

Mutt and Jeff: On Strike (1920)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Bud Fisher Films Corporation, distributed by the Fox Film Corporation.
PRODUCER: Bud Fisher. DIRECTOR/WRITER: Charles Bowers (?). RUNNING TIME: 7 minutes.

On Strike is one of more than 300 animated “half-reelers” that ran from 1913 to 1926 and featured the popular comic strip characters Mutt and Jeff. Harry Conway “Bud” Fisher’s strip, already more than ten years old when this film was produced, first appeared as *A. Mutt* in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on November 15, 1907. Though it was not the first daily comic strip to feature an ongoing story line, Fisher’s was by far the most successful, and he is widely credited with popularizing the form. *A. Mutt* featured Augustus Mutt, a compulsive gambler who bet on horse races every week. On March 27, 1908, Jeffries (“Jeff”) was introduced and appeared intermittently until 1910, when he became a permanent fixture. In 1916, the comic strip was officially renamed *Mutt and Jeff*, though the duo was already well known (and well merchandised) by that time. The Mutt and Jeff comic strip continued long past Fisher’s death in 1954, finishing its run in 1982.

The notoriety of Mutt and Jeff, while largely due to the popularity of the daily comic, extended beyond the newspaper pages. Fisher published collections of his strips in book form, and as early as 1910, the characters were featured in live musical theater performances and accompanying sheet music. In 1913, Nestor Films produced a number of live-action Mutt and Jeff “one-reelers,” which were distributed by Pathé Frères. The first 17 animated Mutt and Jeff films were produced in 1916 by Mutt and Jeff Films Inc. and distributed by Celebrated Players. In 1917, Fisher publicly announced that he would take charge of the production and distribution of Mutt and Jeff cartoon shorts. Fisher went as far as to place an ad in *Moving Picture World* announcing that he had “personally taken over the management of the Mutt and Jeff Animated Comedy business.”¹ He oversaw the distribution of 15 films that year through the Mutt and Jeff Film Exchange. His very public involvement in both the distribution and the production of the films was meant to reassure

1. “Bud Fisher Films Corporation,” *Moving Picture World*, May 19, 1917, 1085.

viewers that the shorts would receive Fisher's personal attention. By this time, Fisher had reached celebrity status as the creator of Mutt and Jeff, and the attachment of his name to these films made for a strong selling point. According to *Moving Picture World*, Fisher's "tremendous advertising campaign" for the cartoons was quite successful, with *Mutt and Jeff* appearing in "278 of the best dailies in the country" and "seen daily by an audience of 17,000,000 people."² Though Fisher constructed himself as the auteur of the Mutt and Jeff cartoons, he appears to have been little more than a figurehead, farming out the animation to Barré-Bowers Studios. In 1918, one year after he declared his personal control over all aspects of production and distribution, Fisher turned distribution rights over to the Fox Film Corporation, quietly promising exhibitors that "'Bud' Fisher is with [Fox] for a finer Mutt and Jeff Animated Cartoon service than ever before."³ In a 1969 interview, *On Strike* animator Dick Huemer described Fisher's involvement in the films as purely financial and said that the animators rarely saw him.⁴

Fisher's dubious involvement behind the scenes makes *On Strike* an even more fascinating piece, as it features the cartoonist as well as his animated "creations." The film follows Mutt and Jeff, who, outraged that Fisher is reaping the financial rewards of their popularity, decide to strike. The film provides interesting insight into Fisher's public image and the discourse around his relationship to Mutt and Jeff.

The opening shot features a projectionist and his friend discussing Bud Fisher's success. The projectionist advises his friend to "go out front and see this reel of Bud himself leading the life of Riley." The shot is almost completely static, with the exception of the speech bubbles that appear above the characters' heads. The dialogue between these two anonymous characters may seem out of place in a Mutt and Jeff short, but the scene serves to introduce the conflict and situate Fisher as a

2. "Bud Fisher An Executive," *Moving Picture World*, September 1, 1917, 1393.

3. "Mutt and Jeff Continue Mad Career on Screen in Fisher's Comic Cartoons," *Moving Picture World*, July 19, 1919, 360.

4. Dick Huemer, "Pioneer Portraits," *Cartoonist Profiles* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1969): 14–18.

familiar celebrity. More important, the distinct aesthetic and minimal movement in the opening ties this animated Mutt and Jeff film to its comic strip origins.

When the two characters exit to watch the reel, Mutt and Jeff emerge from a film canister. With the appearance of the miniature Mutt and Jeff, the aesthetic shifts from the static pages of the comic strip to the more dynamic movement of animation. Hoping to see what their boss has been up to, they sneak into the theater to watch the reel. The film cuts between the reel, a live-action sequence of Fisher, and the animated Mutt and Jeff watching from the back of the theater. The live-action sequence shows Fisher living an affluent lifestyle, complete with chauffeur, butler, and beautiful home. While the incorporation of Fisher into the story line situates him in the Mutt and Jeff world, the contrast between the “realist” aesthetic of Fisher’s footage and the animated portion of the film also sets Fisher apart from his characters. This is most evident in the way the live-action sequences represent Fisher’s bourgeois lifestyle, while the animation portrays the high jinks of Mutt and Jeff, characters clearly coded as belonging to the working class. These contrasts become even more evident as Mutt and Jeff take control of the means of production and make their own film. Ultimately, the film tells us, without Fisher they produce an inferior or at least a less polished product. These differences point to high and low divides, in terms of both aesthetics and class. The class distinction is particularly relevant in relation to the film’s theme of labor unrest.

When they see how much money their boss is making, Mutt and Jeff demand a cut: “We want 75% of the profits—a three-hour day and a five-day week!!” When Fisher refuses, Mutt and Jeff decide to go on strike. The film’s highlighting of labor unrest was likely the result of a series of major strikes and labor disputes that took place after World War I. However, it might also be possible to connect *On Strike* to the specific case of the Actors’ Equity Association strike that began on August 7, 1919. The strike lasted 30 days and affected eight cities in the United States. The reference to arbitration in *On Strike* and Mutt’s quick dismissal (“Arbitrate me eye!!!”) may be an allusion to the failed attempts at arbitration that led up to the Actors’ Equity strike. *On Strike* was

released in January 1920, five months after the actors' strike was resolved. Given the time needed to create hand-drawn animation, the production of the film may be dated closer to the time of the strike.

Once on strike, Mutt and Jeff set about making their own cartoon. When it is finally time for their debut, they look on anxiously from the back of the theater. At this point we are treated to another film-within-a-film, as Mutt and Jeff's animated short fills the screen. The quality of the work is noticeably lower, and the narrative is lacking. We even see a technical glitch when Jeff fires a bullet, which stops in midair while his foe falls to the ground. The audience is unimpressed by the film, leading Mutt and Jeff to ask Fisher for their old jobs back. Mutt sends Jeff in to talk to him, and when Jeff returns, his face lights up: "He was so glad to see me that he kissed me."

Interestingly the film speaks clearly to Fisher's discussion of Mutt and Jeff in the press. The same year *On Strike* was released Fisher published an article in *Photoplay*, detailing the animation process. Although he did not play an active role in the making of his films, Fisher describes the painstaking process of hand-drawn animation. Over the course of the article Fisher never discloses his minimized role in the animation process, nor does he acknowledge collaboration with other artists. In fact, Fisher gives most of the credit to Mutt and Jeff. They "control their own destinies," and "All I have to do is to give them some scenery and they supply the action."⁵ In an article published three years before *On Strike*, Fisher even says of Mutt and Jeff, "I think they enjoy working for me, and I certainly hope they never call a strike."⁶ The idea that these characters had a "life" outside the control of their creator is true in a certain sense. This life beyond Fisher, however, had little to do with his fantasy of Mutt and Jeff's agency and more to do with the work of other artists.

Not only did Fisher play a minimal role in the animation process, but his involvement in the comic strip was also dwindling during the teens. By the time *On Strike* was released in early 1920,

5. Bud Fisher, "'Here's How!'—Says Bud," *Photoplay*, July 18, 1920, 50.

6. "How Mutt and Jeff Happened," *Moving Picture World*, August 11, 1917, 965.

cartoonist Ed Mack was doing much of the work on the Mutt and Jeff comic. In contrast, the stylistic discrepancies between Mutt and Jeff and their self-made animated counterparts in *On Strike* reinforces Fisher's public image as auteur. Although Mutt erases and successfully redraws Jeff in the process of producing their film, when their finished product is screened, it becomes evident that even Mutt and Jeff cannot produce authentic versions of themselves. Taken in conjunction with Fisher's ongoing lawsuits (first against the *San Francisco Chronicle* and later against Hearst Newspapers) for ownership of his characters, the film, though produced by other artists, reinforces Fisher's status as Mutt and Jeff's creator. Ironically, Fisher's onscreen appearance in *On Strike* may represent the most substantial creative role he played in the Mutt and Jeff films. Nonetheless, the visibility Fisher attained onscreen and in the press made him inseparable from his creations, even if he spent most of his time living the "life of Riley."

—Erin Hanna