

# Often Imitated But Never Duplicated

Tonight, following an extra long day at work, I will be heading over to the Huber to audition for a role in the holiday classic *It's a Wonderful Life*. There are so many great roles in the show starting with George Bailey, himself. I'm tempted but 300+ lines sounds a bit daunting to me. I thing Clearance would be fun to play. I love playing an evil villain so Mr. Potter is definitely on my radar. Of course, there is the duo of Bert and Ernie whom I have been looking into and the people behind *Sesame Street* state uncatagorically that it is mere coincidence that the muppet friends are named as such. Of course, I will be pleased to accept any role offered to me. So many great roles in the beloved tale that ironically was a flop when it was released in 1946. So many variations on the theme but has it ever been duplicated?

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## And Your Favorite Muppet Is?

Recently I came across an interesting article about everyone's favorite comedians, the Muppets! I grew up watching the Muppets; whether it was on the various incarnations of their tv shows (The Muppet Show, Muppets Tonight, etc.), their feature films, *Sesame Street*, or even in their hilarious Muppets 3D attraction at Disney's Hollywood (formerly MGM) Studios in Florida. Here are some fun facts about 20 of the Muppets that you might not know:

1. Cookie Monster: Jim Henson drew some monsters eating various snacks for a General Foods commercial in 1966. The

commercial was never used, but Henson recycled one of the monsters (the "Wheel-Stealer") for an IBM training video in 1967 and again for a Fritos commercial in 1969. By that time, he had started working on Sesame Street and decided this monster would have a home there.

2. Elmo: The way it's described by a Sesame Street writer, apparently this extra red puppet was just lying around. People would try to do something with him, but nothing really panned out. In 1984, puppeteer Kevin Clash picked up the red puppet and started doing the voice and the personality and it clicked – thus, Elmo was born.

3. Telly Monster was originally the Television Monster when he debuted in 1979. He was obsessed with TV and his eyes would whirl around as if hypnotized whenever he was in front of a set. After a while, producers started worrying about his influence on youngsters, so they changed him to make him the chronic worrier he is now.

4. Count von Count made his first appearance in 1972 and was made out of an Anything Muppet pattern – a blank Muppet head that could have features added to it to make various characters. He used to be more sinister – he was able to hypnotize and stun people and he laughed in typical scary-villain-type fashion after completing a count of something and thunder and lightning would occur. He was quickly made more appealing to little kids, though. He is apparently quite the ladies' man – he has been linked to Countess von Backward, who loves to count backward; Countess Dahling von Dahling and Lady Two.

5. Kermit was "born" in 1955 and first showed up on "Sam and Friends," a five-minute puppet show by Jim Henson. The first Kermit was made out of Henson's mom's coat and some ping pong balls. At the time, he was more lizard-like than frog-like. By the time he showed up on Sesame Street in 1969, though, he had made the transition to frog. There are rumors that he got the

name Kermit from a childhood friend of Henson's or a puppeteer from the early days of the Muppets, but Henson always refuted both of those rumors. Mental Floss: 15 reasons Mr. Rogers was the best neighbor ever

6. Real Swedish Chef Lars "Kuprik" Bäckman claims he was the inspiration for the Swedish Chef. He was on "Good Morning America," he says, and caught Jim Henson's eye. Henson supposedly bought the rights to the show's recording and created the Swedish Chef (who DOES have a real name, but it's not understandable). One of the Muppet writers, Jerry Juhl, says that in all of the years of working with Jim Henson on the Swedish Chef, he never heard that the character was based on a real person.

7. Animal: The Who's Keith Moon may have inspired everyone's favorite member of Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem. This is speculation, but people who support the theory will point out that Jim Henson named one of the Fraggle Rock characters "Wembley," which is the town where Moon was born.

8. Miss Piggy is apparently from Iowa. She started as a minor character on "The Muppet Show," but anyone who knows Miss Piggy can see that she wouldn't settle for anything "minor." Her first TV appearance was actually on an Herb Alpert special. It wasn't until 1976, when "The Muppet Show" premiered, that she became the glamorous blonde with a penchant for frog that we know and love today. Frank Oz once said that Miss Piggy grew up in Iowa; her dad died when she was young and her mother was mean. She had to enter beauty contests to make money.

9. Rowlf the Dog, surprise, surprise, was first made in 1962 for a series of Purina Dog Chow commercials. He went on to claim fame as Jimmy Dean's sidekick on The Jimmy Dean Show and was on every single episode from 1963 to 1966. Jimmy Dean said Rowlf got about 2,000 letters from fans every week. He was considered for Sesame Street but ended up becoming a regular

on "The Muppet Show" in 1976. Mental Floss: Commercials from a late-80s airing of 'A Muppet Family Christmas'

10. Oscar the Grouch is performed by the same guy who does Big Bird, Carroll Spinney. Spinney said he based Oscar's cranky voice on a particular New York cab driver he once had the pleasure of riding with. He was originally an alarming shade of orange. In Pakistan, his name is Akhtar and he lives in an oil barrel. In Turkey, he is Kirpik and lives in a basket. And in Israel, it's not Oscar at all – it's his cousin, Moishe Oofnik, who lives in an old car.

11. Gonzo: What exactly is Gonzo? Nobody knows. Even Jim Henson had no particular species in mind. Over the course of "The Muppet Show," "Muppet Babies" and various Muppet movies, Gonzo has been referred to as a "Whatever", a "Weirdo" and an alien. Whatever he is, he first appeared on the scene in 1970's The Great Santa Claus Switch. His name was Snarl the Cigar Box Frackle. In 1974, he showed up on a TV special for Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass. He became Gonzo the Great by the first season of The Muppet Show and developed his thing for Camilla the Chicken almost accidentally: During one episode where chickens were auditioning for the show, puppeteer Dave Goelz ad-libbed, "Don't call us, we'll call you... nice legs, though!" It was decided then and there that Gonzo would have a bizarre romantic interest in chickens.

12. You have to love Statler and Waldorf. I couldn't find much on their particular inspiration, but I can tell you that they've been around since the 1975 "Muppet Show" pilot. They are named after popular New York City hotels (the Statler Hotel was renamed the Hotel Pennsylvania in 1992.) Guess what Waldorf's wife name is? Yep... Astoria (she looks startlingly like Statler.) FYI, Waldorf is the one with the mustache and white hair. Statler has the grey hair. Apparently Waldorf has had a pacemaker for more than 30 years.

13. Beaker: I always thought of Beaker and his buddy Bunsen

Honeydew as characters that came along later in the Muppet timeline, but they have been around since the “The Muppet Show.” Although Beaker usually says things along the lines of, “Mee-mee-mee-mee!”, he has had a few actual lines: “Sadly temporary,” “Bye-Bye” and “Make-up ready!” Despite being word-challenged, he manages to do a pretty convincing Little Richard impression and, surprisingly, had mad beatbox skills. Beaker is one of the only Muppets that was never recycled from some other purpose – he was created solely for “The Muppet Show.”

14. Fozzie Bear. Poor Fozzie. He’s the perpetual target of Statler and Waldorf because of his horrible jokes and puns. It actually created a bit of a problem during the first season of The Muppet Show, because when Fozzie got heckled, he got very upset and sometimes cried. Viewers didn’t feel sympathy; they felt embarrassed. The problem was solved by making Fozzie an optimist so that even when he got heckled he was good-natured about it. It’s often thought that he was named after Frank Oz, who was his puppeteer, but Frank said it’s just a variant of “fuzzy bear.” Yet another story says he was named for his builder, Faz Fazakas. Wocka wocka!!

15. Bert and Ernie are the Muppet version of Felix and Oscar (“The Odd Couple,” for you young’uns). Lots of people think Bert and Ernie were named for some minor characters in It’s A Wonderful Life, but according to the Henson company, that’s just a rumor. Jim Henson always maintained that it was just a coincidence – the names just went well together and seemed to fit the characters. Jerry Juhl, one of the head writers, corroborated this and said that Jim Henson had no memory for details like that and would have never remembered the name of the cop and the taxi cab driver in the old Jimmy Stewart movie. Other rumors to clear up: Bert and Ernie aren’t gay and neither one of them are dead. Now that we’ve got that straightened out, here are a few more tidbits: the original Ernie used to have a gravelly voice similar to Rowlf the

Dog's. Frank Oz was Bert's puppeteer and hated him at the beginning. He thought Bert was ridiculously boring, but then realized that he could have a lot of fun with being boring. Jim Henson once said, "I remember trying Bert and Frank tried Ernie for a while. I can't imagine doing Bert now, because Bert has become so much of a part of Frank."

16. Grover: Everyone's favorite "cute, furry little monster" made his TV debut on the "Ed Sullivan Show" in 1967. At the time, he was known as "Gleep" and was a monster in Santa's Workshop. He then appeared on the first season of Sesame Street, but sported green fur and a reddish-orange nose. He didn't have a name then, but by the second season he transformed into the Grover we know today, more or less – electric blue fur and a pink nose. The original green Grover was reincarnated as Grover's Mommy for a few episodes. In Latin America and Puerto Rico Grover is known as Archibaldo, in Spain he is Coco, in Portugal he is Gualter and in Norway he is Gunnar.

17. Sweetums is one of a handful of full-body Muppets. He showed up in 1971 on the TV special "The Frog Prince." This is where he got his name – when Sir Robin the Brave is about to defeat the ogre, a witch shows up and changes him into a frog (who later becomes Robin, Kermit's nephew). Apparently smitten with the ogre, the witch tells her darling "Sweetums" that he can have the frog for breakfast. Bigger fame awaited Sweetums, though – in 1975, he appeared on Cher's variety show to do a duet with her to "That Old Black Magic". He officially joined "The Muppet Show" cast in 1976.

18. Rizzo the Rat might sound familiar to you, especially if you've seen "Midnight Cowboy" – he is named for Dustin Hoffman's character, Ratso Rizzo. He was created after puppeteer Steve Whitmire was inspired by rat puppets made from bottles. He first showed up on "The Muppet Show" as one of a group of rats following Christopher Reeve around – he's easy to spot because he hams it up more than any of the other rats.

He occasionally performs with Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem.

19. Pepe the King Prawn's full name is Pepino Rodrigo Serrano Gonzales. I heart Pepe. He was a chef in Madrid before going Hollywood on "Muppets Tonight" in 1996. He was paired with Seymour the Elephant (Pepe was originally going to be a mouse) on the show, but Seymour never developed quite the same following and was only in two episodes. He rarely gets names right – some of his mispronunciations include "muffins" instead of Muppets, "Kermin" instead of Kermit and "Scooper" instead of Scooter. He's quite full of himself – in addition to thinking that he's quite the ladies' man, he also fully expects to win several Oscars.

20. Herry Monster from Sesame Street was the Big Bad Wolf in his original incarnation, which you can kind of tell by looking at his fur. It's pretty wolf-like (if wolves were blue, I mean). He became a Sesame monster in 1970 to replace the Beautiful Day Monster, who looked kind of like Sam the Eagle and existed to cause destruction wherever he went, thus ruining the beautiful day people had been having before he showed up. Herry used to have a furry nose but got upgraded to his non-furry, purple nose in 1971.

*The preceding article was written by Stacy Conradt and was published on [cnn.com](http://cnn.com)*

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And for your enjoyment (and so you can get this song stuck in your head for days on end), here is the Muppets catchy performance of Mahna Mahna – it's a really fun video to watch!