



Laurel & Hardy: A Celebration

*By Adam Pepper
Session 1*



Welcome to Session 1 of this celebration of the life, times and laughs of Laurel & Hardy! This year marks 60 years since the death of Stan Laurel, and English Vaudeville comedian who became part of the world's most famous on-screen double act.

Over the next ten weeks, we will journey through their lives, their movies, their highs and lows, and immerse ourselves in the history of their time in Hollywood; a time when movies were only just beginning!

So, adjust your hat, avoid the banana skin and let's follow 'the boys' on an adventure...

Session 1:

In Session 1, we will travel back to the mid-1800s. The industrial revolution is in full swing and the factory worker has become the job to clamour for in cities all over the UK and the world. Migration to the cities for these jobs opens up a new demand; the demand for entertainment!

And, as a new breed of theatre appears across the industrial landscape, the Music Hall, a new breed of comedian is needed to entertain the hard-working masses.

And, with this fancy new gas lighting along the streets, it's safe to stay out laughing until late into the night.

So, follow us as we head out to meet a young Chaplin, a young Stan Laurel and a host of weird and wonderful entertainers.

Oh, and something called the 'moving picture' gets invented! It'll never catch on...

Useful information for Session 1:

Dan Leno

George Wild Galvin (20 December 1860 – 31 October 1904), better known by the stage name Dan Leno, was a leading English music hall comedian and musical theatre actor during the late Victorian era. He was best known, aside from his music hall act, for his dame roles in the annual pantomimes that were popular at London's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, from 1888 to 1904.

Leno was born in St Pancras, London, and began to entertain as a child. In 1864, he joined his parents on stage in their music hall act, and he made his first solo appearance, aged nine, at the Britannia Music Hall in Coventry. As a youth, he was famous for his clog dancing, and in his teen years, he became the star of his family's act. He adopted the stage name Dan Leno and, in 1884, made his first performance under that name in London. As a solo artist, he became increasingly popular during the late 1880s and 1890s, when he was one of the highest-paid comedians in the world. He developed a music hall act of talking about life's mundane subjects, mixed with comic songs and surreal observations, and created a host of mostly working-class characters to illustrate his stories. In 1901, still at the peak of his career, he performed his "Huntsman" sketch for Edward VII at Sandringham. The monarch was so impressed that Leno became publicly known as "the king's jester".

Leno also appeared in burlesque and, every year from 1888 to 1904, in the Drury Lane Theatre's Christmas pantomime spectacles. He was generous and active in charitable causes, especially to benefit performers in need. Leno continued to appear in musical comedies and his own music hall routines until 1902, although he suffered increasingly from alcoholism. This, together with his long association with dame and low comedy roles, prevented

him from being taken seriously as a dramatic actor, and he was turned down for Shakespearean roles. Leno began to behave in an erratic and furious manner by 1902, and he suffered a mental breakdown in early 1903. He was committed to a mental asylum, but was discharged later that year. After one more show, his health declined, and he died aged 43.

Fred Karno

Frederick John Westcott (26 March 1865 – 17 September 1941), best known by his stage name Fred Karno, was an English theatre impresario of the British music hall. As a comedian of slapstick he is credited with popularising the custard-pie-in-the-face gag. During the 1890s, in order to circumvent stage censorship, Karno developed a form of sketch comedy without dialogue.

Cheeky authority-defying sketches such as *Jail Birds* (1895) in which prisoners play tricks on warders and *Early Birds* (1899), showing the poverty and realities for the poor of London's East End, can be seen as precursors of movie silent comedy. His innovative 1904 sketch *Mumming Birds*, produced for the Hackney Empire in London, became the longest-running sketch the music halls produced. Many of his comics subsequently worked in film and used Karno material throughout their work. Film producer Hal Roach stated: "Fred Karno is not only a genius, he is the man who originated slapstick comedy. We in Hollywood owe much to him."

Among the music hall comedians who worked for him were Charlie Chaplin and his understudy, Arthur Stanley Jefferson, who later adopted the name of Stan Laurel. These were alumni of his comedy companies all of whom trained at his headquarters, The Fun Factory, in Vaughan Road, Camberwell, South East London. Such was Karno's fame that his name became associated with any chaotic situation, and the disorganised volunteer soldiers of the Great War labelled themselves "Fred Karno's Army". The phrase was also adapted into a trench song in World War I, to the tune of the hymn "The Church's One Foundation". In World War II it was adapted as the Anthem of the Guinea Pig Club, the first line becoming "We are McIndoe's Army ...". The song also features in the musical comedy film *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969).



Films to look out for:

Mister Moon (1901)

A Trip To the Moon (1902)

The ? Motorist (1906)

Brats (1930)

Chaplin (1992)

The Limehouse Golem (2016)