

CARTOON DESK

# PARTY TIME WITH MICK STEVENS



**By Robert Mankoff**

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My friend and colleague Mick Stevens has been contributing cartoons to *The New Yorker* since 1979. His first was this classic:



Since then, almost nine hundred have followed. Cartooning is a solitary occupation: just one person, a blank piece of paper, a drawing board, a pencil, a pen, an eraser, a cup of coffee, and of course, in Mick's case, Mozart.

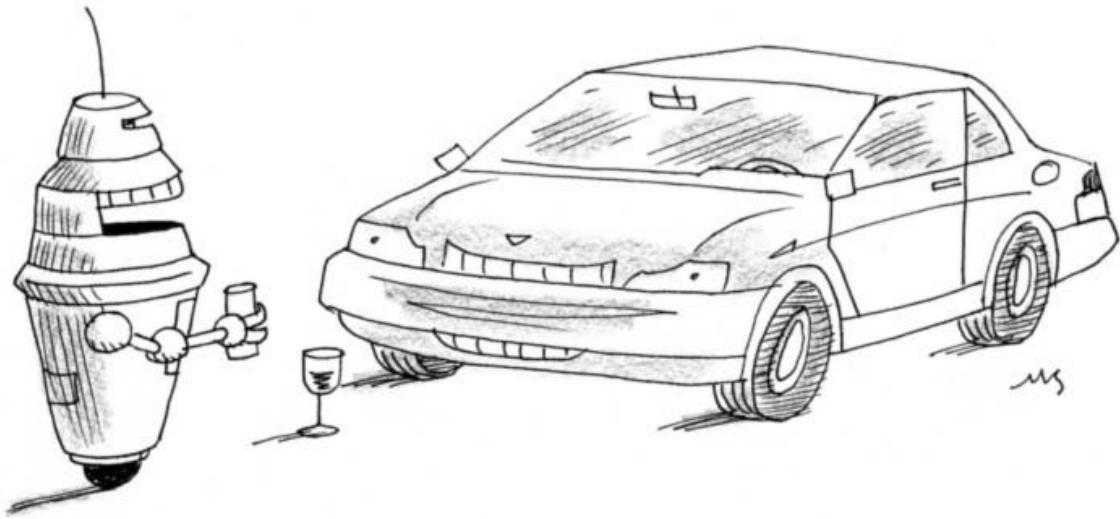
But really, when you think about it, the cartoonist does not

accomplish his or her work completely alone. Characters, once created, have lives of their own, and without them cartooning would be like, well, like life without Mozart.

In this guest post, Mick celebrates those characters. Take it away, Mick:

Every year, I have a big party at my house with my people; that is, with all the characters I've drawn in my cartoons over the years. They come dressed the way they are in their respective cartoons, for the most part, though there are always a couple who refuse to do that and show up naked, or in cutoffs, or in bear costumes that they didn't get a chance to wear in a cartoon that year. They're mostly black-and-white and two-dimensional, graphically speaking. A few come as line drawings, without shading. I think they're just lazy, or maybe they want to look as though they were drawn by another artist—maybe Saul Steinberg or Charles Barsotti. I guess it must be a little irritating to have to conform to my particular style of drawing for their entire careers. I try to go easy on them; I don't draw their noses too big or give them bowed legs. But of course there are exceptions: I've drawn a few with extra arms or legs, or even with extra heads.

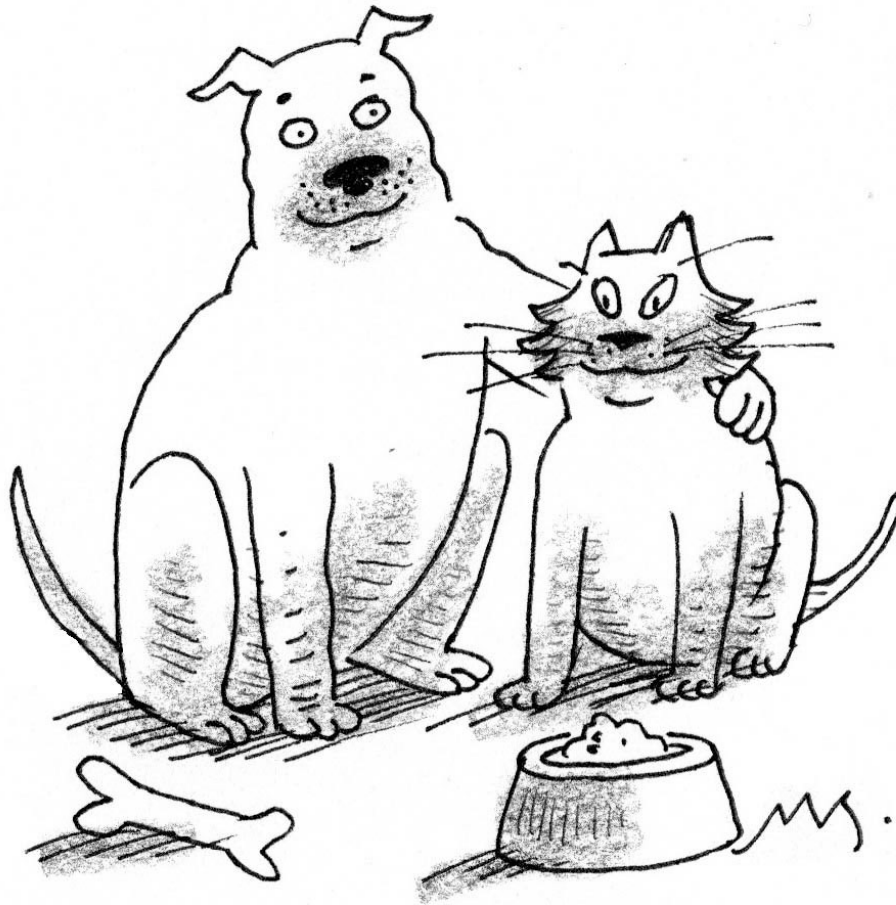
There are a lot of robots and other machines. Most of them seem content to be who they are, not too resentful about being stuck in the style I've confined them to.



I've noticed there's a hierarchy of sorts. Nobody seems to want to hang around with the desert-island people, who look sort of rough and don't smell that good. The desert islanders and the desert crawlers and street bums mostly hang out by themselves in one corner of the room.



The dogs and cats seem to get along pretty well, as long as I make sure there's plenty of kibble and tuna fish available.



All the cocktail-party people, of course, are right at home at this event, standing around with drinks in their hands and chatting.

The clowns pop up all over the room, inserting themselves unexpectedly into other groups and disrupting things, especially when there seems to be a too serious conversation going on.



God is always there. He brings a couple of angels, who hand out leaflets containing some of his latest pronouncements and admonishments. One year, he lugged in the original stone with the Ten Commandments etched on it, but it was too hard to hold it with one hand and hold his cranberry-juice cocktail with the other. Halfway through the night, he made Moses carry it.



Occasionally, God will come in the guise of Zeus, which gives him a little more leeway in his conduct, including allowing him to drink wine instead of fruit juice. The lightning bolts are a little awkward to deal with, so he usually brings only one and makes a dumb joke of threatening people with it throughout the night. Actually, everyone has gotten pretty tired of the joke, but they all have to put up with it, given who he is.



There are other religious figures at the party. Noah comes with his entire family and several animals from the ark. I had to build an extra wing on my house just for him and his retinue. He's usually in front of the TV in there, watching the weather channel.



Adam and Eve are always there, usually naked: a popular couple. The snake hangs out in a nearby houseplant.



Literary figures come, too. Moby Dick has an entire room pretty much to himself. (Captain Ahab is usually somewhere else, scowling into his mug of grog.)

Death is there, lurking, out of habit, but, once you get into a conversation with him, he can be quite charming. It turns out that the whole hood thing is due to the fact that he's insecure about his looks and doesn't like to show his face. He has a lot of interns, who come to the party dressed just like him, so you never know if you're talking to the Grim Reaper himself or to some young Harvard grad with a master's degree in

post-life studies.

All the guests stay a little longer than they should. Most of them have to work the next day. They show up late the next morning, sleepy and out of sorts, hung over and in need of a shave—even some of the women! A few of these characters are actually dead. I cut them a lot of slack, though. I just draw them the way they are at the moment and try to fit them into the next batch of cartoons headed for the magazine or the wastebasket. They always recover—even from being dead, in some cases—and go right back to work.

It's a good group. They work hard for very little compensation—for no compensation, in fact. I feel a little guilty occasionally for profiting from their labors. Maybe I should draw them all with big bags of money. I think they'd like that.

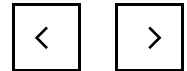
Thanks, Mick. That was great. Please invite us next year, too. One thing, though: let's hold off on the big bags of money. If that gets around, everyone else's characters will want them, too.

P.S. Here's a slide show showing off some of Mick's characters.



*"I can't help thinking there's a book in this."*

1 / 9



*Bob Mankoff was  
the cartoon editor of  
The New Yorker  
from 1997 to 2017.*

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