

# American MASTERS

**thirteen**  
WNET NEW YORK

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## press information



AMERICAN MASTERS  
is produced for PBS  
by Thirteen/WNET  
New York

FROM CHARLIE BROWN TO THE LITTLE RED-HAIRED GIRL, THIRTEEN/WNET NEW YORK'S *AMERICAN MASTERS* EXPLORES THE INNER WORLD AND UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF *GOOD OL' CHARLES SCHULZ*, PREMIERING OCTOBER 29 ON PBS

The Artist Who Redefined The Comic Strip Is First Cartoonist Included In *American Masters* Library

Life And Work Intertwine In Cartoons, Home Movies, Original Animations, And Interviews With Family Members, Real-Life Inspirations For Cartoon Characters, And Cartoonists Jules Feiffer And Lynn Johnston

Linus never sees the Great Pumpkin. The nefarious Red Baron always gets away. Good ol' Charlie Brown never, ever kicks that football. Armed only with security blankets and vivid imaginations, the *Peanuts* gang endured unrequited love, loneliness, resentment, and despair for almost 50 years – just like their creator, Charles M. Schulz. Every day for decades, Schulz poured out his heart on the comics page, and helped us all laugh at life's toughest struggles. Although characters like Snoopy and phrases like "Happiness is a warm puppy" became part of a billion-dollar global phenomenon, success failed to quell Schulz's own doubts. "I can't believe they think I'm that good," Schulz said tearfully at the end of his last on-camera interview. "I just did the best I could."

In *Good Ol' Charles Schulz*, *AMERICAN MASTERS* presents an unexpected portrait of the man behind the most popular comic strip in history. The feature-length documentary premieres Monday, October 29 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). It is a co-production of Thirteen/WNET New York, Twin Cities Public Television and Lumiere Productions. The film is directed and written by David Van Taylor, and produced by Ali Pomeroy. Calvin Skaggs is the executive producer for Lumiere; Gerry Richman is the executive producer for Twin Cities Public

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Television. Susan Lacy is the creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*.

“I grew up reading *Peanuts* – we all did,” says Lacy. “The characters are as familiar to us as our own siblings. Their trials and tribulations evoke our own childhood desperations. To learn that Charles Schulz, as incredibly successful as he was, struggled with the same kinds of frustrations and self doubts his characters did – and that they helped fuel his art – was a revelation.”

Schulz’s genius – evident throughout his 17,897 comic strips – lay in depicting the daily collisions of insiders and outsiders, of mundane cruelties and transcendent hopes. With both whimsy and profundity, Schulz offered millions of readers different facets of his own personality, along with a unique take on 20th-century America. *Peanuts* burst on the scene in 1950 with a minimalist aesthetic and emotional wallop unlike anything seen before. The strip combined open expressions of malice (the very first punch line was “Good ol’ Charlie Brown...How I hate him!”), psychological insights and a lifelong loser of a protagonist in a way that upended not only the comics page but also the era’s prevailing *Father Knows Best* mythology. It had an immediate impact on readers of all ages, from bohemia to Peoria.

“Charles Schulz was one of the great artists of the 20th century, and an utterly fascinating individual,” says director Van Taylor. “His is a quintessential American tale, in both the extraordinary accomplishments and the relentless self-questioning. Like Horatio Alger’s ‘self-made man,’ Schulz and his best-loved creations wanted to fit into the crowd and couldn’t help but stand apart from it.”

*Good Ol’ Charles Schulz* includes excerpts from classic *Peanuts* television specials, archival footage, personal photos, and home movies – as well as unlimited use of the comic strips. Archival interviews with Schulz himself offer insight into a humble man who reached the pinnacle of his profession but still described himself as ordinary. Original interviews include Schulz’s widow and three oldest children, the real-life inspirations for Linus and the “little red-haired girl,”

prominent cartoonists who knew “Sparky” Schulz, and David Michaelis, author of *Schulz and Peanuts* (available in October from HarperCollins), who served as consultant to the film.

Throughout, the documentary explores the many connections between Schulz’s life and art, from wintry images of a Minnesota boyhood and the echoes of a first marriage in the relationship between Lucy and Schroeder to the dismal family Thanksgiving that found its way into a holiday special. Even when the strip seems least grounded in reality (such as Snoopy’s well-loved flights of fancy) it reflects on Schulz’s state of mind. The film also uses video compositing and original animations to meld *Peanuts* and Schulz’s life.

Like *Peanuts*, Schulz’s story highlights the extraordinary drama of ordinary life. The loss of a parent, heartbreak, divorce, illness, death – Schulz confronted these universal challenges in his own life and found a way to translate them into the everyday doings and musings of grade-schoolers. The *Peanuts* gang made smart observations about literature, art, classical music, theology, medicine, psychiatry, sports and the law – becoming permanently affixed in our collective psyche.

But while *Peanuts* affirmed the Charlie Brown inside us all, Schulz continued hoping he could leave behind the isolation that shadowed him since childhood. Again and again he found, or made, homes and communities for himself: in a Church of God congregation he joined after returning from World War II; at the art school where he taught as an aspiring cartoonist; in the idyllic estate he and his wife Joyce built for their five children in Northern California; in his very different second marriage to Jeannie Schulz.

His continuous ascent encouraged these hopes. *Peanuts* debuted in seven newspapers on October 2, 1950 through United Features Syndicate, and ended up in 2,500 newspapers. In 1965, after *Peanuts* made the cover of *TIME* magazine, the animated special *A Charlie Brown Christmas* was seen in more than 15 million homes, capturing nearly half of all American viewers. *Peanuts* soon became a worldwide industry. For the first time in the book trade, booksellers started to sell

not just *Peanuts* books but also sweatshirts, dolls and an increasing array of paraphernalia that bore the image and form of the characters in the books – an old idea called licensing would bring in \$1 billion a year to United Features and make Schulz richer than any popular artist in the world. Even in death, his annual earnings of \$35 million place him just behind Elvis Presley.

But essential doubts continued to plague both the creator and his creations. Would his many admirers seek him out, he wondered, if he weren't rich and famous? Like Charlie Brown, he awoke in the middle of the night to ask hard questions about God, love and life. In later years, he found himself wondering more and more about basic mysteries of his childhood, including the death of his mother just as he left home for military service. He watched *Citizen Kane* as many as 40 times, looking for clues to his own personal Rosebud.

Through it all, Schulz's work, his dedication to his characters and to his art never flagged. He had known since boyhood that he wanted to be a cartoonist, and it remained his number one commitment. That could be an obstacle in itself, as Schulz's solitary vocation often isolated him even from his loved ones. As a close friend describes it in *Good Ol' Charles Schulz*, "He was in his own world – close the door and he lived in Snoopy's doghouse."

But it was also, clearly, his salvation. When all else failed him, Schulz still knew, like Schroeder at his piano, the satisfaction of mastering his art. Even after he developed a tremor, he did all the drawing, all the lettering, himself. Jeannie Schulz compares it to his diary, where he could express and explore his feelings, even those he couldn't share with his family.

That "diary" was not only Schulz's deliverance, but his legacy. The way Schulz used the strip to wrestle openly with difficult emotions is the ultimate convergence of his life and art. And after viewing *Good Ol' Charles Schulz* you'll never look at *Peanuts* the same way again.

To take *AMERICAN MASTERS* beyond the television broadcast and further explore the themes, stories, and personalities of masters past and present, the companion Web site ([www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters)), created by Thirteen/WNET New York, offers interviews,

essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

*AMERICAN MASTERS* is produced for PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. This acclaimed series, now celebrating its 21st season, has become a cultural legacy in its own right. The *AMERICAN MASTERS* film library is one of the most highly honored in television history with profiles of more than 140 artistic giants. In addition to eight Peabodys, an Oscar, a duPont-Columbia and two Grammys, *AMERICAN MASTERS* has won 19 Emmys, including Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series for 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

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