

Jimmy Nelson (& Danny O'Day)

(b. 1928)

They taught each other how to speak — without moving their lips.

By Elizabeth McCracken

"It seems to me that if I could teach you how to be a ventriloquist," says Jimmy Nelson on the record "Instant Ventriloquism," addressing his wooden partner, Danny O'Day, "I could teach just about anybody." This, as with so much in ventriloquism, is either literally true or entirely fake or both simultaneously. It's 1964, and the two are already famous for their appearances on shows hosted by Milton Berle and Ed Sullivan, as well as more than 100 television ads for Nestlé's Quik (alongside a ventriloquial chocolate-loving dog named Farfel). But Nelson is, at heart, a teacher. This record is how he plans to teach Danny O'Day — and every single kid who listens in — how to ventriloquize.

Nelson puts Danny O'Day through the paces: Here's how you hold your mouth (never mind that Nelson controls said mouth); here's how you move your tongue (never mind Danny hasn't got one); here's how to produce the easy consonants and how to produce the difficult ones, those that ordinarily require lip movement. "I can't impress upon you too much the importance of thinking B while saying D," he tells Danny, as Danny tries to do just that.

Nelson himself acquired his first ventriloquial figure when he was 9, and was performing professionally by the time he was 14. At 16, in 1945, he realized he needed professional assistance, so he approached a

fellow Chicagoan, Frank Marshall, a legendary maker of the figures, who first insisted on seeing the kid perform, then asked for a photograph, so that the young ventriloquist and his new partner might bear a family resemblance. When Marshall suggested two years later that he carve a backup Danny O'Day, Nelson found the new figure not enough like Danny, and instead of making him an understudy gave him heavy eyebrows and a cultivated demeanor and the name Humphrey Higsbye. Soon afterward, the three appeared on television together, singing "Rag Mop," trading lines so fast a listener might think they were harmonizing, three versions of the same young man: Danny, Humphrey, Jimmy in the middle.

Young Jimmy Nelson looked a bit like a ventriloquist dummy, even without a ventriloquist dummy by his side: The patent-leather midcentury hair, the sharp suit that hung oddly, the mismatched ears, one jug, one flush against his head. Danny O'Day was wide-eyed and wide-mouthed and needed a haircut. He didn't have a complicated personality, like his countryman Charlie McCarthy, but he and his partner, whom he called Nelson, had something Bergen and McCarthy never did: sweetness between them. They needed each other. Onstage, Danny occasionally hides his face in Nelson's shoulder; Nelson regards Danny with genuine warmth, breaks into delighted laughter when the puppet cracks wise. It's dizzying to realize that the fondness, the pleasure, are all for his own talent.

"Ventriloquism will always exist because sometimes we just need to believe," the ventriloquist Jay Johnson says at the end

of his 2007 Tony-Award-winning, one-man, many-puppet show, "The Two and Only!" There is still an appetite in the age of C.G.I. and robotics for the original analog special effect. Three of the 14 winners of "America's Got Talent" were ventriloquists, and one of them, Terry Fator, has been headlining in Las Vegas for more than a decade. (Like many working ventriloquists, Fator credits Jimmy Nelson's records as an early influence.) A great ventriloquist must learn to do many things simultaneously and alternately: the trick of speaking *sub rosa* if not *sotto voce*; the animation of the figure, movement and voice and personality; the work as a straight man, holding still while one arm tears it up, reacting with surprise and laughter and irritation to his partner's insults and one-liners, which are also his. Or, as Jimmy Nelson says on his follow-up record, "Ventriloquism 2," "You're two actors up there, student, two of you, you and the ventriloquist doll, so be actors and act out your lines."

In one of his bits — he performed it on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1950, and on HBO in 1978 — Danny announces that *he* could be a ventriloquist. In the early version, Nelson, not quite 22, is a little nervous, introduced by Sullivan as "The greatest I have ever seen in his field"; nearly three decades later, he's suaver, more paternal. The jokes feel different — one of the performers has grown older, after all; the dynamic was bound to change — and yet entirely fresh. Only one of them is alive but both of them are mortal: That's the sad truth of any such partnership. Danny leans back to check for the hole in Nelson's back, and then takes a cigarette between his teeth while Nelson sings "The Best Things in Life Are Free," his mouth open, lips moving, his voice Danny's falsetto. And that seems like a trick you've never seen, the little fellow's voice coming out of the big fellow's mouth. You forget it was his own voice all along. ●

JIMMY NELSON



Jimmy Nelson with his pals Danny O'Day, Farfel and Humphrey Higsbye in 1952.