

Film

INTERNATIONAL

# REMEMBERING CHEETA:

## PAL CHIMP AND TARZAN CO-STAR

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Madrid

On December 24, 2011, Cheeta, la mona Chita, died of kidney failure. If it had died on any other day of the year I wouldn't remember Debbie Cobb, director of the exclusive primate asylum where the chimp lived after its retirement from showbiz, delivering the sad news on CNN. The multi-prizewinning star had been domiciled at the Cheeta Primate Foundation in Palm Springs, in sunny California, since 1967. That year Cheeta appeared for the last time on the big screen, co-starring with Rex Harrison in *Dr. Doolittle*. Until 1968 it performed secondary roles in television series, like any superannuated actor dismissed by Hollywood. In retirement Cheeta played piano and painted, although it lived in a bare cage. The paintings, created by strong and colorful brushstrokes, are known as Ape-Abstracts and can be bought online at <http://cheetathechimp.org/donate.htm>. It is a donation.

Cheeta was born in Liberia in 1932 and, legend has it, arrived two years later in Hollywood after being "accidentally" found by a young zoologist researching rainforests. Soon the young chimpanzee, allegedly female, was the star in a dozen films alongside the Olympic gold medalist Johnny Weissmuller, as Tarzan, Maureen O'Sullivan as Jane, and Tarzan Jr., the adopted son rescued from a plane crash in the jungle when he was a baby. Cheeta appeared in all of Hollywood's Tarzan movies, from the 1930s to the 1960s. Its character brought further absurdity to those films about the jungle where the hero swung from tree to tree, supposedly emphasizing the idea of "man in nature" in Hollywood's golden age, when the levels of *Reelpolitik* were somewhat politically immature

Cheeta outlived both Weissmuller, who died in 1984 aged 79, and O'Sullivan, who died aged 87 in 1998.

The secrecy around the chimp's arrival in Hollywood is just one of the mysteries spicing the life of Cheeta – or Jiggs. Some sources say that Jiggs was the chimp's "real" name. And was it really a female? The enigma of her/his sex was never revealed. Gender studies only came on the academic scene when Cheeta/Jiggs had retired. Wikipedia refers to "a chimpanzee of undetermined sex, born about 1937, trained by George Emerson..." Well, Rock Hudson didn't

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Cheeta at his painting studio

reveal his sexual preference either, until it became news. Hollywood stories. Cheeta is also a metafictional character, a product of the movies, as no tame chimpanzees featured in any of the Tarzan novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs which the films, supposedly, were based on.

When Cheeta died at around 80 years old, it was awarded the title of longest-lived chimpanzee in captivity. Already at age 70, it was cited in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's oldest non-human primate. In the wild a chimp can live to 40–45 years old, and in captivity to about 50. For this reason some research claims that "Cheeta" is just a symbol: no one chimpanzee could possibly perform, let alone survive, over such a long period. Most probably there were several Cheetas.

Cloning and impersonation were not words in the vocabulary of kids growing up in the post-war world. Cheeta was Cheeta, and no one bothered to ask if whether s/he was original or the copy.

December 24 is already an overloaded date: so many memories crowd back, competing for attention with the bird roasting in the oven. Even immersed in all those complex issues, it is heartbreaking to recall the images of this urban and comical chimpanzee that enjoyed eating beauty lotion, drinking liquor, patting talcum powder on its face, luring elephants, and defying lions. Images of Cheeta detonate a mental connection to those Sunday matinees with my grandmother at the movie theater, filled with giggling kids. Laughter was easy available. Not a therapeutic tool. Generations grew up with the close-up shots of the large, brilliantly white teeth the chimp loved to expose while acting hysterical and mischievous: unpacking Jane's suitcase filled with fine lingerie, effusively hugging a lady visiting the jungle dressed as if for 5 o'clock tea, exchanging confidences over dinner with Tarzan. At the time of Cheeta's death, its teeth were rotten and black.

Writing this at the beginning of January 2015, and still having December 24 memories alive, Cheeta is the archetype of my "age of innocence." Today, when laughing seems unfit and we are tempted to join any of the 5,000 laughter clubs worldwide, perhaps we need more Cheetas instead!