

“Casey at the Bat”--De Wolf Hopper (1906)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Ernest Thayer



Original label



De Wolf Hopper

As charming as Ernest Thayer's 1888 classic baseball ode "Casey at the Bat" is, it's hard to imagine that it would be as well-known or beloved today had it not been for the dedicated support and vivacious performance that vaudevillian De Wolf Hopper brought to the work first on stage and then evermore in a popular, enduring 1906 recording. It was Hopper's 10,000+ performances of the piece, and his rendition of it on wax, that forever secured the poetic tale of Mudville's determined, if ultimately unsuccessful, hitter within the national consciousness.

Ernest Thayer was a 1885 Harvard grad (majoring in philosophy) and onetime contributor to the school's legendary "Harvard Lampoon" magazine. He first published his poem, "Casey at the Bat," in the "San Francisco Examiner" on June 3rd of 1888. It ran without an author's credit. It reappeared, again unaccredited, in an abbreviated form, a few weeks later in the "New York Sun." There, it caught the eye of writer Archibald Gunter who clipped it and stuck it in his wallet.

Serendipitously, Gunter happened to be friends with famed stage actor De Wolf Hopper, who, in August of 1888, was appearing at the McCaull Opera Company in New York City in the comic opera "Prince Methusalem."

Hopper, a 6' 5" actor/comedian with a deep, booming voice, was already one of the Broadway stage's leading players, having had starring roles in "The Black Hussar," "Erminie," and various Harrigan and Hart musicals. In 1888, Hopper, a life-long baseball fanatic, one day suggested to the opera houses' owners that they host, for one performance only, the home team New York Giants and the visiting Chicago White Stockings. The owners agreed. Determined to make the evening different and memorable, Hopper began to seek out something special to perform. His friend Gunter believed he had just the thing and gave him the clipping of "Casey at the Bat."

Memorizing the poem quickly, Hopper delivered it for the first time on stage that night while in the middle of the second act. It was an immediate hit. Hopper related in his autobiography, "Once a Clown, Always a Clown," "I thought at the time that I was merely repeating a poem, a fatherless waif clipped from a San Francisco newspaper. As it turned out I was launching a career, a career of declaiming those verses up and down this favored land the balance of my life."

The mix of Hopper's impassioned performance, the poem's solid rhyme scheme, dramatic tension and unexpected outcome enthralled the audience, even the non-baseball players who were in attendance. Word of mouth spread quickly and, soon not only would "Casey" become a permanent part of Hopper's "Prince Methusalem" performance but he would also start

performing it elsewhere and everywhere. Throughout the remainder of his career, almost everyone one of his curtain calls, regardless of the production, would bring shouts for “Casey.” They were requests that Hopper was happy to oblige. And, then, once again, for five minutes and 40 seconds, he would work himself up and repeat once more Casey’s less-than-triumphant tale.

Ironically, despite Hopper’s fame with the piece, he was not the first to record it. Russell Hunting, an entertainer and early sound recordist, recorded it first, in 1893 and then again in 1898, both times using a heavy Irish brogue. In 1905, John Kaiser recorded it for Edison. Hopper’s version, recorded for Victor, didn’t come out until 1906. Hopper would be the first to commit the verse to film, in an early short subject made by Lee De Forest in 1922.

In any medium, as it had reportedly been on stage, Hopper’s reading on record was full oratory, an all-out performance. He throws his entire theatrical might into its presentation. He rolls his “R’s”; he indulges in various vocal flourishes (He said, “I dropped my voice to B flat, below low C at [the line] ‘the multitude was awed’”); he incorporates various rises and falls in volume. His delivery can be jarring upon its first hearing, especially to those who are used to more staid and subdued poetry readings.

His showy performance has been described as affected, melodramatic, over the top, even borderline parody. But Hopper is just bringing life to the words. He takes on various voices throughout the reading, adopting different guises. He is Casey’s thoughts, the anxious crowd in their anticipation, and the umpire as he bellows out a reverberating “Striiiiike!” Hopper even adds a few vocal sound effects throughout but saves his most impassioned emphasis and energy for the poem’s concluding line, the dire “But there is no joy in Mudville—mighty Casey has struck out.” Hopper’s voice practically weeps at its sad finality.

Though Hopper always recited “Casey” without accompaniment, his pacing, rhythm and the poem’s tight rhyming couplets lend it a sort of musical quality. Though the subject matter is obviously quite different, one finds in Hopper’s “Casey” traces of the avant-guard, radicalized poetry slams born in coffee shops in the late 20th century as well as the basic essence of rap.

Since Hopper’s famous version of the poem, the “mighty Casey’s” tale has often been retold. Wallace Beery starred in a 1927 film version. Comic Jerry Colonna recorded a rendition for Disney which later provided the basis for a 1946 Disney cartoon. Jackie Gleason performed it on his television show in the 1950s. Actress/producer Shelley Duvall later adapted it for an episode of her “Shelley Duvall’s Tall Tales and Legends” with Elliot Gould playing the lead. And Garrison Keillor has performed it on his radio show, “A Prairie Home Companion.” Lending the work an even greater level of authenticity, pro ball players from Johnny Bench to Tug McGraw have also voiced the poem, often in orchestral settings.

Notably, unlike most contemporary poets, the poem’s author, Thayer, never made any known recordings of his most famous work. Perhaps this is for the best since, according to Hopper at least, Thayer’s own rendition was rather wimpy and timid, especially when compared to the versions of Hopper and others.

Despite all the other recorded interpretations, for many, Hopper’s—even with his vocal embellishments--remains the definitive reading of baseball’s definitive poem. And its recording, despite the primitive nature of its origins, endures as a testament to the charm of the original verse and as a fitting tribute to the great American pastime.

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