



## ...A VENTRILOQUIST

by  
**Bob  
Abdou**

**M**y name is Bob Abdou. (*That's not me in the picture above; that's me in the photo below with my characters Rusty Zippers and Gutters McGee.*)

I'm a ventriloquist. I'm also a puppeteer. I live in both worlds – the world of strings, hands, rods, and fine artistic expression and the world of dummies, lip control and funny jokes.



To the outside world, puppeteers and ventriloquists do the same thing: we both make inanimate objects come to life. But to those of us in the field, there is a world of difference.

Last year the Puppeteers of America asked me to promote their national festival in Atlanta to the ventriloquist community. I couldn't do it. Why? The Puppeteers festival was scheduled on the same week as the Ventriloquist convention in Ft. Mitchell Kentucky! I wish I could attend both. I live in both worlds, but I have to admit that my heart is in the world of dummies, lip control and funny jokes.

As the consultant for ventriloquism to the Puppeteers of America, I wanted to write this article to tell you about some of the differences that I have noticed between puppeteers and ventriloquists. I want to reveal what's in the mind of the ventriloquist and to let you all know that— even though we might

seem “in-your-face”—we're okay people. I'll share just a couple of things I've observed being a part of the ventriloquist community for the last 20 years. There are always exceptions to the rules, and keep in mind that these opinions are mine and the thoughts reflected in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or beliefs of all ventriloquists or the ventriloquist community at large. With the legal disclaimers over, let's begin.

*Testing: One, Two, Three*

### **Ventriloquists are hams.**

Give a ventriloquist a puppet and they will perform. A vent (we call ourselves “vents”) without a puppet might be quiet or even introverted, but given the opportunity and an audience (anyone with a heart beat), any time is a good time for a show. Whether they're in a restaurant, hotel lobby or doctor's office, the show could go on. I know a vent that was thinking about performing at a funeral, and would have if we didn't tell her to reconsider!

I've found the opposite is true for puppeteers. Puppeteers tend to be more reserved when it comes to performing. It has to be the right time and the right place, especially if a show needs a stage set up and lighting. I will never forget my first experience at a special puppet festival at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta. I was walking around with one of my puppets, chit-chatting with the crowd. This is a very, very common occurrence at a ventriloquist convention, but no one else was doing it at the puppet festival. I asked another puppeteer where everyone else's puppet was. He told me that for the most part, puppet shows are theme-driven and need a stage so puppet people don't walk around performing willy-nilly.

Wow, that hit me like a ton of twelve inch foam!

As ventriloquists, we love showing off our puppets and our skills, and we love to make people laugh without a stage, no matter where, no matter when. Puppeteers are more structured when it comes to performing. They show off their puppets, skills and create laughter at the proper place and the proper time.

### **Meet your Maker**

When two or more vents meet and talk about our “dummy” partners, the first question we ask is “Who made it?” For the most part, ventriloquists do not make their own dummies. There are two distinct groups: performers and makers. We have separate roles, but we go to the same conventions and we know each other well. Now with the internet, there seems to be more vents making their own dummies, but this is not yet the norm. If it is a traditional dummy with a control stick, we can almost guess the maker by their certain look: Marshall, Turner, Brown, Coats, Spencer, Robinson, Maher (the list goes on and on)... these are names that are part of most ventriloquist's conversations. The figure makers depend on the performers to use their creations and the performers depend on the figure makers for their partners. And if a dummy breaks, we have to send it back to certain figure makers for repair.



Frank Marshall (1900-1969) credited for carving Charlie McCarthy, Jerry Mahoney, Danny O'Day, Farfel. He also made marionettes, hand puppets and Punch and Judy characters and thousands more

On the other hand, most puppeteers make their own puppets. The creation of the puppets and the stage, lavish costumes, lighting, sound and effects is almost part of the performance. The performance is the last step: they design, sculpt, mold, sand, sew, glue, solder, drill, paint, then perform.

### **Shut Your Mouth**

Want to drive a ventriloquist crazy? Give them a puppet without a moving mouth. There are exceptions—some famous ventriloquists have acts with puppets whose mouths didn't move, but most need that moving mouth. A ventriloquist's act is mostly done in dialogue, with the vent and the dummy in full view of the audience. The vent is one of the characters on stage and the dummy is the other. Since the vent talks for the dummy, the moving mouth increases the illusion that the dummy is alive. The moving mouth and manipulation moves the viewer's attention to the dummy. Puppeteers are usually out of sight during their performances so it's not as important.

### **Read My Lips**

I confess, when I saw parts of the Broadway show "Avenue Q" I was confused and found it hard to focus on the show. It wasn't just because there were half-body puppets floating in the air or because you could see the puppeteers (who weren't really characters in the show.) I was distracted because the puppeteers lips were moving a lot! One of the illusions of ventriloquism is lip control or talking without moving your lips. Some don't do it perfectly, but all vents will at least make the effort to control their movement somewhat. Okay, Edgar Bergen moved his lips a lot, but all the time he spent on radio took its toll. (Incidentally, at the end of his career, Edgar Bergen was performing in Las Vegas and a heckler said to him "Hey, your lips are moving, Paul Winchell's lips don't move!" Bergen replied "Yeah, but Paul Winchell doesn't have millions in the bank!") Bergen said that he wanted the millions listening on the radio to be able to understand him clearly, rather than impress the 100 sitting in the studio.

In the vent world, the debate goes on. Is it more important to have perfect lip control or to be entertaining? Can a ventriloquist still be a ventriloquist without lip control? I'm sure this is not a debate in the world of puppeteers.

### **Solo Act**

Puppeteers are more open to a wider variety of puppets than ventriloquists. Puppeteers don't just stick with hand/glove puppets – they use marionettes, body puppets, shadow puppets, object puppets, etc. Vents are more focused only on ventriloquism – using either hard dummies or soft puppets. One year, at the ventriloquist convention, a professional marionette company performed. It was an excellent show, but a lot of people in the audience just didn't get it. They

just couldn't think outside the ventriloquist box. I've noticed that when a puppet show comes to town, other puppeteers attend the show, help with production, or volunteer their time to promote the show. Ventriloquists come from a tradition of one performer, one suit case, and one dummy. Vents are more solitary performers – a one man or woman act. That's one important thing I appreciate about puppeteers, the camaraderie. When I hang out with puppeteers (and magicians, clowns and mimes) I learn about becoming a better performer, not just a better ventriloquist.



Group photo from the 2010 Ventriloquist convention, photo courtesy of Phillip Jones

### **Ventriloquist or Puppeteer**

Let it be known: ventriloquists are puppeteers. For some reason, certain ventriloquists don't want to be known as puppeteers (it's worked well for me – my stage name is "Mr. Puppet"! ) but if entertainment had to be listed alphabetically, vents would be at the bottom of the list just above walkers (stilt), xylophone players, yodelers and zoo animals! Puppeteer would be way above any of that. That's a good enough reason for me! As I said before, to the outside world, both vents and puppeteers do the same thing: we make inanimate objects come to life. Maybe one day we can join together at a convention— not just at the same time, but in the same place! Vents with their dummies and puppeteers with their puppets and an empty stage for all of us to perform. Now that would be one awesome "open-mic/potpourri"!

*Bob Abdou is a professional ventriloquist, marionette performer and comedian living in Austin, Texas. Bob has performed all over the world: Honolulu, Hawaii, Tokyo, Japan, and Newark, New Jersey. Bob has a whole array of characters and has been performing his Beatles puppet show for the official Beatles convention throughout the states since 1996. He has been doing 400 shows a year for the past 11 years without an agent, ticket sales or his mothers help. Bob is a member of the Hospitality Committee for the Vent-Haven Ventriloquist Convention and is the consultant for ventriloquism to the Puppeteers of America.*