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[Home](#) > [Issue 17](#) > Betty Boop Born & Praised in L.A.



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## Betty Boop Born & Praised in L.A.

By [Camille Lowry](#)  
Photography By Greg Bojorquez



## *Betty Boop:* **BORN & PRAISED IN L.A.**

There's a strange phenomenon in Los Angeles: the Betty Boop phenomenon. Much like how Felix the Cat became a symbol for the lowrider crowd, and Irish singer Morrissey was chosen as a soundtrack for Chicano youth, Betty Boop has become an unlikely icon of the Latino community of East LA.

Betty Boop first appeared on August 8, 1930 in the cartoon *Dizzy Dishes*, as part of a series created by Max and Dave Fleischer for Paramount Pictures. The character, drawn in black and white, was originally designed as half woman, half French Poodle. Over time her poodle ears became hoop earrings and she evolved into a human. She premiered as the first real female cartoon character in the cartoon *Any Rags* of 1932.

No other animated gals had true female forms at that time. However, Grim Natwick, the artist who drew Betty, had drawn nudes while studying Art Nouveau in Paris. His experience allowed him to create a realistic figure for Betty, complete with cleavage, curves and shapely legs.

Betty Boop was portrayed as a flapper with closely cropped hair and short skirt. She also exhibited an overt sexuality and girlishness. The sexuality made her popular with adults, but her innocence tempered the innuendos of the plotlines.

It is curious that Betty Boop is still popular now, considering she hasn't appeared on television or in movies in recent years, nor has she been featured in any major ad campaigns. Denise Hagopian, whose store Heavenly Choice carries the largest selection of Betty Boop merchandise in the world, says that Betty has a multi-generational following. But she also admits that it's the older fans who really keep her alive.

As fanciful as they were, Betty's cartoons also reflected reality. Denise says, "The storylines were taken from New York daily life in the 1930s. The Fleischers showed the current social issues on the big screen, which made them universal. And they did it through Betty." Denise recalls seeing Betty asking for equal rights and fighting harassment. She says, "That's why the women embraced [the cartoons]. They were bringing things that women kept inside out for public debate." Most of Betty's followers claim to love her independent spirit and gumption. Denise explains, "In the era of the '30s and '40s, society did not allow a woman to have her voice. Betty Boop challenged society's rules. For the regular woman she was their voice. Only for the first time she wasn't blond and a Skinny Minnie."

Elizabeth Kalous, 53, was born and raised in Los Angeles. She's been collecting Betty memorabilia for over 30 years, has decorated her bathroom in Betty Boop, and has Betty tattooed on her lower back. Elizabeth also loves Betty for her moxie. She says, "In my age group, especially in my culture, when we were young we weren't brought up to speak our own minds. My father demanded respect. He didn't encourage independence. I had a curfew in college. Betty didn't care. Betty did what she wanted. We could live through Betty."

Colin Gunkel of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA points out that Betty "looks a bit like a chola. She resonates with a style that's perhaps more cha-cha than chola." Cha-cha being a hyper-feminine and extravagant Latin aesthetic, in comparison to the tougher image of a chola, who often contrasts tomboyish clothes with highly stylized makeup. However, Betty's thinly arched eyebrows and bold lipstick could easily be claimed by either style of lady.



Colin believes that Betty was appealing because she was able to successfully negotiate the good girl being bad. He says, "She's racy, sexual and flashy without compromising her morals, which are the competing demands of our culture."

Margaret Garcia is an artist who lectures on art in different cultures to a variety of students, many of whom want to paint Betty as a subject. Margaret also attributes Betty's appeal to her provocative streak. She says, "Betty was precocious. Betty was a rebel." She also adds that cuteness is a main factor of her appeal. Betty, she says, "is a symbol for a cholita who might think, 'I want to be an outlaw, but I want to be cute too.'"

The power of Betty's image has been best exemplified by the murals of Peter Quezada, an artist and youth counselor. He's painted her likeness on walls throughout East L.A. since the 1980s, as a tactic to discourage graffiti. Quezada explains, "I started drawing cartoons because that's what the taggers liked. She was a character that a lot of people liked, both males and females."

Quezada depicted Betty Boop as a variety of other pop icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvira, even Santa Claus, and juxtaposed her image with advisories against drugs and gang violence, creating a sometimes jarring effect. One of his most memorable murals placed Betty in a scolding position alongside the grim reaper and the Zig-Zag man with the words, "Don't... and drive..." In creating his art, he sometimes managed to draw taggers in to help him, and away from the spray cans.

Quezada is not the only person who took Betty's image and ran with it. There was also a bottling company in Mexico illegally putting Betty on their sodas and calling her Lulu. The bottles offer another explanation for the Latino-Boop connection. As Denise says, "When a little girl went to the drink stand, what was she going to ask for? A Lulu. What did every girl want to be when she grew up? Lulu!"

Denise started her store in the Los Angeles suburb of Montebello in 1983, right when Betty Boop

merchandise had a resurgence. She says, “On opening day I was drinking from my Betty Boop mug. The first woman who walked in said, ‘Oh my god. A Betty Boop mug, I want one of those.’” She sold it for \$15. She adds, “In 1983 you didn’t pay \$15 for a coffee mug. There was this pent-up desire for her product.”

At Heavenly Choice you can buy almost anything emblazoned with the cartoon. Should you desire a Betty Boop chessboard, toilet seat or a bobblehead of Betty in yoga pose, this is the store for you. Denise says, “The reason we have such a wide range is that the different age groups have different wants.”

Denise has sponsored a two-day Betty Boop Festival in the parking lot of her store for the last 22 years. Saturday is primarily a children’s Betty look-a-like contest, while Sunday is a show-and-tell for serious Boop collectors.

She was inspired to have the look-a-like contest after noticing that many of the kids who came to the store resembled Betty. Through neighborhood connections she was able to get Rick Dees to announce the contest on the radio, and Tony Danza as a judge. One thousand people showed up at the first festival, making it so crowded that the police chief shut it down.

During the competition each age group is given a different challenge, other than the babies, who just look cute. The 2-year-olds must blow a kiss. Three-year-olds say “boop-oo-be-doop.” Girls aged 4 and 5 must sing a song. Every child gets a trophy for participating. The contestants have ranged from 20-days old to the cut off age of 5. She’s had over 1,000 children in the contest over the years, 90 percent of whom are Latino. And for 15 years Denise has been able to place the winners in the annual Montebello parade, for the crowds to marvel at tiny Betty Boops on procession through town in sparkles and strollers.

The Betty Boop fanaticism shows no sign of dying down anytime soon. Women who competed as child lookalikes in the ‘80s are now grown and dressing up their babies as the icon. And this October, Carnival Cruises will host the first Betty Boop-themed excursion, which is sailing from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas. Denise Hagopian has been invited to attend and speak about Betty in all her splendor. Fans have already marked the cruise dates on their calendars.

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