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Preschool and really cool 'Yo Gabba Gabba!' grabs grownups

By Joanna Weiss
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(Globe Staff / Pat Greenhouse)

Daniel de Lara, a junior at Emerson College, doesn't usually watch TV meant for preschoolers. But he's hooked on "Yo Gabba Gabba!," a Nickelodeon show that features music from such indie-rock bands as the Shins, retro graphics in the style of '80s video games, and a tie-in with a line of hipster toys.

"Yo Gabba Gabba! is ill," de Lara recently posted on his blog.

He's not the only non-preschooler to discover the kid-network hit. Brad Searles, 38, an Allston drummer and local music blogger, can't wait until his seven-month-old son is old enough to watch - and in the meantime, tunes in anyway. "We watch it under the guise of 'research,'" he said.

In the competitive world of preschool TV, appealing to parents has become a widespread goal. But "Yo Gabba Gabba!," which premiered on Nickelodeon's "Nick Jr." programming block last August, is something different and potentially more valuable: a show with enough cool-guy credibility to cross into the mainstream.

Nickelodeon tracks Nielsen ratings only for children, and those are strong. "Yo Gabba Gabba!" draws 683,000 2-to-5-year-olds per week - not enough to eclipse the cable channel's "SpongeBob SquarePants" or "Dora the Explorer," but enough to win its 11:30 weekday time slot among children of that age.

Producers know the show has older fans, as well. Sales have soared for adult-targeted "Yo Gabba" T-shirts and figurines produced by Kidrobot, an upscale merchandiser with hipster credibility. And some 20.1 million clips from the show have been streamed from the Nick.com website.

While it's unclear who's doing the downloading, "I have a strong suspicion that it's not your 3-year-old," said Charles Rivkin, president and CEO of WILDBRAIN, which produces the show and owns Kidrobot.

No, it's far more likely to be someone like de Lara, 20, who heard about the show through a colleague at campus radio station WERS-FM. Or like Dan Goldberg, 34, who works at the Newbury Comics store in Newton and discovered the show when a friend e-mailed a clip of rapper Biz Markie teaching children how to mimic the sound of a beatbox. He has recorded every episode and bought a collection of "Yo Gabba Gabba!" vinyl figurines.

"There's no doubt in my mind that I'm watching a children's show, but it's a really interesting one, you know?" he said. "They kind of take it to a different level."

The "Yo Gabba" creators, 36-year-old childhood friends Christian Jacobs and Scott Schultz, said they

didn't make their show with hipsters in mind. They were aiming for something they could watch with their own children. So they created a bright, low-budget world in which a set of toys - a red cyclops, a yellow robot, a blue cat - come alive and learn lessons through song and dance. (The songs have such titles as "Please Don't Throw Things at Friends.")

"It's really a hybrid of so many shows, from 'The Electric Company' to 'Pee-wee's Playhouse' to 'H. R. Pufnstuf' to 'Sesame Street' . . . all the things we really loved watching as kids," Jacobs said. "We definitely wear our influences on our sleeve. But we hope that we're not parodying them or ripping them off, but rather paying homage and trying to do something new."

He and Schultz have been steeped in indie culture for years. Jacobs is frontman for the cult band The Aquabats, who perform in skin-tight superhero costumes. Schultz, the singer for the indie-pop band Majestic, cut his teeth directing skateboard and music videos.

Jacobs and Schultz developed "Yo Gabba" on a shoestring, cobbling together money from friends and relatives, painting sets in their backyards. For a host, they tapped Lance Robertson, a gangly non-actor who spun records in Los Angeles clubs under the name DJ Lance Rock and worked by day at a hip Los Angeles record store. They produced a pair of pilots for \$100,000, posted a trailer online, and started spreading the word.

Brown Johnson, who heads creative development for preschool television at Nickelodeon, said she heard more buzz about the "Yo Gabba" pilot from entertainment-industry types than for any other show she can remember. Among the early fans was Jared Hess, director of the sleeper-hit movie "Napoleon Dynamite."

Greenlighting "Yo Gabba Gabba!" was a leap of faith, Johnson said. But the show's aesthetic quickly attracted a flurry of big-name collaborators.

Mark Mothersbaugh, a famed composer who co-founded the New Wave band Devo, said the request to appear on "Yo Gabba Gabba!" - hosting an art segment, introduced simply as "Mark" - came at a time when he was watching kids' TV with his two daughters.

"It stood out from a lot of the other programming," Mothersbaugh said. And he noted that the show's opening music - a sort of Hawaiian twang - sounds like the riff he wrote decades ago, to introduce the "Pee-wee's Playhouse" theme song.

"Pee-wee," of course, is another kids' show that broke into grown-up culture: "Adult Swim," the Cartoon Network programming block aimed chiefly at young men, once aired episodes of that series at midnight.

Kidrobot targets a similar teen and twentysomething audience. Newbury Comics, which reaches that collegiate crowd, carries some of Kidrobot's "Yo Gabba" products, including \$150 themed hoodies and \$25 figurines.

With a second season guaranteed, the product tie-ins will increase. Rivkin, the show's producer, said "Yo Gabba" has generated 35 licenses so far, for everything from clothes to children's toys. (Newbury Comics will soon carry "Yo Gabba" keychains.) In a joint venture with Sony, Nickelodeon plans to release an album of "Yo Gabba" songs.

Rivkin suspects the merchandise will sell beyond the preschool set. Just the look of the "Yo Gabba" characters, he said, can be a draw. His 14-year-old son recently walked through school in a hoodie that featured Muno, the "Yo Gabba" cyclops who resembles a tall, red pretzel stick. The other children swooned.

Rivkin asked his son if they knew Muno came from the ranks of preschool TV. "He said, 'Of course not. They just think it's cool.' "