



fps

frames per second magazine » [www.fpsmagazine.com](http://www.fpsmagazine.com) » may 2005 » your guide to an animated life

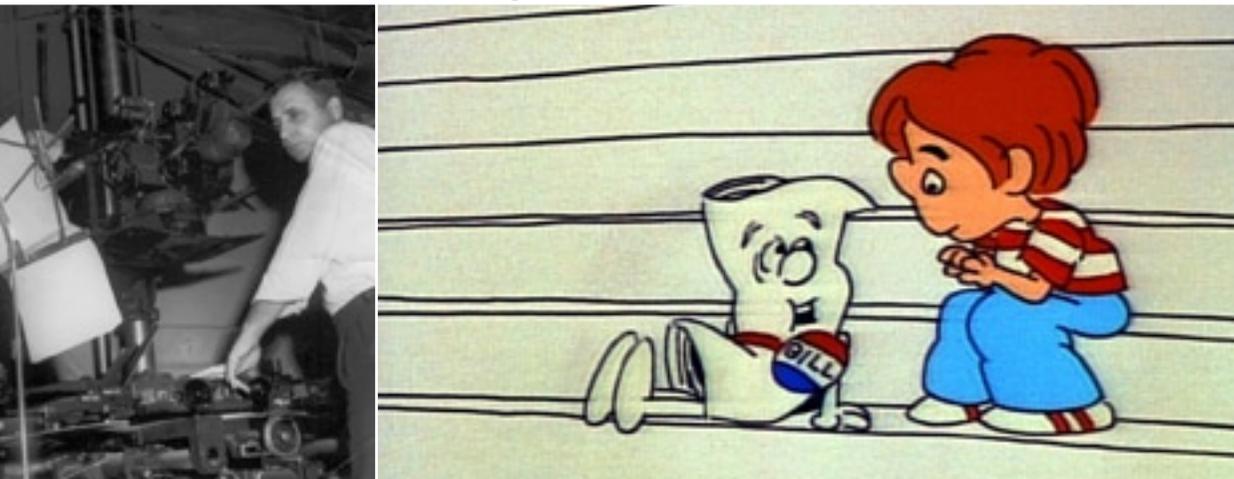
# Defining Anime

How to spot the real thing—if it even exists

**Also:**  
George Davis

Chuck Jones

Alexandre Alexeïeff



# Fifty Years of Shooting Cartoons

Noell Wolfgram Evans talks to longtime animation cameraman George Davis

George Davis picked an odd time to get into animation. It was 1950 and most of the animation studios at the time found themselves at a crossroads. Television and its unique requirements were just coming together and calling for content; theatres were adapting to these new rivals with special processes like 3D, Cinemascope, Emergo and others. If those weren't enough, UPA exploded into the public consciousness with an Oscar win in 1950 for *Gerald McBoingBoing*, which brought a new style to the industry.

Still, this was animation and plenty of people were willing to get involved in the making of cartoons. One of these was George Davis. In

1950, Davis was working in New York City as a commercial artist and sometime photographer. He used his dual skills to keep busy, often landing referrals from artists for photographic work and vice versa. One of the referrals he got landed him a photography assignment from Paul Terry's Terrytoons studio in New Rochelle, New York. They wanted him to head to the Toy Fair Show in New York City and take some pictures of the Terrytoons licensed products that were on display.

When he returned with the photos, he presented them to Paul Terry himself, who was very taken by he had done. They had a long conversation about photography

and then got into Davis's other business, commercial art. Former newspaper photographer Terry must have sensed something of his own career path in Davis and, liking what he saw, offered him a job with the studio. Happy to have steady work, Davis agreed to become an opaquer. It's a position that he calls "the lowest of the low," but he knew that he had to take it and put his time in if he hoped to become an animator.

While opinions of Paul Terry seem to range, Davis has nothing but kind words. "He was a good guy," Davis remembers. "He treated people pretty well. He was always very involved in production, he wasn't one of these guys to just sit back,

he was always right in the middle of everything, chomping on that cigar."

Davis didn't stay at Terrytoons long as he was pressed into service by Uncle Sam. His penchant for photography was quickly noticed by his Air Force superiors and Davis was assigned to the Aerial Photography Department. It proved to be an immensely fortuitous assignment for him because he had the opportunity to work in an area that he enjoyed and showed real talent in.

Four years and thousands of photographs later, he was discharged. He took his honed photographic skills back to Terrytoons where his opaquer position was being held for him. After seeing

**Above:** George Davis at work; *I'm Just a Bill* on *Schoolhouse Rock*.

the experience that the Army had provided him, though, Terry decided to reassign Davis to the camera department and have him trained as a cinematographer.

Davis entered a seasoned camera room, where the veterans had no time or patience for newcomers. They gave Davis a rough reception; he recounts being unable to eat lunch because whenever he left his camera someone would readjust the settings on it. He stayed dedicated and strong, though, eventually catching the “favour” of Doug Moyer who “really sheltered me,” Davis recalls. “After about a week he turned to me and said: ‘My job’s not to teach but if you stick by, you’ll learn.’” It’s not the best welcome to a new job, but Davis is nothing if not tenacious and determined, and the rough welcome he received probably only drove him further to succeed.

At this point, Terrytoons had been a studio stuck in a sort of time warp. Most of the employees had been there for years, which inspired a certain complacency, a general disgruntlement and a

static-ness to the house animation style, which had remained relatively unchanged from 20 years earlier. This was all thrown into upheaval in 1955 when Paul Terry, to the surprise of everyone, sold the studio to CBS. This change, along with the ever-increasing encroachment of television, caused some mild panic within the studio. At this point in his career, George Davis was making \$28 a week and starting to wonder what he should do with his life. The CBS purchase seemed wonderful for him because it could, he believed, provide him access into live television.

So Davis approached CBS about switching to the live camera department, but the network had other ideas. Terrytoons had a contract with 20th Century Fox to supply them with theatrical cartoons. And they did, in the same format every week. Terry knew what worked and he wasn’t willing to change. This meant that although Fox had originated Cinemascope, since Terry saw no financial gain in the process for *his* studio, he never

had any Cinemascope cartoons produced. CBS wanted to change this and they asked Davis to create a “Cinemascope Department” within Terrytoons.

It was not an easy task to get some of the veterans at the studio to understand this new process and especially understand why a (new) cameraman was running it. Although they are vital to the animation process it seems that at Terrytoons, camera operators were often seen as workers and not creative partners as perhaps they should be. Davis told this story to explain further how uphill his work could be: “One day I was shooting a theatrical and I noticed a pretty big inconsistency so I called the director in and pointed this out to him. He got very defensive and yelled that if I knew anything I would understand that this was cartoon license. He stormed out of the room and I was stuck to try and make this thing work. About a week later we were finished shooting and were going to have a showing in the theatre. (There was a 100-seat theatre at the studio). So I’m sitting in there and up comes the faulty scene. After it played so poorly, the director jumps out of his seat, turns to me and screams ‘What did you do?!’ Of course I hadn’t touched the thing but he had to look out for himself.”

It took him six months of research, twisting arms, picking

brains and trial and error but he finally created the perfect set-up to get Terrytoons on screen in Cinemascope. The first was *Good Deed Daily*, followed quickly by *Bird Symphony*. It’s an achievement that Davis calls one of his proudest.

While his fellow cameramen may have been the cause of much grief early on, coworkers in other parts of the studio realized the importance of a good cameraman and would request Davis for work. There seemed to be a general consensus that he would look out for them, that he was interested in making each short the best it could possibly be and would do whatever it took to ensure that happened.

Davis thought highly of many of his coworkers, singling out director Connie Rasinski, writer Gene Wood, cartoonist Jules Feiffer and animator Ernie Pintoff (“The greatest” in Davis’s words). It was Pintoff who provided Davis with one of his favourite Terrytoons moments. After Paul Terry left, the studio was effectively run by Bill Weiss, by all accounts a hard-nosed man whose only interest was in the bottom line, often at an employee’s expense. After being chastised at lunch by Weiss for some sort of production matter, Pintoff turned to Weiss and said, “You know I sure hate fish but even more than that I hate you!”

Another of his coworkers at the studio was Doug Crane. I asked

While his fellow cameramen may have been the cause of much grief early on, coworkers in other parts of the studio realized the importance of a good cameraman and would request Davis for work. There seemed to be a general consensus that he would look out for them.

Crane if he could remember his first encounter with Davis: “I put myself back in time for a brief visit to Monday morning June 11, 1956. Oh, how well I recall sitting on that highly polished church pew-type bench along with another half dozen ‘first day’ artists outside Bill Weiss’s office that day. I was waiting to be called in to sign the necessary workers’ papers and get instructions on how to punch the time-clock and the associated house rules. I was going to be a Terrytoon!!!

“As I sat there, I was fascinated by the number of people scurrying past me zipping here and hurrying there, each busily tending to their departmental tasks... And above this din... the dulcet tones of one individual opening Bill Weiss’s office door and starting to come out, waving a sheaf of exposure sheets, and vociferously proclaiming the difficulty of... no, the *impossibility* of shooting a scene with the sheet instructions made out in such a sloppy, awkward, unreadable, unprofessional, incoherent, idiotic, (etc.) way... ‘And another thing...’ with that he rolled the sheets into a tube and, returning to Weiss’s office, slapped them on Bill’s desk, and with one final tiger’s bellow, he stormed out to where we novices were sitting, there was a pause as he looked us over—as though to say, ‘Do you people have *any* idea at all what

you’re getting into?’ And then with a slight grin, he winked.”

Davis used that “tough guy” persona to get his way; it was almost as if by sheer will power and stubborn force he could make a mediocre film good. Beneath that exterior, though, was a man who was open, receptive and always willing to help out. Crane again: “I used to take my attempts at animation to George in the hope that he’d find a spare moment to film my drawings and add them to the tail end of his daily shoots which would then go downtown to the NYC labs and when returned, he’d splice off my bits and I could study my actions on the Movieola...”

“When he had a few free minutes, he would often look over my animation, and take a pencil and some paper... and show me where he thought I was going a bit off... a little too ‘soft’ or too fast with an action... give this run more ‘leaning into’... this could use more weight... this needs another full half second of ‘hold’... ‘I’d cross-dissolve here instead of fading out/fading in... shows a quicker passage of time...” It turned out George is not only a cameraman, but an animator and an animation instructor to a bunch of us. If George thought you were really willing to learn, he would willingly give you his professional advice.”

## Davis remembers Ralph Bakshi as a “kid who won an award so the studio hired him. He was good. Out there, though.” And Bakshi remembered Davis, years later when both were no longer at Terrytoons; Bakshi approached Davis about shooting a new full-length feature he was developing called *Fritz the Cat*.

Crane further shared stories of how Davis used his knowledge and generosity, not just to help people on their side projects but to try and enhance the films of the studio without causing more work for everyone else: “If we needed a green glow as an effect or a ghostly image—it was ‘ask George’... and he’d give two or three ways it could be done. He told me once that I was wasting my time figuring out a ‘vibrating’ pan... east/west slowing to a stop as I recall... I’d had my ruler and calculations all worked out and he said... “oh... just make a note... east-west vibrate to stop and make a scribble to show me about how long you want it... “ He’d do that vibration or that stagger himself—and it was always precisely what I wanted.

“George realized that animators were often overworked,” Crane continued to say, “and were fully capable of making mistakes on their exposure sheets. He was almost always able to figure out what the animator intended... and he’d fix it

himself. On occasion he’d say to an errant artist: ‘I was tempted to shoot your scene the way you exposed it... to teach you a lesson...’ but thankfully, his bark has always been worse than his bite.”

One of Davis’s Terrytoons coworkers who left a particular impression on him was [Ralph Bakshi](#). He remembers Bakshi as a “kid who won an award so the studio hired him. He was good. Out there, though.” And Bakshi remembered Davis, years later when both were no longer at Terrytoons; Bakshi approached Davis about shooting a new full-length feature he was developing called *Fritz the Cat*. Davis found the piece “too dirty,” though, and passed. The two would work again with Davis shooting a pencil test of a series Bakshi was pitching to HBO.

After working with *Tom Terrific*, *Heckle and Jeckle*, *Mighty Mouse* and a host of others, Davis finally left Terrytoons and went to TransLux Studios (known for introducing *Gigantor* and *Speed Racer* to

America) were he shot *The Mighty Hercules*. He also spent a lot of time on the side shooting commercials for places like Hal Seeger Studios and Shamus Culhane. Over the years he shot commercials for clients like Mercedes, Honey Nuts, The Care Bears, and Pepsi.

The work he did for Seeger was so consistent and good that Davis was asked to also take on the production of several of their animated television shows including *Milton the Monster* and *Batfink*. We might look back on some of these shows with a certain smirk, but Davis says that Seeger worked hard to create “nothing but the best... in his programs and in the employees.”

Commercial work seemed to be the path he was destined to take until he had a chance conversation with Phil Kimmelman of Focus Communication. Kimmelman had worked with Davis in the past on a number of commercials and was now preparing to work on a series of animated shorts for television. He approached Davis one day saying, “George, you’d be perfect for this project I’m working on. If you had your own studio I’m sure I could give you a steady stream of work.” At this point in his career, Davis had nearly

expended all he could do at others studios and decided that having a steady place of his own wouldn’t be all that bad. So, after securing commitments from a few other producers he opened up a studio on 45th Street in New York City. Davis remembers the first few months as being hard. “I had taken out a \$10,000 business loan but after paying \$6,000 for a camera and buying the rest of the equipment plus paying rent and so on... it was not fun for the first few months. There were days that I just sat next to all of this equipment, in the dark, because I couldn’t afford to pay a light bill so I couldn’t turn the lights on. I would have Life Savers for lunch while I waited for the phone to ring.” True to his promise, Kimmelman did call; his project was getting ready to start and he wanted Davis to shoot it. The project that Kimmelman had was one of those touchstone pieces that makes a mark not just in animation circles, but as a cultural icon. Kimmelman’s series was *Schoolhouse Rock*. Davis’s best memory of his time spent on the series is of shooting *I’m Just a Bill*, the Emmy award-winning segment that told the story of how laws were made. All told, Davis

ended up shooting about 85% of the *Schoolhouse Rock* segments that Kimmelman’s group animated.

One of the people that Davis worked closely with during the making of *Schoolhouse Rock* was Doug Compton. Compton met George Davis in 1975 when he was just starting out in the animation business. Compton says, “George is a great guy. He comes off as a ‘tough guy’ when you first are getting to know him, a real New York City ballbuster, but deep inside he is, as Phil Kimmelman put it, a ‘pussycat.’ I met George when I started as a messenger for Phil. I would bring the artwork down to George’s place to be shot, sometimes I would be assigned to do rotoscoping there, which means I would spend hours under the camera, tracing relevant details from live action footage projected down onto the stand. I came to know George as a consummate professional, without a doubt the best in the city. He shot my own student film for me, tacking my scenes onto the footage he shot for Phil, at no extra charge. I know he was also involved with coaching youth sports groups at the time, which impressed me. I spent a lot of time in between running messages for Phil just hanging out at his place. His company, although a bit gruff, was quite enjoyable.”

That “gruff but enjoyable” seems to be a fair summation of the Davis persona. Witness this remark from Dean Yeagle. I asked Mr. Yeagle what one of the best things was about working with Davis (Davis shot a number of commercials for Yeagle’s studio, Caged Beagle Productions). Yeagle responded “he always had a fund of stories to tell, in his crabby and irascible manner.” Yeagle went on to say: “George is the most professional cameraman I’ve ever worked with, and once I found him, I stuck with him. He always knew what he was doing, how much it should cost, how it might best be accomplished, and he did it on time and as promised. [He] cared about his work and took the necessary pains to do it right.”

During this time, Davis continued to pull in work from other animation studios, like Zander’s Animation Parlour for whom he shot *The Gnomes* because, as he bluntly states, “you have to eat.” *The Gnomes*, while not memorable to many, was important for Davis because it was his first experience using a computer-automated camera system. Up until this point Davis had done everything by hand, creating optical effects in camera or directly on the table. It’s an art form that he feels is passing. “No one works that way anymore, it’s all so you just push a button and it happens. It makes it

True to his promise, Kimmelman did call; his project was getting ready to start and he wanted Davis to shoot it. Kimmelman’s series was *Schoolhouse Rock*.

So after a nearly fifty-year career that touched on practically every outlet for animation, is there one film or piece of work that he would consider a favorite? The answer is surprising.

easy, sure, but you miss something.” Davis was forced into this direction by the times; to be competitive he had to integrate an MPS system into his work. Davis shows no resentment to the change, what he finds an issue with is people who allow the computer to do everything. “Because I had to do things manually for so long, it’s no stress to me to have to do the calculations to create a zoom or a pan,” Davis stated before adding in a grandfatherly way, “Kids today can’t do that, they rely too much on the machine to do all the work.”

At this point, as any animation that he was shooting was expressly for television, he figured that his days as a cameraman for theatrical animation were over. He was wrong. In 1977, he was asked to take a look at the animated sequence of *Annie Hall*. The animation was created by Chris Ishii and for some reason the final product didn’t look right. Davis took one look at it and realized that it had been shot with the wrong aspect ratio. The producers asked Davis if he would not just assist in the reshoot but if he would take on the task himself. Which he did,

reshooting the sequence at 1.85:1 and saving a memorable scene in the Oscar-winning film.

Over his long career, George Davis has been recognized a number of times by his peers, receiving accolades from the Art Directors Association, ASIFA East, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. All this attention doesn’t really faze Davis though. “I am not much of an award guy,” he says in that perfect straightforward, just-the-truth way that has been his hallmark.

So after a nearly fifty-year career that touched on practically every outlet for animation, is there one film or piece of work that he would consider a favorite? The answer is surprising: The 1991 film *Don’t Tell Mom The Babysitter’s Dead* wasn’t shot by Davis, but he did shoot the title sequence. He singled this work out because it was “a challenge. There was a young girl, the graphic designer who created the piece on paper but she had no idea how to lay it out for the camera so I had to get down there with her and say what if we try this or

that. It was a good thing that I had the commercial artist background because I could speak her language as we created this thing.”

George Davis is no longer an active cinematographer. He recently retired and donated his camera to the Rochester Institute of Technology. He scoffs at the idea that he was doing any good with the donation: “I was just looking for a tax writeoff,” he said with a gruff laugh. His colleagues and his history suggest something a little different, that perhaps he donated his equipment to do what he always did: try and help out the next generation of animation filmmakers.

“Studios have a way of commending their voice talent... directors... and even some of their animators... but the guys and gals behind the curtain... especially camerapersons—are the unsung heroes,” says Doug Compton. “Terrytoons was very fortunate to have had George Davis behind their lenses. He was a professional, a workhorse, a powerhouse at the studio, and an inspiration to a whole group of us beginners.” ■