

Dancing with the Monsters

Nick Jr.'s new preschool show *Yo Gabba Gabba!* features goofy monsters, catchy songs, psychedelic toons and some very cool indie bands (for the sake of the poor parents). by Claire Webb



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Nick Jr. turns up the volume on preschool educational programming with a brand-new, magazine format show reminiscent of *Sesame Street*, with hipster musical acts and bright animation. The new Nickelodeon show, from producer W!LDBRAIN and co-edited by Christian Jacobs and Scott Schultz of *The Magic Store*, hits the airwaves this month with musically focused entertainment that is sure to turn heads with its interactive and colorful style.

At the start of each piece, an orange-clad host DJ Lance Rock (a.k.a. Lance Robertson) bursts onto the screen, grabs his boom box and says the magic words, "Yo Gabba Gabba!" The screen then transforms with an array of color as friendly monsters—Muno, Foofa, Brobee, Toodee and Plex the robot—emerge from the stereo and entertain their young audience with pop beats and skits. The show incorporates original pop music, dancing, real children, animation and guest appearances from the likes of Elijah Wood, Biz Markie, The Shins, and Tony Hawk.

The two men who created the show are as multifaceted as segments of the show itself. Christian Jacobs and Scott Schultz began their careers in the music industry with their respec-

tive bands, *The Aquabats* and *Majestic*. Yet they felt compelled to put their lyrical use in a TV show once they had children of their own and started to feel nostalgic for the kinds of '60s and '70s-era shows they watched as children themselves.

"We wanted to develop a show that was appropriate for kids but had a different sensibility as far as music and style that were a little closer to our generation," notes Jacobs. Schultz agrees, "There was a music sensibility I thought was lacking. Christian and I are both in bands so we thought we could provide different kinds of music that was a little more..." Jacobs chimes in, "some would say edgier or more progressive." So the two began writing songs with fellow band mates and formulating the core characters for a show that would facilitate both innovation through artistic freedom and preschool appropriate content.

After a couple of years of development, the two posted their trailer on the internet to test the waters of its popularity, and immediately caused a viral phenomena. Charles Rivkin, president and CEO of W!LDBRAIN and exec producer for the show, says the popularity makes it one of the first preschool shows to get a

viral mass audience, which he says was crucial in gaining network attention. And Schultz and Jacobs agree. "I would like to say it was our diabolical plan to launch it on the internet and get a direct hit, but we just wanted to see what people thought of it," Jacobs remarks sarcastically. From there it was only a matter of time before Jacobs and Schultz were teamed with W!LDBRAIN to assist in production and animation and the show was picked up for the Nick Jr. block.

The creators say the majority of the animation is done in Flash and After Effects, dabbling a bit in stop motion, simply because they feel that style lends itself to the graphically changing quality of the programming. "I think it's important to keep things coming that are different and fresh. It think it's the right age for it too since preschool is the age of discovery," Jacobs notes. Taking inspiration from Sid and Marty Krofft classics such as *H.R. Pufnstuf* and the more recent *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, the pair decided to ensure a diversity in their content by producing the live-action sections in-house at their base in Orange County, Calif., and including up-and-coming guest animators (in addition to W!LDBRAIN'S animation production) to create the remaining animation.

"We didn't want them to contribute completely to our vision, meaning we didn't send out storyboards like 'Here is what you have to do.' We would just out a song and match songs to the animators," says Schultz. And there is no shortage of music either since both creators were involved with essentially all the tunes like the healthy eating jingle "Party in My Tummy" and the inclusion of special guests like Biz Markie teaching Beat boxing, among others.

With its colors and wacky delivery, the show is definitely a risk that some may not immediately latch onto as their brand of preschool programming. But Jacobs, Schultz and Brown Johnson, exec VP and creative director of Nickelodeon preschool, all express their belief in the success of the project, and Nick Jr.'s nurturing it, because it's different and innovative entertainment for the usually safe demographic. Johnson proclaims, "It's the weirdest thing I've ever seen on TV, in a good way. *Yo Gabba's* uniqueness what makes it fit in to Nick Jr. and it's kids messaging with fantastical musical beats." It will certainly be fun to check back with the preschoolers who grow up watching the show to see how *Yo Gabba Gabba!* distorts their view of reality in a few years!