

# Read his lips:

## Ventriloquist Terry Fator not just all talk

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**N**ot all success stories happen overnight. Just ask Terry Fator, a ventriloquist, impressionist, singer and comedian who, after 32 years of performing, finally got his big break as the \$1 million winner of NBC's "America's Got Talent" in 2007.

Fator wanted to be an entertainer from a young age and set out to do whatever he could to perform in front of an audience.

He landed a gig at the Las Vegas Hilton in 2008 and released his autobiography "Who's the Dummy Now?" In 2009, he opened a show at the Mirage, the start of a five-year, \$100 million contract.

Not only does Fator sound like countless entertainers from Elvis to Michael Jackson, but he can do all of these impressions and more without ever moving his lips. His show features music and comedy that spawns from the wacky personalities of his eight puppets.

Fator's show starts with a performance of the Etta James hit "At Last" sung by his lovable puppet Emma Taylor. It's the same routine that won over the hearts of audiences nationwide in his debut performance on "America's Got Talent."

Next, he pulls out Winston the Impersonating Turtle, who performs Roy Orbison's "Crying." It's awe inspiring to hear Orbison's voice projecting from a cute turtle puppet while Fator seems to be standing there taking in the outstanding performance just like the rest of the audience. Aside from just singing, Fator has brief, comical discussions with each of his characters.

"I'm like a convertible, I look better with my top down," says Vikki, a sassy and voluptuous cougar puppet who made her debut in the show at the Mirage. She performs songs from artists like Amy Winehouse and Beyoncé. Her lifelike movements and dynamic personality make it easy to forget that you are watching a one-man show, backed by a live band.

Fator also does impressions on his own to demonstrate that his puppets are not the only ones who can carry a tune.

"I like to do that because after seeing me on TV most people don't even realize that I can sing," says Fator.

Walter T. Airedale is the next puppet to perform. He is a country music lover who also has an eye for the ladies. "Last time I saw that many beautiful women in Vegas I had to pay a cover charge," says Airedale after taking a look at the audience. Not even Fator can help but laugh.

Fator's success story is one that dreams are made of, but getting there wasn't easy. In his autobiography he describes how a disapproving father and chronic illness got in his way, but he never lost sight of his dreams. "That's my message to everyone. Never give up. Don't let somebody tell you what you can and can't do with your life. What do they know? You're the one who has your life in your own hands. The amount of work you're willing to put into something is what you're going to get out of life," said Fator.

**Q: When did you first realize that you wanted to be an entertainer?**

**A:** I was three years old, and I decided that I loved the feeling of singing. Whenever I would sing in front of people at church or something like that, man, it always made me so happy. I knew that it was just too much fun to sing and to have people cheer for me so it was just something I wanted to do. I'm a ham. I always have been.

**How old were you when you first discovered ventriloquism?**

I was ten years old. It was just one of those things where it sounded really unique and different. I was planning on being a famous magician ... I was going to be the next Doug Henning, but my father took my magic away. He said that I had become obsessed. So I had to decide to try something else. I went to ventriloquism. It just sounded fun, and I didn't know anyone else who was trying to do it.

**Was it hard for you to learn?**

No I was pretty natural. I was very gifted right away. I just picked it up, learned how to do the techniques and I was doing it within just a few minutes.

**Who were some of the first voices you learned?**

My father had some records of old comedians like Bill Cosby and Jose Jimenez, who was a guy named Bill Dana, who would do a Spanish accent and he would do comedy routines. I found these records in my dad's record collection and I loved them. So I started learning how to do the accents and I would do the routines just like the voices ... I became a huge hit with my parents and their friends. I mean who wouldn't want to see a six-year-old doing impressions? At the time I didn't realize I was doing impressions. It just didn't seem like that big of a deal to me. When I got older I quit doing impressions of speaking voices and I started doing impressions of singers.

**When did you get your first puppet?**

When I was ten I went and got a little puppet ... he was called a Willie Talk. I bought it at Sears. He was a \$20 puppet. I paid \$10, and my mom paid the extra \$10 for me. I actually bought him with babysitting money ... My mom kind of took him apart and made it so his head could turn. He was a really rudimentary character - and my mom turned him into something a little more professional. As I got older I bought a semi-professional one using the

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money that I made doing shows. My mom bought me my first professional character and that's Walter T. Airedale. She gave it to me for my eighteenth birthday. He is still a major part of my act and always will be.

**When you got your first puppet did you develop his personality?**

Oh, absolutely. His name was Josh, and I wanted to use him to do things in church and to tell Bible stories. I named him Josh because it was a double thing, Josh as a joke and also the name of a Bible character. So I would take him to church and I would write comedy skits that had to do with Bible stories.

**What did it take to be able to master all the puppets movements to make it look like they are the ones really singing?**

That was just an awful lot of practice. I just decided that in order to be the best in the world you had to spend a lot of time with it. I would carry my puppets around with me all the time. I'd say 'listen I'm not trying to be crazy here, I just really feel that I need to learn how to make these puppets feel real.' I would bring puppets to the dinner table. Any time we were sitting around talking I would have my puppets there just because I really believed that they needed to feel like they were in a real conversation or in a real area. They never did actually feel like they were alive. It was all just an illusion.

**Do you ever have to do that now?**

No. That kind of stuff is really only the kind of thing you need to do once. You really need to spend the time to learn how to make the puppets react. If you watch me in a [live] interview it's easy to see because the puppet will sit there and act like they're taking part in the conversation. I don't even have to think about that anymore. It's so natural to me because of the many, many, many countless hours that I spent learning to do that. There's no substitute for practice. If you're not willing to take the time then you are never going to be the best. I really determined when I was about fifteen that I wanted to be the best ventriloquist in the world.

**What made you decide to do "America's Got Talent"?**

Actually I saw the first season and there was a ventriloquist on there. He did okay. He was on for only two shows, but after being on two shows, everywhere I went in the country everyone kept asking, 'did you see that ventriloquist?' I could not believe how much exposure he got. So I definitely needed that. Then the guy got on David Letterman a couple of months later, and I had been trying to get on David Letterman since 1983. I said okay, I'm going to go on that show and try to get on David Letterman. I figured I would have the exact same experience that he had. I figured I would get on two, maybe three episodes. I would build my exposure and help a lot of people know who I was, and then that would help me get higher paying shows. I had no idea I would win it. I never could have dreamed I would have ended up being a headliner at the Mirage ... it's just freakin' awesome.

**Have you been on Letterman?**

Yes. The funniest thing about that is right after I won 'America's Got Talent' Letterman called me and wanted me to do the show. I couldn't because I was in the hospital. I was sitting there depressed as I could possibly be thinking, the main reason I did the show was so I could get on David Letterman. He had to call me four times because I suddenly got so busy working, and I had to turn him down. He even mentioned it when I was on the show. What a great experience to be able to have David Letterman say 'This guy is so popular we couldn't even get him on.'

**Which are the most difficult voices?**

Some voices I can do within five minutes, other voices can take me months. I have been working on Barbra Streisand for almost a year. I'm going to get it down. I'm getting really close to it, but some voices are just really hard to re-create. Others are quite simple. Etta James for some reason was right in my range, and I was able to do in just a matter of minutes. The hard part was learning to do it without moving my lips. That always takes more work. I had done Roy Orbison's "Crying" many times during my show but I had never done it without moving my lips. It took me the full week during the time that I was on "America's Got Talent," literally eight to ten hours a day, to get it down.

**How did you come up with the different characters for each of your puppets?**

I start with deciding what songs I want to do. Then I see if there's a puppet in my show that would be perfect for this particular song. If there's not, then I say 'what puppet would be good for this?' I'll give you an example. I wanted to do some modern stuff like Pussycat Dolls, Amy Winehouse, Beyoncé, things like that ... I have a little girl character named Emma, but I wanted to sing 'Rehab' and I thought this little girl character would not be appropriate for that. So I thought, well who would be a good character to sing young, hip modern female singers? I thought, I know a few ladies who are cougars, and I thought it would be really fun to have a cougar character ... So the cougar was created and I named her Vikki. I had a puppet maker create her and she's just incredible.

**When you create a new character with a puppet maker do you take part in the design process?**

Absolutely. I don't sketch - I am a horrible artist, but I hire artists to do the sketches for me. It's kind of like a police artist. I'll give them as many details as I possibly can and then they sketch it out. That's how the characters are created.

**How do you come up with different voices?**

I have to actually hold the character in my hand to come up with the voice. I just can't do it until I see them ... Once I create the character then I can say, here's what he's going to sound like when I have them in my hand.



Photos courtesy the Mirage

## The puppets are no dummies

### Winston the Impersonating Turtle

He likes reading "The Tortoise and The Hare" and "Yertle the Turtle." He enjoys performing songs like Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" and Roy Orbison's "Crying." When not performing he visits the turtle ranches in Pahrump, Nev.



### Vikki

She is a sassy cougar known for her taste in attractive men. She likes to belt out songs from popular female artists like Amy Winehouse's "Rehab" and the Pussycat Dolls' "Don't Cha." When not performing, Vikki hits on young men at Jet.



### Duggie Scott Walker

He is a hardcore rock 'n' roller who refuses to cut his mullet or lose his tie-dye T-shirt. He likes to rock out with songs like Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine" and ZZ Top's "Sharp Dressed Man." When not performing he likes to kick it at all the rock joints in town like Wasted Space and House of Blues.



### Walter T. Airedale

He's a hardcore country music aficionado. He likes to perform songs like Brooks and Dunn's "Boot Scootin' Boogie." When he is not performing he likes to hang out at Texas Station and hit on ladies at Stoney's Rockin' Country. He also likes to attend the NFR when it's in town.

### Emma Taylor

She is a lovable and sweet little lady with a big voice who likes to sing songs like Etta James' hit "At Last." When not performing she likes to watch the Bellagio fountains and other beautiful sights in Las Vegas.



### Maynard Thompson

He's a self-proclaimed "World's Greatest Elvis Impersonator." He is somewhat clueless and bashful, but has no shame when it comes to singing. When not performing he hangs out downtown on Fremont Street in his Elvis attire.

### Julius

He's a smooth operator who was a member of the Five Tops before they decided to downsize. He likes to sing hits like Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On." When not performing he hangs out in lounges and sings.



### The Beatle

He was an "original" member of the legendary Fab Four who got left behind. He likes to sing Beatles songs like "Yesterday" and "A Day in the Life" with his "original" lyrics. When not performing he goes to see "Love" and rehash memories of what should have been.