

reclaiming
FELIX
the **CAT**



in the Picture Gallery

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HELLO SYDNEY!

I HOPE YOU LIKE
ME AS MUCH AS I
LIKE YOU



PAT SULLIVAN

reclaiming
FELIX
the **CAT**

in the Picture Gallery

The Picture Gallery presents highlights from the collections of the State Library of New South Wales.

The State Library acknowledges the generous support of the Nelson Meers Foundation.

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Reclaiming Felix the Cat

Reclaiming Felix the Cat recounts the story of the expatriate Australian artist and entrepreneur Pat Sullivan (1887–1933), a Sydney boy who settled in New York where he created the cartoon character Felix the Cat. Felix rapidly evolved into an international star and became a household name around the world in the 1920s and 30s.

Felix associated with the royalty of stage and screen. At the height of his fame, during the 1920s, Felix starred in over 100 films. He made the controversial Sullivan a wealthy man through the sale of films, music, comic books, soft toys and badges as well as wooden, metal and ceramic collectables and clothing.

Felix connected with people of all ages, nationalities and from all walks of life – Sullivan even presented Felix dolls to King George V and Queen Mary during the 1924 British Empire Exhibition.

Reclaiming Felix the Cat, curated by Judy Nelson, draws a unique selection of original artwork, sheet music and comic books from the incomparable collections of the State Library of New South Wales. Thanks are also due to Josef Lebovic, who has generously lent to the exhibition a wonderful assortment of Felix the Cat collectables.

Dagmar Schmidmaier AM
State Librarian & Chief Executive
May 2005



Left: Mr Pat Sullivan and his wife, ML Q 059/H

Below: Comic from *The Felix Annual: Adventures of the Film Cat*, 1929
Pat Sullivan, DL 93/366

Reclaiming Felix the Cat

'I made the cat and the cat made me', prophetic words from Pat Sullivan (1887–1933), the Australian creator of Felix the Cat, on a rare visit to Sydney in December 1925. Little could Sullivan know that some 40 years after his death in New York on 15 February 1933, two Americans — cartoonist and colleague Otto Messmer and author John Canemaker — would dispute that Felix the Cat was Sullivan's creation.

Unknown to his opponents, in March 1917 Pat Sullivan had submitted a cartoon film, *The Tail of Thomas Kat* (the precursor of Felix), to the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress. His next film, *Feline Follies* (November 1919), reintroduced Thomas Kat as Master Tom. This cat became the prototype for Felix. *Musical Mews* followed quickly in the same month, with the cat renamed 'Felix'. One month later, in *The Adventures of Felix*, the little black cat's name appears in the title for the first time.

Reclaiming Felix the Cat aims to tell the story of Pat Sullivan, cartoonist and entrepreneur, and the creation that became a worldwide phenomenon. A Sydney boy, Sullivan's early cartooning for *The Worker* preceded his travels to England and then America, where he settled and found fame and fortune.

Reporters arrived quickly on Thursday 3 December 1925 when the P&O liner *Narkunda* docked at wharf No. 8 Woolloomooloo — an appropriate place for the arrival of the inner city boy who had 'made good'. The daily newspapers recorded Sullivan's triumphal return to Sydney, according him celebrity status. With his wife Marjorie by his side, he attended a civic reception organised in his honour, which was hosted by the Lord Mayor of Sydney.

Early days in Sydney

Though a wealthy man by this time, Sullivan's origins were humble. Son of a Darlinghurst cab proprietor, Sullivan had a Catholic upbringing, going to school at St Benedict's in Chippendale and later at the Marist Brothers' St Mary's School in Woolloomooloo. After leaving school, he worked at various jobs, including as gatekeeper at the Toohey's brewery in Surry Hills. He attended classes at the Art Society of New South Wales and earned a meagre income selling caricatures of turf and boxing celebrities to barbers' shops and personalised caricatures to anyone willing to part with a few bob.





By 1905, aged 18, he was submitting humorous and political cartoons, caricatures and illustrations to *The Worker*, the trade union affiliated newspaper. His early drawings for *The Worker* are little known and appeared in issues during August, September and November 1905 and January 1906. In the Christmas issue (21 December 1905), Sullivan's work includes the banner design and individual illustrations for 'Around the Campfire: An All-Australian Collection of Verse Sketch and Story for the Christmas Season'.

He parted company with *The Worker* in 1907 and freelanced for a while. The visit of the American Fleet to Sydney in 1908 stimulated his desire to go to the USA, and in 1909 Sullivan left Sydney for London and New York.

Struggling in London & New York

Sullivan struggled to survive during his stay in London, even sleeping rough on the Thames Embankment when necessary. He tried his hand at many different kinds of jobs — everything from boxing, to singing and dancing in London music halls!

Left: Detail of comic book cover
Félix rêve ... 1935, Pat Sullivan,
ML Q 741.5/28

Right: Wooden Felix figure
courtesy of Josef Lebovic Collection



Below & right: Cover and comic from *Felix the Cat*, 1926–1927, Pat Sullivan
ML Q 741.5/14

Eventually, cartooning work came with an offer to contribute to the comic strip *Ally Sloper*. This character first appeared in 1867 in the weekly humour magazine *Judy*, which was modelled on the London *Punch*. During the year and a half that he contributed to *Ally Sloper*, Sullivan learned the technique of drawing comic strips.

Christened Patrick O'Sullivan, it was in London that he finally decided to drop the 'O' (he had been signing his work 'O'Sullivan' and 'P. O'Sullivan').

Emigrating to the United States in 1914, Sullivan found employment prospects as bleak as in London. Comic postcards and poster designs for the cinema provided his first income in New York. The McClure newspaper syndicate engaged him for a comic strip about the adventures of a coloured boy called Sambo. In 1914 Sullivan worked for McClure on *The Adventures of Sambo*, *Johnny Boston Beans*, *Obliging Oliver* and *Old Pop Perkins*, which he later animated.



Animation — in its infancy with the experimental work of Windsor McCay — not only gave cartoonists a whole new vehicle for their talents but also provided a solution to the perennial problem of suggesting movement. Comic strip artists embraced the new medium enthusiastically.

Sullivan freelanced for a while and was employed by the Hearst Syndicate before opening his own small studio in New York in 1915, on the corner of Broadway and 63rd Street. He produced his first animated film, *The Tail of Thomas Kat*, and submitted it for copyright in March 1917. This cat was the precursor to Felix.

Felix the Cat appears

While Felix first appeared in films in 1919 (in *The Adventures of Felix*), it wasn't until 1923 that Felix, the animated film hero, appeared in comic strip form. By now Sullivan had 12 men working on sequential animation and printing. A new Felix film was issued every two weeks, requiring a large number of separate drawings. With the studio system employed by Sullivan, he produced the key drawings and his staff drew the animated sequences and inked in the images.



The first Felix film took six months to complete and Sullivan, who regarded it as a failure, was hospitalised for five weeks suffering from a nervous breakdown. However, the production of subsequent films became easier. During Sullivan's 1925 visit to Australia there was sufficient material for the fortnightly film output to continue for some months and for newspaper comic strips to appear for nine months.

Felix's screen persona adopted some of the mannerisms of Charlie Chaplin. The little black cat was treated as an individual, able to think, reason and solve problems, often with a wild disregard for reality. Sullivan manipulated Felix's exclamations and question marks, creating visual gags. Felix would be shown pacing backwards and forwards with frowns and puzzled looks until he seizes upon a solution to his problem: question marks become grappling hooks, three exclamation marks metamorphose into a propeller for escape. A single exclamation mark playfully doubles as a bat and ball. When Felix was not surrounded by the fantastic, he created it.

Left: Tin pull-along toy, courtesy of Josef Lebovic Collection

Above left: Souvenir of Katoomba (Taken at Echo Point), c. 1928 photograph by D. Evans, ML MIN 413

Above right: Tea party at 'Highfield', Glen Osmond, Victoria, c. 1929 courtesy of Dawn Fitzpatrick

While the original Felix was an angular cat, often shown with severe facial expressions, his form gradually became softer and more rounded. His regular appearance on cinema screens saw Felix's name up in lights alongside screen luminaries such as Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin. The cat's fame spread from England and Europe to China, Japan and South America. Royalties from the manufacture of Felix toys added to Sullivan's fortune.

Speaking to the *Argus* newspaper during his 1925 visit to Australia, Sullivan explained the origins of Felix: 'The idea ... was given to me by the sight of a cat which my wife brought to the office one day'. From such a prosaic beginning, more than 100 cartoon films were produced and distributed worldwide by 1933.





Return to New York

Following their family reunion in Sydney in 1925, the Sullivans returned to New York. Sadly, his wife met an untimely, accidental death in March 1932. On 1 January the following year, Sullivan signed a three-year contract with Paramount for Felix cartoons, but, unfortunately, he died from pneumonia six weeks later in New York's Sherman Square Hospital. The obituary in *Smith's Weekly* (25 February 1933), farewells Sullivan with this parting line: 'A billion children, white and yellow and black — a billion adults — will mourn the passing of Pat — and the Cat'.

Above: Pat Sullivan and his wife Marjorie with hundreds of thousands of entries in the 'Draw Felix' competition, New York, 1923, ML PXD 946
 Right: Decorated bucket with lid, courtesy Josef Lebovic Collection

Felix is revived

As the 1930s progressed, the popularity of Felix declined. Two contributing factors often cited are the onset of sound in films and the burgeoning popularity of Mickey Mouse.

But in the 1950s Joe Oriolo (once Otto Messmer's assistant), revived Felix. Oriolo, president of Felix the Cat Productions (established 1959) recruited Messmer, who had worked in Sullivan's studio, to draw the cat. This new Felix, created from circular shapes, had more in common with Walt Disney characters — including a friendlier disposition.

Since Sullivan's death, claims have been made that Felix was not Sullivan's creation. Artists in Sullivan's studio had ghosted the comic strip, and Otto Messmer was the most talented and frequently mentioned. However, the animated Felix preceded the comic strip by some four years, and Messmer's claim — made many years later in the absence of any defence from Sullivan — needs to be treated with caution.



FELIX facts

- ❧ Felix was not the first film cat. From **1915** to **1918**, Hearst's International Film Service Studio produced George Herriman's Krazy Kat.
- ❧ Felix the Cat appeared in films in **1919**, four years before the comic books were published in 1923.
- ❧ In February **1922**, students of the Royal College of Art took their 'Famous Felix the Cat' to the Chelsea Arts Ball in London, saying: 'He is going to be up to his tricks too!' Their Felix was approximately 15 feet high and was surrounded by handmaidens wearing Felix masks. Let the show begin.
- ❧ Pat Sullivan was invited to London for the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in **1924**. King George V and Queen Mary were each given a Felix doll to take home. Sullivan is reported to have earned £100 000 from the sale of Felix toys at the Exhibition.
- ❧ Felix dolls displaced sales of Teddy bears in England in **1924**.
- ❧ Sales of Felix films distributed by Pathé in Europe made Felix the Cat world famous in **1924**.
- ❧ In **1925** Felix films entertained children and adults in Germany, South Africa and China. Felix's comic strip was published in more than 60 newspapers worldwide.
- ❧ Contrary to popular belief, a Felix doll did *not* accompany Charles Lindbergh (1902–1974) on his 36-hour transatlantic flight on the Spirit of St Louis from 20 to 21 May **1927**.
- ❧ Felix created his own aeronautical adventures in the **1927** film, *Non-Stop Fright*. He takes up the challenge to fly to Timbuctoo [sic] to win \$50 000.
- ❧ In **1927**, Macy's Annual Thanksgiving Parade enlisted the services of huge air-filled puppets. Tony Sarg, a puppeteer and children's book illustrator, was commissioned to create the huge puppets. Felix the Cat made his debut appearance leading the parade. In **1928** the puppets were replaced by helium balloons, which unexpectedly burst above the towering skyscrapers. They were redesigned with safety valves in **1929**, and rewards were offered for their retrieval.

- ❧ One of Felix's nine lives was spent pioneering the experimental phase of black & white television broadcasts. The first black & white television broadcast — by RCA via W2XBS New York in **1928** — used a Felix doll in place of a human model, because it could withstand heat from the intense lighting used. The tonal contrast of the black and white cat was also useful. The doll was filmed for two hours each day, and this experiment lasted for almost a decade while RCA finetuned its picture definition.
- ❧ In the **1931** parade, with the band playing 'When the moon comes over the mountain', balloons were released and the Felix balloon drifted off over the Empire State Building.
- ❧ In Brazil in the **1930s**, children's book author Monteiro Lobato introduced Felix as a guest celebrity in one of his books.

Other Felix facts

Pat Sullivan held copyright for the name 'Felix the Cat' and for at least 200 different Felix toys of various sizes manufactured internationally. Also, there was a wealth of Felix collectables such as postcards, cigarette cards, comic books, pencils, jigsaw puzzles, sheet music and recordings, tin toys, chinaware and teapots, silver spoons, brooches, tiepins, pillow slips, clothing, wool-winders, confectionery and various other novelties.

A skilled title writer and punster, Pat Sullivan came up with the following film titles:

Balloonatics
A Tale of Two Kitties
No Fuelin'
Wise Guise
Daze and Knights
Forty Thousand Laughs under the Sea
Felix the Cat in Blunderland
Felix the Cat Collars the Button
Felix the Cat in Zoo Logic
Felix the Cat in Germ Mania
Felix the Cat as Romeeow
Felix the Cat in Sure-Locked Homes





Item list

- Pat Sullivan
Three Felix the Cat comic strips, c. 1927
Pen & ink drawing
ML PXD 946
- Pat Sullivan
[Greetings from Pat Sullivan to Edward Perier], c. 1930–32
Pencil drawing
ML SSV*/CART/40
- Photographer unknown
Mr Pat Sullivan and his wife
Enlargement from *The Home*, 1 January 1926, p. 74
ML Q 059/H
- Brian Geach
Surfers, Bondi Beach, NSW, 2004
Enlargement of photograph
Collection of Australian Tourist Commission
- Pat Sullivan
Felix the Cat, 1926–1927
Original comic book and reproduced pages
McLoughlin Bros. Inc., Springfield Mass., 1927
ML Q 741.5/14
- Pat Sullivan
The Felix Annual: Adventures of the Film Cat, 1929
Comic book
Daily Sketch & Sunday Graphic Limited, Sydney
DL 93/366
- Photographer unknown
Tea party at 'Highfield', Glen Osmond, Victoria, c. 1929
Enlargement of photograph
Courtesy of Dawn Fitzpatrick
- Everyone's*, 30 December 1925, pp. 12–13
Magazine
ML Q 792.005/E
- Pat Sullivan
'War Daze' with Felix [1937?]
Comic book
Offset Printing Coy. Pty. Ltd, Sydney
ML Q 741.5/32
- Pat Sullivan
Felix the Cat in 'Perils in Pearls' [1939?]
Comic book
Offset Printing Coy. Pty. Ltd, Sydney
ML Q 741.5/33
- Felix Follows the Swallows*, 1925
Cartoon film footage
VC1
Footage provided by the National Film and Sound Archive
- Felix Lends a Hand*, 1922
Cartoon film footage
VC1
Footage provided by the National Film and Sound Archive
- Music by Pete Wendling & Max Kortlander, words by Alfred Bryan
Felix, the Cat performed by Paul Whiteman and his orchestra, 1928
Sound recording of 78 r.p.m. record
Columbia, 1928
Collection of Mike Sutcliffe

Music by Pete Wendling & Max Kortlander, words by Alfred Bryan
Felix, the Cat performed by The Jazz Artists, 1928
Parlophone, 1928
78 r.p.m. record
Collection of Mike Sutcliffe

Music by Pete Wendling & Max Kortlander, words by Alfred Bryan
Felix the Cat, 1928
Music score
Sam Fox Pub. Co., Cleveland, 1928
ML MUSIC FILE/KOR

Photographer unknown
Pat Sullivan and his wife Marjorie with hundreds of thousands of entries
in the 'Draw Felix' competition, New York, 1923
Pen & ink drawing on photograph
ML PXD 946

Pamela Debenham
Australia Felix, 1982
Silk-screen print
Private collection

Pat Sullivan
Félix rêve ... 1935
Comic book
Hachette, Paris
ML Q 741.5/28

Pat Sullivan
Félix le Chat, 1931
Comic book
Hachette, Paris
ML Q 741.5/51

Photographer unknown
Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, Eagle Farm, Brisbane, 9 January 1928
Enlargement of photograph
State Library of Queensland image no. 171865

The Sydney Mail, 1 July 1936, pp. 18–19
Newspaper
BN 336

Pat Sullivan
Felix the Cat, 1967
Comic books
Page Publications Pty. Ltd, Surry Hills, 1967
ML K 01759

Pat Sullivan
Felix the Cat, 1971
Comic books
Page Publications Pty. Ltd, Surry Hills, 1971
ML K 01759

D. Evans
Souvenir of Katoomba (Taken at Echo Point), c. 1928
Tintype
ML MIN 413

Felix the Cat memorabilia, c. 1920s–1930s
Various media
Courtesy of Josef Lebovic Collection

Felix the Cat, pre–1966
Comic books
Elmsdale Publications Pty. Ltd, Sydney
ML Q 741.05/1 SET

Right: Felix figure, courtesy Josef Lebovic Collection



The

Felix

Corner

Elmsdale Publications Pty. Limited,
Scottish House,
19 Bridge Street,
SYDNEY.

Dear Boys and Girls,

Well this month the Felix Comic comes to you in a new style. Do you like it? I believe that the pictures are much easier to follow and the general appeal of the book is enhanced. Do let me know how you like this new book.

As I promised you, a long list of pen-pals is published on this page, as are also this month's prize jokes. Don't forget that 2/6 is awarded to the boy or girl who sends in a particular joke or riddle which, in our opinion, is considered to be a really good joke.

Now, I shall not take up more of your time, for I know that you will be waiting to read of how I managed to win out in my most recent fight with the Giant of Toyland. And how I was able to rescue the midgits from their sad plight.

Don't forget to send me your prize jokes, and I am always glad to have a letter from you telling me how you enjoy my comic adventures.

Love to you all,

Your friend,

Felix

Z - Z - Z

Z - Z - Z

Z - Z

Above: Letter from comic book, ML Q 741.05/1 SET
Right: Selected Felix illustrations, ML Q 741.05/1 SET,
ML Q 741.5/28, ML MUSIC FILE/KOR, Q 741.5/51,
ML Q 741.5/37

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