

## This Day in History... April 16, 1889

# Happy Birthday Charlie Chaplin

Sir Charles Spencer “Charlie” Chaplin was born on April 16, 1889. While there is no official record of his birth, it’s believed he was born in South London, England.

Born to music hall entertainers, Chaplin’s childhood was one of poverty and hardship. His parents were both ill and had trouble finding work. They sent him to a workhouse when he was just seven. Amidst his difficult childhood, Chaplin discovered he had a talent for acting, making his first stage appearance at the age of five.

Acting was something that he wanted to pursue. So, through his mother’s contacts, at nine years old, Chaplin joined a clog-dancing troupe known as The Eight Lancashire Lads. Dancing never fulfilled his desire for acting though. At nineteen, Chaplin toured Britain with the Fred Karno Company, and in 1910, he made his first trip to America with the troupe. In 1913, Mack Sennett, a producer in the new field of “flickers,” saw his act and offered Chaplin a part. At first, Chaplin was hesitant to leave the stage for films, but his mind was made up when he heard he could make \$150 a week (about \$15,600 in today’s wages).

In 1914, Chaplin’s debut came in a short film called *Making a Living*. Wanting to stand out more as an actor, he then put together a costume of oversized pants, a tight coat, a derby hat, and a cane. His character, “The Tramp” was an instant success and became one of the most popular and easily recognizable figures of the twentieth century. Using his wild imagination he was able to transform dinner rolls into ballet shoes or a worn boot into a feast fit for a king.



*From the Silent Screen Stars issue*

Chaplin soon began directing films and made 35 short movies with Sennett the first year. Chaplin was so successful in those early years that he was offered a contract for \$670,000 a year in 1916 (equal to over \$68 million today), making him one of the highest paid people in the world of any profession. He was often hailed as “the funniest man in the world.”

By 1919, Chaplin’s box office appeal was so great that no studio could afford to hire him. So he joined with actors Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and D.W. Griffith to create United Artists, a distribution company. He could now have total control over the pictures he made. The first film he produced with the new company was *A Woman of Paris*. Though the critics praised it, audiences were disappointed that Chaplin didn’t appear in the film. The Tramp returned in the next movie titled, *The Gold Rush*. It was one of the highest-grossing silent films, making \$5 million in profits.

When sound was added to films, Chaplin was hesitant to switch. He did incorporate music into his movies, composing many of the pieces himself. Eventually, the actor and director did make several “talkies” in the 1940s and ‘50s. Though he still worked mainly in comedy, Chaplin took on a more political tone. Films like *Modern Times*, *The Dictator*, and *A King in New York* highlighted social and economic issues brought about by the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler, and the Red Scare. By then, his popularity had faded and his political views were controversial. He moved to Switzerland in 1953. Although he lived in the US for more than 40 years, Chaplin never became an American citizen.

In 1971, Chaplin received an Academy Award for lifetime achievement in film, and in 1975, Queen Elizabeth knighted him. Over the course of his career, Charlie Chaplin made 82 films, most of them comedies, and most of which he directed. Chaplin’s movies enjoyed a resurgence in popularity later in his life before he died on December 25, 1977. Six of Chaplin’s films are now preserved in the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress.



*Chaplin stamp from the Celebrate the Century – 1910s sheet*

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