



Don Rosa sits in front of a portion of his Duck family collection.

Going Quackers

By Linda Perry

Don Rosa brings Donald Duck & Co. to millions

Don Rosa — that name won't ring a bell with most folks in the United States. But if you're reading this in Norway or Denmark, chances are you know precisely who Rosa is. It's his stories and art in comic books that bring the antics of Donald Duck's entire family to millions of Duck fans across Europe, as well as other parts of the globe. It's fair to say that these Duck fans can't get enough of Donald, Scrooge McDuck, and Huey, Dewey and Louie. Each week for the past 50 years a new Duck comic book has been published in **all** of the European countries — and that one issue is *always* the largest selling *anything* in Norway.

Which brings us to two questions: why are Disney's ducks so popular in other countries with the general population — both young and old — and how did 1973 UK civil engineering grad Don Rosa develop such a significant role in pleasing Duck fans?

That might be akin to asking which came first, the 'chicken' or the egg?

Which Came First?

Actually, first came Walt Disney and then came Carl Barks.

A short history: Donald Duck was created by entrepreneur Walt Disney, whose animation company used the water fowl in its early films. Around 1935, a talented man by the name of Carl Barks started working with Donald for Disney, but it wasn't until Barks began drawing the angst-ridden duck for comic books by Western Publishing Company in the early 1940s that the duck developed the characteristics and personality we recognize as all Donald's. Barks' powerful command of ink and brush strokes com-

bined with his talent for expressing a story and bringing life to the Ducks gained him a cult-like following as Donald Duck and his cohorts entertained millions of fans as they struggled through each adventure until Barks officially retired in 1966.

If all that sounds like a testimonial to Carl Barks, Don Rosa would have it no other way.

Tales that Fit the Bill

"The Walt Disney Company had nothing to do with these characters, the creation of these characters or anything that's ever been done with these characters in the comic books," says Rosa. He, like other fans of Carl Barks, attributes the total personality development of the entire Duck family to the talented Barks. "The greatest storyteller of the 20th century," says Rosa.

And Rosa would surely know. He got hooked on comics early, thanks to his older sister's comic book collection. This introduction to stories with colorful art on paper had a lasting impact on him. He grew up in the '50s and '60s wanting to tell stories. He practiced telling stories and creating drawings to accompany them based on his sister's collection, which included Barks comics. Scrooge McDuck was his favorite and he couldn't wait to come home from school at the end of the day and concoct his own stories.

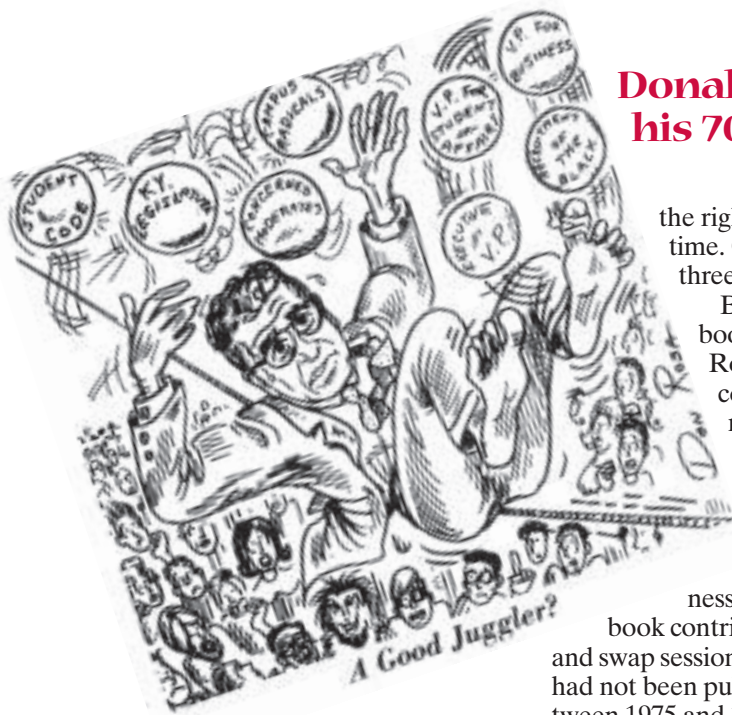
Later, his attempts at telling a story and drawing improved to the point that he produced art work for his school newspaper at St. Xavier High School in Louisville. Rosa continued his educa-



Don Rosa, at left, met Carl Barks once at Barks' home in Oregon.

tion at UK where he earned a civil engineering degree in 1973. While he was on campus he drew editorial cartoons for the *Kentucky Kernel*, along with a serial comic strip called "*The Pertwillaby Papers*." This legacy of work has since been collected and reprinted in other countries for fans who just can't get enough of Rosa's work.

Rosa says he went to college because his Italian family expected him to and he did what his family wanted, which also included joining the family's ceramic tile business after graduation.



Don Rosa's first editorial cartoon for the *Kentucky Kernel* on Aug. 26, 1969 shows Otis Singletary, as UK's new president, dealing with the controversial issues of the day.

However, he used every spare moment he had to tell stories on paper. Various publications occasionally carried his freelance cartoons, like *The Louisville Times* did, publishing a weekly strip of his called "*Captain Kentucky*," featuring Lancelto Pertwillaby. Don eventually wrapped up that series and killed off the main character.

Waddling into the Big Time

So how did Rosa, a man with no formal art training, living in Kentucky and working at a ceramic tile company, get to do what he loves most — tell stories — and then go on to become a celebrity in other countries? How is it that there are thousands of fan Web site pages devoted to him and his work? How is it that this Kentuckian is so popular in Europe that his name is an answer on a crossword puzzle in Italy? How is it that he can walk down a street in Europe and be called by name, but his neighbors in Jefferson County don't know what he does for a living?

Maybe it's magic. Maybe it's about risk-taking. Maybe it's about being in

Donald Duck celebrates his 70th anniversary in 2004.

the right place at the right time. Or a combination of all three.

Being a fan of comic books, it was only natural Rosa would become a collector (he now has more than 40,000).

Along the way he developed relationships with other collectors and people in the comic book business via his freelance comic book contributions, conventions and swap sessions. After Disney comics had not been published in America between 1975 and 1985, Gladstone Publishing, a small three-person company in Arizona, obtained the license to publish the comics simply because no one else wanted to. When Rosa realized that the first Disney/Duck comics in 10 years were about to be released in 1987, he moved on what he saw as a unique opportunity for himself. The 36-year-old approached Byron Erickson, the editor at Gladstone, and told him it was his destiny to draw Scrooge and Donald, he was up to the task and he was not going to take "no" for an answer.

Erickson agreed to let him try one

comic and from then on Rosa's days revolved around ceramic tile and his evenings around his comic book.

Gladstone issued Rosa's "*The Son of the Sun*" in 1987. It was a sequel to the 1948 comic "*Lost in the Andes*" by Carl Barks. Interestingly enough, Rosa based this Duck sequel on the storyline contained in the first comic strip he wrote for the *Kentucky Kernel*. As for the Duck family, Rosa tried to capture the personalities of the characters in the Barks manner, relating a story that's more about real people — not cartoon ducks — who have adventures within the context of a real world.

Rosa continued to supply Gladstone with stories. "They did a fabulous job. Gladstone ... showed other publishers they could produce Disney comics both for kids and adults," says Rosa.

Before long, he and family members agreed to liquidate the tile business, thus allowing Rosa more time for his comic book work. Rosa also worked on other Disney-oriented projects, including scripting for "*TaleSpin*."

In the early 1990s, wanting to devote his attention to comics again, Rosa became involved with the one market that had not seen a decline in comic book sales: Europe.

Ducking History

"Disney comics were the best selling comic books in American history, as well as world history. In the mid-'50s they were selling two million to three million copies an issue. Fifty years later, what would you expect sales to be? Twice that? Ten times that? Disney comics don't even exist anymore in the United States," says Rosa. "Nowadays, a successful comic here only sells about 20,000 copies."

Over the years in the United States, lead characters and the subject matter in comics have changed. So-called superheroes with names like Spider-man, X-Men and The Hulk have appeared. Though comic books are



Photo: John Sommers II

Don and Ann Payne Rosa '72 live in a rural part of Jefferson County with three basset hounds and one cockatoo named Gyro Gearloose. Ann recently retired after 30 years from Thomas Jefferson Middle School as a social studies teacher.

In Finland (5 million people) Aku Anka comics sell over 350,000 each week. It is estimated that each of those issues is read by an average of 4 people.

still popular with a core group of dedicated fans, the overall sales of comics in the United States has diminished from its highest circulation around World War II. Today, comic books in the United States typically are sold only in specialty comic book stores.

But other countries march to the beat of a different drummer. Not only did comic book sales not decline in Europe, they continued to increase. Donald Duck was, and is, enormously popular, even more so than Mickey Mouse, and Donald Duck comics have been published continuously in Europe since World War II. Europeans subscribe to Duck family comics to read to their children; but *adults* like Donald, too, and it's quite common to see them reading Donald Duck comics at any time of day on commuter trains.

In 1990, Rosa approached Egmont Publishing, a large conglomerate in Europe that is licensed to publish Disney comics in a multitude of countries. Once again he got the go-ahead to produce Duck family stories.

Since then, he typically produces two Duck family comics a year. While other freelancers around the world also produce Duck stories for Egmont, Rosa is the only one who gets his name prominently displayed on the cover or splash panel of the comics. Thus, his name is a household word in a world where Donald Duck usually gets 200 write-in votes during a national election.

Diving through the Day

Rosa's work space is a studio in his home, filled with Duck family images collected over the years. A typical day starts early and ends late. Rosa still accomplishes his work using the labor intensive traditional tools of the trade: pencil, pen and ink. That might sound counter-productive to most of us. But if you could spend five minutes with Rosa, you'd understand that it's not just

about obtaining the final product; it's as much about the joy of the journey and spending all day doing what you love to do.

He meticulously researches all of his stories because he wants to get the tale just right, since most of the storylines in his comics are based on an historical event. Also, by his own admission, he fills his comics with unnecessary details and complex plots, which slows down his pace. But most fans appreciate the details of his work because that's what makes it a Don Rosa comic.

When preparing to pitch a new comic to his editor, he'll put together a storyboard-script: fairly complete thumbnail sketches, with dialogue in place, that tell the tale. If he gets the



Could \$crooge McDuck say it any better?

A Duck by any other name...

United States	Donald Duck
Sweden	Kalle Anka
Finland	Aku Anka
Italy	Paperino
Indonesia	Donal Bebek
Arabia	Battouta
China	Tang Lao Ya



Don Rosa stands in front of his comic book collection, used as a prop for his COMICS license plates from his vintage cars, a 1938 Nash Lafayette Deluxe and a 1948 Dodge Custom 6.

go-ahead, he'll proceed with full-scale drawings, first in pencil on paper, later with the addition of black-inked lines. He leaves enough balloon space to accommodate the words spoken by the Ducks no matter what language will be slotted in later, be it French, Italian, Chinese or something else. Just like Barks did, Rosa starts writing his story from the last pages until he reaches the middle. Then he starts from the first pages until he reconciles the story in the middle.

He does all the work freehand, except for some shape templates he uses that were purchased when he was an engineering student at UK.

As a tribute to "the master," Carl Barks, Rosa includes the hidden letters D.U.C.K. on the cover or splash panel of all of his work. The acronym means **D**edicated to **U**ncle (Uncle) **C**arl from **K**eno (Don's given first name).

His next new story will appear in the weekly Egmont comics across Europe later this year, and thereafter in other parts of the world as other licensed publishers learn of it and obtain Photostats from Egmont. "It's the longest and most complex story, in both plot and art, that I've ever done.

It involves Scrooge returning to Castle McDuck, the McDuck ancestral home in Scotland in search of the lost treasury of the Knights Templar," says Rosa.

Some fans wonder if he will ever insert a new major character into a Duck story but Rosa says that will never happen. There is no incentive for him to do so because any new character he creates will become the sole property of Disney. "I'm a freelancer and I get paid a page rate, like a piece worker," he says.

Rosa has won what insiders consider the most prestigious award in the world of comics, the Will Eisner Comics Industry Award, *twice*; the first time in 1995 for best serialized story for his 12-chapter epic, "*The Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck*," and the second time in 1997 for best humor writer and artist.

"I don't think my stories show any special ability as an artist, but that I have a joy for telling stories. I guess the readers sense that enthusiasm," he says.

Last June the first Donald Duck comic book to be published in the United States since 1998 was released. Uncle Scrooge #319 "*The Dutchman's Secret*" contains a Don Rosa story, sold overseas but never available before in the United States. With this release, more people in the 50 states are sure to become aware of Rosa's flair for a story and his state-side anonymity might change.

"In Europe I appear on "Today" type TV shows, pack giant shopping malls when I do signings, have huge press conferences built around me, and get to have dinner with mayors when I appear in a European metropolis. I'm mighty proud of that and people in America would never suspect I could be so famous in other parts of the world yet unknown here," says Rosa. "But they would probably think you were lying if you wrote of it because it sounds so absurd!"

Linda Perry '84 AS is assistant editor of Kentucky Alumni magazine. Linda can be reached at 859-257-1478 or at lperry@email.uky.edu



Last month, the first Donald Duck comic book to be published in the United States since the early 1990s arrived in comic book stores. It includes a Don Rosa story and Rosa did the cover art.