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FRED: THE BARETTA 'TOO

Will the Real Fred Please Stand Up?

Whatever Happened to Fred the Cockatoo?

By Claire Britton-Warren

Fred Hatches on the Scene!

On January 17th, 1975, a new actor flew onto the 70's television scene. With his stunning good looks, charming personality, and zany antics, he won the hearts of millions of viewers. In many ways, Fred the cockatoo changed the world forever. Fred was the delightful sidekick of television detective Tony Baretta, played by actor Robert Blake. For four seasons, from 1975 through 1978, this infamous avian captivated television audiences nationwide on the "Baretta" TV series. For many bird owners, it was Fred who kindled the first sparks of desire in their hearts for companion parrots. But where is our crime-fighting hero today? What became of this elusive avian, who has nearly disappeared from the public eye? The answer, it seems, is nearly as elusive as Fred himself!

Oh Fred! Say it ain't so!

Fred's story begins with a startling revelation — the stuff of tabloid headlines. Fred was a girl! And a boy! Actually, the part of Fred was played by several Triton Cockatoos, all of which were owned by famed animal trainer Ray Berwick.

Ray Berwick began his career doing a vaudeville rope-spinning act with his sister. He worked as a bull-rider and eventually met Renee Renfro who was the animal trainer on the television show "Blondie." The two worked together and Ray ended up taking over during the filming of "The Birdman of Alcatraz." Ray went on to do "The Birds" and many other films. When he was called upon to do the Baretta show, Fred was originally cast as a mynah bird. Ray introduced the producers to La-La, his Triton Cockatoo and sold them on the idea that Fred was meant to be a Cockatoo.

La-La is remembered as the primary avian actress to play the role of Fred. When Ray Berwick died, La-La went to live with Berwick's nephew, Steve Berens, of Animals of Distinction. Recently, the leading lady passed away, bringing down the final curtain on one of the most prominent careers in avian history.

Both Steve Berens and trainer Brian Renfro agree that La-La was an incredibly talented actress, but that their feathered starlet could be a force to be reckoned with!

"Brian and La-La were very close." Says Berens. "When Brian would have to travel out of town for a few days, La-La was always angry with him when he got back."

"Every time I returned from a business trip," recalls Renfro, "La-La would give me a serious bite. After that, we could get on with business as usual."

This got to be a joke at the hospital where they stitched me up! On one of the final episodes of Baretta, we were standing in front of a live audience. La-La bit me hard, right on the nose! I had blood running down my face and all over the front of my shirt!"

'Too birds are better than one!

Every actress simply must have a stunt double and La-La was no exception. For those taxing scenes, which ruffled the actress' feathers, one of several "stunt birds" would stand in for the leading lady. Brian Renfro fondly recalls Harold, a Triton Cockatoo who did stunts and flying scenes for La-La.

"One of the first behaviors I taught Harold to perform was for a scene in which Baretta had been injured. Harold had to fly over to Baretta, who was lying on a bed. He had to take a handkerchief which was being held against the "injury" on Baretta's head, fly back with the handkerchief and dip it in water. Then, he had to fly back to Baretta and put the handkerchief against his head."

Harold quickly became a favorite of Brian Renfro's. The two worked well together and soon developed a close bond. But suddenly, Harold fell ill during the second season of the Baretta series.

"I took Harold with me everywhere so that I could take care of him.," says Renfro. "It didn't matter where I was going, I took him with me in his carrier." But despite all of Renfro's careful nurturing, Harold's condition worsened.

"It just killed me when Harold died." Renfro recalls. "It was the day before Christmas. It was terrible. I cried for the next three days!"

Harold was not the only "stunt bird" who performed on La-La's behalf. Flying Sweetheart took over Harold's flying stunts after his demise. Pookie was another Baretta bird who has since gone to that "great aviary in the sky".

Brian Renfro, who worked longest on the set, recalls that two or three birds died during the Baretta series.

After the death of trainer Ray Berwick, Steve Berens inherited both La-La and another "stunt bird" named Lion Country Sweetheart. Lion Country Sweetheart had come to Ray Berwick from Lion Country Safari Animal Park in Florida.

"Lion Country Sweetheart is a sweet and docile bird." Says Berens, "She would work well with actor Robert Blake and was so calm that she could even do the scenes where Baretta had to take a punch in the face and fall to the floor. She would stay right on his shoulder through the whole thing!"

Today, Lion Country Sweetheart enjoys semi-retirement. She spends her days with Steve Berens, at the offices of Animals of Distinction. Occasionally, she still makes special appearances and takes on a few acting jobs. She recently had a small part in the film "The Animal" starring Rob Schneider and will be appearing at the Marriot Hotel in Santa Clara, CA with trainer Kevin Keith.

The Live Shows

There were other birds who played Fred the cockatoo and never appeared on the television series. When Baretta ended, Ray Berwick's Baretta birds toured the U.S. in a live show for Universal Studios. Joining them were several new avian actors. "Fred Tours" delighted audiences from coast to coast. Eventually, they performed live acts at the San Diego Wild Animal Park.

After Ray Berwick's death, trainer Gary Price purchased Berwick Productions. Caesar, JB and Mt White are three of the cockatoos who performed in the live shows. Caesar and Mr. White still live at the offices of Berwick productions, where they do special events and keep the staff amused all day long!

A bird show trainer, Steve Martin, who worked at the San Diego Wild Animal Park until 1980 said, "JB was easygoing and worked well with people." He recalls. He did all the live show behaviors and much more. Caesar was one of the smartest birds I have ever known. He learned things in seconds. He did everything we asked, but he had a bit of an aggressive streak. A couple of our trainers lost blood to Caesar!"

Bird-napped!

Living the life-style of the feathered and famous is not without its dangers. This became clear, the day that Mr. White was bird-napped from the San Diego Wild Animal Park.

"I'm sure that the bird-nappers did not know that they had stolen one of the Freds," recalls Gary Price. "The local news made a big story out of the bird-napping. Because Mr. White's trick routines and talking abilities would be easily recognized, the bird-nappers left him by the side of the road to walk back to the park!" Mr. White was recovered unharmed, but his abductors remain at large to this day!

How Fred Changed the World

"Before Fred," says Steve Berens "Parrots were not a common companion pet. They were virtually unheard of in the entertainment industry. Ray Berwick changed all of that. He pioneered the animal training techniques that are in use today and the popularity of companion parrots has boomed tremendously."

Steve Martin views Fred's impact on society and on wild parrot populations differently. "Personally, I feel Fred did his fair share of harm to his wild counterparts. Many cockatoos were taken from their forest homes because people wanted to have a "Fred bird." I did not realize it then, but now I understand the impact that Fred had on wild populations of cockatoos and on all parrots in general."

"Today, I battle with the ethics of using parrots in the shows I produce. We try very hard to help people understand that parrots are challenging pets. We do not say parrots are bad pets, but we do warn people of the common problems associated with having a parrot. I wish the entertainment industry would realize their moral responsibility to the wildlife they use and portray in their shows."

Other Freds

Lea Burrell is the owner of Parrot Kamp, a refuge for unwanted birds in southern California. About twenty years ago, Lea received a call from Universal Studios about taking in a Moluccan cockatoo that had been owned by a celebrity. As part of the deal, Universal agreed to give her Yeager, a Baretta cockatoo, who had also made an appearance on "Dynasty." When the van from Universal Studios arrived with the birds, Yeager somersaulted out of his crate and into Lea's heart. Her life has never been the same since. Yeager's wild antics and seemingly endless repertoire of tricks, makes him a favorite of everyone who meets him.

"Yeager is so unlike any bird I have ever known." Says Lea, who has been sheltering birds since the days of her employment with Sea World, "Yeager is always up to something. He actually got me kicked off an airplane once by shouting from his crate. "Help! Help! Let me out! I'll be a good boy. (Editor's Note: I was a speaker at the same event that Lea and Yeager were supposed to speak at. Obviously Lea was late and we regretted not being entertained by the cockatoo. I met Yeager on a trip to visit Lea. There was no doubt in my mind that I was in the presence of a psittacine genius!)

Yeager appears with Ray Berwick in a photograph in his book, "[How to Train Your Pet Like A Television Star](#)." He is easily recognized by the hump on his back and early signs of scoliosis, a genetic disorder.

Yeager, like many stars, has a few skeletons in his closet. He is accused of having "murdered" his mate, a lesser-sulfur-crested cockatoo. Yeager allegedly whistled for the neighbor's dog, then pushed his mate out of their tree and into the jaws of death... literally!

Fred Impersonators?

According to Gary Price, due to Fred's immense popularity, many birds were sold as "Baretta birds" that were never actually owned by Ray Berwick. But could there be other Baretta birds out there?

"There are always animals who are acquired to work in the entertainment industry and for one reason or another, they just don't work out." Says Steve Berens. "There were some Cockatoos that did not make it through the training to be used on Baretta. When that happens with an animal, we always try to find them a good home."

The Author's Baretta Bird

My own interest in researching the Baretta birds began when I adopted Cloudy, a thirty-something-year-old Triton Cockatoo. A friend had owned him for more than twenty years and could no longer keep him. She agreed to give him to me, on the promise of a good home, rather than selling him. Cloudy, who had been called by the names Fred and Baggy Buddy, had been sold to her as a Baretta bird, but was he really? Either way, I was dying to know!

Cloudy knows the words and sounds that were taught to the Baretta birds. He says "Hello" into the phone, lies on his back and drinks from a bottle and does "the crazy eagle," a displaying routine, on command. He has an immense vocabulary. If he's not a Baretta bird, I thought, someone certainly spent a lot of time training him to act like one!

But there are no records of Cloudy's past, no leg band to trace, and no paper trail is left for me to follow. No proof at all, other than the avian vaudeville shows that takes place in my living room every night. I watch these antics and wonder, could he be a Baretta bird that didn't make the final casting cut?

"Hello baby" he says, in that special way reserved just for me. It is then that I realize that it doesn't really matter. He's a star in my eyes.