

Actor has that voice but didn't get crunch

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By BOB ABELMAN

"Stays sugar sweet and crunchy, even in milk."

These words may not actually haunt Bobby Thomas' days or disturb his sleep at night, but they linger nonetheless. They serve as a perpetual reminder of just how competitive the world of voice-over artistry can be and how close he came to embedding himself in our nation's popular culture.

"Stays sugar sweet and crunchy, even in milk" has been the catch phrase for Cap'n Crunch breakfast cereal since its inception in 1963. It was spoken by voice-over impresario Daws Butler in the guise of the product's namesake. Until his death in 1988, Mr. Butler was the voice behind Captain Crunch and just about every Hanna Barbera TV cartoon character ever created, including Yogi Bear, Huckleberry Hound, Quickdraw McGraw and Snagglepuss.

Enter Bobby Thomas.

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, Mr. Thomas was a child of television. A fan of cartoons, he was always impressed by the notion that one person -- a Daws Butler or a Mel Blanc at Warner Brothers -- could be so amazingly versatile to give life to such diverse characters.

Admiration turned to action, first as a high school radio disc jockey in small-town London, Ohio, and then as a series of starts and stops in small-town radio, including Ashtabula, Massillon and Oberlin. There, Mr. Thomas honed his comic timing and voice-acting skills, which eventually led to a job in Cleveland at what is now WMVX, Mix 106.5, and a nationally syndicated comedy feature.

During the early-1980s, Mr. Thomas started his professional voice-actor career and performed in hundreds of local, regional and national commercials for radio and TV, as well as narrations for industrial films, sales videos and special projects. In 1986, he moved to Los Angeles to pursue voice acting in cartoons. While there he met Mr. Butler, who shared his vast knowledge and offered encouragement, although the industry was changing and generating fewer and fewer job opportunities.

When Mr. Butler retired due to ill health, the ad agency for Quaker Oats was looking for a sound-alike to replace him. After making a demo tape, being invited to Chicago for an audition and making the final cut, Mr. Thomas learned that "Stays sugar sweet and crunchy, even in milk" would become another man's legacy.

When Mr. Butler passed away, the agent called again with an opportunity to audition for the new animated "The Jetsons" movie, replacing Mr. Butler in another of his iconic characters, Elroy Jetson. Once again, close but no cartoon exploding cigar.

Back in Cleveland in late-1987, Mr. Thomas joined the on-air staff at WDOK, Soft Rock 102.1. He happily remained at this top-ranked radio station for over 12 years but continued to hear voices from the past -- odd character voices with silly speech impediments -- beckoning him. He and his family relocated to New England to give voice-over work one more shot in a top media market.

"The year we moved," he recalled, "the Screen Actors Guild and AFTRA went on strike against the commercial producers. As a member of both unions, I could not and would not cross a picket line." The strike lasted for over eight months. It created changes in the industry that made it even harder to make voice-over a full-time occupation and sent Mr. Thomas back to Cleveland.

Living in Solon, Mr. Thomas continues to audition and work as a freelance disembodied voice. He has also discovered some use for the body he has dragged to these auditions all these years, including acting in local community theater, on-camera character roles for TV commercials and performances in independent films. He just recently wrapped up a Web "mockumentary" comedy series called, "The Road to Sundance: On a Shoestring Budget."

In the quiet of the evening, with his wife sound asleep and his children off pursuing their own careers, Mr. Thomas still hears silly voices from the past. They still whisper, "Stays sugar sweet and crunchy, even in milk." However, these days, these words just make him hungry for cereal.