

# The Music Box

By Randy Skretvedt

This is the Laurel and Hardy film everybody remembers. The image of Laurel and Hardy forever pushing a piano up a tremendous flight of steps seems to have stuck in the public consciousness, a tribute to this movie's beautifully controlled milk-ing of one basic gag. Just as Harold Lloyd is forever dangling from the hands of the clock in "Safety Last," Laurel and Hardy are fated to carry that piano up the steps and watch it roll back down again forever, two slapstick Sisyphuses.



*The Boys find themselves in a fountain with a piano. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

Stan and Ollie are dispatched to deliver a player piano to a hilltop home. The boys make several trips up the redoubtable flight of steps, and just as many down. En route, they encounter a haughty nursemaid, a grouchy cop, and the blustery Prof. Theodore von Schwarzenhoffer. The boys make a shambles of the house while trying to bring in the piano; they are interrupted by the arrival of the professor, whose home this is. He insists that this piano can't be his — he hates them — and to prove it, he hacks it to pieces with an axe. (This film was made as the Great Depression was deepening. A piano, formerly something found in almost every home, was by now an expensive extravagance that few could afford. No doubt audiences of 1932 gasped and squirmed as they watched the professor destroying this costly instrument.)

This film is a partial reworking of a silent L&H short, "Hats Off," where Stan and Ollie were carrying a bulky washing machine instead of a piano. The crew used the same monumental flight of steps that had given the boys such grief in 1927. For you sight-seers, they're located in the Silver Lake district of Los Angeles, between 923 and 935 Vendome Street, near Del Monte. (No doubt many Laurel and Hardy fans have searched in vain for the fictitious 1127 Walnut Avenue referred to by the professor's wife and the salesman at the start of the film.) In recent years, the steps have become a cherished landmark not only to the team's fans, but to Los Angeles residents in general. A sign now marks the "Music Box Steps," and a commemorative plaque has been placed at their base; nearby at the Del Monte Triangle is Laurel and Hardy Park, where the second Saturday of October marks the annual Music Box Steps Day. Few movie locations have been so honored.

Billy Gilbert, who was also a "gag man" at the Hal Roach Studios, recalled in 1969 that he, Stan and the other writers thought that Stan and Ollie should deliver something "huge and cumbersome but also delicate" to the hilltop home. "That was about all we needed for a script," Gilbert stated. "When we started shooting, we found to our delight that the rollers on the bottom of the piano crate were a great plus because it rolled easily down the full flight. The other gags we wrote right there on location. We had already decided that I would be the owner of the house and that I would hate pianos. I decided to do a German accent as it made me different from Jimmy Finlayson and Edgar Kennedy who also played comedy villains with *The Fellows*. The piano — I should say pianos, because we wrecked several, were dummies as I'm sure everyone would know.

"Stan Laurel was the greatest comedy writer I ever knew. He loved his work and was a wonderful man. Babe Hardy was, too. They were both fine gentlemen."

Gilbert, born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1894, was in show business from the age of 12 and appeared in more than 200 films and television shows, notably the screwball comedy "His Girl Friday," Charles Chaplin's "The Great Dictator," and Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," where he gave voice to Sneezy. The professor's wife is portrayed by Hazel Howell, born in Los Angeles in 1898 and in films from 1920 to 1933.

The policeman is played by Salt Lake City native Sam Lufkin (1891-1952), who appeared in more than 150 films, 39 of them with Laurel and Hardy.

The nurse is Lilyan Irene (1892-1979); although her voice gives no trace of it, she was from Manchester, England and had roles in notable films such as "Mutiny on the Bounty" and "Random Harvest." The piano salesman is William Gillespie (1894-1938), born in Aberdeen, Scotland. He appeared with Chaplin in "Easy Street," "The Cure" and "The Immigrant" in 1917, and later that year joined Hal Roach, for whom he would make almost all of his 170-odd films.

The postman is diminutive Charlie Hall (1899-1959), whose distinctive accent is by way of Birmingham, England. He appeared in 47 films with Laurel and Hardy, more than any other actor, and was aptly nicknamed "The Little Menace" by Hal Roach. He had been a carpenter at the studio before breaking into acting, and continued working at that job when between pictures.

The "voice" of the piano was supplied by T. Marvin Hatley, pianist and musical director of the Roach studios. Oklahoma-born Hatley (1905-1986) composed many of the background themes used in the L&H films, and also wrote "Ku-Ku," their theme song.

The filming, which took place in December 1931, was complicated by some cloudy days; the long sequence of carrying the piano up the steps was shot

over several days, and the sunlight had to be consistent. This meant that there was less time to edit the film before the scheduled release date. Stan Laurel did the cutting along with Roach studios editor Bert Jordan. "Stan really had to work to meet the schedule," recalled crew member Roy Seawright. "He'd be in the cutting room, have a sandwich brought in, maybe sleep in his dressing room for a couple of hours, and then back to work."

"The Music Box" deserved its popularity, which was confirmed on November 18, 1932, when the film won an Academy Award as the "Best Short Subject (Comedy)" of the 1931-32 season.

And in case you're wondering, there are 133 steps.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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