



TELEVISIONARIES

A History of Light, Color, and Truth in kids' TV Programming

By Nevin Martell

Illustrations by Jeffrey Brown

"The most sophisticated people I know--
inside they are all children."
-Jim Henson

When you're a kid, the hours of the day after school and on Saturday mornings are sacred. It's the time when you're allowed to drop everything and embrace the wonder of being young. You hunt for treasure in the backyard, sled down the hill by your house, and build futuristic spaceships out of blocks. You hit the sandlot, practice your free throws, and reenact improbable Hail Mary football passes. Or maybe you plop down in front of the television, where you know you'll find good friends telling great stories that make you laugh, dance, and possibly even learn something.

The best of these kid-centric TV programs manage to impress both young and old audiences with stunning visuals, cutting-edge music, and thought-provoking guest stars while delivering life-changing lessons and real-world values. These shows want to engage, entertain, and educate viewers of all ages in a way that doesn't feel too indulgent or overt. Beginning with *H.R. Pufnstuf* and continuing on to *Fraggle Rock*, *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, and, today, *Yo Gabba Gabba!*, visionary children's television has always had the power to move hearts and change minds. The underlying message of all of these shows is crystal clear: love yourself, love your neighbor, and love the world around you. A simple notion, no doubt, but the creative forces behind these groundbreaking ideas don't ever want their viewers to forget the incredible power of positivity.

When brothers Sid and Marty Krofft debuted *H.R. Pufnstuf* back in 1969, there was nothing like it on television. Combining their hyper-colorful puppets, lo-fi special effects, psychedelic storylines, and live-action hijinks, the series immediately caught the attention of kids, parents, and even The Beatles (who reportedly had reels of new episodes shipped over to England each week). Though the show went off the air in 1972, it spawned a feature film and homages have popped up on modern classics like *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Mr. Show with Bob and David*. The Kroffts went on to create more equally head-spinning material, including *Land of the Lost*, *The Bugaloos*, and *Lidsville*, all of which helped put them at the vanguard of alternative programming for children.

Jim Henson's *Fraggle Rock* was an unexpected turn after his successes on *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show*. Darker and more fantastical, the series tackled complex interpersonal issues

through the daily interactivity of different groups of inhabitants such as Fraggles, Doozers, and Gorgs. And while it ran from 1983 to 1987, *Pee-wee's Playhouse* was also blasting a hole in the pop culture consciousness. Swerving from live-action to puppetry to animation to claymation, Paul Reubens' masterful series managed to appeal equally to audiences of all ages without pandering to anyone.

Taking influence from the legacies of these shows, today Nickelodeon's *Yo Gabba Gabba!* carries on this tradition of entertaining both children and parents at once. A vivid cast of unique characters created out of every color of the rainbow undertakes strange adventures to overcome real-world hurdles. Along the way, they meet up with a dream list of indie-rock icons, including The Flaming Lips, Band of Horses, The Roots, and Devo. The music is really what makes *Yo Gabba Gabba!* stand out from the usual dross that passes for children's television, which typically relies on sickeningly simple ditties that have the power to drive you insane. By exposing young viewers to quality alternatives to mainstream pop artists, shows like *Yo Gabba Gabba!* can turn kids into discerning music fans and help develop their musical tastes for life. Danny Tamberelli, who played Little Pete on Nickelodeon's early '90s series *The Adventures of Pete and Pete*, remembers acting alongside musician guests such as Iggy Pop, Michael Stipe, and LL Cool J on his show. "I was like everyone's little brother, so they'd all keep feeding me mix tapes," Tamberelli says. "I got introduced to so much amazing music because of *Pete and Pete*. It was there I discovered some of my favorite bands of all time."

But for all their quirky content, catchy tunes, and inventive lessons, perhaps the most amazing part about all of these shows is how they unite their creators, collaborators, and audiences across space and time. No matter the viewer's age, location, or even language, the progressive appeal is universal. As *Fraggle Rock* artist Michael Frith says, "If you can change how kids view the world, then you can change how they grow up and how they interact with each other." Here, FILTER speaks with the creators of four transcendent "kids' shows" to explore what makes these programs so uplifting, unforgettable, and undeniably life-changing.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BEN CLARK; ED KRIEGER; TM & © 2006 THE JIM HENSON COMPANY; COURTESY OF MARTY KROFFT



H.R. PUFNSTUF with Show Creators Sid & Marty Krofft

There is no duo that has made more of an impact on children's television than the Krofft brothers. As the creative force behind such groundbreaking, noggin'-twisting shows as H.R. Pufnstuf and Land of the Lost, the Kroffts earned widespread acclaim for their fantastical visions brought to life.

What influenced you as creators?

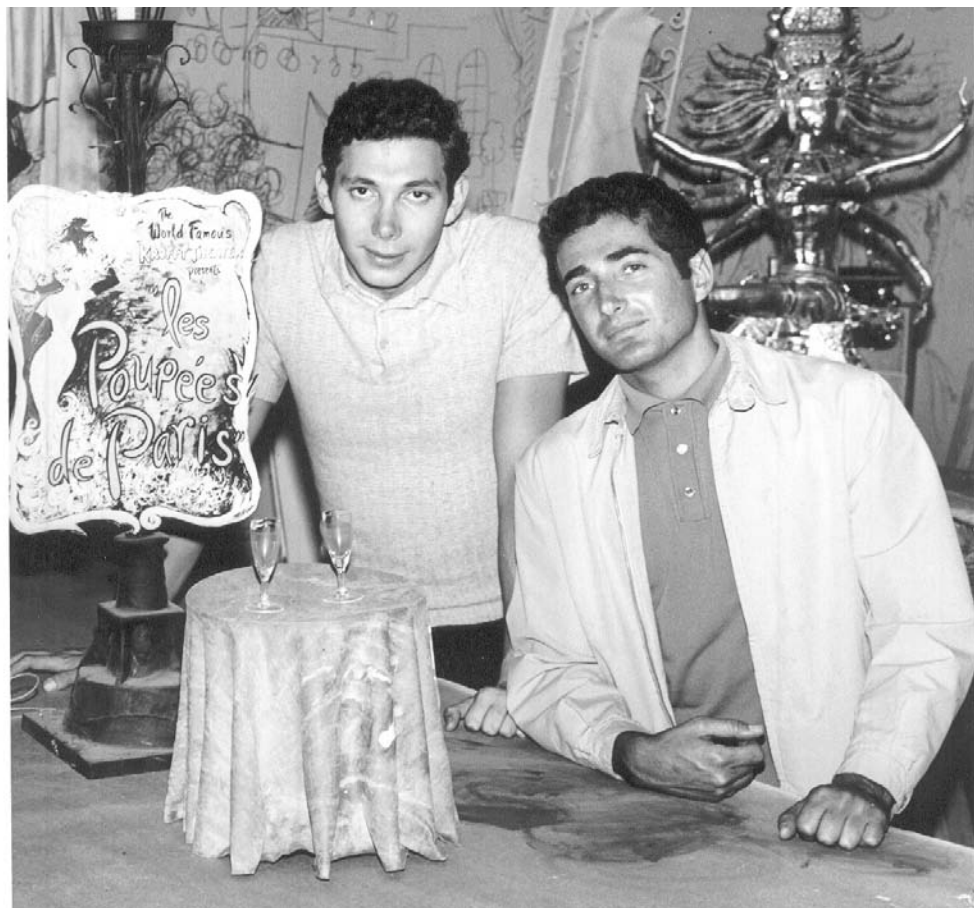
Sid Krofft: Every Saturday, my father used to take me to this vaudeville theatre to see show after show. In 1939, he took me to see *The Wizard of Oz* on opening day at the Majestic Theatre in Providence [Rhode Island]. To this day, that is my favorite movie. It made a huge, huge impression. Then when I was 10, I saw *10,000 B.C.* and I never forgot it. *Swiss Family Robinson* made another big impression. *Land of the Lost* is a combination of those two influences.

Marty Krofft: Kids' movies were never my thing. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Scarface* is where I'm coming from.

How did H.R. Pufnstuf come about?

Marty: NBC came to us because we had done a kids show for Hanna-Barbera called *The Banana Splits Adventure Hour*. We had created the Pufnstuf character for Coca-Cola and they used him at the World's Fair in San Antonio, Texas, in 1968. The character was originally a dragon called Luther.

Sid: That was our first show, and our favorite. When it became such a hit, all three networks would wait each year to see what we would offer them next. We made this beautiful, huge book with all the characters from the shows we were conceiving. We would go into the network and the executives would look at the pictures while I told the story. That's how they bought all the shows after *Pufnstuf*.



COURTESY OF MARTY KROFFT

Over the years, there have been a lot of theories that involve you being stoned out of your gourds when you were creating H.R. Pufnstuf.

Marty: You can't be a producer and be stoned; you end up with gibberish. If we did as many drugs as people said we did, we'd be dead. Chemicals were never my trip. Nothing about work was ever mixed in with anything like that.

Are there any plans to do anything further related to H.R. Pufnstuf?

Marty: Right now we are developing a *Pufnstuf* movie. Sony is the studio and Dennis McNicholas [*Saturday Night Live*, *Land of the Lost*] is writing it. Conrad Vernon is going to direct it, which will make it his first live-action. He's done a couple of small cartoons—*Shrek* and *Monsters vs. Aliens*—so we thought we'd give him a break.



FRAGGLE ROCK with Conceptual Designer Michael Frith

Ask someone if they remember *Fraggle Rock* and they'll probably sing a few lines of the theme song back at you: "Dance your cares away/Worry's for another day/Let the music play/Down at Fraggle Rock." The man who brought that magical place to life was Michael Frith, a talented conceptual artist who also designed the Swedish Chef, Fozzie Bear, and the *Muppet Babies* for Jim Henson.

Jim Henson and I were having a conversation about why *The Muppet Show* turned out to be such an enormous success and he said something that resonated with me: "No matter how cynical the world may become; no matter how sophisticated people may think they are; no matter what a person may seem to be on the outside, inside there is an innocent place that wants to be touched." I really think that was what the work was about. We spoke to that place. We did it with humor, insanity, and characters blowing up and biting each other's heads off. But it was always coming from a good place and in the right spirit, so that resonated with viewers. And the success of *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show* made it possible to do the insane things we did with *Fraggle Rock*.

It all began after *The Muppet Show* folded and Jim was

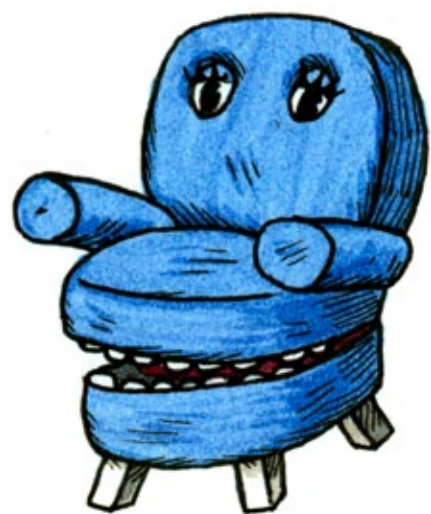


looking around for his next project. In the early '80s, the world was a chaotic place with a lot going on. You looked around and wished you could do something about it. Jim, being the idealist he was, thought he could succeed with the talent, experience, and creativity that we had, and that we could make a difference. If you can change how kids view the world, then you can change how they grow up and how they interact with each other.

The basic premise for *Fraggle Rock* was that it would involve a race of little furry creatures that lived behind the walls of a house and stole things. As I started building upon that notion, I found myself pulling in a lot of influences from my background. I'm a Bermudian and on the island we have these crystal limestone caves that go on and on. And there are these deep, dark pools of water that go drip, drip, drip. *Fraggle Rock* was a mouse hole that grew into this alternate universe of life beneath our feet with endless caverns and creatures that lived there. Not just furry mouse-like things, but things from our imagination. I once said the caves from *Fraggle Rock* were like the imagination itself—it's all just lying there waiting to be explored and the farther we go, the more extraordinary things we discover.

One of the main messages of *Fraggle Rock* was to talk to kids about how they could peacefully coexist in our world, despite the differences in different cultures. A lot of television over the last 10 to 15 years has become about a kind of divisiveness, rather than about healing. It may be a cliché, but kids have to learn that our similarities are much closer than our differences, and our dependencies on each other are much more interesting than what divides us and drives us apart. You don't need to create antitheses in order to create excitement, have a hell of a lot of fun, and tell great stories. In my experience, the more you can show how characters can appreciate each other, the more kids will follow them on a deep level. A lot of producers say the parents have to be divorced in television storylines or the brother and sister have to hate each other and be in constant conflict. My response to that is, "No, that's what kids will be expecting to be the norm and that can be something that shapes their behavior." Why not start from the positive point of view? If there are problems in life, you want to show the kids how to survive them and deal with them themselves. Why begin from the viewpoint that shows how really rotten life can be? I always wanted to accentuate the positive and I find that's what kids always respond to the best.

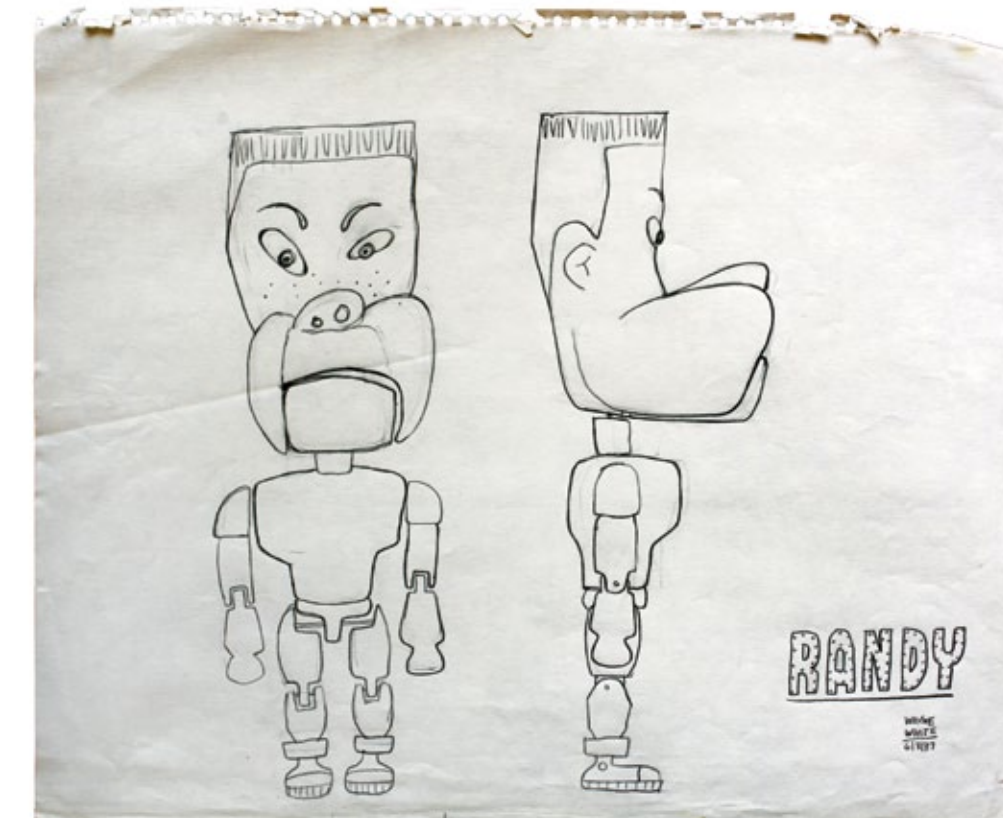
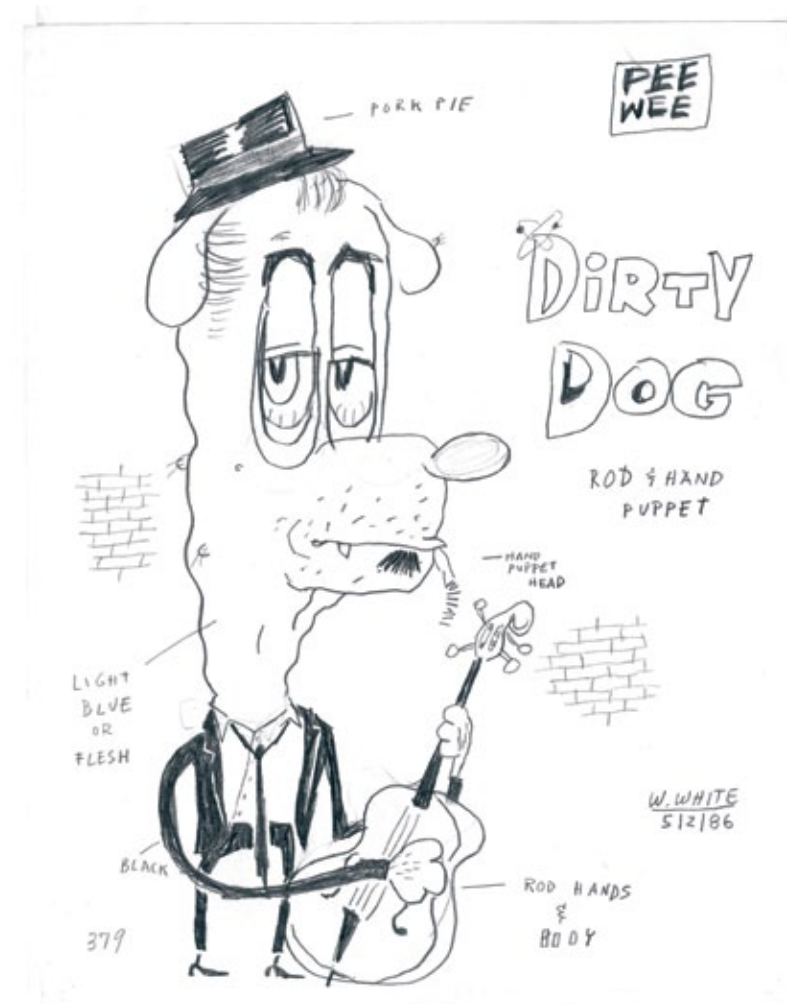
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PEE-WEE'S PLAYHOUSE with Production Designer/ Voice Actor Wayne White



PHOTO AND CONCEPTUAL SKETCHES COURTESY OF WAYNE WHITE



CONCEPTUAL SKETCHES FOR "DIRTY DOG" AND "RANDY" BY WAYNE WHITE
OPPOSITE PAGE: PAUL REUBENS AS PEE-WEE HERMAN WITH "DIRTY DOG" PUPPET AND WHITE

As the designer of the puppets on Pee-wee's Playhouse (and the voice of many of them), Wayne White helped take a streetwise underground comic sensibility and turn it into mainstream success. He went on to art direct Peter Gabriel's seminal "Big Time" music video and The Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight" before turning his talents to painting.

How did you first get involved with *Pee-wee's Playhouse*?

I was living in Manhattan, working as a cartoonist and illustrator, but I had also been doing my own crazy-ass puppet shows, just as a lark. I'd do them at house parties, gallery openings—anywhere anybody would let me. Based on these performances, a friend in Nashville got me a job designing a kids' show called *Mrs.*

Cabobble's Caboose. So I left New York and went to Tennessee for four months and that became my first professional job doing puppets. When I came back to New York in January of '86, I heard that [Paul Reubens as] Pee-wee Herman was going to be doing a kids' show for CBS. So I took my brand-new portfolio over there, showed it to them, and that's how I got the job.

What was the rest of the show's creative team like?

Everybody involved was not your regular Hollywood hack; we were all new to showbiz. We were a bunch of sculptors, painters, cartoonists, and artists who had never done a TV show before. So it really was an art project and that's what gave it its power and its edge.

How did your career as a cartoonist and an illustrator influence your work there?

I was used to sneaking adult realities into a child's medium and the *Playhouse* was really just an underground comic come to life. It was the first time the underground comic sensibility was brought mainstream, so I was totally in my own environment. I was handed crazy stuff to create, and then I handed back even crazier stuff and they liked it. That was what was so great about it—[there was no such thing as] too crazy with that show. Paul was just one of the greatest creative bosses I've ever had. That's been my luck in my career: I've had good bosses. I've had people who let me do what I want to do and that's what every artist is looking for:

somebody in power that lets you do your thing and doesn't give you too much shit about it. I wish I could say I proposed crazy stuff and it was shot down, but I was just hanging on and going along for the ride. I was just trying to keep up with everybody else.

Do you remember your first time meeting Paul Reubens?

I was very surprised when I first met Paul, because he was very low-key, very low-energy. Nothing like his character at all. That's a common Hollywood story, though; it's all an illusion.

What was the highlight for you?

Being hired as a performer on the show was one of the first big thrills. Even though I'd been doing those crazy puppet shows on my own, I didn't have the confidence to think I was worthy of doing it professionally. So when Paul hired me as a performing puppeteer and when I first heard my voice on television, that was a huge thrill. It gave me confidence across the board; it helped my artwork, it helped everything. Getting to meet these heroes of mine—Todd Rundgren, Mark Mothersbaugh of Devo—was also a high point. And to see the impact the show had on the wider culture was incredibly thrilling. We knew it was going to be big, but we weren't quite sure how big. When it started

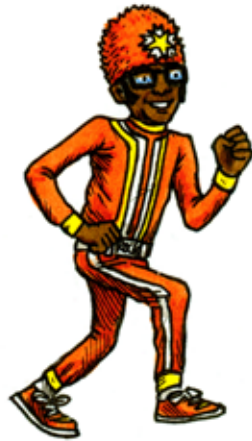
breaking, it was a real life-changer and it opened up all these other doors for me—it still does.

In your mind, what is the show's legacy?

Pee-wee's Playhouse brought the art world into television. I don't think it's ever been repeated, except maybe with Adult Swim. It brought art to television—and not in a pretentious, "Let's visit the museum" kind of way, but in a real, straightforward, "This is how art works" kind of way. It was a downtown New York art project that happened to get on national television. That's why it was so fresh, blew everybody away, and stood alone.

YO GABBA GABBA!

with Show Creators Scott Schultz and Christian Jacobs



There is nothing else on television quite like the joyous and melodic celebration that is Yo Gabba Gabba!. The show's exuberance and cool factor can all be attributed to creators Scott Schultz and Christian Jacobs, two musician fathers who created the show out of their frustration over the shallowness of kids' television. Their kaleidoscopic, music-driven vision for better programming led them to create Yo Gabba Gabba! in 1999. The show didn't take off until it went viral, ultimately landing the pair a deal with Nickelodeon in 2007. Since then, they've helped open young minds with healthy doses of characters such as DJ Lance Rock, Foofa, and Plex, as well as a slew of cooler-than-cool guest spots from the likes of Biz Markie, The Shins, and MGMT.

What kids' shows influenced your creation of Yo Gabba Gabba!?

Scott Schultz: We're super-huge fans of kids' television shows, even the ones we didn't grow up on and bootlegged later in life. For me, it was *The Muppet Show* and *Sesame Street*, both of which ultimately got me wondering about creating something both kids and their parents could watch—something super musical and still funny. Those shows inspired me to make a show that was so colorful that it should be a cartoon, but instead it's live action.

Christian Jacobs: *Fraggle Rock* was amazing because it was punk rock. It was indie. It was Jim Henson going against the grain and saying, "I'm going to make this show about diversity, getting along, and world peace. I'm gonna do it and I don't care what anyone says." That's pretty awesome. Even as a kid, when I watched that show I could feel that there was

something about it that made it stand apart and gave it more heart and emotion. There's real purpose to *Fraggle Rock*.

How do you balance the needs of your young audience with those of your adult viewers?

Jacobs: A lot of people try to project things into the show, especially adults who don't have kids. But the people who have kids get that we are doing something sweet and sincere that's honest, colorful, and fun. We want to keep kids young and for as long as they can be. In a lot of ways, we're still longing to be kids again, because that's the best time—it's the time of discovery. If anything, Scott and I have to rein ourselves in when it comes to some of the creative elements. We have such free rein to do whatever we want to do that we really have to keep checking ourselves and making sure that it's going to translate for the kids and engage them.

Schultz: We don't really want the show to be subversive. We honestly want our kids to watch this and we want to watch it with them. We're just approaching the issues that we, as dads, have to deal with.

Yo Gabba Gabba! has had some phenomenal musical guests over the years. Who has been your favorite?

Schultz: I had an amazing moment with The Flaming Lips, Wayne Coyne in particular. You go to Flaming Lips shows and it's such a feel-good vibe and Wayne seems like a cool guy. But in person he's twice that—he's the awesomest guy ever. He really gave the extra effort to help out on set and make it special. I've kind of become friends with Wayne and he'll send us pictures of



the Lips having 20 DJ Lance Rocks dancing off to the side of the stage at their shows, which just blows my mind.

Jacobs: It's hard to narrow it down to one amazing experience, because there's been an endless stream of them. A childhood dream came true when I was directing Devo. We have themes on set and it was Pirate Day, so the whole crew was dressed like pirates. And there I was directing Devo in their energy domes in front of light boxes like it was the *Freedom of Choice* era.

Do you have moments where you forget you're at a job?

Jacobs: It's funny because you'll be trying to do something incredibly serious and everyone's dressed up like vampires. It's weird, but it keeps a really great energy on the set. A couple times a week, I'll just stop and take a step back from what we're doing and think, "How did we get here?" This is seriously the greatest job ever and it's almost criminal that we're getting away with it.

There's such exuberance to your show. How important is that optimism?

Jacobs: It's ironic that we come from punk and hip-hop backgrounds where there have been such dark periods, but we love championing the positive. When you have a family, you don't even care about yourself anymore. You put yourself away and you're totally focused on nurturing your child and helping them become better than you in this world. Both Scott and I gravitate towards more positive things. We need more champions of light, color, and truth. We want to be a part of the positivity in this world.



THIS PAGE: BEN CLARK; OPPOSITE: NICK JR.

THE FLAMING LIPS PERFORM "I CAN BE A FROG" ON THE GABBA SET
OPPOSITE PAGE: JACOBS, DJ LANCE ROCK, AND SCHULTZ WITH THE GABBA GANG



TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE SATELLITE HEART

Wayne Coyne on Yo Gabba Gabba! and the power of simple truths

Flaming Lips frontman Wayne Coyne has the distinction of having appeared on not one, but two classic children's television programs: Yo Gabba Gabba! and Pancake Mountain. Plus, he wrote a song for The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie. No doubt your eight-year-old nephew thinks Wayne is just as cool as you do.

The *Yo Gabba Gabba!* set is such a wonderful place because it looks great and everyone there is so into it, which makes all the difference in the world. Sometimes you'll see fantastical things somewhere, but when you are exposed to the behind-the-scenes, you'll find a bitter bunch of people who hate what they're doing. But with *Yo Gabba Gabba!*, we got the feeling that everyone loved

what they did. I don't want it to seem like it's a bunch of hippies on ecstasy; it's just a reminder that working hard doesn't have to be a miserable experience. I like to do things with people who give a shit and when the *Yo Gabba Gabba!* folks show you around and show you all the things that they make and all the weirdos that are involved—and how much care is put into it—you really want to be a part of it, because you know they care.

[On *Yo Gabba Gabba!*] We did a song called "I Can Be a Frog." I sing that "I can be a frog," "I can be a bear," and "I can be a bat." But it's not meant to be a children's song; it's talking about a woman who can take on all the characteristics of these dynamic creatures. We got to pick our own costumes and be absurd, all of which can be embarrassing for a rock group, but the *Yo Gabba Gabba!* way of presenting it makes it feel fun and cool.

Obviously, I normally do very adult things with The Flaming Lips. But we also want to remember the simple things, like being kind to animals, liking your friends, and embracing that people are all different. Those may sound like stupid and simple-minded lessons, but they're not. I don't try to be optimistic; it just comes out eventually because of the way I am. We're all drawn to that sense of believing that things are gonna work out. Maybe it's contrived to have a message that says these simple things, but also says, "Come on, there are challenges. And there's not a right or wrong answer." The people who make *Yo Gabba Gabba!* are like that. They remind us to ask ourselves, "Why do we have to stop believing in these good things, because we all know the world is full of death and horrible, evil people?" All these things can remain true. One doesn't negate the other, and that's the good news. **F**