

Jackie Coogan

Titles: 19 Sources: 7 Stills: 113

Born: John Leslie Coogan Jr; Los Angeles; 1915

Died: Elder brother of Robert Coogan [\[qv\]](#); grandfather of Keith Coogan [\[qv\]](#)



The androgynous looks, as much as the native theatrical talent from his father, were the key to Coogan's enduring childhood celebrity. There is more of Clara Bow about him than Mickey Rooney, and the look was widely imitated. Source: indeterminate



*Jackie at his most coquettish, like a ragtime Cupid, button-nosed, mop-haired and knees sparkly clean.
From the dustjacket of *The Moving Picture Boy**

Not the first child actor in the cinema of course, but certainly the first child star, and he remained the pre-eminent name until the arrival of Shirley Temple, who eclipsed his memory, although Coogan during his brief peak was every bit the international celebrity she later became. Coogan however did not sing or dance, and his popularity with the public relied solely on winsome appeal. Aside from "**THE KID**", in which he upstaged even Chaplin, none of his films are seen today, so it is impossible to assess his actual talent. He made an extremely young "**OLIVER TWIST**" to Lon Chaney's Fagin, and landed the usual American boy star roles of "**PECK'S BAD BOY**" and "**TOM SAWYER**", but most of his vehicles were written expressly for him. He later became the centre of a national scandal when it emerged the totality of his childhood earnings as a major studio star had been splurged by his selfish mother and stepfather. The case resulted in the passing of what came to be known as the "Coogan law", protecting the earnings of child performers.

A desultory adult career had its highlight when he played the bald squeaking Uncle Fester in TV's "**The Addams Family**". Rather a sad comedown for the child who once so captivated cinema audiences worldwide. One apocryphal Hollywood tale has it that during the Second World War, Chaplin was making a morale-boosting tour of the Navy, and while visiting one particular ship a large burly sailor came up and planted himself beaming on Chaplin's knee. It was Coogan, all grown up. Chaplin did not recognise him and, so the story goes, was not



*Pearly prince – Jackie asleep on the set of **"BUTTONS"***

Source: The Silents Majority

much amused when Coogan identified himself. He was perhaps the first screen child to be heavily merchandised, and the shearing of his trademark locks was a watershed signalling, like Sampson, the end of his powers.



*As yet unidentified Coogan vehicle – the still reference no. suggests it might be "LONG LIVE THE KING" (24)
Source: The Silents Majority ?*

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion note:

"American child actor of the twenties who achieved outstanding star status but later reappeared as a less appealing adult in minor roles."

A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen comment:

"1920... Another outstanding event was the discovery by Chaplin of Jackie Coogan. The story goes that Jackie winked at Chaplin in a Los Angeles railway station and was given the role in **"THE KID"** which skyrocketed little Jackie Coogan to stardom."

The World's Great Movie Stars entry:

"Billed as 'The Greatest Boy Actor in the World', Jackie Coogan was the most phenomenal child star of the silent era, the counterpart of Shirley Temple in the sound

film. He became a star in the greatest child role in the cinema, Charlie Chaplin's **"THE KID"** in 1921. An orphan junior tramp, his enormous eyes and cherubic five-year old face set off by an oversize cap, he was irresistible to the sentimental '20s. Chaplin's brilliant mixture of comedy and pathos brought two and a half million dollars' worth of laughter and tears to the coffers of the First National Company.

John Leslie Coogan Jr was born in Los Angeles in 1915 and made his stage debut at the age of two. He acted in Chaplin's 1919 short **"A DAY'S PLEASURE"** before helping to create Chaplin's greatest box office success ever as **"THE KID"**. He starred in a dozen films during the next six years including **"OLIVER TWIST"** (with Lon Chaney as Fagin), **"OLD CLOTHES"** (with Joan Crawford as his co-star), and **"DADDY"**. They made over one million dollars, and he became one of the major box office attractions of the time.



Top: Cover boy and trading card celeb.

Right: also unidentified, but possibly from "DADDY" (23)

Source: various websites



All of his films were unashamedly sentimental and remained smash hits until he began to grow up; then his star gradually dimmed. He made two reasonable sound films based on Mark Twain novels ("**TOM SAWYER**" and "**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**") and then was old enough to marry Betty Grable, the first of his four wives. He sued his parents for the money he had made (he lost the case) and continued to work in films and TV in a minor way. Today Mr Coogan is a bald and beefy actor in his 60s, but the child he once was remains an eternally young movie star."

Hollywood – the Pioneers interview with Coogan:

"**"THE KID"** starred Jackie Coogan, who was four years old when he appeared with his father – Jack Sr – in a vaudeville act. Chaplin saw the act, and was so impressed he determined to have Jackie in a picture. But Arbuckle signed him first. Chaplin was dismayed; he knew just how effective the little boy would be opposite the fat man. When it turned out to be a false alarm – Arbuckle was negotiating for the father – Chaplin gratefully brought the boy to the studio and slowly and painfully put the film together. For Jackie Coogan, the film was the experience of his life. He still talks about it with delight. Chaplin was immensely kind and considerate, and his direction of the boy was one of the miracles of the movies.

"The Chaplin studio was unique" said Coogan, "and as he was the only producer on the lot, we had the whole place to ourselves. Sometimes we wouldn't turn a camera for ten days while he got an idea. And when he got an idea, he brought it all together in his mind. He was a brilliant man. Everybody in the motion picture business or any of the arts should be terribly envious of this man because he had it all. He could originate it, he could facilitate it, and he was a director; he later scored all his own pictures, and he had the ability to get the most out of people."

"Here you've got a little boy, a waif, he's adopted without the benefit of the law, and he gets sick and the County Orphanage man comes and says 'He has to go into the hospital. Are you the father?' And he says 'No...' And they try to take me by

force to the workhouse, which was practically condemning a child to death in those days."

"I can remember him explaining what he wanted me to do. He started to dramatise it – I saw it in my mind's eye. He was a marvellous story-teller, and he put it on an intensely personal basis, so that when he said 'Camera' and then 'Action!' and the welfare worker threw me into this truck, that's when the dam broke. I was really gone. I was torn up. 'I want my daddy'. I was hysterical. If you're going to portray someone being hysterical, you'd better get yourself hysterical, or it's as phoney as a three-dollar bill. You've just got to let everything go. It's just like vacuumising yourself, just letting everything out. In a grown person, I would say frustrations; in a child, I don't know what was let out. But I know I just felt hollow. My head was like a bell that was ringing." "

The M-G-M story note:

"...Old age was creeping up on Jackie Coogan in 1927, and when "**BUTTONS**" finished shooting he went into temporary retirement. His remarkable public appeal had lasted for seven years; at 13 he looked forward to a life of ease with the million or so dollars he had earned. But ahead lay years of litigation with his mother and stepfather who had frittered almost all of it away (resulting in a new California law requiring that the bulk of children's earnings be held in trust for them), and decades of diminishing movie roles. In his last M-G-M starrer, [he was] a street urchin who became a page-boy in a transatlantic liner. "

The Movies entry:

"It was Douglas Fairbanks who first observed that children and animals make the best movie actors. From the beginning children played a more important part in pictures than they ever had in the theatre, and many became stars in their own right. Of these by far the most beloved was Jackie Coogan, around whom Chaplin centred his peerless "**THE KID**" (20). Coogan's parents, small-time vaudevillians, were sharp enough to realise at once the valuable property they had in their son, and bargained for his



Above: Jackie and the trademark cap, sixty years before half the male population of the planet (the dumber half) would express their own individuality by wearing baseball caps the wrong way round.



services with a rapacity which astounded even Hollywood. After his discovery, the five-year old Jackie was signed to a starring contract which netted him a fortune of \$4,000,000, and he remained a top favourite until he outgrew little boy roles.

The fate of this infant gold mine was not uncharacteristic of show business. His performances of adolescent roles, especially in "**TOM SAWYER**" (30), demonstrated that young Coogan was a genuine artist, not just a cute bundle of mischief and pathos. But in maturity he could find no place on the screen. Nor did he enjoy a penny of his vast childhood earnings. When he turned twenty-one and asked for his money, his mother, who had remarried after the death of Jack Coogan Sr, found a Californian law which held that the earnings of a minor are the absolute property of his parents, and refused her son any part of the fortune which had supported her in luxury for years."

Excerpt from **Classics of the Silent Screen** filmography:

"..."**THE KID**" and "**OLIVER TWIST**" apart, Coogan made no really important films. Important, that is, in an aesthetic sense. They were most decidedly important to the exhibitor, who found Jackie a little goldmine whether he was playing a mischievous little brat in "**PECK'S BAD BOY**", or a pathetic orphaned waif who befriends an old sea dog in "**MY BOY**".

Jackie's films were unashamedly sentimental. They played mercilessly on the heartstrings of the audience - and they succeeded with a vengeance. They were made for very little, and grossed a small fortune. While movie audiences of today have (to their loss, I feel) outgrown the honest sentimentality of the '20s to such an extent that Coogan's type of film will never be made again, his films still hold up surprisingly well. Their charm is still remarkably preserved, and little Jackie's performances are as moving and effective now as they were well over thirty years ago."

The Child Stars incidental note from Coogan biography:

"..."**A BOY OF FLANDERS**", his second picture for Metro, also dripped saccharine.

The story was adapted from the well-known book, "A Dog of Flanders", by Louise de la Ramée, who wrote under the pen name Ouida. Prominent in the cast was Teddy, a Great Dane, hero of many comedies, and child actress Toby Wing, later to be linked romantically with Jackie. "It's different, tremendous" read the advertising posters. The world famous story of a Belgian boy and his dog, and his fight against poverty and enemies, until, with the roof taken from him, and the coveted painting prize won by his rival, he wanders friendless and alone out on the Flemish fields in a blinding snowstorm... "You'll laugh and cry and be thrilled with Jackie Coogan at his triumphs and headaches," warned *The New York Times*: the film revealed in Jackie "a steady Coogan inclination toward imitating adults". In an attempt to counter recurrent criticism of weak plots in his son's films, Jack Sr. announced that henceforth Jackie would stick to roles like the one that had brought him such acclaim in "**THE KID**"..."

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** comprehensive entry on Coogan:

"...His follow-up vehicle [to "**THE KID**"] was based on the popular "**Bad Boy**" series of G.W. Peck. Again he wore a cloth cap (though a less decrepit one) and again wowed the nation. In 1921 he got down to the smiles and tears as an immigrant orphan in "**MY BOY**" with Claude Gillingwater, then in "**TROUBLE**" was teamed with Wallace Beery (as Jackie Cooper was later to be), and finally played a very under-sized "**OLIVER TWIST**"..."

What the Critics said:

In "**PECK'S BAD BOY**"

"Still fresh and enjoyable vehicle for child-star Coogan as a young mischief-maker..." - Matlin

"Jackie Coogan shines as the mischievous scamp who commits all manner of mayhem upon anyone who happens to cross his path, yet miraculously escapes the lethal designs his

victims must harbour.” – Video Movie Guide 1993

"**PECK'S BAD BOY**" was Jackie Coogan's first film released on the enormously successful heels of "**THE KID**" (Charlie Chaplin Productions, for First National, 1921), with Charlie Chaplin. Even though the critics were less impressed with the story line, they loved Coogan and so did his fans. The film received favourable reviews.

Variety, on April 28, 1921, stated, " "**PECK'S BAD BOY**" as a picture will not go down in history as a great achievement. It is just a picture, and it is more than likely that the producers of it didn't expect to do more than present simply a picture of Jackie Coogan, and in figuring that he was enough they were probably right."

Photoplay, in July of 1921, exclaimed, "It is a rare acting talent and a loveable personality that Jackie Coogan brings to the screen. But his directors will be hard put to it to find stories to fit him. Probably never again will he have the chance that Charlie Chaplin gave him in "**THE KID**"."

Jackie Coogan related decades after making the picture that he really enjoyed the experience. "**PECK'S BAD BOY**" was the first film he made fresh from his triumph with "**THE KID**" (Charlie Chaplin Productions, for First National, 1921), starring Charlie Chaplin. The public ate up little Jackie and his engaging personality with a spoon. He integrated his own charms with a bright, acting polish from his tutelage with the great Chaplin. Coogan was the first of the great child stars and the greatest of the silent era...." – The Silents Majority

In "**OLIVER TWIST**":

"Entertaining silent version of the Charles Dickens classic, geared as a vehicle for Coogan, who was then at the height of his juvenile stardom..." – Maltin

"...Although the film was a starring vehicle for Jackie Coogan, Chaney's Fagin won most of the critical acclaim..." – NFT Bulletin

In "**BUTTONS**":

"...Coogan's fame was genuinely world-wide – he was hero-worshipped by kids in

Soviet Russia, and on one occasion had an audience with the Pope – and it lasted for over a decade; yet we hardly ever see him now except as Chaplin's "**KID**", aged barely 6. "**BUTTONS**" is a good example of middle-period Coogan, and shows him as stowaway and then page-boy on a smart transatlantic liner. His tireless devotion to the Captain includes trying to run his love-life for him." – NFT Bulletin

In "**TOM SAWYER**":

"Jackie Coogan made a big comeback at the age of 15 after three years off screen. He starred as Tom with Junior Durkin as the ragamuffin Huckleberry Finn who arranges most of their escapades..." – That Was Hollywood: the 1930s

FILMOGRAPHY

Year	Age	Title	Role
19	4	A DAY'S PLEASURE	
20	5	THE KID	in title role
21	6	PECK'S BAD BOY with Charles Hatton	in title role, Henry Peck
22	7	OLIVER TWIST with Edouard Trebaol	in title role
22		MY BOY	in title role
22		TROUBLE	in title role
23	8	DADDY	
23		CIRCUS DAYS with Peaches Jackson	
24	9	A BOY OF FLANDERS with Toby Wing [F]	in title role, Nello
24		LONG LIVE THE KING / THE YOUNG KING	in title role, Crown Prince Otto
24		THE RAG MAN	
25	10	LITTLE ROBINSON CRUSOE	in title role
25		JOHNNY GET YOUR GUN	
25		OLD CLOTHES	
26	11	JOHNNY GET YOUR HAIR CUT	
27	12	THE BUGLE CALL	
27		BUTTONS with Coy Watson Jr	in title role
30	15	TOM SAWYER € with Mitzi Green, Junior Durkin, Jackie Searl	in title role
31	16	HUCKLEBERRY FINN with Junior Durkin, Jackie Searl	as Tom Sawyer
35	20	HOME ON THE RANGE	

[In 1976 he played a bit part as a silent movie stage-hand in "WON TON TON, THE DOG WHO SAVED HOLLYWOOD"]