

VARIETY

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'Gabba' grabs tots... and celebs



Ben Clark / Nick Jr.

Melora Hardin of "The Office" is among the celebs set to appear in the second season of Nick Jr.'s popular kids series "Yo Gabba Gabba."

By MICHAEL SCHNEIDER

Deep inside a massive warehouse off the busy 60 freeway in Industry, Calif., the hippest show ever to hit the juice-box demo is winding down its three-month, season-two shoot.

Grabbing a microphone to amplify his voice inside the massive, converted stage that once housed a dairy plant, "Yo Gabba Gabba" co-creator Christian Jacobs is helping guide host D.J. Lance through a song about an art show.

Lance, who has replaced his trademark fuzzy orange hat with a beret for the scene, is encouraging the "Gabba" characters -- a green monster named Brobee, a cat/dragon named Toodee and a red Cyclops named Muno, among others -- to display their art projects, via song. Toodee's entry isn't, well, all that good, but Lance still cheers her work.

That's the underlying theme of the Nick

Jr. series, from the rapidly expanding Wild-brain shingle: Keep trying, don't give up, play hard, share with others, hugs are fun ... and "don't, don't, don't bite your friends."

The messages aren't that different from Mr. Rogers or "Romper Room" (well, except maybe for that biting one). But the delivery sure is.

"Yo Gabba Gabba" attracted hipster parents and their Ramones T-shirt-wearing offspring last year by mixing life lessons (Brobee scarfs down green beans and sings about the party in his tummy) with indie rock (the Shins, Cornelius), cutting-edge animation and cuddly, off-beat characters -- all set to a dance beat.

Decked out in large Run DMC glasses, a striped jumpsuit and that oversized cap, host Lance begins each episode by opening up a colorful boombox and bringing the show's characters to life. In between songs about sharing and being nice to everyone, segments range from Devo's Mark

Mothersbaugh demonstrating how to draw and rapper Biz Markie demonstrating his beatbox skills.

The brainchild of Jacobs (also known as Aquabats frontman "MC Bat Commander") and Scott Schultz, "Yo Gabba Gabba" was named one of 2007's top 10 new series by Time magazine and has earned Emmy and TV Critics Assn. award noms. Of course the show's campy, frantic antics haven't won over everyone.

"Our goal has been working to really connect with both parents and their kids," Jacobs says. "But my favorite is the one parent out of 10 who finds out what I do -- and you see their face drop, as if to say, 'Oh, you make that show? I want to kill you.'"

But for the generation of Gen X parents raised on "Pee-wee's Playhouse" and Krofft puppets, "Gabba" has also developed a cult following -- and oh yeah, their kids are watching (and humming along) too. The show's even a hit among teens and college-age kids who aren't exactly in the Nick Jr. demo.

At this summer's Comic-Con -- not exactly a popular toddler hangout -- Lance was mobbed by teens and adults.

For season two, set to bow in September, Jacobs and Schultz have attracted a who's who of hip celebs and bands to visit Gabbaland: Jack Black, Andy Samberg, the Roots, MGMT, the Ting Tings and "The Office's" Melora Hardin (who teaches the "Gabba" gang how to conga) stop by.

In a recurring segment, "30 Rock's" Jack McBrayer will offer up a joke of the day, while in one episode, Amy Sedaris plays the tooth fairy.

"We're really trying to outdo season one," Schultz says.

Adds Jacobs, "We went a little crazy this season and had less time to do it in. It's just been a whirlwind, and we're coming up for air. Plus, there's no air conditioning here, so it's like a battle in the desert."

At least it's the most colorful desert ever, complete with a skateboard ramp, empty costumes (is that Muno's extended family sitting over there?) and production assistants wandering around, passing out red velvet cupcakes. Lance is right: Gabbaland is awesome.