

The New York Times

Business

Classic Icons Seek Fresh Fame

By ROBEN FARZAD

Published: June 23, 2005

Liberace's image is being featured on items like this shirt.

UNDERDOG is getting a lot of work these days.

The classic crime-fighting beagle can be seen swooping into a Visa check card advertisement and on the hood of a Nascar racecar. Soon he will be reading lines for a Disney movie. Classic Media, which owns the rights to the Underdog character, is not alone in seeking to profit from marketers who are rushing into properties that were once hot with baby boomers.

At the Licensing 2005 show, which runs through today at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in Manhattan, other cartoon and real-life characters are also in search of comebacks, including Richie Rich, Casper the Friendly Ghost and Liberace.

"Nostalgia is a hit," said Mike Alic, general manager of the show, as he stood under a depiction of Superman stopping an 18-wheeler from falling off a bridge. "The people running the licensing business had these brands in their childhood, and they appreciate the decreased risk of going with already proven track records."

Necco, one of the country's oldest candy companies, is pushing its flagship wafers and Clark bar icons to apparel makers. "There's comfort with the familiar," said Ross Misher, president of Brand Central LLC, the Los Angeles-based licensing agency representing Necco.

Kellogg is a partner with 20 licensees to produce products including Norman Rockwell-printed ceramic cereal bowls. The company is drawing from its own century-old archive of more than a million pieces of art that includes works by Rockwell, J. C. Leyendecker and Andrew Loomis, and has a domestic deal for a 1960's style Tony the Tiger bikini that is already a hit in Japan.



The cereal maker has signed off on licensed stationery and puzzles to help it reintroduce the original Snap! Crackle! and Pop! characters from its Rice Krispies brand, as well as Sugar Pops Pete and Smaxey the seal, the long-retired spokesperson for Sugar Smacks. (Now known as Honey Smacks, and touted by Dig'Em frog.)

Throwback marketing is also being used for toys, with the Care Bears, My Little Pony and the Cabbage Patch Kid characters displayed prominently at the show.

Hasbro is heavily promoting Transformers, the toy robots that first hit the big time during the Reagan era. Interest in the brand had been declining until 2002, when the toymaker joined with the Cartoon Network to introduce three new generations of characters. Hasbro is currently working with DreamWorks and Paramount for a Transformers movie, and exploring deals with licensees to support the movie's release with apparel, video games and even Transformer bandages.

"We're bringing it back in a way that dads can relive their childhoods with their children," said Bryony Bouyer, a senior vice president at Hasbro.

In addition to Underdog, Classic Media is promoting Richie Rich, Peter Cottontail and Mr. Peabody, the time-traveling, bespectacled genius dog. Classic has sought deals to get these and other classic animation and children's programming back into the mainstream, including making Mr. Magoo a co-star with Tiger Woods in an American Express ad, and having Lassie scare off a cougar in a commercial for General Electric.

Classic Media is also promoting Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties, Roger Ramjet and Gerald McBoing Boing, which will have a new series on the Cartoon Network.

"These characters have an emotional tug that sticks around," said Leslie Levine, Classic's head of worldwide licensing.

I Love Liberace, a Las Vegas-based company that secured exclusive worldwide licensing rights from Liberace's estate, has a booth with towels, bags and clothing featuring Liberace kicking like a Rockette. In addition to having trademarked the phrase "Mr. Showmanship," the company aims to roll out Liberace barbecue sauce, complete with edible glitter.

Much of the old imagery is being revised with the help of new technology.

After a 19-year hiatus, Superman is expected to hit movie theaters next year with a healthy helping of computer-generated imagery. And the jingle "Everyone knows it's Slinky" is now available as a cellphone ring tone.