gangster film with Robert Montgomery and Maureen O'Sullivan (Mia Farrow's mother); and *Reckless* (1935, Victor Fleming), with Powell and Jean Harlow. By this time, Rooney had signed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the most prosperous and glamorous Hollywood studio of the day.

He played Puck in the William Dieterle-Max Reinhardt film version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), which starred James Cagney (a performer to whom Rooney was often compared) as Bottom and Olivia de Havilland as Hermia. The film is not an artistic triumph, but it certainly remains of interest.

Also in 1935 (he appeared in 14 films in 1934 and seven in 1935), Rooney appeared in Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, directed by the talented Hollywood veteran Clarence Brown, along with Wallace Beery, Lionel Barrymore and Spring Byington. *Ah, Wilderness!* is the most light-hearted of O'Neill's plays, and, in this reviewer's opinion, perhaps the most pleasurable.

Rooney performed in a number of films of the era with other prominent child stars or "juveniles," including *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936, John Cromwell), with Freddie Bartholomew, about an American boy who inherits an estate and has to learn to be an English aristocrat; *The Devil is a Sissy* (1936, Van Dyke), with Bartholomew and Jackie Cooper; and *Captains Courageous* (1937, Victor Fleming), based on the Rudyard Kipling novel about a spoiled brat who goes overboard from an ocean liner and gets picked up by a fishing boat, with Bartholomew again (as well as Spencer Tracy).

The first of the Hardy family series, *A Family Affair* (1937, George B. Seitz), about a small town family in the Midwest, was produced as a B-movie by MGM. Lucien Hubbard, according to Thomas Schatz in *The Genius of the System*, "produced it on a seventeen-day schedule… *A Family Affair* did a tidy business, and soon exhibitors were clamoring for another 'Hardy picture.'"

Schatz goes on to say that the studio "would go all out with the Hardy pictures. The rationale was obvious enough. Not only the casting but the sets, props, music, even the story formula could be standardized, rendering what was already a low-budget enterprise that much more efficient and economical." The assembly line had come to Hollywood.

"Satisfying [studio head Louis B.] Mayer's—and the public's—longing for the naïve innocence of small-town life," Schatz continues, "the stories celebrated home and family and, especially once Rooney's character took hold, the myriad rites of male adolescent passage… [I]t was Rooney who carried the series. His Andy Hardy was a kind of centripetal narrative force that picked up speed with each picture, as character and actor steadily merged into a cultural icon of perpetual motion and perpetual adolescence."

The most significant female characters were the objects of Andy's desire, including Ann Rutherford, Judy Garland, Lana Turner and Ruth Hussey. *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938) is one of the best-remembered of the films—and one of the three, not coincidentally, graced by Garland. The series' idealized, unreal version of American life, intended as something of a refuge from the harshness of the Depression, makes the films difficult to sit through in large doses today, although there are poignant moments and strong performances.

According to Otto Friedrich's *City of Nets*, appropriately enough, "Louis B. Mayer's great favorites were the pseudo-family comedies featuring Mickey Rooney as Andy Hardy." Friedrich writes that Mayer's judgment of the series, in comparison to more ambitious artistic efforts, was forthright: "Any good Hardy picture… made $500,000 more than [Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 Greta Garbo feature] *Ninotchka* made."

Rooney, in addition to the enormously popular Hardy family series, also managed to appear at the time in *Slave Ship* (1937, Tay Garnett), about the slave trade in the 19th century, with Warner Baxter and Wallace Beery; *Boys Town* (1938, Norman Taurog), with Spencer Tracy as Father Flanagan, founder of the famed home for delinquent boys; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1939, Richard Thorpe), based on the Mark Twain novel; and *Young Tom Edison* (Taurog,

1940).

To all these projects, of varying artistic success, the diminutive actor brought his characteristic drive and enthusiasm. “Perpetual motion” seems the most suitable phrase in regard to the typical Rooney performance. His delivery of lines, his physical stance, his psychological attitude—everything suggests a man in rapid pursuit of something, which he firmly believes he can catch up with. And, in that regard, the Rooney performances of the time, even if they occur in less than brilliant films, do suggest something optimistic, sympathetic and quintessentially American.

Realizing they were on to something important, MGM executives paired Rooney and Garland in numerous films, including several musicals. Their first film was *Thoroughbreds Don’t Cry* (1937, Alfred E. Green), but it was *Babes in Arms* (1939), directed by the remarkable Busby Berkeley, which first brought them serious acclaim as a song-and-dance duo. The film, about vaudeville kids who “put on a show,” was based on a Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart Broadway musical, although Hollywood, in its ineffable wisdom, cut almost all of the Rodgers and Hart numbers. New songs were written by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown and Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg.

In *Strike Up the Band* (1940, Berkeley again), Rooney and Garland were paired up once more in a story about youngsters who dream of making music. The film takes its title from the 1927 George Gershwin tune, although most of the music and lyrics in the film were written by Roger Edens. *Strike Up the Band* was nominated for three academy awards.

By all accounts, Rooney and Garland, two tremendously gifted performers, who each suffered great psychological damage at the hands of the film and entertainment industries, became very close. Rooney told an interviewer in 1992, “Judy and I were so close we could’ve come from the same womb. We weren’t like brothers or sisters but there was no love affair there; there was more than a love affair. It’s very, very difficult to explain the depths of our love for each other.” This clip from Garland’s television show (c. 1963) is both amusing and moving.

Rooney was the most popular movie star in the world from 1939 through 1941. He continued to appear in some worthwhile films, in addition to the Hardy family series, which marched onward, including *The Human Comedy* (1943, Clarence Brown), based on the William Saroyan play about the home front during the war, and *National Velvet* (1944, Brown), with a vibrant, youthful Elizabeth Taylor as the girl for whom Rooney’s character helps prepare a horse for England’s Grand National Sweepstakes.

The astute film critic James Agee (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) praised Rooney highly in *National Velvet*: “I am quite sure about Mickey Rooney: he is an extremely wise and moving actor, and if I am ever again tempted to speak disrespectfully of him, that will be in anger over the unforgivable waste of a forceful yet subtle talent, proved capable of self-discipline, and of the hardest roles that could be thrown it.”

After the war, for a variety of reasons, his career slumped. In the first place, the popular mood had changed under the impact of the second imperialist slaughter and the crimes of the Nazis. As difficult as the Depression days had been, the atmosphere of political and social radicalism and struggle had kept alive a certain optimism about the future. The postwar period witnessed a darker mood in Hollywood, made even darker by the anti-communist purges and McCarthyism. Rooney’s eternal boyishness seemed out of place.

Unfortunately for him as well, what had once served as an advantage, his diminutive stature (5’2”) now worked against the actor. He was not the film industry’s vision of a leading man, in the era of Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas and Robert Mitchum (all of whom were actually *older* than Rooney).

Rooney appeared in an ordinary boxing film, *Killer McCoy* (1947, Roy Rowland), with Brian Donlevy and Ann Blyth, one of many about a slum kid who fights his way to the top, encountering gangsters en route. Critic Manny Farber, in “Fight Films” (1949), commented, “Occasionally an aggressive actor turns up, like Cagney or Mickey Rooney, who loves to act and move in his own way, which results in a style as unique and worth watching as the technique of the average pug [boxer].”

One of Rooney’s more interesting performances of the time was in *Quicksand*, a 1950 film noir directed by Irving Pichel, later one of the “Hollywood Nineteen” and a blacklist victim. Rooney plays an auto mechanic who borrows $20 from his employer’s cash register, setting off a dramatic series of events.

In *Fireball*, (1950, Tay Garnett), Rooney played a fiery roller skating star, along with Pat O’Brien and a young Marilyn Monroe. He appeared in several films in the 1950s directed by Richard Quine and co-written by Blake Edwards, the future director: *Sound Off* (1952), a Korean War story; *All Ashore* (1953)—three sailors on leave; and *Drive a Crooked Road* (1954), about an auto mechanic who gets talked into taking part in a crime by a gangster’s girl-friend. He played second or third fiddle to Jack Lemmon and Ernie Kovacs in *Operation Mad Ball* (1957, Quine), before making one of his last memorable performances as 1930s’ gangster Baby Face Nelson in the 1957 film of the same name, directed by Don Siegel.

Interesting or disturbing performances were scattered over the next few decades in films as disparate as *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961, Edwards), *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962, Ralph Nelson), *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963, Stanley Kramer), *Pulp* (1972, Mike Hodges) and *The Black Stallion* (1979, Carroll Ballard). Rooney appeared in innumerable television series as well during the 1950s and 1960s, including *The Twilight Zone*, *Naked City*, *Checkmate*, *Rawhide*, *Wagon Train*, etc. He also appeared in various shows and revues on Broadway, most notably *Sugar Babies* (1979-1982), along with Ann Miller.

The actor’s financial problems, including a bankruptcy, his struggles with alcohol and drugs and his eight marriages are well known. None of that is surprising, considering his eight decades or more in the meat grinder known as “show business.” If one survives the film industry that long, it will inevitably, one way or another, exact its pound of flesh.

Rooney deserves to and will remain in our collective memory as he was in 1939 or so, a youthful, cheerful human dynamo, bursting with energy and enthusiasm.