

Gabba Gabba What?

A new children's show has everyone from preschoolers to hipster dads grooving to the beat. That includes the clown prince of hip-hop, Biz Markie.

By **Jessica Bennett**

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Like most kids her age, 2-year-old Saylor Gillet has a love-hate relationship with veggies. But ever since she and dad, Spencer started watching "Yo Gabba Gabba!," a quirky new children's show, carrots have become a big hit. That's because of a song called "Party in My Tummy," a favorite on the Nick Jr. show, that encourages kids to eat veggies by getting them psyched about the tummy party going on downstairs. "It's a totally hip way to teach kids good things," says Gillet, whose daughter, he says, can't get enough of the show. ("Gabba gabba" is one of her few phrases, as is "it's fun to brush your teeth"—from yet another episode).

It's no shock those tactics work on a 2-year-old. But it is surprising how much Saylor's 28-year-old father—and his twentysomething single friends—are digging the show, too. Despite the almost 700,000 preschool-age kids who make up Gabba's weekly audience, the show's retro animation and hip-hop beats (as well as its title—a reference to '70s punk band the Ramones) have become a cult favorite among Gen X and Y. Its songs created a viral frenzy on YouTube before the show even launched, and blogs are still buzzing about the genius of a show that has the 20s set, well, dancing around like little kids.

The show itself is a cross between "Sesame Street," the Muppets and "Soul Train," mixed up with a little N.W.A. (though with an orange-haired MC host and five costumed "monsters" as its regular characters, its message is a bit tamer). It highlights simple life lessons like sharing, eating healthy and cleaning up that Christian Jacobs and Scott Schultz, the show's creators, say come straight from their own homes. (When Schultz couldn't persuade his 3-year-old to eat his veggies, he told him there was a party in his tummy and that the green beans wanted to go to it. Later, when biting became a problem, the duo put together a tune called "Don't Bite Your Friends." You get the picture.)

"Gabba" also has a star-studded musical lineup that has introduced many a tot to mom and dad's favorite bands—from the Shins to Supernova to the Roots' Rahzel. But it's Biz Markie, hip-hop's clown prince, who's landed himself a breakout role. The Harlem-born rapper and DJ, best know for the goofy 1980s hit, "Just a Friend," is teaching kids how to beatbox—and says "Gabba" has tapped into a newfound passion for children's entertainment. "I really want to be the black Mr. Rogers," says the 43-year-old host of "Biz's Beat of the Day." Biz spoke with NEWSWEEK's **Jessica Bennett** about his role on "Yo Gabba Gabba!," his future as a children's entertainer and his coining of the phrase "Oh, snap!" Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: I can't believe how good you are with kids. Do you have any?

Biz Markie: Nah, but I got a lot of nieces and nephews, and I just love kids.

Why'd you decide to do "Yo Gabba Gabba!," and how'd it come about?

They approached me, and I said, "If it's a kids show, I'm gonna be down for the duration." There's nothing really out there for kids no more. "Dora [the Explorer]" is all good, but we really need to educate these kids, because they're our future. "Yo Gabba Gabba!" is a breath of fresh air.

Do you watch the show?

I watch it sometimes, whenever I get a chance. It's real upbeat and gets kids up and exercising, singing, dancing ... It reminds me of shows like "Sesame Street" from back in the day.

Do you have fun doing it?

Yes, I love doing it.

Does it affect your street cred?

Never.

What do your friends and family say about it?

People say, "Oh I saw the show, it's cool." I would never be a sellout, but you can never be a sellout to kids. Kids is kids!

Tell me about Biz's Beat of the Day. How do you decide what you're going to teach?

The beat of the day is just teaching kids how to do a beatbox. I put some thought into most of them. But the demographic is for little kids, so I don't want to make it too complicated. I want it to be catchy and easy to do.

Do you teach your nieces and nephews to beatbox?

I don't teach 'em, but they pick it up because it's around the house.

Are they good?

They better be good.

What were your favorite kids' shows growing up?

"Zoom," "Electric Company," "Sesame Street." I like Oscar the Grouch.

Does Biz have a future in children's programming?

I really want to be the black Mr. Rogers, that's my goal. I would do everything the same, but with a hip-hop feel to it. [Biz raps *"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood."*]

You're the pioneer of working the turntables with your belly. How'd that happen?

I didn't really invent it, I just made it popular. I used to practice with Cash Money and Jazzy Jeff, and they'd be trying out all kinds of crazy things. I said, "I'm gonna put this in my repertoire."

Did you really coin the phrase "Oh, snap"?

Yes, that was one of my sayings. I was always saying that. Like, "Oh, snap! Guess what I just saw?"

What do you think about the state of hip-hop today, the way much of it has become all gangsta all the time?

I can't knock the rappers today. I just think it should be more individualist in the game. When something comes out now, everybody follows it, they sound the same, dress the same way. When we came out, it wasn't about that, it was different. We were *worried* about sounding like somebody else.

What about hip-hop for kids?

Most music better be positive, it shouldn't be derogatory, no cursing, not even a hint of it. The only bad things I talk about in my songs are picking boogers or sitting on the toilet.

Will you keep doing "Gabba"?

I hope we're on for another season and another season and another season. As long as I got breath in my body, I'll do it.

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