

## ***Looney Tunes Golden Collection: Volume Three***

**Reviewed by Jesse Van Hoy**

We open on a lovely backdrop of an animated desert scene. The road winding through the barrens appears to be abandoned save for a lone figure: a rather svelte coyote with a wicked grin on his face stands perched next to a comically oversized catapult, ready to hurl a boulder at some unknown foe. Then we see it. Off in the distance a trail of smoke blazes its way along the highway, approaching the would-be assailant. It is an altogether daft-looking bird speeding along with no regard for the danger that lies in its path. Without having to see title cards for this story we can already be sure of two things: the bird will escape unscathed, and both the boulder *and* the catapult will somehow end up on top of that poor coyote.

This is, of course, a scene from the immensely popular, ultraviolent Roadrunner/Wile E. Coyote series of cartoons released by Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* studios. The cartoon in question is titled "To Beep or Not to Beep," and is available for the first time as part of the *Looney Tunes Golden Collection Volume Three*. Beginning in 2003, Warner Brothers decided to finally open its hallowed vault of animated shorts and release a definitive anthology of its classic cartoons. Previous VHS and DVD sets had been produced, such as the *Spotlight* and *Premiere* collections, but these were criticized by cartoon devotees as neglecting the catalogues of directors other than Chuck Jones. They were also light on shorts from the black and white era, and virtually bereft of special features. Finally, most of the cartoons included in the earlier sets featured a certain wascally wabbit, at the expense of many other lesser-known characters.

The *Golden Collection* has remedied all of these issues. Now in its third edition, each four-disc set presents roughly sixty shorts produced between 1935 and 1963, Warner Brothers' golden age of animation. With this expanded range, Warner Brothers has allowed *Looney Tunes/Merrie Melodies* enthusiasts to trace the evolution of their favorite characters, as well as gain exposure to earlier ones who did not have as much staying power but nevertheless represent important milestones in the history of animation. This comprehensive collection also showcases the work of virtually every important Warner Brothers animation director, including Friz Freling, Tex Avery, Frank Tashlin, Arthur Davis, and Robert McKimson.

To the casual cartoon fan, the work of different directors may seem subtle or even downright imperceptible. In this regard, the *Golden Collection's* wealth of special features makes the discs worth their weight in gold. Every set is peppered with commentary on signature shorts by animation historians and former Warner Brothers animators. These commentaries provide insight into the many diverse styles of direction and animation that are manifested in the cartoons. A classic Bugs Bunny/Daffy Duck rivalry cartoon directed by Chuck Jones, for example, is likely to be much richer in character development than a short by Tashlin,

who relied more on intense strings of physical gags. The commentary tracks appeal to both neophytes and aficionados alike, relating everything from technical explanations of backgrounds and camera techniques to intimate anecdotes about the origins of certain gags and fond memories of the deceased voice master, Mel Blanc.

Rather than simply presenting a hodgepodge of shorts, Warner Brothers has organized them according to character. Each set has, of course, featured an entire disc of Bugs Bunny films, but the other major characters have been given the spotlight as well. Past collections have highlighted Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, and the gastronomical pursuits by Sylvester and Wile E. Coyote of Tweety and the Road Runner, respectively. The sets also typically include a disc of miscellaneous shorts starring other perennial favorites such as Foghorn Leghorn, Pepé Le Pew, Yosemite Sam, and Marvin the Martian.

The latest compilation, however, brings the series to new heights by including a disc of classic cartoons parodying the entertainment industry. In viewing these shorts one receives a crash course in the history of media from the 1930's to the 1960's. At the dawn of studio animation, before Saturday morning became the playground for childhood fantasy, cartoons were developed as marketing tools. They were played along with newsreels before feature films in movie theaters across the country. Cartoons served as showcases for the music being featured in upcoming shows and movies that were being financed by the studios. The strains of "As Time Goes By" can be heard in several early shorts, just as it served as one of the unifying elements in *Casablanca* (both the film and the play upon which it was based). Music has always played a central role in American animation, as evidenced by titles of the various cartoon series (*Looney Tunes*, *Merrie Melodies*, *Silly Symphonies*, etc.).

One of the first shorts on the disc parodies a medium that grew up alongside the cinema: radio. "The CooCoo Nut Grove" (1936) opens in a forest setting that plays host to a nightclub dance party officiated by Ben Birdie, a caricature of Ben Bernie who was, according to the invaluable commentary track, a popular band leader and radio host during the 1930's. His voice perfectly mimics the deep, pleasant tone used by radio jazz show hosts from the period. The club is inhabited by a bevy of celebrity animal anthropomorphs, from a horse-like "Katherine Heartburn" to a swine version of Oliver Hardy, as well as human caricatures. Just as the stars were under contract to the studios, their images were also open to being used in cartoons. The cartoon has no real story; it simply depicts a variety of familiar personalities in stylized, humorous parodies of themselves. Though some of the references are not as fresh today as they were seventy years ago, the cartoon still provides some good laughs and shows that Hollywood has a sense of humor about itself.

Tex Avery's "Thugs With Dirty Mugs" (1939) parodies the entire genre of gangster movies, which were some of the most popular films of the period. The main character, a grouper-lipped dog with ever-narrowed eyes, is a right-on-the-money double of Edward G. Robinson, one of the actors who defined the role of the mobster. Blanc's inestimable talents provide the voice to go along with the face, and at one point the conniving canine even turns toward the camera and comments upon his uncanny resemblance to Robinson. With this short, Warner

Brothers not only displayed the courage to harp upon some of the absurdities of a genre that it very much relied upon, but also dabbled in new vistas of comedy by breaking down the fourth wall of the cinema.

When television emerged as a viable medium and developed recognizable personas of its own, the writers and directors at the Warner Brothers animation studio set their sights on this new source of material. "The Honey-Mousers" (1956) is an unapologetic lampoon of "The Honeyymooners." The Kramdens and their neighbor Ed Norton are recreated as mice. The hole-in-the-wall that the original characters inhabit is an actual one in the cartoon. Ralph and Norton devise several elaborate schemes to get past the resident cat and raid the refrigerator but, much like in the classic show, they are foiled at every turn. The most ingenious plot involves a Trojan dog. Alice, of course, saves the day, making the men look like buffoons. All of the show's classic catchphrases are transplanted perfectly.

The preponderance of celebrity send-ups produced by the *Looney Tunes/Merrie Melodies* crew suggests that to have made an appearance in a Warner Brothers cartoon was akin to being awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. One would not be caricatured if there were any possibility of the joke being lost on an audience because they were unfamiliar with the personality in question. This use of popular culture icons and the ingenuity of the animators and directors at Warner Brothers cemented the cartoon studio as a cultural institution.

Perhaps the greatest proof of this hypothesis is "The Mouse That Jack Built" (1959). This short followed a day in the life of Jack Benny (again with mice as the main characters). However, instead of having Mel Blanc voice all of the characters, as was the typical practice, Benny and the actors from his radio show provided the vocal talent. Benny was one of the most popular media figures of the twentieth century, having achieved success in radio, television, films, and the stage. His crossover into the cartoon world lent even more credence to the viability of the medium.

The *Looney Tunes Golden Collection Volume 3* is a fine installment in a series that has set a high benchmark for home entertainment. The selection of shorts presented is just as fresh as those from the former installments. Warner Brothers continues to give the lovers of these cartoons a healthy portion of commentaries, unseen shorts, and featurettes that allow the viewer to delve deeper into the animation. The third volume's greatest achievement, however, is its retrospective look back on the symbiotic relationship between the cartoons and the rest of Hollywood. The effective use of parody complimented the studio's strong stable of original characters and helped make them as familiar to the American moviegoer as the celebrities they so lovingly mocked, contributing greatly to the lifespan of the cartoons long after the end of their golden age of production.

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