

Jimmy Nelson, 90, Star of Golden Age of Ventriloquism

By RICHARD SANDOMIR

On Sept. 24, 1950, Jimmy Nelson, a skinny 21-year-old ventriloquist, was introduced by Ed Sullivan on his Sunday night variety show, "Toast of the Town," as "the greatest I've ever seen in his field."

Mr. Nelson was clean-cut and genial, with an air of boyish mischief. His dummy was a smart aleck in a suit and bow tie.

"My name is Danny O'Day," the dummy said to the audience. "This schnookle standing next to me is Jimmy Nelson. The kid thinks he's a ventriloquist."

"That's ventriloquist," Mr. Nelson said, starting a rapid-fire exchange with his dummy.

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It was an auspicious national debut for Mr. Nelson, who in the 1950s and '60s was one of the stars of the golden age of ventriloquism, performing with Danny and with Farfel, a quick-witted hound dog.

His contemporaries included Paul Winchell (with the dummies Jerry Mahoney and Knucklehead Smiff), Shari Lewis (who gave voice to Lamb Chop, a sock puppet) and Señor Wences (whose characters included Johnny, a gruff-voiced head in a box). They followed the lead of Edgar Bergen, the celebrated vaudeville and ra-



JAMES KRIEGSMANN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES, VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jimmy Nelson in the 1950s with characters he brought to life during the golden age of ventriloquism: Humphrey Higsbye, in chair; Danny O'Day, standing; Farfel the dog; and Ftataeeta the cat. Mr. Nelson was also renowned for his instructional albums.

A favorite of Ed Sullivan, and an inspiration to Jeff Dunham.

dio ventriloquist whose best-known dummy was Charlie McCarthy.

As successful as Mr. Nelson was on television and in nightclubs, he had a greater legacy as a ventriloquism teacher, via instructional albums he recorded in the mid-1960s.

Jeff Dunham, currently the most successful ventriloquist, credits his career to Mr. Nelson and his albums. "I don't think I would be where I am today, doing what I do as my profession, were it not for Jimmy and his wooden partners, Danny O'Day and Farfel," he wrote on Facebook.

Mr. Nelson, who last performed a few years ago, died on Tuesday in a nursing facility in Cape Coral, Fla. He was 90.

His wife, Betty (Mooney) Nelson, said the cause was complications of a stroke he had in May.

The relationship between Mr. Nelson and Danny fascinated Jay Johnson, a ventriloquist who works with several dummies and is known for his role on the hit television series "Soap" and a Tony Award-winning 2006 Broadway show, "Jay Johnson: The Two and Only."

"Jimmy was kind of this straight man with a little guy and a dog," Mr. Johnson said in a phone interview. "He didn't lose his personality; he didn't defer to

them. He was a good friend, while Danny took no hostages."

While Mr. Nelson, Danny and Farfel were seen on many variety shows, they gained their greatest early renown from the two years they performed live five-minute commercials on the weekly "Texaco Star Theater Starring Milton Berle." Mr. Nelson and his dummies, along with guest stars including Ronald Reagan, mixed comedy with a pitch for the sponsor's gasoline.

"The people at Texaco wanted a ventriloquist to do their commercials," Mr. Nelson said in "I'm No Dummy" (2009), a documentary about ventriloquists directed by Bryan W. Simon. "They caught my act at Radio City Music Hall and said, 'That's what we wanted.'"

In 1955, Mr. Nelson brought Danny and Farfel to an audition for spokesmen for Nestlé's chocolate drinks, of which the best-known was Quik. They got the job, and that relationship proved more enduring than the Texaco job.

They made 120 commercials with different comedic setups, all ending with a memorable jingle: Danny sang "N-E-S-T-L-E-S, Nestlé's makes the very best," and Farfel added, "Chaw-klit!" At the final syllable, his mouth snapped shut.

"The three turned this ditty into a world-famous jingle that remained beloved by audiences for more than 10 years," Heather Taylor wrote on the Advertising Week 360 website in 2017.

James Edward Nelson was born on Dec. 15, 1928, in Chicago. His father, James, was an accountant, and his mother, Winifred (Southern) Nelson, was a secretary.

When Jimmy was 9, his Aunt Margaret gave him a life-changing gift: a ventriloquist puppet that she had won playing bingo. After he brought it to show and tell in his fourth-grade class, his teacher urged the shy boy to perform with the puppet by reciting lessons with it. When he was in

fifth grade, he and his father began to create routines.

It was all the encouragement he needed. He soon began to perform at amateur nights and in movie theaters and found a mentor in a local ventriloquist named Herman Stoike. By the time he was 17, he had an agent and had hired the artisan figure-maker Frank Marshall to build Danny O'Day.

His dummy cast later grew to include Farfel, the sophisticated Humphrey Higsbye and Ftataeeta, a cat.

Television fueled his career, as it did other ventriloquists. He became the host of a TV show in Chicago in 1950, billed as "America's newest ventriloquist sensation." His success there attracted Ed Sullivan's interest.

For the next decade or so, Mr. Nelson was a staple on television (he hosted two short-lived game shows) and entertained around the country.

In 1964, the novelty company that was making children's versions of Danny and Farfel agreed to release his album "Instant Ventriloquism." Two years later, he recorded a sequel.

As a teacher, Mr. Nelson focused on how to make difficult sounds easier to produce.

"The albums gave people interested in the art form something to start with," Mr. Johnson said. "On one side were instructions. But on the other side, you got a script where you interacted with Danny, which gave you a sense of performing."

In 1968, as ventriloquism's heyday was fading, Mr. Nelson and his wife, a singer, moved to Florida. While still performing, he also spent about 15 years as a spokesman for a local bank, starring in commercials that sometimes featured his daughter Elizabeth as well as Danny and Farfel.

He announced his retirement from performing in 2014. In a letter that year to the International Ventriloquist Society, he wrote: "Danny & Farfel are protesting, but I just close the suitcase cover and listen to their muffled, 'Let me out of here.'"

In addition to his wife and his daughter Elizabeth Chambers, he is survived by two other daughters, Marianne Taylor and Lane Nelson; three sons, Leelay, Larry and Jerry; six grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. His marriage to Margot Humphries ended in divorce.

Mr. Nelson's Nestlé's Quik commercials used benign humor to sell the popular chocolate mix. Danny played various roles, including astronaut, football player and racecar driver.

In one of them, for example, Danny lies woozy on a table after being knocked out in a boxing match.

"Oh, oh, Quik, I should have had more Quik," he says, sounding delirious.

After Jimmy, as his trainer, mixes Quik into a glass of milk, Danny revives and says: "Step aside, Dad. Quik. Get Quik. It tastes like a million. Let me at 'em."

"The fight's over," Jimmy says. "Really," Danny responds. "Who won?"

