

## (Travalanche)

The observations of actor, author, comedian, critic, director, humorist, journalist, m.c., performance artist, playwright, producer, publicist, public speaker, songwriter, and variety booker Trav S.D.

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TRAVSD

## Clark and McCullough: Sunshine and Roses



(<https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/img29.gif>)

**OF CLARK AND MCCULLOUGH**

*Today is Bobby Clark's birthday (the guy from whom I stole the glasses).*



[https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/3385737268\\_f37f299a7a\\_o](https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/3385737268_f37f299a7a_o)

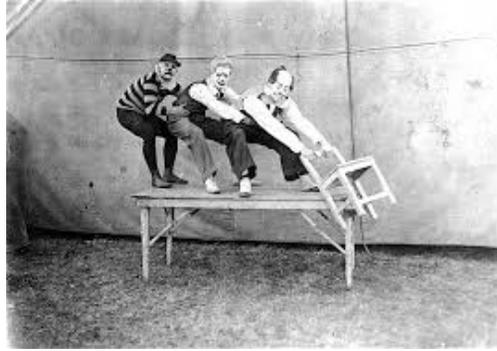
*Photo by Evan Fairbanks*

A tension exists in all comedy teams between the “funny” member(s) and the straight man or stooge (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2015/09/21/300-other-stooges/>). One gets all the glory and is everyone’s favorite – the other remains an unsung hero, truly appreciated by only a few aficionados. The situation can lead to strife, and there are numerous examples of the straight man turning to drink, exploding, and/or just quitting in disgust: Bud Abbot (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2009/10/02/stars-of-vaudeville-60-abbott-and-costello/>), Ed Gallagher, (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2009/05/12/stars-of-vaudeville-9-al-shean/>) and Zeppo Marx (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2009/10/02/stars-of-vaudeville-59-the-marx-brothers/>) are some prime examples. But the most extreme and tragic illustration of this psychological phenomenon is that of Clark and McCullough.



Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough were boyhood friends, born and bred in Springfield, Ohio. McCullough was the senior, having been born in 1883, five years before Clark. It is McCullough who introduced Clark to tumbling, and they both took gymnastics lessons at the local YMCA. They made the official decision to team up and go onstage in 1900. Their first real employment was in minstrelsy (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/06/11/variety-arts-5-the-minstrel-show/>)\*\*, where they expanded their skills, learned to sing and dance and other show business fundamentals. From there, they went on to work as circus (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/06/26/variety-arts-10-circus/>) clowns at Ringling Brothers (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/of-ringling-bros-et-al/>) and others, billed variously as The Jazzbo Brothers or Sunshine and Roses. During these years (1906-11) they developed a routine that was to be a staple of

their act for many years, a pantomimic routine involving the pair's inability to to successfully deposit a chair on top of a table. McCullough, originally the comedian, would say: "It looks simple...but its actually quite complicated."



(<https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/url.jpg>).

*Circus clown days. With a third partner,  
Hank Peare*

By 1912, the boys' characters had taken shape and they made the plunge into vaudeville (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/07/21/variety-arts-20-vaudeville/>) as Clark and McCullough. Contrary to standard practice, the team put the "funny" member's name first. How this evolved is not difficult to imagine. Bobby Clark was a scene stealer who hogged all the attention wherever he went. He was one of show business's great grotesques; (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/06/01/the-immortality-of-the-grotesque/>) as with Ed Wynn (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2009/11/09/stars-of-vaudeville-76-ed-wynn/>) or Groucho or Harpo Marx (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2009/10/02/stars-of-vaudeville-59-the-marx-brothers/>), he is more "clown" than comedian. His get-up alone qualified him as a sort of honorary Marx Brother (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2009/10/02/stars-of-vaudeville-59-the-marx-brothers/>). His trademarks were a pair of eyeglasses which he drew directly on his face with grease paint, and a cane, which he apparently carried only to hook things with. Standing a mere 5'4", and invariably with a cigar in his puss, he would charge around the stage like a scene-chewing dynamo, devouring anything and everything in his path. His leer was downright creepy, a little too real, and more dangerous than Groucho's. A favorite trick of his was to spit his cigar out and catch it a couple of feet in front of his face, and continue smoking.



McCullough was a sort of mixture of the straight man and stooge (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2015/09/21/300-other-stooges/>) roles. Slow witted and innocent, he would feed Clark the set-ups for all the laugh lines. Clark wrote all the routines, which consisted of verbal *non sequiturs*, stunts and sight gags in such profusion and

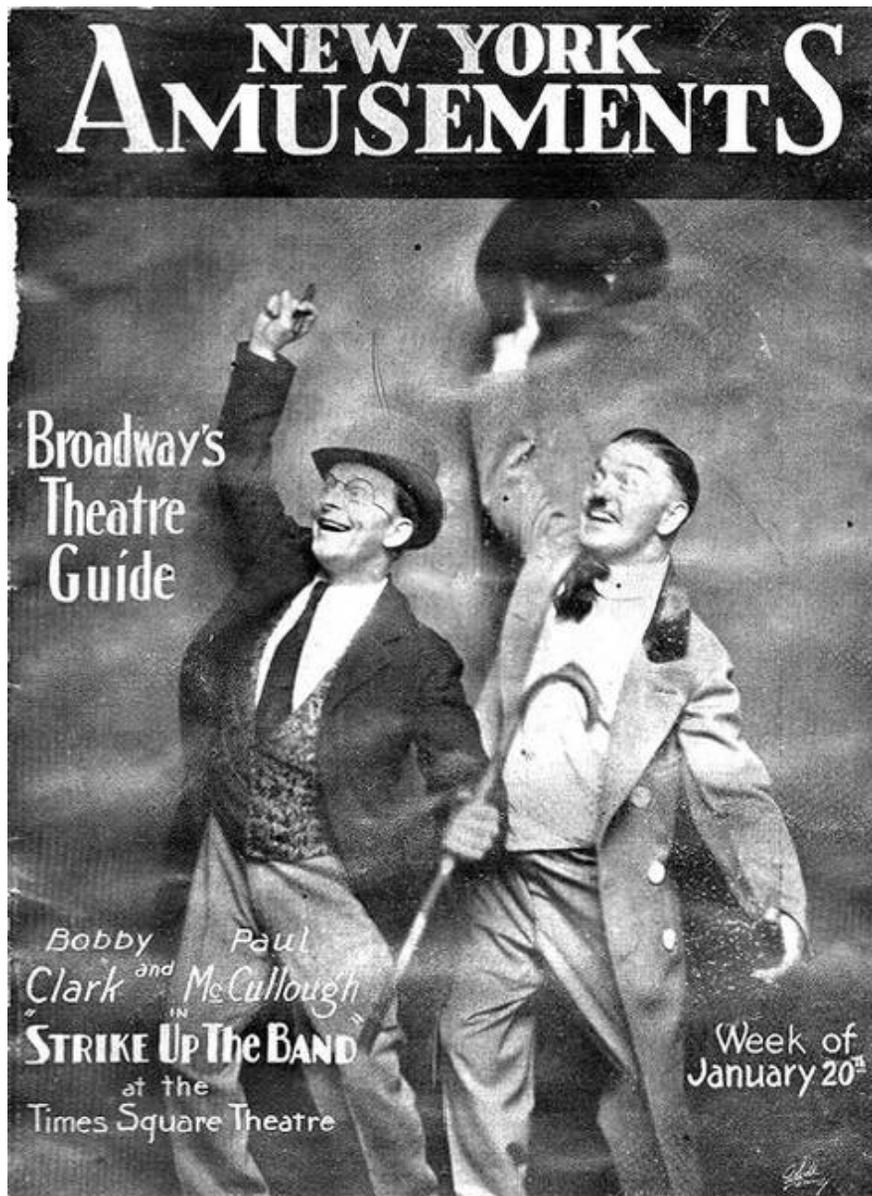
delivered so rapidly that it left the audience gasping for air.



(<https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/img28.jpg>).

Yet, while, the pair worked steadily in vaudeville, they never headlined (during these early years).

And, in 1917, they spoiled their chance to do so by participating in the White Rat strike (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/02/21/stars-of-vaudeville-300-george-fuller-golden/>). They were put on the Vaudeville Managers Association's blacklist and barred from big time. They made a hit in burlesque (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/05/12/variety-arts-2-burlesque/>) however, becoming some of the biggest comedy stars in the entire industry, so much so that by 1922, they were able to creep back into vaudeville and receive better and better bookings. In 1922 they were starring in a revue called *The Chuckles of 1922* where they were spotted by Irving Berlin (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2009/05/11/stars-of-vaudeville-7-8-irving-berlin-phil-silvers/>). He brought them back to the states to headline his *Music Box Revue* ([wp link placeholder](#)). It is their big shot. After this the team takes off, starring in numerous book musicals over the next decade, notably Gershwin's *Strike Up the Band*, but many others as well.



(<https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/img15.jpg>).

Vaudeville continued to play a part, and in 1928 they headlined at the Palace. (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/03/24/the-palace/>). Hollywood also beckoned, and they made several shorts for Fox (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2011/01/01/william-fox/>) in the late 20s and some films for RKO in the thirties, while continuing their work in the theatre.



(<https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/clark-mccoullogh-title.jpg>).

In these later years, Clark literally stole the show, and McCullough had less and less to do. In the films, McCullough contributes little but a rasping laugh, which he does so often it becomes irritating. Sometimes he has no lines—he just laughs at Clark's. Demoralized, he would ask for less to do, for the little he'd been doing he'd begun not to like. By the mid-30s, McCullough was hardly in their shows at all, and was barely missed. Following a nervous breakdown and a sanitarium stay, he committed suicide in 1936 by slashing his own throat with a straight razor. He'd stopped into a barber shop for a haircut, and picked up the razor when the barber wasn't looking. Top that for a big finish.



(<https://travsd.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/imgres3.jpg>).

Miraculous as it may seem, Clark managed to recover from this trauma after a few months and went on to become a bigger star than ever, headlining in numerous Broadway book musicals and even legit classics by **Congreve**, **Sheridan** and **Moliere** (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2021/01/15/musings-on-moliere/>). He makes an appearance in the 1938 film *The Goldwyn Follies*. (<https://travsd.wordpress.com/2015/07/02/the-goldwyn-girls-et-al/>) His last Broadway show was 1949, although he briefly came out of retirement for a regional tour of *Damn Yankees* in 1956. But the stage was Clark's milieu— he never conquered another medium, which, ironically means that his fame was ephemeral and today he is every bit as obscure as his hapless partner. If only someone could have told that to McCullough.

I visited his grave at Woodlawn Cemetery in 2015. (<https://travsd.blogspot.com/2015/04/the-stars-of-woodlawn-cemetery-part-one.html>) A relatively modest marker:

