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LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE BOYS...

A stooge in the head is worth three cheers from the heart

by *Nick Zegarac*

The Three Stooges are today regarded as cinematic icons; as American as apple pie and the undisputed masters of slapstick. If Laurel and Hardy were sublime punsters, the stooges were punch drunks. When pitted against the Marx Bros. leftist witty barbs geared toward the anarchist intellectual, the stooges are decidedly low brow chuckleheads for the every man. Yet, the stooges have remained eternal – and arguably, have surpassed their contemporary comedic legends. The endurance of one “nyuk-nyuk-nyuk” for example has managed to outlive almost all other bits of business put forth by rival acts, save perhaps radio hams cum film comedians, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello’s ‘Who’s on First?’



Who can forget the riotous boxing tournament, when Curly (the troupe's most popular numb skull) manages to decimate not only his opponent in the ring but also his managers, Larry and Moe after hearing 'Pop Goes the Weasel'; or the moment when Curly, attempting to 'fix' a leaky bathtub, inadvertently builds a cage around himself from plumber's tubing. Or even better still, the sight of Curly with a large couch coil stuck to his rump being pulled from his oafish female dancing partner at a society party. Once seen, these and many other moments from the Stooges' two reels are seared into the memory. Not bad for three guys with limited education, who spent the bulk of their film careers appearing in short subjects – rather than feature films.

Woman - "I'm in a terrible dilemma."

Moe - "Yeah, I don't care much for these foreign cars either."

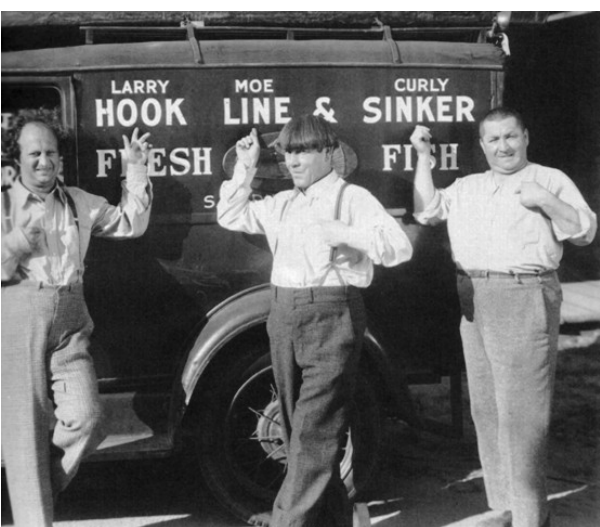
Professionally, it all began in 1908, when a feisty Moses 'Moe' Harry Horwitz (then eleven) decided he had had enough with school and wanted to become an actor. There was one problem. Moses lacked even a glint of matinee idol good looks.

"Seeing my face in the mirror," he would later recount, "covered with large jagged freckles...I would end up the ugly duckling of the Horwitz family."

Still, Moe managed to finagle a gofer's position at Brooklyn's Vitagraph Studio on Avenue M in New York City. When asked by Maurice Costello why he had consistently refused remuneration for his menial services, Moses replied, *"Because I'm looking for a job in films."* The ploy worked. Moses was cast in a string of bit parts for Vitagraph, including Van Dyke Brooks **We Must Do Our Best** (1909).

That same year, Moses (newly rechristened as 'Moe') met Ted Healy, the man who would amalgamate the Stooges into one fledgling act before departing into other ventures. Healy was a bit of a drifter with greater aspirations for becoming a businessman than an entertainer. However, by 1912 Healy's focus had shifted to Vaudeville and a modestly successful traveling troupe that included Moe and his brother Sam (Shemp).

The men appeared briefly in Australian swimmer, Annette Kellerman's **Diving Girls**. Previously, Kellerman had made headlines for defying the odds of polio at an early age to successfully swim the English Channel as a youth. Currently she was the star of an aquacade. But the Healy/Kellerman





association ended abruptly after only one season when a contract diver fell to her death from a high wire platform.

Still, Moe was determined to become a success. At sixteen, he cajoled his way into an acting stint aboard a traveling riverboat, *The Sunflower* for two seasons at a then plumb salary of \$65 dollars a week. With his newfound success, Moe reunited with Shemp for the blackface comedy relief routine: *Howard & Howard – a study in black*. Shemp's draft into the Armed Forces briefly interrupted this lucrative venture, though afterward the two worked circuits for Loew's and RKO until 1922. That was the year both men decided to marry; Moe to Helen Schonberger (the cousin of Harry Houdini) and Shemp to Gertrude Frank. But there was precious little time for romance.

A reunion with Ted Healy (and his wife Betty), paved the way for a new Vaudeville act – one that included aspiring

comedian Larry Fine. The troupe also featured the Haney Sisters – of which Larry would court and later marry the eldest, Mabel in 1927. At the outbreak of World War I, the act played small town venues. Larry attempted something of a breakout sketch 'Fine and Dandy' with a woman ironically named Winona Fine. The venture was extremely short lived. Back in the Healy fold, the act reopened as *Ted Healy and his Three Southern Gentlemen*, then later as *Ted Healy and the Racketeers*.

However, in 1927 Moe resigned himself to an official retirement from showbiz. His decision had been predicated on a deep seeded desire to prove his wife's family wrong. Prior to their marriage, they had insisted that any marriage to an actor would never make for a stable home. After the birth of his daughter Joan, Moe ventured into real estate. The shift in profession proved disastrous.

In an instant, his investment of \$22,000 had dwindled into a meager \$200.00. Another attempt at respectability, this time as the proprietor of a dried goods store, did little than to further strain the family's financial status. Finally, Moe resigned himself to a reunion with Ted Healy – who had by this time become a rather prominent figure on the stage. The reunited group debuted in **A Night In Venice** (1929) – a musical comedy staged by Busby Berkeley.

A Night In Venice was a colossal success and paved the road to Hollywood in 1930 with a film offer from Fox Studios (then a precursor to 20th Century Fox). The film, **Soup to Nuts** (1930) was enough to convince agent Winnie Sheehan that the Stooges were ready for the big time. However, a mere four days later the offer of a seven year contract was revoked, prompting Moe to make inquiries. What he discovered was that the contract had not included Ted Healy.

Fearful that he was losing his own chance to score in films, Healy had confronted Sheehan with an impassioned plea not to sign the Stooges as a solo. The rift generated between Moe and Healy was sufficient enough for the Stooges to strike out on their own.

For the next several years, Healy and the new independent act of *The Three Stooges* (Moe, Shemp and Larry) struggled separately to find their niche. Both toured the theater circuit with their quiet animosity building. Another rupture occurred when Healy – ever more becoming a cynical drunk and embittered recluse – threatened to sue the Stooges if they incorporated any bits of business from **A Night in Venice** into their new Vaudeville act. This pending lawsuit was



settled quietly, but it did leave a bitter aftertaste for all concerned.

It was at this junction in their career that the success of **Soup to Nuts** began to pay off – with one caveat. It prompted more film offers to pour in but only as the act *Ted Healy and His Stooges*. Reluctantly, the troop reunited. However, while on tour for a live engagement at *The Triangle Ball Room*, Shemp received a solo film offer which Moe encouraged him to pursue. Outraged, Healy lamented that Shemp's departure would ruin the act. But Moe had a winning replacement – his brother Jerome 'Curly' Howard.

With Curly in tow, Healy and the Stooges reunited on screen for **Meet The Baron**, **Plane Nuts** and **Dancing Lady** (all in 1933). From the start, this partnership impossibly strained. After 1934's cameo in **Hollywood Party**, Moe cornered Healy and his agent Paul Dempsey and officially broke their contract. Henceforth, the new act would be known simply as *'The Three Stooges.'*

(Previous pages: The original Columbia title card introducing the boys in their first two reel hit, *Woman Haters* 1934. In 1935, Columbia condensed this intro so that the title of the short subject fit at the bottom and realigned the order of the stooges heads so that Curly was first. Curly traps himself in the shower of an upscale swell in *A Plumbing We Will Go* (1940). Moe prepares to exact some hair pulling revenge on Larry in *False Alarms* (1936).

Two typical Columbia snapshot of the boys, the first showcasing their deaf, dumb and blind mugging with a chimp, the second - in their underwear no less – strolling down the avenue. Curly prepares for some heavy pounding from the champ in *Punch Drunks* (1934) – perhaps the most famous of all shorts. Curly goes insane every time he hears 'Pop Goes The Weasel.' Edna Mae Oliver and Ted Healy are the serious foils to the Stooges in *Meet The Baron* (1933). For 1935's *Horse Collars*, the boys set out to discover an Egyptian mummy.

Below: In *The Sweet Pie and Pie* (1941) featured a case of mistaken identity gone hopelessly awry. The boys are pursued by three gold diggers; Tiska, Taska and Baska Jones who marry Moe, Larry and Curly to collect their inheritance. Unfortunately, the Stooges are exonerated of their crime and set free, leaving them to pursue the girls until death – or a really good divorce attorney - do them part.)





Insanity Unhinged: The Golden Age of Stooage-dom

Moe – **“Are you kidding? We’re the best in the city!”**
Larry – **“But how are you in the country?”**

The break between Ted Healy and The Three Stooges proved the beginning of one of the most successful comedy acts in film history. It also became the focus of a minor snafu in contract disputes. Signed by agent Walter Kane to Columbia Studios, President Harry Cohn agreed to produce one two-reel comedy featuring the Stooges for which they would be paid a poultry sum of \$1500.00. Under Healy’s control, the boys had barely collected \$100.00 per week. If the results proved a success with audiences, Cohn would sign the trio to a long term contract.



Moe signed the Columbia deal on behalf of the act. Unfortunately, across town at Universal, Larry was signing a similar deal with agent, Joe Rivkin. The wrangling between Carle Leammle Jr. (Universal’s President) and Harry Cohn was amicably resolved when Cohn discovered that Moe had signed their contract by only a few hours in advance of the Universal deal. **“You boys belong to Columbia,”** Cohn told Moe.

In June of 1934 *The Three Stooges* debuted in their first Columbia two-reel comedy; the musically rhymed **Woman Haters** written and directed by Archie Gottler. On the strength of that short subject, Harry Cohn agreed to a long-term contract at seventy-five hundred per film. Cohn also agreed to produce a pet project of Moe’s: **‘Punch Drunks.’** However, the Columbia deal did come with stipulations.

The first, allowed the studio to re-release the Stooges shorts without royalties paid to them. This did not mean much to the trio in 1934, but with the advent of their loan out two decades later to television a vast amount of potential earnings was denied for years to come. Also, the Columbia deal came with a yearly renewal clause at which time the studio could simply decided to cancel their option. Columbia used this clause as a means of keeping demands for salary increases down.



(Top: Moe with wife Helen during the boys Coca-Cola tour. Despite family objections, Helen and Moe would remain husband and wife until his death in 1975. Shemp Howard, the original stooge who broke up the act before they became famous to pursue his own career. Shemp became famous playing a reoccurring buffoon ‘Knobbie Walsh’ at Universal. After Curly’s death, he rejoined the Stooges with considerable ease. Bottom: the boys, in plain clothes and natural hair styles, ham it up with their boss, Columbia President Harry Cohn. Though Cohn was infamous for his totalitarian rule on the back lot, by all accounts he pretty much left the Stooges to their own devices. After all, they were Columbia’s number one box office draw through the 1930s and most of the 40s.)



(Top left: I don't know much about art, but I know what I like! The boys give artistic license a whole new meaning in *Pop Goes The Easel* (1935), as three aspiring craftsmen who gradually degenerate their love of creation into an all out violently funny clay fight. Top right: Moe and Curly pose for this portrait on the Columbia back lot, circa 1939. Born Jerome Howard with a full head of thick hair, Curly tended to resent the fact that he was forced by stipulations in his contract to keep his pate shaved even when the boys were not shooting.

Left: *Consorting with the Hoi Polloi* (1935) with Kitty McHugh harboring amorous affections. By the look of things, it seems no such thoughts have entered Curly's mind.

Bottom: the Stooges began their movie career during the aftermath of the Great Depression, so perhaps it is not so surprising that a goodly number of their shorts cast them as a trio of unemployed vagabonds desperate for work, or, as was more often the case, just a free meal.)



Every time a request came around, Cohn would lament how difficult it was becoming to sell two-reelers to theaters. In reality, Columbia was exploiting the popularity of the trio to market their inferior B-movies to theater owners. It would be 24 years, 194 short subjects and 5 feature films later, before Columbia would allow their option on *The Three Stooges* to lapse.

The Columbia contract also allowed the Stooges a yearly twelve week hiatus during which time they could freelance. It was during their 1935 Children's Hospital benefit performance in Boston that the trio learned of Ted Healy's untimely death. According to reports of



(Never a dull moment in Stooge-land. Above: typical high jinx on the set of *An Ache in Every Stake* (1941) and *Restless Knights* (1935).

Left: Ted Healy and His Stooges in *Hello Pop* (1933) – the only time the Stooges were ever photographed in Technicolor. Below: The boys break into song with Florine Dickson in *You Nazi Spy* 1940.



After the Stooges breakout in the musical rhyming *Woman Haters* 1934 the Stooge shorts infrequently featured the boys doing some sort of song or dance or both.

The Stooges' success at Columbia was so immediate and profound that the studio went to great lengths to promote their shorts as much as they did their features.

Columbia was then known as 'poverty row' but the short subjects that the Stooges appeared in were A-list affairs with increasingly solid and complex scripts, exemplary set pieces and fine details in costumes.)

the day, after lashing out in a drunken brawl and being beaten by four men outside of a nightclub, Healy was taken back to his apartment by friend and comedian Joe Frisco where he died a few days later of a brain concussion.

During the next few years, *The Three Stooges* became an intercontinental rage, playing sold out performances at London's Palladium, The Royal Theater and appearing in the 1939 run of **George White's Scandals** on Broadway.

They also toured the army/navy circuit during the war, entertaining the troops on behalf of Coca-Cola. They also signed a deal to appear in Harold Minsky's new Vaudeville revival – a short-lived venture made all the more brief by the advent of television.





All The World's A Stooge ...or Three



Executioner - ***"You may either have your head cut off or be burned at the stake."***

Larry - ***"Cut my head off."***

Curly - ***"Not me! I wanna be burned at the stake."***

Larry - ***"Why?"***

Curly - ***"A warm stake is better than a cold chop."***

To say that the late thirties and early forties were a time of prosperity for *The Three Stooges* is to contextualize their success without a sincere grasp on just how wildly popular the trio had become. They had weathered a rough series of misfires to be the most celebrated of slapstick artists and the upswing of that career had yet to plateau. For a while, this seemingly endless tenure of revolving workload proved lucrative and satisfying. But on May 4, 1946, while relaxing between takes inside a very humid soundstage, Curly Howard suffered a debilitating stroke.



(Previous page: mugging with actor Franchot Tone on the set of *Time Out for Rhythm* 1941 and with a trio of conspirators in *You Nazi Spy* 1940. This page, above: Angel Marti Shelton takes dictation from St. Peter (Moe) as he informs Shemp that his request to get into heaven has been denied in *Heavenly Daze* 1946. Right: the boys pose with a temperamental cat in *Hold That Lion* 1947.

Though no one could ever take the place of Curly Howard, Shemp proved an amiable foil, partly because he did not attempt to mimic Curly's comedic stylings but rather, assumed the role with the same verve and trademark he had already established as Knobbie Walsh over at Universal Studios.

Right: *Of Cash and Hash* 1955 found the boys in typical film noir territory, running amuck with the criminal element and coming up short as usual.

Right: by the time Joe Besser assumed the mantle of the 'third' stooge, the act had already begun to show signs of slowing down. Columbia cut the budget on the shorts with Besser – many of which were flat out remakes of previous shorts made with Curly. This one is *Sappy Bullfighters* 1959, a less than stellar remake of 1942's *What's the Matador?*



Confined to the Motion Picture Country Home in Woodland Hills for care and treatment, Moe Howard regrouped the act with Shemp replacing Curly. Since the early thirties, Shemp had had a modestly successful film career playing a cameo comic foil. Still, with Curly's reputation so heavily ingrained in the act, many in the industry, including Columbia president Harry Cohn, feared audiences would never accept anyone as Curly's replacement. Debuting the new stooges with the modestly budgeted **Fright Night** (1946) Moe and Columbia soon discovered that Shemp's own brand of comedic genius was more than adequate to sustain the laughter and repartee with audiences.

The fifties was a lucrative period for *The Three Stooges* professionally– but a decade marred by two tragic losses that devastated the act and the artistic community. Curly Howard, who had never fully recovered from his initial stroke, suffered a series of additional strokes and suddenly passed away on January 1952 at the age of forty-nine. However, an even more





(Left: Curly-Joe DeRita joined the act, seen here with bodybuilder Samson Burke in Columbia's slap shod feature *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* 1962. The Stooges' later success at the box office was largely due to their renewed popularity of their Columbia shorts featuring Curly from the 1930s and 40s that by 1958 were main staple kiddie fare after school and Saturday mornings. It would take the moral outrage of civic and women's groups from the 1980s to censor stooge-mania off the air, presumably because the boys were just too, too violent for the impressionable ages.)

disheartening blow followed a scant three years later. On Nov. 23, 1955, Shemp Howard was returning from an outing at the races and the fights with several friends when he suddenly slumped over, and with a queer sort of peaceful smile on his face, inexplicably died.

Shemp's replacement in the act was Joe Besser, a main staple comedian on Milton Berle's television show. But the association between Besser and the stooges proved all too brief. After only 16 short subjects, the Columbia contract was fulfilled and Besser, unable to go on tour because of his ailing spouse, was exchanged for Joe DeRita – ironically Moe's first choice after Shemp's death and one who had been under contract to Harold Minsky all along.

By this time in his career, the determination that had fueled Moe's earlier aspirations for the act had begun to fizzle. A nightclub debut of the new-new stooges proved an unqualified disaster. However at roughly this same interval, Columbia Pictures had managed a minor coup in repackaging the old Stooges shorts for general release on television. These shorts created a minor sensation with children and teens, many of whom had never even heard of *The Three Stooges*. It was yet another resurrection for the act. During the summer of 1958, *The Three Stooges* proved a star attraction at John Bertera's Pittsburgh nightclub and restaurant.

This revitalization continued with three guest appearances on the Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen television talk shows. Almost overnight, the stooges were in vogue once more, appearing as cameos of comic relief for Francis Langford and even starring in their own **Three Stooges Scrapbook** (1960) for Columbia's television division; Screen Gems. Columbia also cast the stooges in their first feature length film, **Have Rocket Will Travel** (1961).

Their final feature, **The Outlaws Is Coming** (1965) ended on a bitter note. Larry suffered a stroke and was hospitalized at the Motion Picture Home. Though he made valiant attempts to regain his mobility, his recovery was never complete and on New Years day 1975 he slipped into a coma, dying one week later. Officially retired, Moe allowed Joe DeRita to pursue the idea of recasting his part and Larry's in a 'new' 'new' Stooges act that never materialized beyond the preliminary stages.

Tired and seemingly with his best days behind him, an invitation from Salem College in West Virginia afforded Moe the opportunity to present reminiscences about the act to a live audience. Audiences fell in love with this one man show. It was so popular, in fact, that Moe was asked to repeat it at New York State University, this time to a packed 1,600 auditorium that had oversold the venue by 400 seats.

In his seventies, Moe Howard discovered that he was more popular than ever. He appeared on Mike Douglas' talk show three times and ambitiously pursued the college lecture circuit throughout 1974. On May 4, 1975, Moe Howard quietly passed away at his home, officially ending one of America's most legendary comedy acts.

Since their time, *The Three Stooges* popularity has continued to thrive. The trio's body of work has weathered attempts at censoring its 'crass' treatment of women by rabid liberal feminist groups, and, it has withstood repeated onslaughts in censorship from civic-minded groups who continue to suggest that the Stooges brand of comedy is too violent for impressionable young minds. Ironically, these same groups do not seem to mind if their children watched the evening news.

From television revivals, through changing audience tastes, and, with the advent of home video and garish colorizations of their short subjects, the comedic legacy of The Three Stooges continues to delight old and new audiences with a rambunctious blend of raw energy and good-spirited craziness. The legends have gone, but their laughter lives on. Not bad for the *ugliest duckling* in the Howard house...not bad at all.

(Below: the trio that everyone remembers best and rightfully so: from left – Larry Fine, Moe Howard and Curly Howard, preparing to take a wet mop in the kisser from their Columbia two reeler: *Three Missing Links* 1938. Today the Stooges continue to be a main staple on cable channels and on home video. In 2006, Sony Home Entertainment released the first chronological compilation of classic Stooge shorts. Since then there have been another two Volumes with a third expected out before the end of Fall 2008.)

