

## Dorothy McNulty: A Fond Farewell

By Jim Linz

Some may remember her as the voice of Jane Jetson, the 1960s cartoon character in the short-lived but long-remembered TV series, the Jetsons. Others may remember her as Blondie, the wife of Dagwood Bumstead in 28 films produced between the late 1930s and 1950. Personally, I remember the late Penny Singleton as Dorothy McNulty, the energetic singer/dancer in the 1930 films *Good News* and *Love in the Rough*. McNulty died November 12, 2003, in Sherman Oaks, California.



Mariana Dorothy Agnes Letitia McNulty was born in Philadelphia September 15, 1908. Her show business career began in 1916, when "Baby Dorothy" landed a job singing and dancing during intermissions at a silent movie theatre. After graduating from elementary school, Dorothy joined a touring vaudeville act known as "The Kiddie Kabaret," quickly establishing herself as an accomplished performer. She continued to take dancing lessons during the teens.

After briefly attending Columbia University, Dorothy left school to pursue her career in show business. She made her Broadway debut in the 1927 musical *Good News*. Her energetic dancing led to a more prominent role in the stage production of *Follow Thru*, another

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DeSylva, Brown, Henderson musical. She introduced "Button Up Your Overcoat," singing to Jack Haley.

McNulty made her film debut in the 1930 film version of *Good News*, albeit in a different, more prominent role. Her performances of the title song and "The Varsity Drag" are, in this author's opinion, among the most spirited and impressive on film.

After one more feature film—*Love in the Rough*—McNulty returned to Broadway and stage appearances. She sang and danced with such partners as Milton Berle and Raymond Guion (aka Gene Raymond). Penny's first speaking part came in the Jack Benny Broadway show *Great Temptations*.

McNulty's movie career got back in high gear in 1936 when she played a tough nightclub dancer in *After the Thin Man*.

**"Hey don't call me illiterate—my parents were married right here at City Hall."**

Dorothy McNulty in *After the Thin Man*

In 1937, McNulty appeared in three films—*Sea Serpent*, *Sea Racketeers*, and *Vogues of 1938*. In 1937 she married dentist Lawrence Singleton. The marriage was dissolved in 1939, but not before McNulty had changed her name to Penny Singleton and borne her first child. Although she started life with four first names, Dorothy McNulty is best remembered today by her stage name Penny, derived from her penchant for saving large numbers of pennies.

Appearing under her new name, Penny Singleton had her most prolific year in 1938, appearing in 11 films, including *Mad Miss Manton* and *Swing Your Lady*. Although she sang and danced in *Swing Your Lady*, her role in the film is best remembered because Penny Singleton was on the receiving end of co-star Humphrey Bogart's first screen kiss. Bogart regarded the film as the worst of his career.

That same year, Penny Singleton landed the role of a lifetime, playing Blondie opposite Arthur Lake's Dagwood Bumstead. The title

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role of Blondie was originally intended for Shirley Deane, but when Deane was unavailable, Singleton dyed her hair blonde and applied for the part. She played the part in 28 films between 1938 and 1950.

In 1943, Columbia Pictures, sensing that interest in the Blondie films was waning, decided to discontinue the series. The two films made that year were the only two in the series that did not mention Blondie in the title. No Blondie films were produced in 1944.

Audiences were so upset by the end of the series, however, that production was resumed in 1945. Half of the Blondie films were made between 1945 and 1950.

**Penny Singleton was the recipient of Humphrey Bogart's first on-screen kiss in *Swing Your Lady*.**

The Blondie films were good for Singleton in other ways. Her second marriage was to Blondie producer Robert Sparks. Singleton also became a shrewd business woman, creating the concept of residuals—payments for repeat broadcasts. She is even credited with coining the term “residuals.”

The Blondie films also had their downside, however, as other movie offers largely disappeared. The Blondie films became so popular that Penny Singleton became typecast. Producers were afraid that audiences would not accept her in any other role. She appeared in only three films outside of the Blondie series—*Go West*, *Young Lady* (1941), *Congo Swing* (1941), and *Young Widow* (1946).

In addition to the 28 films, Penny Singleton played Blondie on the weekly radio series from 1939 until 1950.

Once the Blondie series ended in 1950, Singleton found herself out of work. Unable to find work in the movies, she created a night club act and went on tour. She frequently participated in USO tours, including trips to Korea to entertain troops during the Korean Conflict.

In 1960, Singleton embarked on yet another career, as a union ac-

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tivist. She was elected vice president of the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA) and set out to reform the entertainment industry. One of the major reforms Singleton pushed through was to treat producers and club owners as employers, requiring them to pay social security and unemployment compensation and contribute to pension plans for performers.

Penny Singleton was also instrumental in driving organized crime out of the union in New York despite threats against her own safety. She also led strikes against New York's famed Latin Quarter nightclub and, in 1967, led the Rockettes in a successful strike against Radio City Music Hall.

Expanding her efforts beyond New York, Singleton helped start the first AGVA branch in Las Vegas in 1969 and, in 1970, led the first strike against Disneyland. In 1969, she was elected president of AGVA, becoming the first woman president of an AFL-CIO union.

Although typecasting largely eliminated her on-screen film appearances—she made no films between 1950 and 1964—Singleton briefly returned to acting in 1964, appearing in a supporting role in *The Best Man*. She briefly returned to the stage in 1971, replacing old friend Ruby Keeler in the Broadway revival of *No, No, Nanette*.

She stayed with the show when it went on tour. At one mid-western stop, Arthur Lake (Dagwood) filled in as her co-star. Like, Singleton, Lake was an accomplished singer prior to landing the role of Dagwood Bumstead.

Penny Singleton became a behind the scene's television star in 1962 as the voice of Jane Jetson. Although the series lasted only one year, it developed an almost cult following and continued in reruns. When the cartoon was revived in 1990 as a feature film, Penny Singleton once again provided the voice for Jane Jetson.

Singleton was honored with three stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Her last public performance, at age 93, was at the El Portal Theatre in North Hollywood during 2001.