

Jane Withers

Titles: 24 Sources: 3 Stills: 15

Born: Atlanta Georgia; April 12th 1926



Autographed studio publicity shot

Source: indeterminate website



Modelling a raincoat Source: indeterminate website

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion entry:

"American child star of the thirties, more mischievous and less pretty than Shirley Temple."

They Had Faces Then - Super-Stars, Stars and Starlets of the 1930s entry:

"Jane Withers started as the female equivalent of Jackie Searle, that mean kid, and as long as she was persecuting Shirley Temple and demanding a machine gun for Christmas, she was a joy. With black button eyes . . . black straight Dutch bob . . . black disposition, she provided considerable contrast to Little Miss Sunshine.

But she got too popular too quickly - not as popular as Shirley, of course, but enough that they had to find "vehicles" for her. And since star vehicles don't go to brats, she became almost a low-grade Shirley in a series of B-minus movies. Her first few starring movies - "GINGER", Tarkington's "GENTLE JULIA", "PADDY O'DAY" - were entertaining and Jane remained something of a rascal, although they never let her go much beyond making mischief.

But her movie stories became more and more hackneyed and her characters variations of the perennial Miss Fixit. Too, she grew up quickly - being quite a big girl before her parts grew up to her. Almost any Jane Withers picture would be worth seeing for moments she would contribute but, by the later ones, the moments were farther and farther apart."

"She was born in Atlanta Georgia, April 12 1926, daughter of Walter Withers, an employee of a rubber manufacturing company, and a stage-struck mother, Lavinia Ruth Elble. Mrs Withers put her two-year old Jane in Atlanta's Boston Academy to study tap, ballet and character dancing. Jane landed a regular spot on a radio show, "Aunt Sally's Kiddie Review", and later the child had her own show, billed as "Dixie's Dainty Dewdrop", doing imitations of W.C. Fields, Greta Garbo, ZaSu Pitts and Maurice Chevalier.

All this inspired her mother to take Jane to Hollywood in 1932, and her first job there was a \$7.50 a day bit part in "HANDLE WITH CARE". After she menaced Shirley Temple in "BRIGHT EYES", her salary jumped to \$150 a week in 1934. By 1937, she was sixth among the box-office champs, earning \$2500 a week.



"THIS IS THE LIFE" Source: *They Had Faces Then*



Withers and the mother who had planned and shaped her career – even before Jane was born, the classic unfulfilled actress-mum.

Later, Withers was firm that her own daughter should not repeat the experience: "I was so busy I missed the wonderful business of growing up. I don't want that for Wendy."

Source: indeterminate website

CARE". After she menaced Shirley Temple in "BRIGHT EYES", her salary jumped to \$150 a week in 1934. By 1937, she was sixth among the box-office champs, earning \$2500 a week.

In 1947 (having been out of movies for four years), she married William Moss Junior, a Texas oil millionaire and part-time film producer. They were divorced in 1953, with three children, Wendy, William and Randy. In 1955 she married Ken Errair, an insurance broker and once member of the singing Four Freshmen, and had two sons, Kenneth and Kendall, before her husband died in a plane crash in 1968. Today, Jane is chiefly known as Josephine, the Lady Plumber, on Comet TV commercials – a run that began in 1963."

The Child Stars chapter "Jane Withers: Dixie's Dainty Dewdrop":

"I want to write a story," Jane Withers told a magazine interviewer at the height of her popularity as America's favourite problem child. "This is the story. My father's a great millionaire, and my mother's a great society mother. She takes me to these bridge parties and I throw mud over everybody. I'm just terrible. I'm never good for one minute all through the picture. That is my idea of a swell story . . . it gives you a chance to yell your head off . . . Garbo and Dietrich never yell at all. That's the trouble with being a glamour girl – no yelling."

For the better part of a decade, Jane Withers yelled, and kicked, and bit, and screamed, while movie audiences bestowed their approval. She early evidenced a remarkable insight into those audiences. "Of course, at the end, just to satisfy everybody, I get a good spanking," she explained. "The minute they slapped me in "BRIGHT EYES", everybody just yelled and

waved, they were so happy. Well, I don't mind. I had my fun. So let them have their fun, too."

"**BRIGHT EYES**", in 1935, provided the prototype for Jane's later characterisations of "the meanie everybody loves." The film was essentially a vehicle for Twentieth Century-Fox's sensational new child discovery, Shirley Temple, who already had a near monopoly on celluloid sweetness and light. As a contrast - almost an antidote-to her engaging, positive qualities, director David Butler began interviewing a series of tiny soubrettes with a bent for more traditional mischief and mayhem.

Round-faced, freckled, homely Jane, shepherded by her mother, was one of those paraded before him, making little impression, however, until her mentor coaxed her to do a number of imitations developed for earlier radio appearances. Butler began to take note, and, in an intuitive moment, asked whether the child could imitate a machine gun. Jane's arms folded, her eyes took on the hard squint of a miniature Edward G. Robinson, a finger shot menacingly into firing position, and the tiny revolving body suddenly shook to the thoroughly convincing "Ra-ta-ta-tat" of an imaginary machine gun. She was given the part with no further formalities.

When the film was released, fond mothers and daughters smiled approvingly and somewhat complacently as Shirley Temple told Santa Claus she wanted a doll for Christmas. Their smiles turned to howls of laughter when Jane bemoaned the fact that she had not received a machine gun and turned on her lively imitation. Critics gasped with delight. "Into "**BRIGHT EYES**" producers inserted an eight-year-old chunk of human ratsbane called Jane Withers," wrote Withers idolator Leonard Hall. "This appalling child kicked and yowled and bit her way through the film so magnificently that millions roared with glee..."

While other studios had ransacked nurseries and dancing schools at home and abroad to find another Shirley Temple - Warner Brothers having gone as far as South Africa to find Sybil Jason - Twentieth Century-Fox had come up with Shirley's foil in Jane Withers. Where Shirley was the model child, incredibly bright, unbelievably pretty and gifted, ever obedient - the sum of what most parents would have liked their dream child to be - wild-eyed, mischievous, uncontrollable Jane was much

closer to the real thing, the noisy, brawling youngster actually making a mess of the living room before departing, strictly against orders, for some neighbourhood gangland mayhem.



The definitive female spanking magnet - Hollywood's girl counterpart for Jackie Searle, with whom she played in several pictures.

Source: indeterminate website

The contrast continued as far as personal appearance: Shirley with her lovely golden ringlets, her bright blue eyes, her delicate, measured movements; Jane, with dark, Buster Brown bangs over the forehead, pigtails trailing behind, dark brown, mildly malicious eyes that photographed black, and a pudgy restless body that moved in sudden, impulsive lurches.

As a happy studio tailored screen vehicles to the diverse talents of its two prodigies, Shirley grew from good to better to perfect, while Jane capitalised on her tomboyish, fun-loving, fight-loving nature, seldom making a picture in which there was not at least one good tussle.

After "**BRIGHT EYES**", she was immediately given star billing in "**GINGER**", playing with her male counterpart on the screen, mean, surly Jackie Searle, who seldom got through a film without suffering a good beating. Miraculously, in "**GINGER**", Searle actually scored a knockout over one of the other boys in the cast.

Critic Richard Watts Jr. bemoaned the fact that "this talented and likable child actress should be forced to go in for sweetness and light when her forte is infant frightfulness." Nonetheless, he

felt the film did have its virtues, allowing Jane to impersonate Garbo



Below: notwithstanding her carefully crafted studio persona of diminutive hellcat, Withers' publicity pictures all seem at pains to portray her as just another sweet-natured, unchallenging daughter figure. Quite what her fans made of these saccharine images is difficult to guess. It wasn't the Jane they knew and loved on the screen, that's for sure.

Source: indeterminate website

Left: Another butter-wouldn't-melt shot, yet there is something in her expression which isn't childlike at all. She seems to have the self-assurance and knowing eye of a much older woman.

Source: indeterminate website



A Sleepy Little Girl Waits for the Sandman After a Busy, Happy Day . . .



Age 10 in "**GENTLE JULIA**", with Jackie Searl on harmonica

Source: *indeterminate website*

and Zasu Pitts, to do a balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet, and to be "roguish, slangy, hard-boiled, humorous, and pathetic, and to demonstrate her gifts for heckling her elders and putting them at their ease."

The plot of "**GINGER**" provided a fair forecast of Jan's future films. As the orphan daughter of two actors, she was reared by an alcoholic old man, once a Shakespearean trouper, who still managed to mumble speeches from the classics. When the old veteran was put in jail for engaging in a brawl, Jane was adopted by a somewhat dotty society woman who considered herself an authority on child-raising, despite the fact that she had made a thorough mess of her own family. The plot showed her trying to reform little slum-orphan Jane, who, all the while, was busily inculcating her with her own particular democratic virtues, including frequent use of such daring expressions as "Skip it" and "For crying out loud."

In his review, Watts concluded that the film made "little Miss Withers at least the number two child actress of the American screen." Reporters and interviewers in the Thirties tried repeatedly to stir up a feud between number one, queen Shirley, and her studio runner-up. Although Shirley and Jane never became playmates or friends, the feud never developed, and as recently as January 1965 a grown-up Jane appeared on a television program and loudly declared, "God bless Shirley Temple," when the moderator tried once again to stir up flames from the ashes of the nonexistent rivalry.

The rivalry existed perhaps less in the actual careers of the two popular child stars than in the minds of their followers. And perhaps one of the strongest sources of Jane's appeal was her confirmed position as the underdog, not only in her films, but in reality, as second fiddle to Shirley. Reportedly, many of the films which Jane made were first offered to Shirley and rejected by her governing council, a fact which

would account for the great similarity in plot structure between Withers and Temple films.

Like Shirley, Jane did an enormous amount of good on the screen. Like Shirley, she could reform wayward characters, like the smugglers in "**ALWAYS IN TROUBLE**", or manage to bring together troubled lovers, as in "**PADDY O'DAY**". Like Shirley, she was often lost or orphaned, but for those who were kind to her, she could accomplish near miracles; in "**45 FATHERS**" she saved her wealthy benefactor from marrying a gold-digging socialite, and in "**PEPPER**" she turned grouchy millionaire Irvin S. Cobb into a reasonably likable old codger.

Similar plots could take on a different colouring as a result of the points of emphasis. The emphasis in Withers films was usually on the difficulties she encountered, the terrible fixes she was suddenly in, and the tomboyish ferocity with which she challenged her fate – a fate, more often than not, largely of her own manufacture. Typical was "**LITTLE MISS NOBODY**", in which Jane once again played the golden-hearted orphan. In her review, Regina Crewe declared that "Little Miss Mischief might well be Jane Withers' nom de theatre. . . . With the aid of the scenarists . . . she manages to get into more jams than a subway rider."

Trouble was the byword for Jane's films, and their titles give a good indication of their spirit and contents: "**ARIZONA WILDCAT**", with Leo Carillo, a frequent Withers co-star; "**THE HOLY TERROR**", which permitted Jane to work mayhem with a toy airplane; "**ALWAYS IN TROUBLE**", in which a monkey named Gertrude became Jane's friend, but not before it had taken a good bite out of her leg; "**WILD AND WOOLLY**"; "**RASCALS**"; "**CHICKEN WAGON FAMILY**", which had Jane sliding down a fire rail, singeing her behind; and "**PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES**", with the zany Ritz Brothers. If a film like "**GENTLE JULIA**", based on popular Booth Tarkington characters, appeared to indicate a shift in direction, the change was more apparent than real. "The picture is Jane Withers from beginning to end, which it probably was meant to be," wrote one reviewer. "And since she lends to her portrayal of the tomboy Florence a sincerity, and at times her customary pointed malice, it is entertaining."

Over a period of six years, Jane made twenty-seven straight starring films. Moving into her

teens, she passed through adolescence often playing Tarkington-type characters and beating the jinx of the difficult transition period with her easy comic ability. In the Forties, she made "**SMALL TOWN DEB**", with a plot born of Jane's own fertile imagination, for which she received \$3,000 and screen credit under the name "Jerrie Walters"; "**GOLDEN HOOFS**", an appealing little racetrack film with Buddy Rogers; and "**GIRL FROM AVENUE A**", which had Jane wearing her first long stockings. "**BOY FRIEND**", her nineteenth movie for Twentieth Century-Fox, brought her her first film kiss, a delicate peck on the cheek. "**A VERY YOUNG LADY**" gave her two leading men, John Sutton and Richard Clayton, as well as twenty-seven changes of costume, while "**HER FIRST BEAU**", made while Jane was on loan to Columbia, co-starred her with Jackie Cooper.

When Shirley Temple had announced her retirement from the screen in 1940, it was felt that Jane would now inherit features of better quality. While Shirley's films had seldom been really big budget, they were all considered "A's," using the studio's top production facilities. Despite the withdrawal of the miniature queen of the lot, however, Jane continued to play in second-string pictures. Of her forty-seven films, all except one, a Samuel Goldwyn entry entitled "**NORTH STAR**", were low-budget "B's". The modest entries brought Jane Withers fame, a following both fervid and faithful, and fortune.

After "**BRIGHT EYES**", she jumped from \$5 and \$7-50 for one-day calls to a contract salary of \$150 per week. Succeeding efforts catapulted her from obscurity to number thirty-four in box-office appeal in 1936. The high rating forced a reluctant studio to boost her weekly pay from \$150 to \$1,500 and to allow her to lend the Withers name to product endorsements, a right which Fox had previously withheld. Mrs. Withers was put on salary as a consultant at \$150 per week.

In 1937, Jane placed sixth among the box-office champs. In 1938, she placed eighth, trailing only Shirley Temple, Clark Gable, Sonia Henie, Mickey Rooney, Spencer Tracy, Robert Taylor, and Myrna Loy, and edging out Alice Faye and Tyrone Power. The high standing jumped her salary from \$.1,500 to \$2,500 per week. If Shirley Temple got the prize roles, the redoubtable Jane was doing remarkably well with the rejects. Only a narrow rung below the leader, she was neatly holding her own.

If Shirley had received more than 5,000 dolls from all corners of the globe, Jane was not really

Eleanor Roosevelt had stopped on the set to visit Shirley, let it not be forgotten that Pauline Longworth, daughter of Mrs. Alice Roosevelt,



A scene from the 20th Century Fox production
PADDY O'DAY
Starring JANE WITHERS
(with Felix Turner and Rita Connors)

201452

unhappy with her collection of 1,500. If Mrs.

had stopped by to sip soda pop with

Goodness, what strumpet is this? Jane hangs from a sausage in "PADDY O'DAY" Source: indeterminate website

Jane. If Shirley had placed her tiny hand and footprints in the celebrated cement of Grauman's Chinese Theatre, Jane, after all, had left her somewhat larger footprints in the

cement at Shaefer's Center at the New York World's Fair.

Like Shirley, Jane was the object of kidnap and extortion plots, and maintained her own

personal bodyguard, a rangy Texan named Jack Trent. And if Shirley was mascot of the Chilean Navy and an Honorary Colonel of the American Legion, Jane was the mascot of the Georgia Tech football team, as well as "The World's Only Honorary Chief Air Hostette of American Airlines", a title copyrighted in her name by company president C. R. Smith. When Temple addicts repeated over and over again the real-life virtues of their baby Bernhardt, Irvin S. Cobb spoke up for the



Aged 11 in 1938 Source: indeterminate website

Withers claue. "If Jane Withers is a sample of what a movie career does for children, a law should be passed forcing all youngsters to have such an experience," stated Cobb. "I have yet to know a sweeter, more well-bred, gently considerate and wholly natural little girl."

Although the younger of the pair, Shirley had already been married for almost two years to John Agar before Jane followed her example, on September 20, 1947. After the conclusion of her forty-seventh film, "**DANGER STREET**", she became the bride of William Moss Jr.

While making her cavalcade of pictures, Jane was taught by her mother to cook, to sew, to budget her \$4.25-a-week allowance, and to participate in family discussions on the expenditure of money. "I am training Jane to be a poor man's wife," declared Mrs. Withers. "I want her to know all the things a girl who marries a man making a modest salary, say, forty dollars a week, should and must know."

The training as a poor man's wife was not immediately necessary. Her mother's careful investment of her earnings had made Jane independently wealthy. Bridegroom Moss was a Texas oil millionaire and part-time film producer. The affluent young couple made their home in Midland and Odessa of the Panhandle State, spending time in California only for Moss's producing activities.

Three children, Wendy, William, and Randy, were bom, but the marriage went through difficult days. An estrangement was accompanied for Jane by an ailment which temporarily paralysed her arms and legs. A reconciliation was effected in July 1953, but by the following July the couple went to the divorce courts.

A settlement gave Jane half of their community property, including oil lands valued at \$500,000, \$1,000 a month alimony, and a \$24,000 education-insurance fund for the children. "Hollywood and the movies had nothing to do with it," Jane said of her divorce. "My life in Hollywood has always been wonderful. And so are the people."

With her children, Jane returned to California, taking courses in cinema at the University of Southern California. "I thought I'd learn something about the movies . . . the technical side . . . maybe I could get a job," she declared. One day, guest speaker George Stevens, the noted director, spotted her among his listeners and offered her the role of Vashti Snythe in his forthcoming film, "**GIANT**". Jane took the role in the Edna Ferber epic on condition that the harsh view of Texans be modified. To Vashti, a blowsy, scatterbrained millionairess, high on diamonds but low on polish, she brought a genial comic interpretation that won praise from the critics, but, curiously, elicited no rash of further acting offers from Hollywood producers.

Jane ventured into a second, apparently more happy marriage, when, on October 18, 1955, she became the wife of Ken Errair, an insurance broker and a former member of the singing Four Freshmen. Two new members, sons Kenneth and Kendall, joined the Errair household, set up in a thirty-three-room mansion in a lovely residential area next door to the Hollywood film studios.

Today, in addition to managing her large family, the once more bouncy and buoyant Jane

paints, designs her own clothing, and does extensive charity work. She is also a regular Sunday school teacher. "In the future, I'd like to do a film with a religious background," she has stated. "Faith has played such an important role in my life." With no screen roles forthcoming, however, she has had to content

most notably, a much-used commercial in which she appears as a lady plumber.

The sight of the one-time child star on the home screen churns up a beady nostalgia for viewers nearing middle age, just as the sight of



herself with occasional television appearances,

Naval motif – age 11 in "THE HOLY TERROR"

Source: indeterminate website

daughter Wendy used to remind people on the street of the girl who used to be mean to Shirley

Temple on the screen. At the time, Jane, despite the fact that she still recalls with great

joy her days as a child star, made it very clear that Wendy would not follow in her footsteps. "Wendy is going to stay a little girl," she declared. "I was so busy I missed the wonderful business of growing up. I don't want that for Wendy."

Jane herself was the product of a very different mother. Lavinia Ruth Elble had wanted desperately to attempt acting, but her parents

considered her "strange notion" ridiculous, refusing even dancing lessons. As a consequence, when Walter Withers, an employee of a rubber-manufacturing company in Atlanta, Georgia, proposed marriage, Lavinia Ruth accepted on one condition - that if they had a daughter and she showed a genuine flair for acting, she could train her for a career. The condition was accepted.



Accordingly, when a baby girl was born in 1926, the name Jane was chosen because it would fit easily onto a theatre marquee.

To her mother's delight, Jane began humming melodies at seven months. She sang before she talked, danced before she walked, providing ample grounds for Mrs. Withers to register her at Atlanta's Boston Academy to study tap, ballet, and character dancing. At the age of three, she sang "Little Pal" at a local theatre's amateur night, and at four, she had her own radio program, specialising in impersonations. To her title of "Atlanta's Sweetheart" was added that of "Dixie's Dainty Dewdrop." As such, she reigned over the Georgia capital until her mother took her to Hollywood in 1932.

One-day calls, bit parts that often wound up on the cutting-room floor, dubbing voices for animated cartoons, and benefit and vaudeville appearances were her lot until the day director David Butler asked her to imitate a machine gun. That was the day Dixie's Dainty Dewdrop turned into America's favourite screen brat. Dixie's loss was the nation's gain."

Above: film unknown

Left: "THIS IS THE LIFE"

Source (both stills):

They Had Faces Then

FILMOGRAPHY

| Year | Age | Title | Role |
|--------|-----|--|--------------------------|
| deb 32 | 6 | HANDLE WITH CARE with <i>George Ernest, Silas "Buster" Phelps</i> | |
| 34 | 8 | BRIGHT EYES with <i>Shirley Temple</i> | |
| 35 | 9 | GINGER with <i>Jackie Searl, Tommy Bupp</i> | presumably in title role |
| 35 | | PADDY O'DAY | |
| 35 | | THE FARMER TAKES A WIFE | |
| 35 | | THIS IS THE LIFE | |
| 36 | 10 | GENTLE JULIA with <i>Jackie Searl</i> | in title role? |
| 36 | | LITTLE MISS NOBODY with <i>Delmar Watson</i> | in title role |
| 36 | | PEPPER with <i>Tommy Bupp</i> | in title role ? |
| 37 | 11 | 45 FATHERS | in central role |
| 37 | | THE HOLY TERROR | in title role |
| 37 | | WILD AND WOOLLY with <i>Douglas Scott, Jackie Searl, Carl "Alfalfa" Switzer</i> | |
| 38 | 12 | ALWAYS IN TROUBLE | in central role |
| 38 | | THE ARIZONA WILDCAT with <i>Rex Downing</i> | in title role |
| 38 | | RASCALS | in central role |
| 39 | 13 | BOY FRIEND | |
| 39 | | CHICKEN-WAGON FAMILY with <i>George Billings</i> | |
| 39 | | PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES | |
| 40 | 14 | A GIRL FROM AVENUE | in title role |
| 41 | 15 | GOLDEN HOOFS with <i>Phillip Hurlic</i> | |
| 41 | | HER FIRST BEAU ‡ with <i>Bobby Larson</i> | |
| 41 | | SMALL TOWN DEB | |
| 41 | | A VERY YOUNG LADY | in title role |
| 42 | 16 | THE MAD MARTINDALES | |
| 43 | 17 | NORTH STAR ‡ | |
| 44 | 18 | FACES IN THE FOG | |
| 46 | 20 | AFFAIRS OF GERALDINE | |
| 47 | 21 | DANGER STREET | [= her 47th film] |

[all her films – unless indicated ‡ – for 20th Century Fox]



The adolescent Jane – a less readily marketable image

Source: indeterminate website

Below: the caption reads "She may only be eleven, but little Withers can troupe" – precisely the kind of asinine copy one would expect of a tabloid feature on any rising child actor today.