

# 'Let's put on a show'

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## CAPTION:

Mickey Rooney and his wife, Jan Chamberlin Rooney, will bring their traveling revue, "Let's Put on a Show," to the Hunterdon Hills Playhouse this week.

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Mickey Rooney and Jan Chamberlin Rooney have been together for more than 30 years.

'Let's put on a show'

Mickey Rooney and wife flash their lives before our eyes in Hunterdon dinner theater engagement.

**Mickey Rooney's been interviewed by them all**, and he's typically had plenty to say.

So much so, in fact, that he's gained a reputation as someone who rambles on without end \_ passionately, ebulliently, but more to entertain himself than to respond to anyone's questions. Not today, though. In this telephone interview, Rooney isn't talking.

Maybe it's that the former child star, who was the No. 1 box-office actor in the world from 1938 to 1941, still commands enough celebrity to decide at the last minute that he simply isn't in the mood to speak.

Maybe it's that Rooney has a different outlook on things now that he's 84.

Or it could be that he's saving his best stories for the stage show he'll be bringing to Hunterdon County Thursday through Sunday.

After all, why delve into his friendship with Judy Garland, his eight marriages, the long fallow period in his career or his Broadway comeback when he'll be reliving those experiences so soon at the Hunterdon Hills Playhouse?

Titled "Let's Put On A Show" in tribute to his famous line in an early movie with Garland, the autobiographical dinner-theater program he'll perform with his wife, Jan Chamberlin Rooney, "is about entertainment," the star says.

"There's jokes, music, videos and a wonderful trio (of musicians)," he says. "Jan and I do duets and I play the piano and we talk about Hollywood, and we do individual numbers. She sings Patsy Cline songs; we sing a lot \_ it's just music, music, music."

What kinds of songs?

"Music you can understand the words," he says.

What Rooney really wants people to know, he says whenever he's asked a question about his past, is how wonderful his wife is in the show.

"Jan sings, and she's a wonderful songwriter," he says of his younger spouse, who's been his companion for 30 years and with whom he shares a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for live entertainment.

And that about wraps up what Rooney has to say. Breezily but firmly dismissive, he hands the phone off to Jan Rooney, who is more than loquacious enough to take up his slack.

She says her husband is still working in his golden years because of the love he's always had for performing. The couple have been doing the touring show for about 20 years, refining it to its current version five years ago.

"He has so many gifts to still give, and he feels that rather than sitting around being idle that why not (perform)?" Jan Rooney says. "He loves the reaction we're getting from the people \_ tremendous reaction \_ and he loves seeing the smiling faces."

She remembers meeting Rooney for the first time at an agent's house in Hollywood and being interested in him because he was a Christian; he is now often described as "born again," a characterization his wife calls accurate.

"One of the reasons I married him was because we went to church together," Jan Rooney says. "The fact that he was a Christian interested me tremendously, and I think that was some of the glue that held us together."

She assumes it was the "ups and downs" of his show-business life that brought him to that way of thinking.

There were, to be sure, a lot of each.

Born Joe Yule Jr. to a chorus girl and a vaudeville performer, Rooney was 4 when he appeared in his first film; his mother had brought him to Hollywood to pursue acting.

It was "the silent era," Rooney says, and not as difficult to get into the movies as it is today. "There weren't many people around Hollywood," he says.

A year later, Rooney started a series of 78 short film comedies in which he played Mickey "Himself" McGuire. When he outgrew the role at 12, he took the name Mickey Rooney and went on the road.

In the 1930s, Rooney signed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to film the "Andy Hardy" series, which, based on box-office receipts for 1938-40, made him the No. 1 star in the world.

Although the Brooklyn-born actor attended the University of Southern California at some point, where he was studying "to be a brain surgeon," he says, "I was working too hard in pictures and didn't finish, I'm sorry to say."

Rooney's resume includes more than 200 films, including "Boys Town" with Spencer Tracy, "Babes in Arms" with Garland and "National Velvet" with Elizabeth Taylor. He's earned an Emmy Award and two Golden Globes.

In 1938, according to E Online, he received an honorary Oscar along with Deanna

Durbin for "bringing to the screen the spirit and personification of youth." He got another honorary Oscar in 1982, E reports, "in recognition of his 60 years of versatility."

The years between the awards, however, were not all glamour and fame.

Rooney had well-noted moments at the top, of course, including his marriage to bombshell actress Ava Gardner.

But after he joined the Army during World War II \_ serving as a private, doing some entertaining and receiving a Bronze Star \_ he had trouble reviving his career.

The Daily Telegraph, in England, reported in 1996 that Rooney had spent some time a couple of decades earlier entertaining at cocktail parties for \$500, pretending to be an old friend of each host. The paper quoted Rooney as saying he did the engagements because he was "broke."

Before that, in 1966, Rooney's then-wife Barbara Thomason was killed by a lover in a murder-suicide.

And throughout those years, the star had problems with pills and gambling and difficulty holding onto money, he wrote in his 1993 book, "Life is Too Short" (Random House Value Publishing).

Rooney finally put some of his troubles behind him in 1979, when he made a comeback on Broadway in the burlesque production of "Sugar Babies." He followed that success with roles in several other Broadway shows and an acclaimed 1982 portrayal of a retarded man in the television film "Bill."

These days, as always, the father of nine who golfs, knows how to play almost every instrument in an orchestra and helps his wife support animal-rights causes is bursting with ideas for future projects.

The couple write songs together, paint as a team and are thinking of co- writing a book about "just the two of us and our lives together and all the things that have happened over the past 30 years," Jan Rooney says.

The spouses, who own a pair of macaw parrots named Cookies and Crackers, recently helped pass a law that requires pet stores to include information about care and feeding when they sell animals, Jan Rooney says.

And Rooney was recently appointed mayor for life of Boys Town, an organization that cares for abused, abandoned and neglected boys, his wife says.

Of course, "we're gone so much that it's hard to stay home and focus on one thing," she adds. "We're out a good deal of the year, up to 250 days a year, sometimes, with the show. It keeps on going, and they keep asking us back."

"Let's Put on a Show" will be performed at 2 p.m. Thursday through Sunday at Hunterdon Hills Playhouse, 88 Route 173 West, Perryville. Doors open at noon for meal and dessert. Tickets are \$59. (800) 447-7313, (908) 730- 8007 or visit [www.hhplayhouse.com](http://www.hhplayhouse.com)

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