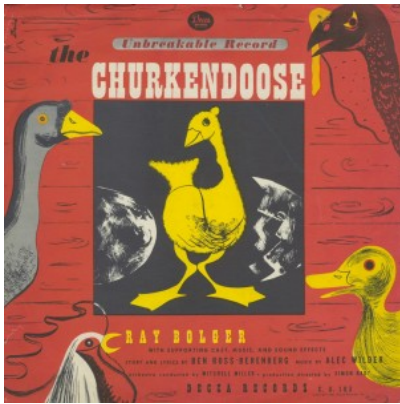


# “The Churkendoose” (1947)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original record artwork*



*Original release label*



*Ray Bolger*

Though it began its life one year prior as a children’s book by Ben Ross Berenberg, the 1947 recording of “The Churkendoose” is so well-remembered and well-regarded today that many no doubt know it only in its aural form.

“The Churkendoose” children’s record, which was named to the National Recording Registry in 2008, stars the singing and acting (and perhaps even dancing talents) of Ray Bolger. Its story and lyrics are by Berenberg. Its music is by Alec Wilder and its orchestra was conducted by Mitchell (Mitch) Miller. It was issued for the first time, as an “unbreakable” record, via the Decca label.

Despite a few mythological underpinnings, the tale of “The Churkendoose” is a relatively simple one. “The Churkendoose” tells the story of a strange little creature, hatched into a barnyard from an oversized egg, born with the head of a chicken, the body of a turkey, the legs of a duck and a mouth like a goose. Meanwhile, its sole ear protrudes from the back of its head. Along with its exceedingly odd appearance, this mixed-up fowl is also unable to walk (but he sure can dance!). He can also already talk--and always in rhyme. He also already knows what he is—a churkendoose!--and he already possesses an extraordinary sense of self. As way of introduction he sings:

Well, I’m not a chicken and I’m not a duck  
I have more brains than I have luck  
I’m not a turkey, and I’m not a goose  
Can’t you see? I’m a churkendoose.

But—as often in life—such rabid physical differences and self-definition are not readily accepted by his fellow farm animals. In fact, he is immediately ostracized. The Churkendoose is unable to quack, awfully small and, according to those around him, “mighty ugly.” So the others ask of him, “What good are you?” Even the Churkendoose’s seemingly innate ability to sing, dance and recite curries little favor with the other livestock. But our hero is not so easily demeaned, protesting:

Must I be a chicken or a goose?  
Can’t I be a churkendoose?

Still, amid a sad swell of horns, the Churkendoose is swiftly banished from the henhouse by the large and in-charge rooster whose imperiousness owes more than a bit to “Alice in Wonderland’s” Queen of Hearts (“Off with her head!”).

And so, a dejected and confused Churkendoose flees to the yard--mirroring “Tubby the Tuba’s” shameful, temporary exile from his orchestra in that other children’s classic. Once on the outside, the Churkendoose sees his reflection in water (again, mirroring Tubby) and wonders aloud why he’s been judged so harshly:

Can it be that I am such a sight? That when others see me they take fright?  
Though I can see what they meant when they said my legs are bent.  
Am I ugly? No. I’m just different.  
[...]  
An alligator’s not a thing of grace. And a camel hasn’t got a lovely face.  
Though I’m not pretty, front or rear,  
And I only have one ear,  
Am I ugly? No, just a little queer.

But our hero is soon snapped out of his doldrums by a commotion in the barnyard. There is a flurry of feathers and clucks! It seems a fox has descended upon the henhouse! He is “running this way and that,” trying to catch a snack. But when the fox turns and eyes the Churkendoose, he himself becomes so frightened of the odd-looking little creature that he quickly retreats, “so fast he...flew backwards.”

Immediately, the Churkendoose is recast as a hero, beloved by the barnyard residents. “You saved our lives, Churkendoose. That fox will never come back as long as you’re here! Three cheers for the Churkendoose!”

But such a speedy reversal of opinion does not sit well with the churkendoose who upbraids the barnyard’s (society’s) sudden, convenient hero worship:

No, no wait. Before you caused me tears, now you're giving me three cheers.  
'Cause I chased the fox and set you free.  
Well, I don't want the tears and I don't want the cheers.  
Can't you like me just because I'm me?

Soon, realizing the error of their ways, all the animals quickly become accepting of the Churkendoose. The ducks teach him to swim while he teaches the ducks to dance. He relates:

What fun we have. Now we help each other and learn from each other.  
[...]  
Making friends can be a pleasure 'cause a good friend is a treasure.

Along with its lovely central message of tolerance and acceptance, the recording of “The Churkendoose” can also boast superb, catchy songs, kicked off with a robust, grandiose overture. It also gains immeasurably from the performance of Ray Bolger. Bolger, who, of course, had already achieved immortality as the beloved Scarecrow in 1939’s “The Wizard of Oz,” brings to “The Churkendoose” his customary amount of charm along with fluid, sprightly vocals and his famous hoofing; the latter in a section of the record where footfalls signal that the Churkendoose is dancing on the farm.

Obviously, the tale of “The Churkendoose” is both fable and metaphor. It has its (webbed?) feet in the folkloric history of any number of odd animal combos such as the griffin or the Pegasus or even such human-animal hybrids as the mermaid or Minotaur. And, of course, much of its story

and structure is owed to Hans Christian Anderson's timeless classic "The Ugly Duckling" as well as that seminal holiday classic "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." With its addressing of the beauty standard, it also brings to mind "Beauty and the Beast" (in all its permutations) as well as various Rod Serling "Twilight Zone" episodes, specifically "The Eye of the Beholder" and "Number 12 Looks Just Like You." (At one time the Churkendoose wonders, "How could they tell I was ugly?... Maybe for a churkendoose, I was handsome!")

The originators of "The Churkendoose" certainly saw a symbolism in its story, one comparable to the US's immigrant experience and America's proposed melting pot. In the album's original liner notes, penned by Bud Fielding White, the title animal is labeled a "mixture." It then expounds that: "most Americans are mixtures too. We're part French, part Italian, part Jew, part Catholic, part Protestant,..." "The Churkendoose" then becomes not only a testament against lookism but also one for racial and religious tolerance, in fact for anyone who society blatantly deems "different."

Beyond even appearance and origin though, "The Churkendoose" also takes on many children's sometimes fragile sense of self-worth. The other barnyard animals' reoccurring taunt of "What good are you?" has no doubt been heard by many a youngster, perhaps even asked of themselves. The Churkendoose's ultimate triumph over his detractors is one of this recording's most timeless and timely lessons.

While, as a biological specimen, the churkendoose may have been one of a kind, its influence in popular culture and children's literature, is still, nevertheless, being felt. Certainly there are traces of it in Bette Midler's "Saga of Baby Divine," a colorful book from 1983 that tells the story of a Little Miss M. born in high-heels, a single red curl on top of her head and with the ability to say but one word, "More!" Despite her differences, Baby D. knows that there's still a place for her. Later, HBO produced an almost sequel of sorts to "The Churkendoose," or at least a more political companion piece, with its airing of the cartoon "The Sissy Duckling" in 1999. "Sissy," as its title suggests, concerns an effeminate male duck who is ostracized by the rest of his flock for his dislike of sports and his love of cooking and art. Ultimately though, Elmer, the duckling of the title, wins over his community and even his own hesitant father with his special talents and compassion. Written by Broadway veteran Harvey Fierstein (based upon his own children's book), the cartoon featured a star-studded vocal cast including Sharon Stone as its narrator.

As for "The Churkendoose," since its debut in 1947, its name and spirit has been widely adopted as a symbol by an assortment of people and causes. In 2002, its name was utilized by the Handle Institute, a foundation for the holistic treatment of neurodevelopment and learning difficulties, for its book "The Churkendoose Anthology: True Stories of Triumph Over Neurological Dysfunction." Since 2006, a foundation, also devoted to neurodevelopment issues, has gone by the name The Churkendoose Project.

"The Churkendoose" has even been analyzed in the philosophy departments of academia. Randy Best of the North Carolina Center for Ethics has expanded upon the story's overall message of society choosing to fear or destroy that which it finds to be different from itself.

That this make-believe, amalgamated animal could serve not only as enchanting entertainment for children but also as such a long-enduring tool for political and social acceptance might have come as a surprise to even its creators. Meanwhile, that it could go on to become an advocate for learning differences as well as an inspiration for a popular gay allegory is probably a shock to just about everyone. But as the Churkendoose itself has said, it all depends "on how you look at things."

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