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## Charm the Children, Tickle the Parents



STEPHANIE DIANI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Scott Schultz, left, and Christian Jacobs, the creators of “Yo Gabba Gabba!,” at their post-production offices.

By DAVE ITZKOFF

ADULTS who truly want to understand what “Yo Gabba Gabba!” is all about are advised to look beyond its roster of brightly colored characters and its catchy soundtrack of moral lessons set to hip-hop beats and focus on a recurring art segment whose host is a man who gives his name only as Mark.

While toddlers tuning into this new Nickelodeon series will no doubt adore Mark for his shaggy, mad-scientist appearance and his singular ability to render potato bugs with a marker, their parents will likely appreciate him for other reasons. If they can imagine him a few years younger and a few pounds lighter, wearing a yellow jumpsuit and a domelike red hat, they may recognize him as Mark Mothersbaugh, the lead singer of the new-wave band Devo.

In subsequent segments of “Yo Gabba Gabba!” (which has its debut on Nickelodeon’s Nick Jr. programming block and sibling channel Noggin on Aug. 20), children and grown-ups alike can nod their heads to an original song titled “It’s O.K., Try Again” performed by the indie-rock

group the Shins, learn a dance called the Electric Eel from the country music duo Sugarland, or brush up on their beatboxing skills with hip-hop artists like Rahzel and Biz Markie.

Nominally “Yo Gabba Gabba!” is a show that uses cuddly creatures — a cat-dragon hybrid, an adorable cyclops, a flower-thingy — and bouncy music to teach little ones, ages 5 and under, that it’s cool to apologize when they make mistakes and to try foods that they haven’t tasted before.

With its wide-ranging use of hip musical guest stars from the worlds of rock, rap and country music, and a decidedly pop aesthetic, “Yo Gabba Gabba!” is broadcasting a different message to young parents, one that family-friendly musicians like Dan Zanes and Laurie Berkner have previously put forward: that there is children’s entertainment adults can watch repeatedly without wanting to hang themselves with a guitar string.

“That’s the kind of stuff I want to see too, you know,” said Christian Jacobs, 35, a creator of “Yo Gabba Gabba!” “My kids don’t know who the Shins are or why they’re cool, but why can’t we introduce

them to them?”

Mr. Jacobs, an ebullient Southern California native with three small children and a vocabulary that still has room for words like “awesome” and “supercool,” hadn’t written or directed programming for children before, but he is no stranger to the entertainment industry.

As a child actor, his résumé included the “All in the Family” spinoff “Gloria” and the Christian Slater skateboarding movie “Gleaming the Cube.”

And to a small but intensely loyal cadre of music listeners Mr. Jacobs is best known as the frontman for the goofy ska-punk band the Aquabats, in which he dons a spandex costume, draws a curlicue mustache on his face and calls himself the M.C. Bat Commander.

More recently, as Mr. Jacobs and his creative partner, Scott Schultz, 35, crossed over into that decidedly uncool full-time occupation known as parenthood, they were disappointed with the children’s programming they watched, which seemed to lack the freewheeling spirit and nonpatronizing voice of shows they grew up with, like “Sesame Street” and “The Electric Company.”

Why couldn’t they design a show that was entertaining and educational, and populate it not with soporific singing dinosaurs or shrill gargoyles with television sets in their stomachs, but with real-life artists and performers who shared their creative sensibilities?

“In a preschool show it almost doesn’t matter so much for the kids,” said Mr. Schultz, who has two children, with a third expected in November. “It may be an indulgence for us as parents.”

Mr. Jacobs and Mr. Schultz had previously talked their way into a couple of dead-end development deals for a television show that would have been based on the Aquabats, but they didn’t get off the ground. And neither did their pitch for “Yo Gabba Gabba!”

So the pair took the unusual step of producing a pair of pilot episodes independently, financing the project with their own money and funds they borrowed from friends and family. (“We picked a few pockets,” Mr. Jacobs explained. “But they were nearby pockets.”)

Still, “Yo Gabba Gabba!” did not find a home until the pilots began to circulate on the Internet. Eventually, Brown Johnson, the executive vice president and executive creative director of Nickelodeon Pre-



LISA ROSE / Nick Jr.

Elijah Wood in an episode of the children's show, which appears on Nickelodeon's Nick Jr.

school, discovered the show when Jared Hess, the director of "Napoleon Dynamite" and "Nacho Libre," tipped her off to it. As Ms. Johnson recounted in a telephone interview, her reaction to "Yo Gabba Gabba!" was immediate: "Lordy. Nothing else looks like this on television."

At this point the results of adults sharing their tastes with their offspring — or inflicting it on them — can be found in everything from to "modern heirloom" cribs to Motorhead onesies, even if little ones can't take as much pleasure from these items as their parents. But parents say there's much more at stake in choosing the entertainment they make available to their children.

"By the time we're in high school, we're already totally programmed on what we're supposed to like," said Mr. Mothersbaugh, who has been composing music for children since the 80s, when he worked on "Pee-wee's Playhouse." "But with kids, they've still got the potential we've always had as a species. If you're going to try to leave any kind of imprint on our culture, that's the time in someone's life to do it."

Ms. Johnson, who has played a crucial role in developing signature Nick Jr. series like "Blue's Clues" and "Dora the Explorer," said that music — in whatever form it may take — plays a distinctive role in children's television programming, making it "entertainment with added vitamins."

"What may seem outwardly like a segment about beatboxing really has to do with counting and rhythm, and being able to imitate what someone is doing, and fol-

lowing directions," she said. "There's all sorts of hidden agendas there."

The creators of "Yo Gabba Gabba!" have also found that, at least for some artists, performing for children is a draw. Rahzel, for example, accepted the invitation because his own children had been begging him for years to go on Nickelodeon.

Other artists, like James Mercer, the frontman for the Shins, did the show to prove that they could still rock out, responsibly, after having the obligations of parenthood thrust upon them.

"We're all reaching that age, and what are we going to do?" said Mr. Mercer, 36, whose wife recently gave birth to the couple's first child. "Do you actually have a playpen in the back of the tour bus? It just seems impossible now, after what usually goes on back there."

And some musicians hope that an appearance on "Yo Gabba Gabba!" might finally convince their children that what Mommy and Daddy do for a living is actually cool. Kristian Bush, of Sugarland, said he had recently brought his 5-year-old son, Tucker, on tour with him for the first time. "He's been around shows before," Mr. Bush said, "but this was his first time sleeping in a bunk, and waking up the next day in a completely different parking lot."

Still, Mr. Bush lamented that Tucker wasn't responding correctly to his band's lead singer, Jennifer Nettles. "Whenever he hears her voice, he goes, 'Ooh, that's daddy music,'" Mr. Bush said. "And he wants to turn it off."