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**BOZO THE CLOWN:
AN ICON AS AMERICAN AS AN APPLE PIE IN THE FACE**

by

KENT OSWALD

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2023

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APPROVAL

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement
for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Bozo the Clown: An Icon as American as an Apple Pie in the Face

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Advisor: Dr. David T. Humphries

There is no single path toward the creation of an American icon, a person or item with resonance to all in the country as well as having an ability to serve as a symbol of America itself for those outside the borders. This thesis considers certain elements that propelled the journey of the entertainment for children, Bozo the Clown, into a representational figure in the minds of young and old. Like all things American, his roots include many elements from outside the country: the name derives from foreign tongues mostly in derisory terms, but in at least one instance as a prod for contemplation. Within the country, the character has been a commercial success from his introduction in 1946 as a best-selling children's record/book combination; served as a branding tool; been used in the early years of television to pioneer the idea of franchising a show, and "Bozo" now signifies in word and image what is a clown. Its cultural and commercial connection has it embedded deep within the American psyche. While there have been no Bozo the Clown records for decades, and the final Bozo television show aired in 2001, the term remains in regular use even by those with no exposure to the character on record or through a screen, and the character remains part of popular culture, not least as demonstrated with the recent sale of the rights to the name and character. The thesis analyzes the character's antecedents, uses contemporaneous accounts and academic analysis of media to chart the clown's journey as a character, and leaves off in the present, with Bozo established in culture and commerce.

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It has been a multi-year journey to get to this point, and, for better or worse, if it were up to me alone, it is likely this thesis would never have come to pass.

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CHAPTER 1

Constructing the Big Top

There is a lot you can learn from a clown, at least one particular clown. Bozo the Clown's backstory stretches forward from sources long ago and not of this country. Nevertheless, there is something of an only-in-America aspect to his story. There is also something in his development that suggests it was only possible for a figure who grew with the baby boomers and during the rise to cultural dominance of the television medium. Only then could that comic figure, with his red hair, red nose, red 83AAA size shoes, white face, and blue suit with his name on the cuffs, take the path toward American icon status, first as the lead character in a book and record for children, to a status today where he is viewed around the world as American as an apple pie in the face.

His roots reach back as part of clown history to characters of ancient and medieval times who questioned authority; he has the general demeanor of the silly adult who generation after generation makes children laugh; and, thanks to the vision of a few influential mid-twentieth century minds and particular talents, he is a seminal part of an evolving media and treads new paths of commerce until he becomes deeply embedded in American culture. There is also a current attempt to morph him into a multi-cultural, digital friendly figure more attuned to the ways and whys of the twenty-first century. He is a phrase and character known to the vast majority of Americans (as well as many people outside the country), most of whom likely have little, or perhaps any awareness of how they know this.

If that seems a lot to suggest about a fictional character, consider the development and influence of the Bozo who spoke to the whole city of Chicago, a man — actually not one but two men who wore the clown costume in succession — who originally amused local kids while they ate lunch for an hour before returning to school. For forty years beginning in 1961, and even as the character was licensed in other media markets around the country and world, “Bozo's Circus” was a point of pride and a connection to the soul of the city. It became, “...the most popular and successful locally produced children's series in the history of television. ‘Bozo's Circus’ also created a generation of young [beloved local baseball team] Cubs fans as most of the

games immediately followed the popular program for two decades” (“WGN-TV History”). Al Hull, who directed the show for its full run remembers that in 1991 when Chicago television station WGN celebrated their thirty-year anniversary broadcasting the franchised show, adults promenading with children during that episode’s “grand march” made a point to let him know that, “This was my childhood” (*Bozo the Clown*).

There is no clear or simple explanation of how a character providing interludes between cartoons or engaged in slapstick skits and low-level puns could build such an emotional connection with audiences. Still, those connections exist(ed) and not just in one Midwestern city. It is also not easy to imagine how many of these emotional connections there might have been, still might be, or might evolve through digital shares of long-ago broadcast episodes or a current attempt to give the character new life. Clowns had long connected with audiences and this one in all its forms had the advantage of becoming a part of people’s lives as first records and then television brought him into their homes. In 1961 when WGN first aired the show for the Windy City’s metro market there were already Bozo’s serving the emerging franchised-television show model in forty-nine other American markets and twelve foreign ones (Schumach 36). In 1978, WGN began airing their Bozo across the country, distributing via satellite their station content as a “superstation” by broadcasting a show that until 2001 “was utterly live, calculatedly silly and old-style grandeur with a thirteen-piece orchestra...”, and “...seen from Coral Gables, Florida, to Anchorage Alaska, over satellite and cable systems (*Bozo the Clown*). Because of the freedom to create a show granted by the franchise agreement — which was specific about the playing of Bozo cartoons created by the franchisor, as well as specifics such as costume and some elements of actions and dialogue of the character — WGN developed elements to the show that supported the main character’s connection with his audiences, including a live orchestra, an expanding set of comic characters, and The Grand Prize Game (and “at-home” player) that proved so popular that other Bozo shows throughout the country adopted some or all of these for their markets as well (*The Bozo Show Children’s Television Programming*).

One way to measure the impact of Bozo (a character played in Chicago by Bob Bell and Joey D’Auria) was the nationwide coverage given the news that WGN was lowering the curtain down on the final Bozo television show, fifty-two years after the character’s Los Angeles television debut, fifty-five years after his record and book debut. Nationwide coverage proclaimed the end of the Bozo show the end of an era. The lede in *The Los Angeles Times* story on Chicago television station WGN’s taping of the final episode of a franchised children’s show after a forty-year run was, “The Bozo Show’ is dead. Ain’t that a pie in the face?” (“Bozo Has Left the Building”). *The New York Times* story, “Chicago Buries Bozo. Time Passed Him By,” explained that the show’s cancellation and what seemed like the end of a piece of Americana was “marking the end of an era here, the death of an icon. It is also the latest, if not last, chapter on Bozo, the clown who once filled the airwaves around the country” (Fountain A16). Of course, by giving “the death” such coverage they were assisting in helping to keep interest alive at least a little longer.

Both newspapers, and all the other Bozo the Clown obituaries offered in 2001 missed an important element to this timepiece of Americana. The Bozo of television might be finished — an aspect of the changing nature of the television medium — just as the Bozo of the record book combination had ended. However, just because this character would no longer star in a particular form didn’t mean he had lost his connection to millions of people ended. There is something in how the character has evolved that has embedded itself into the American psyche. You can find it in the multitude of views of clips of the myriad of Bozos who appeared on television around the country. It is on display with the continuing interest in the Bozo miscellany found on auction sites. It is in the cultural references of those who watched the shows when they were live, as well as those who have grown up since but recognize what Bozo looks like, or understand that the term Bozo is built on the character of one specific fool, but “bozos” can represent all clowns.¹

¹ *The New York Times* “Mini Crossword” of November 15, 2022 — appearing during preparation of this thesis— offered the clue for three down as “Total Clowns” with “Bozos” as the answer.

We study to learn how something occurred and to see if we can take those lessons and use them to do something similar. With this specific Bozo we take a trip through some etymological influences, some circus history, and a microcosm of mid- to late twentieth century United States media and popular culture as we trace elements that help to embed a character in a country (maybe a world's) subconscious. While impossible to pinpoint exactly why it happened, or when "bozo" became "Bozo," this particular American record-book-television-merchandise clown's path to icon status, might trace all the way back to an eleventh century Catholic monk's treatise on why a divine being showed and sacrificed himself in human form. Or it might just be the result of a series of accidents that based as the character is within American culture might also be an inevitability. The tale of Bozo on Chicago superstation WGN may serve as a glimpse into how far a commercial character has become embedded in American culture, but it doesn't explain why the country continues to remember this character, instead of, for example, the teacher character from the more or less contemporaneous *Romper Room*, the television show franchising pioneer growing from its 1953 debut in Baltimore to 119 US markets and multiple foreign markets before its 1994 demise (Moran 7). There is much that can be learned from the study of a particular clown, but that does not mean that it all adds up to one clear lesson. If it did, the future of Bozo and how to succeed with the "reinvention" of an icon would be a lot clearer than it appears at present.

CHAPTER 2 The Parade of Influences

Bozo may appear a simple character, but the character has a wide range of influences and history. While there is a simplicity on the surface that connects with audiences, one manifestation of the appeal may be found audience recognition of wonder and joy in his use of the catch phrase “wowie-kazowie.” Another is available in the wisdom of the earnest expression that ended many of the shows to remember that, “It’s nice to be important, but it’s more important to be nice” (Hinton). And then there are the layers and time-tested attractions that help to explain how he appeals to so many and for so long.

For example, it appears from ancient written records that humans have always wanted an authority to provide wisdom while also connecting with characters who foolishly challenge that authority or status quo, and by standing up to it give it legitimacy. As early as Egypt’s fifth dynasty (ca. 2500 BCE) there was a priest / clown whose “purpose, as became the clown’s role in countless courtly manifestations throughout history, was to challenge the absolute authority of the ruler with the unspeakable truth of his or her fallibility” (Lebank and Bridel 2). This is the model found in one work of the noted 11th century Catholic Church father St. Anselm of Canterbury. His *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man) is an explanation for why it is necessary for the divinity to appear in human form. It was written during the years the Italian Benedictine Monk served in and was also exiled from the England of William II and Henry I. The work’s format is of the straw man asking simple questions of Anselm, whose answers focus a condescending light on the question and questioner while explaining Church teaching (Anselm). The name of the work’s foolish character, the straw man whose questioning of authority according to Anselm, “contains the objections of infidels, who despise the Christian faith because they deem it contrary to reason” (Anselm Preface), is Boso (Brinkerhoff A22).

While Anselm used his Boso to confirm a religious belief. A fool or clown can also be a disruptive figure, whose entertainment comes from a challenge of authority. Either the clown or the authority figure will be made to look silly at the end of a bit. People have long been attracted to the clown figure because it serves both as a way to measure what is and isn’t true, as well as release through laughter pressure that builds up to have an answer to every big question of life.

Delving into the history of the figure as background for talking about modern clowning, circus scholars LeBank and Bridel explain that,

Whether a part of sacred rituals first created in ancient societies and maintained in certain indigenous communities today, or a part of the far-reaching and multifaceted modern entertainment industry, the clown's function remains remarkably consistent: to turn established protocols (societal, political, cultural, logical, linguistic, or otherwise) on their heads, and to provoke a new understanding of, and appreciate for, the human condition through a celebration of foible and a mockery of power. By examining our lives from nonsensical and chaotic perspectives, clowns throughout time have given us a most vital permission, the license to laugh at ourselves and our beliefs" (LeBank and Bridel 1).

Laughing, particularly the sharing of laughter creates a sense of security. This is important for adults, who may want to feel stronger in their relationship to an authority, and important for a child, who can find the building blocks of emotional security in seeing how authority can be questioned — often humorously — and without significant negative consequences.

There may be no direct line from eleventh century philosophy to twentieth century children's programming figure, but there is a somewhat scattershot trail to be followed through different languages describing a particular type of colorful and foolish character. In Spanish "bozal" refers to someone simple or stupid; and in Italian "bozzo" is a cuckold. In French, a "beau sot," although not currently a common expression, is a figure of fun, a fool or an idiot with the "beau" being used in an ironic manner (Little 326). It is possible American soldiers serving during World War I brought back the usage — it began to appear as a nickname from American writers who had war experience (Little 327), and the name Bozo gained a degree of prominence after the war: it was the moniker of, among others, a monkey eluding police in 1927 ("Simian in Tree") and a "fighter" providing comic relief at a 1930 Featherweight title fight (Kelley 9). In other words, there is evidence that even as most current references to Bozo are to a specific

media figure, not every use of the word has to be viewed as a specific reference to a specific clown.²¹

The etymological trail for the twentieth century Bozo the Clown's name and origin might also include some geopolitics and a dislike of immigrants. For example, it may be worth noting that the etymology for the word "clown" suggests an overlap of definition, with the English word having northern European roots possibly rooted in different languages that similarly describe a character as someone boorish, poor, bad mannered, clumsy, etc. ("Clown"). The tensions in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century led to immigration to America from Dalmatia, Serbia, and Croatia where "Bozo" was a common man's name. ("Bozo") The "b" and "z" pronunciations that require both a staccato and vibration, as well as the double long "o," make the word when pronounced in English memorable, and for some slightly amusing. Due to the usual antipathy expressed toward poor immigrants as well as the nature of the word, it seems a reasonable conjecture that Bozo might take on a slightly derogatory meaning and be applied to the wandering men who take on day work, a group also referred to at this time as "hobos." This might have been a connection — there are similar sounds — leading to "bozo" as a name making its way into American circus terminology for a tramp-like, clown character by the early twentieth century. Certainly, the American media character beginning mid-twentieth century was never assigned a family and so this lone comic figure of record and television might well be connected to the solitary worker from a foreign land who others mocked.

Whether it is possible to establish the definitive origins of Bozo the Clown's name, the link to the circus is both obvious and has a likely background. When considering how the character was developed as a twentieth century commercial product it is worth noting that the first paying job for Vance Debar "Pinto" Colvig — who first gives voice to Bozo in the 1946 debut

²¹ While France was a western Africa colonizer during the latter part of the 19th century controlling territories including modern day Mali where the Bozo people live, there does not appear to be a connection to be drawn between the tribe and clown's name, despite the identical English spelling.

recording *Bozo at the Circus* — was at twelve years old, when he worked as a “squeaky clarinet” player at The Temple of Mirth on the Midway at the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition. The person who hired him “...put the clown white makeup on me for the first time. Then he made me put on an old derby and some big old clothes, and he stepped back and took a look at me. ‘Now you make a good Bozo,’ he said” (Truwe 09:05-10:20). From there he would have numerous jobs in the circus and take that experience with him to the development of the character on record and then again as the first television Bozo.

Like America itself, Bozo includes multiple ingredients sourced from clowns and circuses beyond the continent’s borders. To begin with the most obvious, his white face, arching eyebrows, large red smile and red nose are derived from the Russian-born clown Albert Fratellini, who, along with his brothers, engaged audiences throughout Europe, and whose “colorful appearance has totally replaced the black-and-white costume of the earlier Augustes [a clown category including those with exaggerated expressions who specialize in slapstick and pranks]. Exaggerated even more, the Albert look has become the basis for the American image of Bozo the Clown, a commercial trademark many people associate with all clowns” (Towsen 236).

With its history embedded in culture, audiences traditionally expect enjoyment when introduced to a clown and a circus. That submersion into our collective unconscious began long before Colvig brought his background to the development of the Bozo character and predates America itself. The root of “circus” is found in the Latin definition for a circle or ring and it referred to a site in ancient Rome where entertainments would take place, some of which involved skillful riding on or in a chariot behind horses. Unlike in ancient Egypt, and at least in part due to the influence of the Catholic Church, audiences are not presented with a character who is both a disruptive figure of fun and a religious figure. By the time of the Renaissance in Europe — and due in part to the development of the Italian *commedia dell’arte* — an entertainment form that grew from itinerant street theater to polished indoor entertainments — the clown was seen as a professional artist (LeBank and Bridel 3). His antecedents might be in the character of a fool who reveals truth to royalty, such as is in the figures of William

Shakespeare's Fool in *King Lear*, or the dwarf jester Hop-Frog of Edgar Allan Poe's story by that name, but his role for the general audiences was to amuse, not necessarily to reveal truths of a political or religious nature.

Of course, just because an audience is primed to love a clown does not mean that any clown can or will deliver that connection with a mass audience. It is the entertainment the character provides to the audience that keeps them listening or tuning in. It is the engagement with the character and the sense of community that gets fostered by actions such as WGN's at-home player (where a viewer would win the same prizes as the child chosen to play The Grand Prize Game) that helps create a foundation of caring for a character that will last well after new content stops being created. sharing your engagement with. And it is easier for that character to be quickly accepted and thus more likely long-lived in popular culture when it comes along on a path already well-worn. In other words, whether or not named Bozo, when thinking of a character who could entertain children, it is a relatively easy choice to select a clown. The disruptive figure of fun is home in the circus, where he can interact with other figures of amusement. It is a choice embedded in traditions of entertainment thousands of years before Colvig debuted the voice of Bozo on records with "Bozo at the Circus" or was the first Bozo to appear on camera in a filmed promotion for the records or on television.

While it is possible to describe a child and adult enjoying watching a clown for their own reasons, when talking of a television show that also connected families and children and adults across generations, it is useful to consider what enjoyment might be similar for both. Modern clowning master René Bazinet says,

...it's the joy, the pure joy of seeing new. And if I'm in the audience, if I'm in front of a good clown, I become the child myself. It's children watching a child. Because he reminds us that life-is-not-that serious, hello! And it takes us out of the seriousness, of our losing a job or gaining a job or keeping my wife or not, and all of this fucked up bullshit you've been accumulating for thousands of years, it just takes us out and says, 'Hey! [*Whistle.*] Cuckoo! Yeah you. How 'bout this? How 'bout that?' And everybody is like, 'Oh my God. Oh, I love him. O, I wanna invite him for dinner.' That's a clown. A kid

who says, 'I refuse to take it seriously. I refuse to take this seriously. I'm sorry! I'm in another world. I don't know where you guys are, but it doesn't seem very happy to me (Bazinet 74).

The origin story for the modern circus, with its combination of clown and other entertainments, is usually credited to British Army veteran Philip Astley. He explored trick riding within a ring approximately forty-two feet in diameter and in 1766 began to stage public performances including balancing centripetal and centrifugal forces to keep him standing on the back of a horse galloping within the circle (Gustafson 11). In developing the show he created a bit where he would disguise himself and act as a clownish character who at first can't mount the horse, then can't get it to move, before surprising the audience by performing tricks and revealing himself.

As this style of entertainment evolved in England and then in America, there was a separation of clown and horseman. The clown often emerged as the star of the show and, "pieces of business were developed, including acrobatic pratfalls, tumbling, bawdy tunes, tricks with props (clothing, food, ladders), wisecracks, dance parodies, swordplay, beatings, dramatic turns used for amusement with clown as victim" (LeBank and Bridel 3). Circuses and circus clowns became enmeshed in the cultural landscape of America: Among his presidential papers are receipts for tickets George Washington purchased in 1793 to see horseman Bill Ricketts, the entrepreneurial force delivering America's first circus in Philadelphia (Dotson).

Circuses enlarged their place in American popular entertainment during the nineteenth century. Shows traveled first by wagon and then by train from city to city. They made a difference to their audience. In a May 1866 letter to her sister, the poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house — still I feel the red in my mind though the drums are out" (Dickinson). In the run-up to the 1868 election, America's most famous clown of the day, Dan Rice, made a not altogether unserious presidential bid (Carlyon), perhaps setting the stage for Larry Harmon, the man behind the televised Bozo franchise to do the same one hundred sixteen years later (Mitchell). Another example of how embedded circus

and clown entertainment was in nineteenth century American popular culture is Mark Twain's use of a circus setting and particularly the antics of a clown in his 1884 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for both the only full chapter of pleasure for the wayward Huck as well as a demonstration of the "naivete" of his title character that carried over to matters of race at the heart of the novel (Hochman).

Entering the twentieth century, clowns and circuses were firmly enmeshed in the American cultural fabric. The Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus — a traveling entertainment via merger of the most prominent nineteenth century circuses — with its three rings of entertainment was an annual visitor to most of the country's largest cities. And images of the circus and its performers, particularly the clowns, were entrenched as part of the country's visual iconography: "The variety and sheer number of works about the circus created by American artists in the 1930s and 1940s is not a testament to the popularity of the circus so much as it is evidence of the circus itself becoming an American icon" (Gustafson 61).

This iconic setting had also found itself as an excellent backdrop for the movie antics of cinematic clowns like Charlie Chaplin in his 1928 film, *The Circus*, and the Marx Brothers, in their 1939 release *At the Circus*, where they save a show from bankruptcy, which had been a too-often real-life threat to traveling shows during the Depression years. By the mid-twentieth century, there were few if any Americans who could not relate to these entertainments, who in some way weren't primed to relate to its characters as *The New Yorker* writer E.B. White did in his 1952 essay about a visit to the winter headquarters of the Ringling circus. He explained, "The circus comes as close to being the world in a microcosm as anything I know; in a way, it puts all the rest of show business in the shade. Its magic is universal and complex" (White 179). In other words — well, in the actual words of American political and literary giants — the stage was set by the mid-twentieth century for the emergence of a popular culture clown.

CHAPTER 3 Bozo on Vinyl

Like America's post-war economy as a whole, the entertainment world beyond what E.B. White saw at one circus in Florida in 1952 was undergoing multiple changes. World War II established America as a manufacturing force with markets around the world. An improving domestic economy put money in the pockets of people whose demands for goods had faced the challenges for a generation first by the need to economize during a time of economic depression and then by how the war limited the supply of goods. In addition, soldiers returning home to claim their GI Bill benefits sending them solidly into the middle class, a sense of domestic security, and available jobs contributed to a rise in childbirths as well as an availability of audiences for entertainments.

With the economic changes came new priorities and thus new decisions regarding how the money would be spent, reflecting cultural changes associated with the emergence of the Baby Boom generation (Morgan 13), and new ideas about child raising and the priorities of children's desires within the family's budget. Historian Stephen Lassonde describes the times as, "the two decades after World War II are popularly remembered as the golden age of family life and childhood in the United States. Indeed, it was during this era that the ideal of the "child-centered family" was enshrined by child-rearing experts, American social scientists, and the mass media" (Lassonde 53).

The post-war years saw continuing rapid changes come to mass media and the relationship of audiences to entertainments. There were more films in color; there were more recordings being sold and advances in the technology that played them; there was a greater sophistication in how radio stations were segmenting their audiences. Our modern media age was emerging: beginning with the growth of movies and then through radio earlier in the century, an increasing number of people could play their part in specific content. As they had with stage entertainments, but now in increased numbers, audiences at the movies changed the nature of others' experience in a way they wouldn't for someone reading a book, for example. With radio and records, a listener was in control of what was played and at what volume. While the involvement was primitive by today's standards, these were steps toward what media

theorist Henry Jenkins has termed for our current day as a participatory culture (Jenkins). While there was a long tradition in media of breaking the fourth wall from the musings of Shakespearean heroes and villains about their intention through the comic asides of Groucho Marx as he addressed audiences directly from the screen as he had done from Broadway stages, an example of a change in the interactivity of audience and content another step of audience interactivity with content occurs with the Bozo “record-reader” when children turned the pages of their book based on a cue from the recording.

The story of Bozo on record begins in the aftermath of the war, a few years after the founding of Capitol Records (originally conceived as Liberty Records) by singer-songwriter Johnny Mercer and two friends (“Capitol History”). Army veteran Alan Livingston talked himself into a job in 1945 by pitching the idea that, “A kid record should have queer, humorous sounds. Kids loved animal records fifty years ago. Let’s try them again — only this time have the animals talk” (Monroe N21).

The history of kids’ recordings Livingston referenced traced its way back more than fifty years. It included phonograph inventor Thomas Edison’s 1871 first tinfoil cylinder recording, his recitation of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Commercial success in recording for children was subsequently found by Gilded Age recording artist Roger Harding, Len Spencer and his hamming-it-up versions of Mother Goose rhymes, and Gilbert Girard, who mimicked animal sounds on “Scene at a Dogfight” and “A Trip to the Circus.” Jacob Smith’s *Spoken Word*, a survey of the phonograph’s history in America, notes that by 1924, “the Victor Phonograph Company could eagerly refer to the novel opportunities provided by reaching the ‘boundless and almost untouched children’s market.’ Victor was embarking on a marketing campaign for one of the earliest lines of mass media products targeted specifically at young children: Bubble Books, the first book and record hybrid for kids” (Smith, Jacob 14). Child-themed recordings were big business through the 1920s, but a combination of competition from the newest media darling, radio, and the changes to the family budget imposed by the Depression, closed down that

market (Monroe N22). Which is where the market stood until the changes emerging in the wake of war met the interest of a new record company looking to make its mark in the industry.

The Capitol Records 1946 release of *Bozo at the Circus* eclipsed the financial impact of all the recordings for this market that had come before it. There was optimism behind its release, but no prediction of the magnitude of its success as there does not seem to be anything in the history of Capitol Records executives, including Livingston, to suggest they were predicting the dramatic changes to come from the baby boom. Instead, trying to grow the label, they saw a possible niche audience the competition was ignoring. In the nine or so months of work prior to release they spent more on this project than any one before in company history — \$100,000 on production of the recording and on the accompanying book which would allow children to follow along — and ordered a pressing of 100,000 packages at a time when a first pressing of 20,000 records was more the norm. Significant to the success they achieved aiming at a market of three to eight year-olds (Monroe N22) with the story of a clown who talked with circus animals, they hired performers, including noted trumpeter, composer, and arranger Billie May and Pinto Colvig, who gave voice to Bozo and brought to the project extensive experience in creating content for children having been involved in animating the Walt Disney Company production of *Snow White*, voiced Walt Disney characters, including “Goofy,” and “Pluto,” (Pinto Colvig) and had performed with the Al. G. Barnes during a couple of its summer circuit tours (Truwe 25:10-34:50).

While impossible to pinpoint the exact recipe, the synergy of American loving clowns and circuses, children loving funny sounds, the novelty of feeling in control of one’s media content, high production values, and timing (and probably some luck as well) led to phenomenal success:

As soon as one child had the album, others flocked to hear it and begged their parents for it. Nor were they satisfied to listen a few times. They played Bozo until the records wore out. One well-known Hollywood musician, Manny Klein, complained to friends at Capitol that he had to buy the album twelve times for his son. ...The album [nine years

after release] has sold \$5,000,000 worth. Eight more Bozo albums have followed, all by Livingston, and all best sellers. There are so many requests for personal appearances by Bozo that Capitol keeps clown suits in all forty of its regional offices, with actors on the payroll to play Bozo (Monroe 116).

Capitol's success with its Bozo package initiated a new (or newly rediscovered) market of recordings for young children: the company's market share would at one point reach seventy percent (Capitol History 33). A 1947 *Variety* report on the money being made with child entertainment-themed records noted that, "Hundreds of them hit the stands during the past year, with everybody from Ingrid Bergman to Spike Jones in the act" (Connolly 220). They did not cite Bozo as a catalyst for the burgeoning market, but he is the only "performer" name checked twice in the article.

Bozo's impact was not just that other record companies responded to the audience for the character created by Livingston and Colvig. America culture embraced clowns and circuses, and as their representative Bozo was becoming more than just an image in a book or voice on a record. The same year as the *Variety* report, a movie theater owner wrote in to a trade publication that for the Saturday morning "Fun Club" that features movies for kids, "He puts Bozo, the Clown, on duty at the box-office at 8:30 a.m., and packs 'em in" (Meyer 54). Bozo was emerging as a three-dimensional aspect of America through a person putting on the costume used to promote a line of recordings and now serving to connect customers with other businesses as well. From record to movie-adjacent, convergence culture (the flowing of content from one media format to another) was beginning.

A few years later, in 1951 according to research by Tom Holbrooke, author of the privately printed *The Bozo Chronicles* that details his year's long involvement as a part-time Bozo and researcher with Harmon's clown, Bozo made his silver screen debut in a variety of skits filmed under the direction of Elmo Williams during a Los Angeles visit by the Yankee Patterson Circus (Holbrooke). The resulting *Bozo's Circus* (Capitol Records), was a twenty-eight

minute promotion film for the records and book featuring Colvig in makeup and costume as “Bozo, The Capitol Clown” and narrating his own on-screen antics as well as highlighting various circus acts.³¹ Although, the promotion was a direct tie-in to the first Bozo project, by the time of the movie hitting theaters, that 1946 release was in book and record stores along with the Capitol record-readers *Bozo and His Rocket Ship* (1947), *Bozo Under the Sea* (1948), *Bozo and the Birds* (1949), and *Bozo on the Farm* (1950). The movie was working not only as promotion for one package, but for the series, as well as for the firm itself, as well as the other children’s records the label was releasing and identifying as “Bozo Approved” with the book and record character’s face serving as a branding logo for stories starring Daffy Duck, Peppy the Possum, Hopalong Cassidy and Bongo the Circus Bear (Smith, Jeffrey). While not necessarily intended that way, it was also serving to test the waters for Bozo’s transition into television: certainly, that was a lesson taken from its acceptance by the audience.

Successful as promotion for the record-reader series, *Bozo’s Circus* also demonstrated the character’s increasing commercial and cultural impact. Identification with Bozo not only lent credibility to similarly themed products, but brought favorable attention to businesses associated with it. The record promotion film could drive theater business. One example comes from a report in *The Exhibitor*, which shared with its trade audience that

Ernie Plitz, manager, Starview Drive-in, Norwalk, O., reports that that his recent Kiddie Cartoon Carnival promotion filled his box office and his concession stand coffers to a new high. He promoted a tie-in with a local record shop and Capitol Records in which Capitol supplied free of charge a 30-minute Capitol release, “Bozo at the Circus,” and the drive-in concession stand exhibited a display that gave the entire stand a carnival appearance. Every youngster received a clown mask. “Bozo” approved records were

³¹ Referring to the character in this way offered branding for other company products as well as helped differentiate this clown character from Larry Bozo Valli’s clown, as the latter sued Capitol for trademark infringement, claiming to have performed as “Bozo the Clown” since 1917 (Suit Names Capitol).

played before the show started and during the intermission. The Carnival resulted in two days of excellent grosses and high concession sales. This same program is available to all exhibitors through Capitol Records.” (“News of the Territory, Cleveland” NT-2)

In another example of how the character was being embraced by multiple audiences, *Variety* reported in August of 1951 that,

‘Bozo: The Capitol Clown,’ Capitol Records promotion film has been booked into 24 Loew’s theatres in the metropolitan New York area, including Newark and Jersey City. ...Highlights of the Loew’s presentation will be prizes awarded to children attending each performance and special gifts for winners of the contests sponsored by each theatre. Film was produced by the diskery to promote its album, ‘Bozo at the Circus,’ which has already reached 500,000 sales” (“Cap’s ‘Bozo’ Bally Pic).

The trade publication noted the following month that rather than continuing as a promotion primarily for Capitol, the theater company recognized it was bringing audiences to their theaters and so, “During the third week, Loew’s agreed to pay all expenses for the promotion after Cap had footed the bill for the first two weeks” (“Loew’s Pays Expenses”). At first it had been the character’s voice that engaged audiences, now it was how he looked and acted that was signifying fun for American audiences through different media forms. The dominant media channels had been radio and film, but it would soon be television that sway. One can see in the character’s popularity on a screen how audiences were being prepared for Bozo’s transition from the record player to the television set.

It does not diminish the legacy of Bozo and the quality of it as a media product to recognize that a part of the character’s finding its way into the national psyche was influenced by matters of timing. As referenced above, the United States was changing. Reflecting that, much entertainment of the late-1940s and 1950s was focusing on the interests of what for the next decades would be the primary demographic group, the baby boomers who were the wave reflected in a change from 1940 when those under eighteen were about twenty-four percent of

the United States' population to 1964, when they made up about thirty-six percent. Their experiences become the country's remembered history. Describing what he calls "The Changing Face of Children's Culture," historian Steven Mintz provides background to the Bozo character's growth:

The post-World War II era unleashed a torrent of iconic playthings, including the Slinky in 1945, Tonka Trucks in 1947, the Frisbee in 1948, Candy Land in 1949, Silly Putty in 1950, Mr. Potato Head in 1952, Play-Doh in 1956, the Hula Hoop in 1957, Barbie in 1959, and the Etch-a-Sketch in 1960. It also witnessed the appearance of the first children's television shows, beginning with *Howdy Doody*, which premiered in 1947, followed by Captain Kangaroo and Disneyland, which debuted in 1955. Compared to today, the early postwar era seems much more child-centered and innocent, with clown shows, such as Bozo the Clown, created in 1946, and a profusion of child-oriented films.... This, many believe, was a childhood that encouraged imagination and creativity, a stark contrast to the seemingly overly pressured, overly structured, if also overly indulged middle-class childhood of today. A Cold War childhood remains the yardstick against which Americans assess contemporary childhood (Mintz 40-41).

Accompanying the demographic and economic changes was a shift in the relative importance of various media platforms. Television and its ability to mesmerize and impact through the tiny screen may have been introduced to America via the 1939 New York World's Fair, but the technology, the affordability, and the content would not make it part of most American's lives until well into the 1950s. Capitol did dip Bozo's toe into these waters from 1949 to 1950 on the CBS Los Angeles affiliate KTTV in 1949 with a live half-hour circus show starring Colvig, but the company never figured out a successful small screen path for their clown. Bozo may have provided an important revenue stream for many years, but he was becoming less important to the company as they identified themselves with more mature artists like Frank Sinatra and The Beatles, both of whom were signed by Alan Livingston. Recordings for children were no longer the cash cow they had been. In 1956, the year Capitol agreed to sell the rights to the Bozo character, *Variety* reported that, "Although the birthrate has been averaging close to

4,000,000 a year, kidisk sales at several of the majors has dropped off as much as 50% from previous years' take. ...Capitol, which has long been hot in the kiddie field with its "Bozo" and "Music Appreciation" series has also pulled in its belt on new releases" ("Col Latest to Put Kibosh on Kidisks"). Capitol would re-release the Bozo catalog in 1961 recognizing that thanks to television he had more staying power than they recognized. While the Livingston-Colvig clown proved influential in the lives of millions over a decade via his records, he was to become a fixture on the landscape for tens of millions in America and around the world for more than a generation thanks to a developing demographic bump, the newest mass media technology, and the business innovation of a franchised television character.

CHAPTER 4 Bozo on the Screen

In its debut, television programming and distribution were as close to their mature state as that first drawing of a clown in the book part of the Bozo package was to the character now deeply embedded in American culture. American audiences were introduced to commercial television prior to involvement in the hostilities in Europe and Asia, but the media's impact grew along with the baby boom generation as a post-World War II phenomenon. While a technological marvel and a children's entertainment might seem an unlikely pairing, in the media and commercial world that developed in America after World War II they emerged in a most successful synergy.

Great Britain's BBC had been broadcasting since 1936, but the official introduction of what conceptually was regularly scheduled programming for America took place in April of 1939 at the World's Fair held in New York. RCA president David Sarnoff debuted commercial television (the company would transform its NBC radio network into a television network) to America, announcing, "It's with a feeling of humbleness that I come to this moment of announcing the birth in this country of a new art so important in its implications that is bound to affect all of society.... Television will become an important factor in American economic life" ("Dedication of RCA"). President Franklin Roosevelt's opening day speech launched the coverage, reaching out in a fifty-mile radius to a television audience of about one thousand received and translated into pictures by approximately one hundred sets, with twelve additional RCA receivers in the pavilion lobby (Becker 370).

The start of television's impact on society (i.e., Sarnoff's vision) was delayed a few years by events around the world that drew the research and development of the technology and content for this new media from its commercial purposes to its use in advancing military aims. When the conflict was resolved the focus returned to how companies could make money, which in the case of RCA, which sold the television sets, and NBC, which distributed the content to be seen on them, led to thoughts of children's programming. A problem for the new media form was answering the question of why someone would want to spend a lot of money on a television if there was not enough of importance to watch. Too few televisions sold would force the per unit

price to remain high, keeping demand low. Also, with too limited an audience, it was not worth the time and trouble (i.e., there was not great enough return on investment) to create more engaging content as advertisers would not pay extra in a mostly untested format to reach significantly smaller audiences than they could through other less expensive means.

Inexpensive content that attracted an audience was one answer to the challenge. While television was to be built on the mass media model used so successfully in radio broadcasting to reach large numbers of people, no entertainment immediately attracts an audience in the hundreds of thousands or more. From the audience built on a desire for content comes the pool of people who will be big enough to support the manufacture of televisions as well as the aggregation of people whose demographics attract advertising and its financial support of programming and content creators. For those behind the commercial growth of the media — primarily the CBS and NBC networks — it was helpful that technology evolved to allow television cameras to move outside a studio setting in order to provide events of national interest to adults like the telecast of the New York Yankees - Brooklyn Dodgers September 30, 1947, World Series game, a television first; and Harry Truman's October 5, 1947, address from the White House, a presidential first. Neither, of course, had high production costs. Nor did another attraction for an adult audience (also with low production costs and the added benefit of offering a community service in response to licensing requirements): In the evening the two television networks of the time began airing regularly scheduled, fifteen-minute weeknight news programs — essentially one man reading the news into the camera — premiering as the “CBS Television News” May 3, 1948, and NBC's “Camel News Caravan” on February 16, 1949.

While adults would decide to purchase television sets, as noted earlier, the desires of children had an increasingly important role in choices made for the household. To build a children's television audience, networks and independent stations looked at what had worked on radio, beginning with Christopher Graham reading children's bedtime stories as Uncle Wip, which debuted on a Philadelphia radio station with the same call letters in 1922, while also working in lots of plugs for station owner, the Gimbel Brothers department store. By the middle of the decade there were numerous locally produced children's radio shows in major advertising

markets, a business model paving the way a generation later for children's television shows (Hollis 2). While Uncle Wip was a magnet for children's attention in his local market and even hosted the store's annual Thanksgiving Day parade, "As in television, there were many network children's radio shows (*Little Orphan Annie; Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*) and even some that were "bicycled" from station to station in the form of sixteen-inch transcription disks, the equivalent of today's syndicated fare (Hollis 1).

In the 1940s and early 1950s when Bozo was (re)creating a market in children's recordings, a farm hand marionette was doing the same thing for television. The first children's television show was transitioned from a New York radio show. The lead, Howdy Doody, was given voice by sidekick "Buffalo" Bob Smith and seen (and not just heard) first on NBC's *Puppet Playhouse* December 17, 1947, a show renamed *The Howdy Doody Show*, for its next episode, December 27, 1947. ("Howdy Doody")

Despite not having the benefit of scientific audience measurements, NBC believed the entertainment attracted enough children (and thus their parents and future advertisers) to the new medium and tapped Howdy Doody as its first show to appear over the network five days a week. In 1955, when RCA (corporate parent of NBC) was introducing television sets that could show programs in color, the world of Doodyville became the first show NBC broadcast in the new form.

Among the Howdy Doody innovations later seen with Bozo's television's success were a world for children that encouraged imagination. Doodyville, the fiction setting where all the show's action took place featured interactions between comical marionettes and comical humans like Doody's adopted sister Heidi Doody, and a human, horn-honking, non-speaking clown Clarabell (played first by Bob Keeshan who would go on to star as Captain Kangaroo, on another early influential children's television show). An important feature of the show was interaction with "the peanut gallery," bleachers filled with children who were often featured on camera and could serve as stand-ins for the children in the audience at home. The televised Bozo world was an imaginary circus, also with lots of stage business and funny voices; there was a live audience of children who would often take part in the action; and the star was often "the straight

man” for comic characters. First Howdy Doody and later Bozo enjoyed significant interest from advertisers who wanted to be part of the show or sell show-themed merchandise (an idea with roots in Uncle Wip’s show where he often featured information about what could be found at Gimbels) (Hollis 2); and *Howdy Doody* having spin-offs in Cuba and Canada foreshadowed the franchising of the Bozo character and format for multiple international television markets (“Howdy Doody”).

The development of children’s TV did not evolve only from a path laid out by Howdy and human sidekick Buffalo Bob. There were economic and cultural influences, and other program innovators. The entertainment landscape was in flux, but would find a successful complement with stories in a visual and aural combination one could access from the convenience of a living room, as a companion when one was otherwise alone at the house, or as a transition on one’s way to or from school. Media critic David Thomson describes its evolution as:

The household pet of once upon a time became a strange, placid being — the elephant in the room, if you like — not a monster that attacked us and beat its Kong chest in triumph but an impassive force that quietly commandeered so much of what we thought was our attention, our consciousness, of our intelligence. Television wasn’t just an elephant in the room. It became the room, the house, and the world” (Thomson 13).

Bozo on record may have been a national hit, but if the character’s impact was only as a ten- or so year fad in that media channel, then it seems unlikely he wouldn’t be the cultural influence seen today. There are no sounds that come to mind as something that can unite a country’s mind. Also, to have an impact in today’s world usually requires having some visual substance, and television, which has been the lead influencer for culture for fifty-plus years, requires images. No visual Bozo; likely no American Icon Bozo.

Despite the groundwork for potential popularity laid by the records, Bozo was not immediately a television staple across the country. In the 1940s after the war and throughout the 1950s television was experimenting with formats and audience outreach. The children’s shows that would build audiences first built local fan bases. Such was the case with *Kukla, Fran*

and *Ollie*, which went national across the NBC network after getting its start in Chicago in 1947 featuring comedian Fran Allison ad-libbing with a Punch-and-Judy style puppet, Kukla, who was the “leader” and a comic foil, for the dragon puppet Ollie (Bianculli 15).

That same year the Dumont network introduced *Small Fry's Club*, the first regularly scheduled children's show with cartoons — first on a weekly basis before it became a weekday afternoon fixture. (Bianculli 39) *Small Fry's Club* included *Aesop's Fables*, animated content created to run alongside movies in the 1920. Three years later, *Crusader Rabbit* arrived as the first animated cartoon series made specifically for television viewers. The syndicated (i.e., content owned by an independent producer sold to individual stations instead of being distributed by a network to its affiliate stations) animated cartoon series was created in series of five one-minute cartoons that formed a story and could be shown individually or programmed together, depending of the needs of the television station (Bianculli 40).

In the words of media critic David Bianculli, “On television, the 1950s were boom years for animation — not visually but economically. Even the crudest drawings could lead to lavish profits, from either syndication revenues or tie-in merchandising efforts. A perfect, though cynical, example of the latter was CBS's *Winky Dink and You*, the first interactive series in TV history” (Bianculli 40). Engagement with the show that premiered in 1952 was enhanced by the purchase of a kit (cloth, crayons, plastic sheet) that let children safely draw a “missing piece” of the show onto the television screen.

Among the range of television influences for Bozo as the show would develop after Capitol sold the character's commercial rights in 1956 was *Junior Frolics* initiated in 1949 from Newark, NJ. The show on WATV that had local DJ “Uncle” Fred Sayles narrating silent movie era cartoons and interacting with an in-studio audience of children (Bendel). Also setting the stage for the growth in programming for young people was *The Children's Corner*, which ran on Pittsburgh's WQED — the nation's first community-sponsored, educational station — and featured Daniel Striped Tiger, offering inspirational messages to children as voiced by the show's producer and music composer Fred Rogers, who would go on to be an influential children's television host through the show *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* (Children's Corner).

Two other elements of the successful Bozo television shows were a sense of anarchy with adults acting in comic, often slapstick ways to tickle the funny bones of youngsters, and, paradoxically, a developed content and business model. While Capitol tried to bring Bozo to television a few times, the formula that would prove successful for Bozo was developed after Pinky Lee hit the screens. While never an adult critic favorite — his 1950 attempt at a show for adults did not last the season — the former vaudeville performer in his trademarked, non-matching plaids on hat and suit had a very successful run from 1954-1956 as a frenetic performer of skits and slapstick and introducer of novelty acts before a live audience of kids in an NBC time slot right before the Howdy Doody show.

While education and Bozo would seem to live in different worlds (and some would blame a didactic emphasis for the eventual demise of Bozo on television) the business model that would serve to make people throughout the country feel a clown with lacquered hair styled in an inverted bowl cut was part of their community was developed by television producer Bert Cluster and nursery school teacher Nancy Cluster for Baltimore's WBAL. Beginning in 1953, *Romper Room* offered pre-school children on air doing an entertaining mix of crafts, singing, listening to stories, and the learning "Do-Bee" and "Don't Bee" lessons taught, of course, with a genus Apis class mascot. Besides blunting criticism of television as a tool of ignorance, it initiated the franchise model for television shows, offering 30-minutes, 45-minute, or hour-long formats that could include approved cartoons for adoption in local markets (Hollis 16). Rather than sell their Baltimore show to a national network for its distribution, the Clusters kept financial and editorial control and franchised the format of their show to be developed beyond Charm City and made local for ninety-one other US markets and in three other countries by 1960 (Rasmussen).

Unfortunately for Capitol Records, the company never hit on a format that worked for them nor could incorporate these various innovations into a show that would play such a part in making Bozo as beloved television character as he had been on recordings. No doubt, somewhere in the story of the company's inability to successfully transition the character from recording industry to television star are lessons in timing, or vision, or media content and

distribution dynamics, or corporate focus, etc. Capitol tried Bozo on television, but they would decide fruitful pastures for their clown were not to be found on the small screen.

The closest they got to the version America knows was with *Bozo's Circus*, debuting in 1949, with KTTV, the CBS Los Angeles affiliate, paying Capitol \$250 as the weekly fee (“KTTV’s \$250 ‘Clown’”). Pinto Colvig, in white face, red nose and tufts of red hair, wore a blue one-piece suit on the live half-hour show. The station’s ad sales team suggested its potential in an ad with the pitch that, “Ask any youngster who Bozo is, and you’ll find he’s far and away the top kiddie’s recording star” (Capitol Records). Besides being a natural for any product appealing to the younger set, “Bozo’s Circus” has loads of tailor-made merchandising features, ready for action today” (KTTV).

In 1950, through its own television production company, Capitol attempted to develop another Bozo show. Relying on much of the team who were involved with the 1949 promotional film for recordings, they next gave “B” list actor Syd Saylor (né Leslie Raymond Sailer) a thirteen-week run as Bozo, with Alan Livingston as the ringmaster and Jimmy Woods All-American Circus acrobats as regulars on the show that was featured on KTTV, and syndicated to other stations as well (Moehring 109). The show failed to gain enough traction among either advertisers or a potential audience for further development taking Capitol’s television production unit down with it.

Dell Comics introduced the first of their two series of Bozo comics in 1950 and while they would continue to publish it quarterly until 1954, there is little evidence from response to this version of Bozo of a significant mass audience at the time for the character through this format (Markstein). In 1953, with sales of Bozo records (by now the books had been dropped from the package) still strong, but not the novelty and juggernaut of earlier years, Capitol tried once again to bring Bozo, The Capitol Clown, to television. Livingston, by now Capitol’s vice president of creative productions after having signed Frank Sinatra to the label and set it on its way to major record label status, commissioned the Hal Roach studio to produce a 30-minute Bozo the Clown television pilot. Experimenting with the character, the pilot episode tells how clown doll Bozo comes to life for a little girl named Amy, and the two of them work together to show that Amy’s

dog, Truesdale, did not eat a neighbor's hen (Paley Archive). No network saw the opportunity of taking Bozo from the circus milieu, and his development as a media figure seemed stalled, at least to Capitol management, which perhaps not coincidentally no longer included originator and brand guardian Alan Livingston.

While Bozo was not a hit on the coasts, a noteworthy television Bozo was on display outside the glare of Hollywood or New York. Having left Capitol, where he was involved in the children's recording department, and licensed the character from the company, Jim Chapin in Memphis, Tennessee, practically one-man-banded as writer, director, producer and Bozo himself, and, alongside "Tiny the Tramp" (played by Ray Hill), lip synched and pantomimed to Colvig's recordings, as part of a mix of live entertainment, cartoons, and, of course, ads (Hollis 261). These were still the early days of television programming, with shows coming and going. Chapin's "Bozo and his Friends" airing Monday through Friday on WHBQ was considered by *Variety* "a thirty-minute package which is neatly geared for not only small fry but also contagious for the grownups" ("Bozo and His Friends"), but it was off the air by 1956. There were announcements in the trade publication of an RKO Teleradio series starring Chapin set for production to be syndicated, with twenty-two minutes of show allowing for 8 minutes of locally sold commercials, but plans changed ("Bozo the Clown as O'Neil's Initial VidPix Venture"). Instead, Capitol, which by now was a major music label for Broadway soundtracks, pop artists in addition to Sinatra including Judy Garland, Andy Williams, Les Paul, and in negotiations to be purchased by the even bigger British company EMI, was rejiggering priorities, which included scheduling no more Bozo singles or albums and ceasing its own licensing of the Bozo character for television.

In 1957, with children's records again a sales non-factor, and involvement with licensing the Bozo character for TV a fairly insignificant part of its business, Capitol got out of the clown business by ceding control to an actor who had appeared as Bozo at numerous promotional events. *Variety* reported:

In an extraordinary deal. Larry Harmon has acquired exclusive tv rights to Capitol Records “Bozo the Clown” property and will shortly launch a half-hour vidfilm pilot which he will star in as well as produce.

Although no details given, it’s understood that no money changed hands in the transaction. Harmon got the okay in return for producing the pilot at his own expense. Part of the deal gives him control of commercial tieups for integration with eventual sponsorships.

“Bozo” is one of the five all-time top selling disk properties. In the last eight years, more than 600,000,000 records have been sold. In the licensing field, retail sales of Bozo toy items amounted to \$2,000,000 in 1952 and have since become a staple in the market (“Vidfilm Series”).

Capitol had made Bozo a household name, but it would be Harmon who would serve as lead sherpa for his emergence as an American icon, codifying the character as a white-faced, huge-smiled clown in a blue costume with puff balls as buttons and under stiff, upswept red hair, standing atop size 83AAA shoes, and ultimately instantly recognizable to those who did and didn’t watch any of the thousands of shows in hundreds of markets where he appeared.

CHAPTER 5
Bozo's Big Top Covers America

Capitol did not cease making money from Bozo the Capitol Clown as they would reissue recordings in the 1960s. However, the 1957 sale of commercial rights to all but their recording masters for what in retrospect looks like a bargain price indicates their reduced faith in the children's market. It was an unstated corporate admission that they hadn't put together the right combination of visual elements to make Bozo the Clown the television staple he had been in recordings, and under new management they were refocusing on their core competencies in selling popular music.

In all fairness when evaluating with hindsight what appears as a shortsighted decision, the record company was not alone in their pessimism about Bozo's commercial future. An article in the trade publication *Sponsor* discussing the state of children's programming, quoted Eugene Gilbert, president of an audience analysis firm bearing his name, explaining that, "Children's tv is at the lowest ebb in the past five years... Since 1956, kid shows have gone down in time, effort and interest. The pendulum, it seems, has swung away from kid programming" ("Are tv kid shows in for a change?").

From the other side of the transaction, by virtue of vision and good fortune, Harmon and partners acquired a character well-established in popular culture, with experiments already conducted demonstrating how a beloved children's character might be successfully exploited commercially in a new media environment. Not that there was any indication in those results of the success that the Bozo of Harmon, et al. would become. That same *Sponsor* article also noted that by 1960 there would be an estimated nineteen million children between the ages of three and seven years; about eighteen million between eight and twelve, and about four million three-year-olds every year entering into television viewing age and having influence in their parents' purchasing decisions: "There's a kid audience, but it has been significantly neglected of late," says television/radio star Al Hodges, who was for years Captain Video. "Perhaps it is all part of the pattern of tv's maturing" ("Are tv kid shows in for a change?").

The record company was rational in retrenching around their success with records for adults, but they let go of a clown character with a successful commercial track record of

engaging children and at a time adult audiences were also often still entertained by circuses and clowns. The venue for the entertainment may have changed from a time when everyone saw them in person, but the attraction remained. Audiences responded to circus and clown movie appearances, including Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show*, a melodrama taking place at the circus that won Academy Awards in 1952 for best picture and best original screenplay; the Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis 1954 comedy *Three Ring Circus*; the fantastical 1954 film, *La Strada*, directed by Federico Fellini; the 1957 Burt Lancaster, Tony Curtis and Gina Lollobrigida drama, *Trapeze*; and 1959 melodrama from producer Irwin Allen, *The Big Circus*.

Coincidental to Harmon's purchase, The Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus changed the settings for its tours. Beginning in 1957 and likely with one eye on television's appeal that made it more difficult to attract audiences in smaller markets, they ceased setting up the big top in open fields. Casting a wider net for audiences through each stop, they reduced operating costs by staying longer in one place, limiting their travel and playing only large big city arenas (Wallenfeldt).

Circus acts were still a great attraction, but the model for business success had changed. The small screen was finding its way to the top of the entertainment period and America's most famous circus made their first television appearance in 1955, when a *Greatest Show on Earth* program included the man with the sobriquet "Mr. Television," Milton Berle, as the ringmaster. Also, on television there was *Big Top*, a CBS network show, starring Ed McMahon as Ed the Clown and airing from 1950 through 1957, that ran first in the evenings and then on Saturdays. NBC showcased a variety of acts on *The Buick Circus Hour* from 1952 to 1953, and ABC had ventriloquist Paul Winchell serve as ringmaster for its *Circus Time* variety show broadcasts for the 1956-57 season. In addition to Colvig and Chapin as Bozo, other local clown hosts of children's television shows included Detroit's Milky the Twin Pines Magic Clown and Los Angeles's Chucko the clown. According to cultural critic Karal Ann Marling, what Capitol never capitalized on was that:

Television was, in many ways, the ideal medium for the circus in the 1950s. The broad

gesture, the wild physical movements, and the exaggerated makeup of the big-top setting ideally suited the little hard-to-see black-and-white screen. Whereas the traveling circus of an earlier days always spoke of the transitory pleasures it brought as the tent went up and the trapeze artists dazzled for only a day or two, the magic of television was that it brought rare sights from far away right into one's own living room, week in and week out (Marling 125).

Perhaps some at Capitol recognized the opportunity they were giving up, but the company pretty much ceded all potential for character and commercial growth because there was risk as well as promise in the new medium. Bringing the world of video imagery (and the accompanying advertising) to a living room was the promise, but it required the right programming at the right time and the purchase of a television set by a large enough audience. Fortunately for Bozo's new owners as they were creating the cartoons that they bought the character of Bozo to emcee, slowly, and then suddenly, the sets appeared amid the other pieces of living room furniture. And where there were viewers there were soon advertisers. In 1950 there were 3,880,000 American households (approximately 9% of the population) with at least one television set, and 10,320,000 households (23.5 %) had one the next year. In 1955 the number was 30,700,000 households (64.5%), and by 1960 45,750,000 (87.1%) of American households included at least one set among their furniture and entertainment options ("Number of TV Households"). During the decade, advertising agency billings for their television work doubled. In 1949, companies purchased \$12.3 million worth of TV time to showcase their wares; in 1951 this rose to \$128 million; and by 1955 \$1 billion worth of advertising ran ("1950s TV Turns on America").

Bozo, the Capitol Clown, appeared on a few, random television stations at the beginning of the decade, but it was Bozo (without the Capitol connection) who was riding high at the end of the decade when television emerged as the dominant cultural and commercial entertainment force, its footprint having expanded across the country, and into foreign markets as well, through the video franchise model pioneered by *Romper Room*. Noteworthy regarding other

forces at work is that this was a time when franchising was booming in multiple industries across the United States as it proved a good deal for parent companies who limited their financial outlay while letting franchisees experiment with a nationwide proven commodity “while requiring them to adhere to certain standards for branding and service” (“American Enterprise: Franchising”). In the early years of television and before big moneyed players other than the media companies like NBC, CBS and to a lesser degree Dumont and ABC got involved with television, there were opportunities for smaller players to make their mark. There is no way of knowing if this would have happened without him, but the focal point of how Bozo spread his influence coast to coast is on actor and entrepreneur Larry Harmon.

In his posthumously-published biography, Harmon explains his first real contact with the Bozo character came in 1952 when he had been playing Commander Comet on the NBC Los Angeles affiliate kids show and auditioned to change from a space explorer suit into white face and a red nose for a television pilot Capitol was calling *Pinky Talks Back* (Harmon 126). The pilot never seems to have been picked up, but Harmon did become one of the many actors who would put on the Bozo kit to appear in promotions for the records in the early to mid-1950's. As he remembered it, seeing the costume hanging in his kitchen when he walked in late one night after a gig with his musical band, provided him the answer to the question he had been pondering about how to put his life onto a productive path.

Claiming that he was inspired by Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* and Buddy Rich's *Little Train* on the record player, he envisioned his path and outlined for himself how his Bozo show would build on children's television and the popularity of this particular clown. As he wrote in his memoir, his outline and epiphany was:

- Makeup, Al Jolson = brand new identity.
- Show no plain skin at all, nothing “human” so he can live forever.
- Dancing, signing, entertaining children.
- An actor, a musician, a comedian, they can all dies and fade away — what lasts forever? Characters do. Lone Ranger, Green Hornet, Superman. They'll survive for decades.
- A symbol.
- Something apolitical, non-religious, non-ethnic, non-economic class. Something approachable and welcoming to all people. Belonging to the world.
- Involve everyone.

I kept writing and brainstorming until I heard the garbage man banging trashcans on the street outside my apartment. The sun had come up and a light haze was starting to burn off as the morning air warmed. By that point, I had devised my plan: Bozo would be my vehicle for spreading entertainment and laughter across the globe. I would transform Bozo the Capitol Clown into Bozo the World's Most Famous Clown (Harmon 129-30).

Also from his memoir, Harmon remembers calling Capitol at 9:00 a.m. later that morning. Shortly after, he had convinced the company to sell him all rights to the character, except the masters for previously recorded records.⁴¹ Not having all the rights to the character, “was fine with me because I knew this was a new era anyway. Television would be the medium and Bozo the vehicle to achieve my dreams.” (Harmon 131) It would be an era where broadcasters attempted to stay away from anything controversial that might damage their attempts to reach a mass audience: a generic clown emphasizing physical humor and generic puns and advice would be an excellent fit for the medium and an outstanding vehicle for Harmon's dreams.

As an aside regarding sourcing, it is important to keep in mind that while all autobiographies and stories relying on someone's memories have elements that veer from an objective truth, Harmon's memories in particular cannot be fully trusted. There are some who knew him who might believe he lied deliberately, while others would be kinder in describing aspects of the stories he told as a salesman's pitch or how a man of enthusiasms talked of his products. In any case, it is on record and detailed in a 2001 ABC news expose that either he claimed or accepted that he had been passively assigned certain credit for developing the character of Bozo the Clown that belonged to others (ABC News). The controversy over the credit led to him first being removed from the Clown Hall of Fame before being reinstated in the year he died, recognizing that while he did not create the character, he still deserved a lion's share of credit for how important Bozo has become (Cashin). While what was published in his book may reflect Harmon's thinking at the time of his “epiphany,” or is the reinvention of his

⁴¹ The version seems unlikely this version fully represents Capitol Records' side of the experience. In conversation researcher Holbrooke said Harmon and his group outbid Chapin for rights to the character, but the records from Capitol or others surrounding the sale do not appear to be available (Holbrooke).

inspiration, it is true that the model he laid out in his autobiography was the foundation for the Bozo show and character that American's embraced in hundreds of television markets over the next forty or so years.

Harmon also recalled for his autobiography foreseeing that once he had success in Los Angeles with the show, that he would franchise its format (rather than seek a network and syndication deal) to local markets whose actors in the clown costume and wig he sold them would build on schtick he created and also play Bozo cartoons. How someone with seemingly little experience in the animation world would develop the cartoons, his memory was that, "I borrowed some money and built a small animation studio to create these short cartoons" (Harmon 139). Unmentioned in his autobiography, and a reason Capitol may have seen more potential in a deal than what one journeyman actor brought to the table with regard to exploiting Bozo's rights, was anything at all regarding Harmon's financial partners or who would be helping him with the animation or the television production or selling the rights to stations across the country. Whatever the backstory, within a couple years of the sale there were cartoons carrying the credit line, "Based on the character *Bozo*, the Capitol Clown, created by Alan Livingston" (Hollis 18), and featuring voiceover by Harmon based on Colvig's sound, and featuring supporting characters including a circus boss foil, a sidekick, comedic villains all playing part in some variety of mischief. *Broadcasting* reported:

Larry Harmon-Ted Ticktin Productions, Inc., headquartered at California Studios, Hollywood, has scheduled 312 animated cartoons for tv distribution by Reub Kaufman's Jayark Films Corp., New York. Highlighting the series will be "Bozo the Clown,"... January 1959 is the target date for beginning to show the first 26 of the six-minute 35 mm, full color Bozo chapters in 50 markets ("Harmon-Ticktin").

The Boing Boing Show, airing Sundays on CBS in 1956, was the first program to be built around cartoons created specifically for television broadcast (Bianculli 41). The Harmon-Ticktin team were still pioneers in creating cartoons specifically for the new television medium rather

than relying on cartoons created to run first in movie theaters.⁵² The debut of their vision-in-process was January 5, 1959, on KTLA, whose history included being an experimental station begun in 1939 by Paramount and then serving as the the DuMont network's Los Angeles affiliate. Vance Colvig, Jr., son of original Bozo, Pinto Colvig, portrayed the character. (Given Pinto's experience working with Livingston on the original character as well as how his past included serving on animation teams for Disney and others, he may have been instrumental in helping Harmon and Ticktin develop their team of animators). In Harmon's memory, "At end of the [first] show, Bozo looked directly into the camera and said, 'well, until I see you tomorrow, remember what your old pal Bozo always says: It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice.' He leaned back, just as we had practiced, and threw his arms out in a wide gesture and took a deep breath, 'So, till I see you tomorrow, juuuuuust keep laughing!'" (Harmon 99).

Around the country franchised Bozos shows popped up on stations in formats that ranged from the title clown and a sidekick interacting amid cartoons to the multi-character, live band and at-home participation extravaganza Chicago's WGN would develop. The concept was franchised for strong stations in major markets who would offer the more elaborate Bozo experiences, and as a result of the introduction in 1960 of UHF broadcasting and their need for cheap programming, to low power stations reaching only a small sliver of an audience who might have a minimal set and the clown alone offering patter amid the main mix of cartoons and advertising (Hollis 19). Whatever the format, everybody was getting their own local Bozo. In each case, at least in the televised versions' early years, Harmon would train the new Bozo in mannerisms, voice and the basics of the Bozo, and require through the franchising contract that the blue Bozo the Clown costume and upswept, krylon-coated, red yak hair, be purchased directly from him.⁶

⁵² Ted Ticktin's role in the team is unclear as he seems previously to have had only one movie producing credit. It seems likely his was more the passive investor role, but, again, there is no available paperwork or memory to confirm this.

⁶Vance Colvig wears the Capitol Bozo promotional suit during his stint in character; the only other variation in costuming will be his father in the original, similar costume and WGN's Bob

The different versions showcased different characters for Bozo to play off — like KTLA’s Professor Tweedy Foofer and Grandma Nelly. Almost immediately after Harmon gained the rights, and as happened with records, Bozomania was sweeping the country. Jayark Films, which had been distributing packages of the Bozo cartoons with Harmon’s voice attempting to mimic Colvig’s announced in August of 1961 that it had sold packages of the Bozo cartoons into 201 markets (“Film Sales”). That November *The New York Times* reported, “At the moment, sixty Bozos are working on local shows on various television stations in the United States. With another twelve Bozos abroad, they are turning out 205 shows for an audience that the boss Bozo, Larry Harmon, says reaches about 35,000,000 persons” (Schumach).

One clown’s imprint on American culture was not achieved just through sales of recordings in years past, or the ephemeral existence of a kid’s television show that might end its run when a newly organized UHF station ran out of its original funding. Those impressions would only have burrowed into the subconscious of the audience watching those shows. The success of Bozo as media content led to his success as a brand, and (in contemporary terms) an influencer. In 1961, Jayark announced that the retail value of licensed merchandise featuring Bozo had hit \$17 million with an expectation that the figure would grow to \$51 million the next year. Licensees of the Bozo name or image included Allison, Audio Creations, Roy Berlin, Hassenfeld Bros., House of Paper, Ideal Toy, Knickerbocker Toy, Pez-Haas, Polly Prentiss, Transogram, Western Printing and Litho, and Capitol Records (“Film-Scope”). By the time WGN shuts down its superstation broadcast of Bozo, generations had watched him train as a fireman; learn to deep sea dive; experience zero gravity like an astronaut, hang out with cannibals; and run for president of The United States, among other adventures and antics. Additionally, one estimate was that the character’s face had appeared before those who watched and those who didn’t on 3000 different items (Holbrooke). By the early 1960s, and paired with the television that would dominate the entertainment landscape during the time Baby Boomers

Bell who will first wear a red costume before changing to the blue. Of course, the costume color will not matter with regard to national branding until everyone is watching the show in color.

were setting America's cultural agenda, Bozo was well on his way to imprinting himself on America's conscious.

CHAPTER 6 Dismantling Bozo's Big Top

The 1981 documentary *Television: The Enchanted Mirror*, an exploration of the media channel's impact on American lives right before cable television and then the internet began their ascent to cultural dominance, explored the idea that television is not an entertainment outside people's lives but an integral part of their day-to-day existence (Csisery). This "mirror" was found in an estimated ninety-eight percent of American homes, where for the many who kept it on as background noise to their lives or looked into a box instead of outside at the world, it didn't feel like a media content choice. The world(s) they were exposed to via the screen was a feature of the landscape of their life.

At one point of the half-hour documentary the narrator comments, "Viewers often expect life to imitate television," and in another section, then ABC Vice President of Broadcast Standards and Practices Tom Kersey states on camera, "Television is a learning experience. Kids learn from it." There is an entertainment aspect to television viewing that may in part be an "escape" from their concerns, but for many people, what is viewed is also a reality, or at least a possible-for-them path forward to a place that works well for others. Bozo as a significant part of many lives is largely due to the character's success at moving beyond the screen and into people's homes ... helped no doubt by the connection viewers felt with the medium as well as the availability of Bozo merchandise on display in stores that found its way into shopping lists for children.

It is true that the clown has a long legacy. It is true that the circus milieu was a comfortable setting for people throughout the country. It is true that Bozo recordings had a successful run that included merchandising spin-offs. However, when considering that Bozo is a part of American culture nearly a generation after they packed up his big tent, it is hard to overstate the role of television taking him into so many people's lives through every major and many minor media markets (sometimes on multiple channels as UHF and satellite TV programming evolved in the 1980s). While no proof can be offered, twenty-some years after he left the airwaves Bozo the Clown continues as an influence in American popular most likely because he was an established figure who caught the TV wave as it was forming and rode it for

the nearly 40-year preceding the digital revolution when over-the-air and then cable television was the country's most important cultural force.

When Jayark began distributing the Harmon-Tickin Bozo cartoon packages in 1959 there were fewer than six hundred licensed American television stations. By the time Bozo departed the airwaves in 2001 there were about three times that number. That explosion of programming opportunities was encouraged by the United States' government's 1963 mandate that television sets must be manufactured with the capability to receive both UHF and VHF signals. The former's frequency offered greater access to urban and suburban dwellers (and as a result was what networks and independent broadcasters in major cities relied on), while the latter provided a better chance of reaching viewers in rural areas, an opportunity fewer stations exploited at the beginning of the television age. The 1960s also saw the investment by large companies in cable systems that would allow independent channels to reach into the lives of families in smaller communities across America.

New stations need to attract viewers. Picking up a nationally prominent brand that attracts the young, particularly one available for a limited investment like a nationally branded Bozo, was a great buy for the programming manager. The less expensive option for stations was a purchase of just the cartoon packages from Jayark, which announced in 1961 its Bozo cartoons arriving in the two hundred and first market worldwide ("Film Sales"). For a little bit more of an investment — which would give them a character with a history of attracting children audiences and who they could use in the community to promote the station or offer advertisers as part of a "value add" — they could negotiate with Harmon for a turn-key Bozo show. They would contract for the costume from him, receive a Bozo manual for the station, and be provided training for whoever would be the station's Bozo.

Tim Hollis, author of *Hi There, Boys and Girls!*, the comprehensive look at children's programming, describes the 1960s as "a major gold mine for Harmon [with] local versions of the show ranged from elaborate productions with real-life circus acts to low-budget affairs that leased the character in name and appearance only" (Hollis 19). The description of the wide variety of Bozo shows — as well as WGN seventeen-year veteran Bozo, Bob Bell, who began

playing the clown in 1961 saying he never spoke with Harmon (Richter) — demonstrates both the often-slapdash nature of children’s television in its early years, as well as Harmon’s greater interest in negotiating deals than micromanaging the character.

Each station’s Bozo may have looked and sounded similar across the country, but viewers were watching a show tailored for their local television market by the performer’s particular whims, or by innovations of the station’s programming director, or the desires of the local advertisers. When Vance Colvig, Jr., son of the original Bozo, Pinto, began Bozo’s new era on TV by appearing as KTLA’s clown, he was joined by a sidekick, “Butch,” aka “Butchy Boy,” who was a character first created for the cartoons, but played on each day’s show by a different child selected from the live audience (“Bozo the Clown”). Another option: while Colvig was featuring a new partner every day, KTUL’s Doug Montgomery was harking back to stage business from the past, using Clarabell the Clown (from Howdy Doody) as his model for clowning around. He only communicated by blowing a whistle until this Tulsa, Oklahoma, Bozo eventually learns to speak and uses the new-found talent to begin making “crank” calls (Hollis 232).

In Nashville, Tennessee, Tom Tichenor’s Bozo interacted with a hand puppet voiced by a camera operator. Tichenor would soon be replaced by Dick Brackett who joined the show as Professor Brackett before switching into a new costume and changing his on-set voice to that of the title character. A measure of that Bozo’s success was at one point having eighteen sponsors for the hour-long afternoon show (Hollis 264). Additional testimony to how well the show could draw in local business interest appeared in Kingsport, Tennessee, where the Bozo played by Rusty Curry had a local dairy and bakery promoting licensed Bozo Milk and Bozo Bread. (Hollis 106).

An interesting aspect to the success of this character in embedding himself into the lives of many baby boomers and some Gen Xers is that they all love the Bozo they saw — thinking it is the same for everyone. Some Bozos were taller, some were stouter, some were a show’s lone character while others acted as part of an ensemble. Some men were the real faces behind the makeup for years and others held the role for months. There is not a particular consistency to

the show's success in each market, which again might speak to Harmon's hands-off approach, or might just be testimony to how hard the television business can be: The Bozo Milk and Bozo Bread-sponsored show on WKPT from Kingsport, Tennessee, began in 1969 and was off the air in 1970 (Hollis 268). WMBD in Peoria, Illinois, recruited "a member of the local Peoria clown club" as their Bozo for a 1958 show that lasted less than a year (Hollis 106). At the other end of the spectrum, WZZM began a Bozo broadcast from Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1966 and after switching out the ringmaster for their original Bozo had a twenty-one-year run engaging advertisers and audiences (Hollis 154). Theirs would be the penultimate Bozo to sign off prior to WGN ending Bozo's television run after forty-years on the Chicago station. It seems paradoxical, but while true that there was a great inconsistency to what viewers across the country saw, the result was an appreciation of one character.

For example, even as Bozo was been winding down as a fixture on television schedules, the character continued as an attraction. Companies continued to believe in the commercial pull of the character. So, in 1987, even as the Bozo shows were reduced to one, a popular-priced merchandiser, Telemania, introduced its Bozo the Clown telephone at a suggested retail price of \$89.99 and "Unlike other personality telephones, it's both a phone and a receiver. Instead of ringing, it laughs, and its nose lights up as it laughs. The full-color and authentic Bozo likeness is fully modular, made possible by a unique and patented chip" ("Animated Bozo the Clown phone").

Recognizing that the franchise model was confronted by changes in the marketplace for local television stations, in 1966, the year after he bought out his partners in order to control all rights to the characters (Stephenson), Harmon made the first of his two attempts to standardize the show. From all the Bozos he chose Boston's, Frank Avruch, who had been headlining WHDH's *Bozo's Big Top* since 1958:

His daily shows in Boston were an hour, and from them producers culled a half-hour program to run in prime time for national audiences. "We had Brownie meetings, birthday parties, and other special occasions right on the air," he said in the 1989

[Boston] Globe interview. “There was a lot of excitement, a lot of fast-moving games and treasure hunts, lots of audience participation, circus acts, and, of course, Bozo’s goodie bag, which was filled with Twinkies” (Marquard).

It is not clear whether the station wanted to end its Bozo, or Harmon was not finding national distribution as profitable as he thought it should be with many local markets continuing to want their own Bozo. In any case, both Boston’s *Bozo’s Big Top* and the nationally syndicated Bozo show ceased production in 1970, although not before Avruch was seen on screens throughout the world in a Bozo costume on travels to countries in Asia and South American to encourage children to donate pennies, nickels and dimes to the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (Marquard). There would be an opportunity to watch Bozo on television for nearly thirty more years, but studio by studio the bright lights were being turned off on the Bozo sets.

In the 1940s Bozo evolved from a primordial American cultural stew into a recordings and book star. He morphed from that status into a character of television significance. By the end of the Boston Bozo’s tenure — and even as he would have a size 88 EEE national footprint for almost thirty more years — it was clear this clown character was entering a period of transition for both him and television as a whole. While it is possible to fault Harmon’s management of the character, it is not clear what he could have done to change the evolution of a television personality at a time when the medium and its audience(s) were undergoing structural changes.

By the late 1970s the television business was greatly changed from when Harmon began franchising the shows. Relevant to his business model, there was less local ownership, less locally based entertainment programming, and children’s programming had evolved from the model that solidified during the days of radio dominance. Local Bozos were not the dominant ratings force in children’s television they had been. In these years leading up to the expansion of cable television providing niche channels devoted full time to children’s programming beginning in the 1980s there was already competition for young television audiences’ attention from videotapes that gave viewers control over what they saw on the screen.

Television had dominated America's cultural landscape for a generation — the baby boomer generation. However, its changing nature reduced the opportunity for continuing the Bozo franchise model. By 1979, cable distribution of television content was providing 16 million households television content options well beyond what the traditional over the air channels offered. By 1989, 53 million households received their television content via cable systems ("History of Cable"). The audience the franchised Bozo and his advertisers depended on was fracturing. At the same time, technology such as the VCR player gave consumers control over when they viewed (and how many times they could watch) a show. Advertising support diminished for local shows that could not consistently deliver the audiences they previously had. Television station ownership was also consolidating due both financial pressures on individual operators as well as legislative changes and the opportunity for larger media businesses to reach more people through first cable and then satellite distribution.

Reviewing his time as Bozo during a 2011 radio interview, the final WGN Bozo, Joey D'Auria, spoke in glowing terms about Harmon and his responsibility for the commercial success of the character as well as its prominence in the American psyche. With hindsight he also recognized that the character he played for so many years was no longer a good fit with a changed medium:

The only thing I would ever fault Larry Harmon was the fact that he still maintained that 1950s television mentality. None of the things that he ever spoke about to me seemed any different from what he had been doing all those years. Television had changed so much. And the concepts of theater had changed so much in regard to children's performances and children's characters that it just seemed it was the same thing (Spears 10:59-11:40).

As Capitol had done years before, it was not that Harmon wasn't trying to maintain the Bozo cash cow. While an earlier incarnation of Art Cervi's Bozo show in Detroit had been a dominant force in local television, appearing for an hour every weekday morning and afternoon, as well as a half hour on Saturdays and an hour on Sundays, the final version of the show in Detroit — which Larry Harmon attempted to market as a syndicated show to multiple markets

— lasted only three years (Kiska). Despite the Cervi Bozo not making its mark nationally, that didn't mean the character had lost all its appeal.

Bozo was much less of a mainstay of local programming beginning in the 1970s, but that did not mean he was in retreat from all markets. The *Chicago Tribune*-owned WGN added to its reach via traditional over the air broadcasting in 1978 by using a satellite distribution to gain a footprint in other markets. The first week Chicago's famed Bozo's Circus was offered through two hundred cable system partners it was newly available to one million households outside the Chicago metro ("Cable Briefs: Ready Customers") and by 1989, with Joey D'Auria having replaced original actor in the role, Bob Bell, in 1984, it was available in twenty-five million homes across the country ("Where Things Stand: Syndex").

From WGN's second attempt in 1961 to bring Bozo to Chicago — when they gave it a lunchtime slot that exposed it to students' home from school in the middle of the day — the show and character were a celebrated part of the lineup.⁷¹

It is possible that there never has been, and never will be, a local children's show that was a bigger hit than WGN's *Bozo's Circus*. It was simply a phenomenon, and the station knew it.... Once the cast and format of *Bozo's Circus* had been established, the daily live broadcast ran like a well-tuned circus calliope. The "Grand Prize Game" was introduced during the program's first year, enabling kids to try for fabulous winnings by pitching Ping-Pong balls into a succession of metal buckets. It became so popular that it was even marketed nationally as a Bozo toy by the enterprising Larry Harmon" (Hollis 96).

Over the years there would be changes to the show. The thirteen-piece circus band was dropped in 1975. In 1980 the show was moved from the noon time slot to earlier in the morning. In 1994 the show was no longer a featured part of the daily broadcast lineup and was re-titled as

⁷¹ Chicago's feeling about Bozo was not limited to an audience of children. He impacted some adults, too. Some, probably, who served as caregivers for the youngsters in the audience. Others for a variety of reasons. For example, in a radio interview done upon the show's demise, long time director Al Hull recalled bomb threats the show received related to adults betting on how far kids could go in a particular day's Grand Prize Game when there was a "do-over" offered to a contestant ("Bozo the Clown").

The Bozo Super Sunday Show. In a particularly controversial move that some consider the toll of the live show's death knell, in 1997, succumbing to the voices over the years that derided this sort of anti-intellectual entertainment for children, as well as allowing WGN to confirm to new Federal Communications Commission regulations regarding educational and informational programming, cartoons were dropped and some comic interplay replaced by "teaching moments" between characters.

A show that at one time had a ten-year waiting list for requests to be part of the studio audience was, despite its reach, no longer the main or even a particularly important minor attraction. Cable television options such as Nickelodeon, MTV, and The Disney Channel offered a twenty-four-hour stream of less old-fashioned, less didactic television options for children and young viewers took their attention elsewhere, as well as the advertisers seeking out them and the adults who watched with them and would make the purchases. WGN cancelled its Bozo, its final locally produced show and the final television Bozo for at least a generation, in 2001.

CHAPTER 7
From Recorded to Televised to Digital?

Given the long history of clowns and circuses and children's entertainment, many will find it surprising that Bozo continues as an American icon a generation past the time the curtain came down on WGN's *The Bozo Super Sunday Show*. After forty-plus years, that long-in-the-tooth entertainment had been relegated to airing at the inconvenient-for-most-viewers and uncoveted-by-most-advertisers hour of 7 a.m., Chicago time. *Chicago Tribune* reporter Steve Johnson's 2001 eulogy for what the city had lost included the lines that:

Bozo is the television equivalent of one of those fish they occasionally find in the darkest, coldest ocean depths, a relic of a different evolutionary era. ...Where once dozens of iterations of the Bozo show roamed America's airwaves, now only WGN's 40-year-old geezer remains, a still-resonant but no longer very popular symbol of Chicago life. ... it is as [the final Bozo, Joey] D'Auria said: "It's not so much that Bozo was killed. I think that Bozo has sort of naturally succumbed to progress." ... Kids' programming has shifted from locally produced shows with roots in theater to slicker, nationally produced ones with roots, too often, in consumer products. ... Cable has gained in prominence, with channels such as Nickelodeon and Disney Channel devoting themselves to becoming the kid-friendly television name brands. ... Clowns in general are passé these days, more likely to be thought of as scary than uproarious. A guy like Bozo, relying on slapstick and vaudeville instead of computer-generated special effects, airing on a station that was doing little other kids' programming, had a hard time keeping up (Johnson).

Children's entertainment had changed during Bozo's time in the spotlight. He ended his time in the spotlight nearly sixty years after having it him as a best-selling entertainment built on hearing Pinto Colvig using "the Bozo voice" to tell a story on records about animals. There was once again limited interest in children's records and WGN shut down production on the televised Bozo when there were plentiful and more sophisticated entertainment options for children twenty-four hours a day. The Bozo character as heard on record or seen on television hadn't kept up with the times. It wouldn't be surprising today to find him gone except for

internet nostalgia pages, video clips, and histories of television's golden age (and he is prominent in all of them), yet a glimpse of current American culture finds that face, and often the costume and distinctive sound still a feature.

Of course, not every bozo is related to Bozo, and it is true that many who attempt the insult "you're a bozo," might find the term's derivation in pre-Capitol Records' history. After all, if the show was off the air before one was born, all Bozos are sort of from the same vein of ancient history as the one St. Anselm addressed. However, the character has an established place in media history. Likely many who use the word in derogation have in their minds' eye the image found in books, comics and on a multitude of screens across the country. Bozo has both a past and a present: a 2022 digital search finds plenty of Bozo image licensed merchandise from years gone past, including Bozo on record, Bozo books and comics, Bozo lunchboxes and other vintage branded merchandise as well as the still produced Bozo Bop Bag (a still popular inflatable plastic toy weighted at the bottom so it returns to a standing position after a child punches it).

One development for the one-time, "world's most famous clown" is an attempt at reinvention. The actor David Arquette — whose grandfather, actor Clifford Arquette, made the transition in the form of character Charley Weaver from radio fame to television celebrity during its early years — purchased rights to the Bozo character from Larry Harmon Pictures in October 2021. The path of the development is unclear. Arquette, who claims to be a fan of the character from having watched him on WGN during his childhood, has expressed ideas for museums and reviving him as television screen staple. An attempt to make him a character in an interactive circus in December 2021 was derailed by the covid pandemic and related issues (Williams). In a move that may either have threatened the core of the Bozo brand or help update the appeal, he hadn't yet put anyone in the traditional Bozo costume, when he expanded the brand by introducing a female, person of color Bozo, Jozo Bozo.

Remembering that it took Harmon a couple years to make the transition of his character from records to television, it would be unfair to accurately assess where Arquette will be taking the character or what percentage of its previous market saturation and commercial success can

be achieved. Upon announcing his purchase, he said, “Bozo represents a world of love, light, and laughter. Something we can all use more of right now.” When introducing Jozo he added, “There’s a lot of stuff we have to do just to rehabilitate the clown image but it’s just about spreading joy and happiness” (Etienne).

Ironically for a character that is all about love and laughter, the Bozo influence is now often prominent in clown characters who do not inspire love, light, and laughter. On *The Simpsons*, the thirty-plus year, veteran television cartoon show, a prominent supporting player is a clown with a local children’s television show, hair and makeup patterned after Bozo’s, who serves as a “humorous” role model of cynicism and corruption. In movie theaters and via streaming options, the character Pennywise, a clown figure with hair and face also resembling Bozo’s, serves as a chilling figure in the movie adaptations of Stephen King’s horror novel, *It*, about a child-eating character. Exploring the connection and detailing this change in the popular reception of clowns, cultural critic Karal Ann Marling wrote, “Like Groening, King draws on a reservoir of popular culture to create works that mesmerize by virtue of their sheer familiarity: suddenly, because we remember Bozo so well, we know what is happening in Derry and can appreciate the spine-chilling horror of characters whose ordinary lives skew sideways by inches....” (Marling).

Probably most apt for a character created for commercial purposes who became a franchised institution, Bozo’s legacy is perhaps most evident in America and around the world in Ronald McDonald, planet Earth’s foremost fast-food pitchman. With reference to Bozo as an icon, it is noteworthy that as McDonald’s serves as a foremost corporate representative of America, Ronald McDonald, the most prominent and consistent aspect of their worldwide advertising campaigns, also serves as a signifier of America (Gershon).

The morphing of Bozo into Ronald McDonald begins in the nation’s capital. The Washington, DC, NBC television affiliate, WRC, licensed its franchise in 1959 and put twenty-five-year-old staff announcer Willard Scott into the costume. One of the sponsors was an association of the area’s five McDonald’s restaurants — the company began franchising its restaurant model in 1955 — and they would employ Scott in his Bozo regalia to make personal

appearances. When WRC cancelled its contract with Harmon, the ad agency for the McDonald's franchisees created a new clown character with a similar face, but some McDonald's-specific features like a striped suit, Styrofoam hat topped by a hamburger, a bag of French fries, and a milk shake, shoes shaped like buns, and paper drink cup nose (Ritter).

Shortly thereafter, Ronald McDonald was adopted as a national symbol of the company and since then there have been adaptations to the character and costume. However, the Bozo face elements remain: white face, red nose, eyebrows arched high, hair an unwieldy red mop, and exaggerated red outline of a smile around the mouth.

Someone born after 2002 who has never encountered any direct representation of "the world's most famous clown" still feels his influence. There is Krusty the Clown on television, Pennywise at the movies, and, pretty much anywhere you go around the world there is Ronald McDonald, all of who (and many other clown figures as well) tracing their look to a particular clown created to sell children a record and book collection. And there may again be Bozo (and perhaps Jozo Bozo) in their future. When Americans think of clowns, it is nearly impossible to do so without Bozo being at least a small part of that definition. Unlike the original Anselm's original Boso, or the fools, jesters, and clowns who are his antecedents, this Bozo is not a character that questions an institution; it is a character of the institution.

Like America itself, the influences of Bozo as an American icon reach deep into the history of western civilization. His is a story of media influence in our lives, as well as the mixing of commerce and culture. The name is recognizable as is the image. And, while we may not know everything about him or agree on exactly what he means, for now at least Bozo remains in our culture with a little bit of the "Goofy" Colvig brought to him through the vocal characterization, and as Harmon scripted him for television. As a result, and perhaps long into the future depending on Arquette's handling, his impact continues and we can agree to, "... remember what your old pal Bozo always says: It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

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