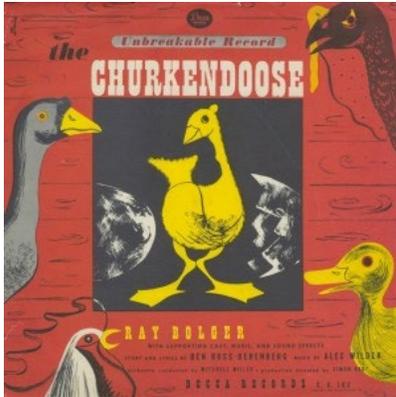


“The Churkendoose” (1947)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Holly Van Leuven (guest post)*



Original record artwork



Original release label



Ray Bolger

“It Depends on How You Look at Things”: Ray Bolger’s “The Churkendoose” Preserves an American Parable

*Does the pear tree say to the apple tree /
“I hate you ‘cause you’re not like me”? /
Does the green grass ask the sky so blue, /
“I’m green, why aren’t you green, too?” /
...they’re different yet they get along, /
And no one seems to think it’s wrong.
---Ray Bolger as “The Churkendoose”*

In the 1930s and ‘40s, Ray Bolger inhabited rarified air in New York: he lived in a beautiful apartment high up in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and he could be recognized as a bona fide Broadway star. That status came in 1936, when he starred in Rodgers and Hart’s “On Your Toes,” in which he originated the jazz-ballet “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue.” His status was galvanized when he starred in the last original Rodgers and Hart production, “By Jupiter,” in 1942. He also endeared himself to the city and to the nation when he bowed out of the starring role after a year, when he could have easily played another six months, and instead traveled to the South Pacific to entertain troops in World War II as part of the United Service Organization (USO). For decades after, soldiers who met Bolger on that stint spoke of the genuine compassion and camaraderie that he offered them, the humanity that he brought to the bomb-addled islands, and how he impressed them for the rest of their lives. Bolger returned to the Broadway stage to star in “Three to Make Ready,” a revue, for most of 1946. He would become a theater legend in 1948 for his performances as Charley Wykeham in Feuer and Martin’s inaugural Broadway show “Where’s Charley?,” for which he won the Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Musical. (Sadly, no original Broadway cast recording of this show was ever made, due to the second Petrillo Ban.)

But in between, it made perfect sense for a man of Bolger's sophistication, popularity, and good will to pop into the Decca studios and record "The Churkendoose," a sweet musical ballad about a fowl that's "part turkey, chicken, duck, and goose," and who has been hatched into a barnyard full of creatures hostile to anyone who breaks the mold of what a bird ought to be. In the nine-minute number, the Churkendoose suffers exile, reflects on his circumstances, inadvertently saves the critical creatures in his life from a predator, and gains acceptance, not because it is given to him based on merit, but because he has accepted himself and understands that difference is to be celebrated--a big-hearted stance the other birds take to.

This treasure, now ensconced in the National Recording Registry, features the music of Alec Wilder, who wrote easy study pieces for children for a wide variety of instruments, and who also wrote the music for a suite of children's recordings that became treasured childhood memories for Baby Boomers: Bolger's "Churkendoose," as well as "Herman Ermine in Rabbit Town" narrated by John Garfield; a version of "Pinochio" for Mickey Rooney, and "Miss Chicken Little" for Jo Sullivan--all actors with significant ties to the American theatre. Matching Bolger with "The Churkendoose" would have been a no-brainer to the Decca decision-makers. He had the status. He was in town. And the character was so delightfully referent to Bolger himself that the actor would have no problem performing it, poking fun at himself in the process.

Like Bolger's greatest surviving work--MGM's 1939 film musical "The Wizard of Oz," in which he played the Scarecrow--his recording of "The Churkendoose" seems at first quaintly simple, the sort of heartfelt performance that remained in children's memories even though Bolger had none of the vocal gifts of Bing Crosby (who happened to be re-recording the master of "White Christmas" at Decca that same year, as the 1942 original master had been played so many times it was worn out). While it's easy to watch "The Wizard of Oz" in 2021 and think that Bolger perfectly prepared for the role of the loose-limbed Scarecrow, in truth his own style of dance was so singular that the Scarecrow was really the only movie part naturally suited to him. "Oz" had plenty of references to old Vaudeville routines that adults in 1939 would have understood, giving dual layers of meaning in the film. So, too, with this record. Adults listening to "The Churkendoose" record with their children in the years after its release would have caught many more in-jokes that reflected the zeitgeist and Bolger's popularity. For example, the other barnyard animals heckle the Churkendoose with taunts of, "You look very peculiar! What kind of legs are those?" The script paying homage to Bolger's unique physicality, which had earned him the nickname "Rubberlegs" as far back as his time in Vaudeville in the 1920s.

Bolger was not exactly a singer--as the line, "You do not look like a chicken, you have only one ear!" winks at. In the early 1950s, he would work on the musical film "April in Paris" with Doris Day, and partnering with a woman who had perfect pitch and perfect rhythm put him a bit out of his depth. His natural gifts fit the raspy sad-sack bird perfectly, as did the Churkendoose's idiosyncrasy: There was only one Churkendoose, and America only ever had one entertainer like Bolger. His talents distinguished him as a true star, and as he himself said of his Broadway work, "I shared top billing with no one." He was too singular to be a true leading man, get the pretty girl, or win the day. Instead, he won acclaim for numerous innovative roles on stage, including the stay-at-home house-husband Sapiens, partner of an Amazonian warrior, in "By Jupiter," and a college student who spends the better part of three hours running around in an old

maid's costume trying to trick his girlfriend into staying in his dormitory, assuring her with the occasional presence of the old woman that all was proper (in "Where's Charley?").

Bolger possessed an astonishing talent for dance, and an equally impressive gift for what is today called "living in the present moment." He had political philosophies as a young man on Broadway (conservative ones, quite the opposite of most of his colleagues, he would later say), but no political aspirations (those came later, in the 1960s, when he decided to campaign for some prominent national Republicans). He was much more interested in transforming people at the individual level, captivating them with his dancing in the theater each night, a great point of pride for him, and by telling stories with wonderful messages and a little whimsy in them, particularly to children. "The Churkendoose" tied together several of his interests: providing a positive and life-affirming message to the young and young at heart, completing a high quality project that both acknowledged and furthered his status, and giving of himself in a way that touches children across generations, even if they have no idea who the voice of the character belongs to.

It's more than a little sorrowful that Bolger, an athletic dancer with a superb sense of comedic timing, who worked with some of the greatest writers, directors, choreographers, and producers of his era on stage and screen, had his more mature projects and accomplishments lost to time for various reasons. The great work that distinguished him as an artist on Broadway was never recorded on film, and so as the legions of theater-goers who saw him in-person have passed away, he has lived on only in the whispers of Old Broadway lore, in the energy felt in the lobbies and mezzanines of the Adelphi, the St. James, and the Winter Garden Theaters before the velvet ropes drop. His greatest film accomplishment, the 1952 Warner Brothers movie adaptation of "Where's Charley?", was never got released beyond its original theatrical run for some complicated and mysterious but ultimately bureaucratic reasons. Likewise his thousands of television guest appearances, night club appearances, Las Vegas strip appearances, and special honors--he was the Master of Ceremonies on the opening night of Radio City Music Hall--have mostly all passed away into archives or posterity.

What has best preserved the most indelible aspects of him--his puckish humor, his Boston accent, and his celebratory attitude toward the singular--are the works he made to speak to children. Like with "Oz's" Scarecrow, the voice of the Churkendoose--Bolger's voice--resides in the memories of generations of children. They likely don't know his name. But they remember the stories he has told them, and he is speaking still, a sincere and important message that can help our society 75 years later. Bolger, as the Churkendoose, concludes by speak-singing:

"...Now we help each other and learn from each other, so you see, it depends on how you look at things...making friends can be a pleasure 'cause a good friend is a treasure, no matter how you look at things."

Holly Van Leuven is the author of "Ray Bolger: More Than a Scarecrow," published in 2019 by Oxford University Press.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

