

DATEBOOK



‘Yo Gabba Gabba’ — cringe-proof TV for Little kids and people who used to be

San Francisco’s W!LDBRAIN multimedia company, the show’s co-producer, is confident about its crossover appeal.

By Joe Garofoli
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Christian Jacobs and Scott Schultz are childhood buddies from Orange County who are parents in their 30s now, but not really grown up. They’re still hooked into the music and skateboard scenes - which means they break into hives when they see the saccharine television shows pitched at their preschoolers.

So a little over two years ago, they started creating a preschooler show that wasn’t laden with music that sounds like what’s wafting through aisle five at Safeway. For those unfamiliar with preschool viewing habits, the I-got-an-ouchie set likes to watch the same thing over and over and over and over ... until Mommy and Daddy want to rip out their eardrums. So a decent soundtrack is a godsend to parents.



MARK CONTANTINI / The Chronicle

Wildbrain CEO Charles Rivkin says “Yo Gabba Gabba” is just the kind of show Jim Henson would love.

They'll get one if they tune in at 10:30 a.m. Monday to "Yo Gabba Gabba," the half-hour show the Orange County boys created, which premieres with a simulcast on the kids cable channels Noggin and Nickelodeon. It's a kids' show that their parents can love. Later this season, the Shins do a guest appearance, hip-hopper Biz Markie appears regularly to teach the kids the "Biz Beat of the Day!," and skateboarding icon Tony Hawk drops by. Not a bad way to frame lessons about brushing your teeth and eating your green beans.

Viewers know the show is different from the opening moment, when an orange-wigged DJ struts onscreen carrying an oversize boom box. DJ Lance Rock (Lance Robertson) opens it and pulls out toy versions of the five live-action characters who anchor the show. What follows over the next half hour is a pastiche of electronic, hip-hop, New Wave and trippy beats of a sort that never rocked Barney's purple booty.

The show is being co-produced by San Francisco's Wildbrain multimedia company, which is so confident about its cross-over appeal that this fall it will be selling grown-up-size hoodies with "Yo Gabba Gabba" characters plastered on the front. They realize that Generation X is exhaling a copious amount of hipster parent media, from memoirs (Neal Pollack's "Alternadad") to online magazines and blogs (Babble.com for the "new urban parent," the endless number of "mommy blogs" and The Chronicle's own parenting blog, the Poop). There are even bands like the Sippy Cups, which play kid songs with an edge that parents won't find on the average episode of "The Wiggles."

Add "Yo Gabba Gabba" as another recognition of a generation that tries to get a babysitter when Arcade Fire comes through town.

"Yes, those are our parents," said Charles Rivkin, executive producer of "Yo Gabba Gabba" and president and CEO of Wildbrain. He may be 45, with kids too old for the show, but he knows enough about television that appeals to multiple generations.

From 1988 to 2003, Rivkin worked his way up to chief executive of the Jim Henson Co., the corporate hands inside the Muppets - who "Yo Gabba Gabba" creators say were a major influence.

"Jim would have loved this show," Rivkin said. "This is what a Jim Henson show would look like today. It plays on



LISA ROSE / Nick Jr.

Actor Elijah Wood stars in Monday's premiere of "Yo Gabba Gabba" and teaches kids a dance.

multiple levels."

The problem was, Hollywood wasn't ready for Schultz and Jacobs' vision when they started pitching it around town. The pair had been down this road before. Since 1998, they had been crafting a kids' show based on Jacobs' good-timey band, the Aquabats. They had landed development deals with two major studios, but the show never saw daylight. Plus, meddling studio execs watered down what they were trying to do. They vowed that "Yo Gabba Gabba" would be different.

"Let's do this kids' show, but do it outside the system," said Jacobs, 35, the father of two boys and a girl. "That way we could hold onto our vision a little more."

They wanted to evoke the irreverent spirit of the kids' shows they grew up on. From the "The Banana Splits Adventure Hour" and "H.R. Pufnstuf" of the late 1960s and early 1970s to "Pee-wee's Playhouse," which they saw in their teens, they wanted a mix of live action and animation, with more than a wink to the grown-ups in the room. That explains why Mark Mothersbaugh - an accomplished artist whom Mom and Dad may recognize as the dude from 1980s New Wave band Devo - shows up sans Devo headgear as "Mark" to teach kids how to draw.

"Musically, we approached it not as 'What would be cool to put on a kids' show?' but 'What do kids like to do?' What would they like to listen to?" said Schultz, 36, a father of two boys who directed

skateboarding videos in the 1990s. "So we went for really simplified songs."

And they pulled story ideas from their own parenting. When Schultz couldn't persuade his son to eat the healthier offerings on his plate, he told him that there was a party in his tummy and the green beans wanted to go to it. Thus was born the song "Party in My Tummy," set to a minimalist beat as sticky as the New Wave classic from Trio, "Da Da Da." It is in Monday's episode:

*There's a party in my tummy!
(So yummy! So yummy!)
Carrots in my tummy!
(Party-Party!)*

Got a child who is a biter? So did Schultz. A forthcoming episode features the song "Don't Bite Your Friends."

With this spirit in mind, they rustled up \$120,000 from friends, family, their credit cards and their house equities to put together two pilot episodes. They dutifully sent the shows to the usual Hollywood suspects - and heard nothing.

They wondered why. Was the music too hip for the room? Was it the African American host? Was it a little too trippy? "We understood this was different, maybe a little too out there for them," Schultz said. "This wasn't a guy with a beard playing an acoustic guitar."

Then they released portions of the show online. The highly trafficked blog Boing! Boing!, among others, noticed it, and within a week more than 1 million people had

seen it. Then their phone started ringing.

"A bunch of studios called and said, 'This is great. Can you send me a tape?' And we already had," Jacobs said.

Ten people - including the director of "Napoleon Dynamite" - sent video links to Brown Johnson, who leads development and production for Nickelodeon's preschool properties, like "Blue's Clues" and "Dora the Explorer." She immediately understood what makes the show special - and it wasn't just the music.

"How many hip-hop alphabet shows have I been pitched? A lot," Johnson said rhetorically. "The great thing about this show is that it's not self-conscious. It's not arch. It's not too-cool-for-school."

Johnson turned the pair onto Wildbrain in San Francisco, which not only could

handle the animation portions but could also bring the show in on time and on budget - it produces the animated kids' show "Higglytown Heroes." And given its experience distributing cool toys for adults and kids through its subsidiary company, Kidrobot, Wildbrain understood the merchandising market as well. Rivkin said all the major toy companies "wanted to be part of this," and various "Yo Gabba Gabba" properties will be flooding stores this fall.

As buzz spread, snagging guest stars became easy. Monday's pilot features Elijah Wood teaching kids a dance. How they'd get Frodo Baggins from "Lord of the Rings"? Producer Justin Lyons saw him at an Aquabats show and gave him a tape. Wood called the next day to sign up.

Not only did he do the shoot at far below his going rate, but he also hung around the set all day. The reason may be simple.

"It's cooler to have fun and be a kid," Schultz said. "I mean who wouldn't still want to be a kid? I'd love to be able to take a nap and sleep all day."

Naps may be tough for kids after a half hour of grooving to "Yo Gabba Gabba." But this show may - like "Pee-wee's Playhouse" and "H.R. Pufnstuf" before it - become a buzz show for adults who may not even have children.

"I don't necessarily want stoned parents watching this," Rivkin said. "But there is a cool factor here."

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