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American Legends: The Life of Buster Keaton

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures.
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*Includes a bibliography for further reading.

"It's said that Chaplin wanted you to like him, but Keaton didn't care. I think he cared, but was too proud to ask. His films avoid the pathos and sentiment of the Chaplin pictures, and usually feature a jaunty young man who sees an objective and goes for it in the face of the most daunting obstacles. Buster survives tornados, waterfalls, avalanches of boulders, and falls from great heights, and never pauses to take a bow: He has his eye on his goal. And his movies, seen as a group, are like a sustained act of optimism in the face of adversity; surprising, how without asking, he earns our admiration and tenderness." – Roger Ebert

A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history's most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors' American Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of America's most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

In the 1920s, the burgeoning movie industry was starting to come into its own, and alongside actor and director Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton was at the peak of Hollywood. It's no surprise that Keaton was so effective in silent films, because he had been practicing comedy in his family's vaudeville acts as "The Little Boy Who Can't Be Damaged", becoming a popular performer by the age of 5. Indeed, his physical form of comedy, which initially involved having his father throwing him around the stage, translated well onto the screen, and some of his slapstick and other comic gags remain legendary even today, in part because Keaton practiced his own stunts. In fact, Keaton wrote his own material and was a crucial comic influence on acts like The Marx Brothers and The Three Stooges.

In addition to being one of the foremost comedians of his time and writing his own stuff, Keaton also directed many of his own films, and he mastered the use of cameras at a time when film was still relatively new. As Time magazine writer Richard Corliss noted, "Watch his beautiful, compact body as it pirouettes or pretzels in tortured permutations or, even more elegantly, stands in repose as everything goes crazy around it. Watch his mind as it contemplates a hostile universe whose violent whims Buster understands, withstands and, miraculously, tames. Watch his camera taking his picture (Keaton directed or supervised all his best films); it is as cool as the star it captured in its glass... The medium was still in its infancy; comics were pioneering the craft of making people laugh at moving images. Keaton, it turns out, knew it all — intuitively."

When the American Film Institute listed the greatest actors of the 20th century, Keaton came in 21st, and second among the silent film stars behind Chaplin, but the transition to making talkies didn't go as smoothly for him. Keaton had developed a deadpan stare no matter what happened to his character or what stunt or "accident" befell him, which added comedic effect in vaudeville and silent films, but when sound moved the focus to dialogue, Keaton's physical brand of comedy didn't go over as well. Nonetheless, he remains incredibly popular and influential today, with contemporary stars like Jim Carrey, Kevin Spacey, and Jackie Chan all expressing their admiration for him in commemorative pieces.

American Legends: The Life of Buster Keaton examines the life and career of one of America's most famous

comic actors. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about Jean Arthur like never before, in no time at all.

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