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Interview: Don Grady

(interview conducted by Noell Wolfgram Evans)

Don Grady is the example of a child star gone completely right. The former child actor is now an accomplished composer with a long and varied show business career; one which has seen him lend his musical abilities to a number of live action and animated efforts. Among his many animated scores are: the 90's version of Johnny Quest for which he was nominated for an Emmy in 1997, What a Cartoon – Kitchen Cassanova and Globehunters – an animated feature. He also composed the song "Pooh Finds Love Everywhere" (with lyrics provided by Marty Panzer), which will be the new Winnie the Pooh theme song in The Magical World of Pooh.

Mr. Grady's career in show business started where so many others have, at Disney. Don was one of the original Mousketeers, sharing the stage with Bobby, Darlene, Annette, Cubby and the others. From here he moved through various projects before jumping into the national spotlight again in 1960 as Robbie Douglas in the hit sitcom My Three Sons. The show, which starred Fred MacMurray and was on the air from 1960 through 1972, was and remains an immensely popular. During its run, Mr. Grady was able parley his popularity into other acting roles and to opportunities with his great love, music. It's a passion that he has pursued ever since, with some interesting stops on the way. But more on that later.

Recently, Digital Media FX (dFX) had the opportunity to interview Mr. Grady (DG). The conversation was lively and direct. Mr. Grady harbors a distinct interest in music, one that he is happy to share. To set the mood, we first discussed the types of things that he likes to listen to when he doesn't have to be "on."

dFX: Who do you listen to casually?

DG: I'm fortunate enough to be spending most of just about every day listening to my own music. Having children, I'm forced to listen to the trend, which is not all that bad. Casually, I love the silence.

The work of Mr. Grady, while individual and distinctive to each particular project does have certain characteristics, which mark it as his own. Among these is a tendency towards Jazz.

dFX: Who might you say your musical influences are?

DG: Ahmad Jamal. I learned jazz by needle-dropping Jamal. Hovering over a turntable you would attempt to drop the needle on the same section of a phrase, over and over, until the voicings were so imprinted in your mind that you could go to the piano and fish them out. It's become a long lost art.....thank God.

Continuing, Tete Montoliu, Roger Kellaway, Stevie Wonder, Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel, Steely Dan, John Adams. The first film music that got to me was an album by Mark Isham called "Film Music." The biggest influence on me has been Stravinsky. Right Now: I 'm quite partial to John Powell and Christophe Beck.

We talked about how certain composers can affect your overall body of work and how some composers are there for you to turn to when you get in a "situational" pinch. An animated example of this second type might be Raymond Scott for some, but Mr. Grady has some animated musical heroes of his own.

dFX: Is there an animation composer that you particularly admire?

DG: Alan Sylvestri's Roger Rabbit is the best. There's a sort of "minimalism" going on in television animation these days, which is really due to time constraints and deadlines. It goes back to shows like the original Flintstones 2-D paper cutout animation which was developed so they could crank out 5 shows a week.

Today's animators grew up on that and many of them think it's very arty. They've (animators) have kept a sampling of this style and the music has followed suit. For my tastes, I like to flesh things out. Doing a weekly sit-com with a gaggle of 5-second soundbites would be a prison sentence to me.

Mr. Grady has leant his talents to animated offerings both on screen and off. In particular he has composed for a number of live action stage shows based (in one way or another) on popular animated characters. These shows include Universal Studios theme park attractions like: The Flintstones, An American Tail, Fievel Goes West, Beetlejuice's Graveyard Revue, and The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show.

dFX: What differences do you find in approaching a score for live action as opposed to something for animation?

DG: Live action scoring is a much more modular approach, stay liquid, stay malleable, flexible, sometimes it's not easy to get a thematic idea stated because it may be cut off by a green light for the stuntman to jump.

dFX: With such a varied group of projects that you've worked on, how do you choose what to do?

DG: Projects choose me. I have had to decline projects because of time issues but that's about it. If somebody wants me for a score that might require 8 banjos and a didgeridoo duet, I'd do it for the challenge. Right now I'm doing a prison blues score for Cell Dogs. I've been listening to Roy Buchanan, Howlin' Wolf, Stevie Ray Vaughan and loving it. I've been a white boy writing scores for so long, I forgot I had the blues.

One thing that you might expect from someone with a 40+ year career in show business is the ability to adapt to changing mediums, which is something that Mr. Grady excels at. Witness the way that he has taken the DVD world by storm by composing music for menus and the interactive games that appear on some discs. This is music that you may not immediately realize is there but it is a major part of the immersive experience that a DVD can be. Among the DVDs that bare the musical mark of Don Grady are: The Emperor's New Groove, Pocahontas, Recess: School's Out, The Fox and The Hound, Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan, Aristocats, The Book of Pooh, Dumbo, Cinderella II, Return to Neverland, Lilo and Stitch, and A Very Merry Pooh Year.

dFX: What is the challenge in scoring DVDs?

DG: Creating new schemes to loop without being detected! Environmental pieces in 5.1 are an exciting new medium for the composer. And get this! There's no dialogue.

Mr. Grady spoke of his passion for finding new and challenging situations to musically work out of. DVD, for him, was a solution to these needs. In speaking to Mr. Grady, one can sense a deep dedication and understanding of "entertainment composers." This feeling particularly came through when discussing what advice he might offer to someone.

dFX: What advice would you offer to those considering a scoring career?

DG: Try anything else first. If you can't live without doing music, then sell everything and start building a composer's studio. Writing music has to be absolutely necessary to your emotional life. You have to love it, so that after they've raked you over the coals you still want to do more. It's like a secret. (A secret you don't want to tell your employer!) Sometimes I can't believe what I gave up to do this! It was easy becoming famous as an actor. It's more difficult to become un-famous. But slowly I'm succeeding at it.

So that brings us to that stop that was mentioned earlier, the one between Robbie Douglas and animation composer. That stop could really more accurately be described as a ride on the Yellow Balloon. The Yellow Balloon was a 1960's rock and roll band which was formed by Gary Zekley. It's a bit of a convoluted story, but due to some maneuverings, Mr. Zekley had just released a hit record as the Yellow Balloon and now needed a band to fill in the pieces. Although acting on My Three Sons at this time, Mr. Grady was attempting to start up a musical career of his own. Through a mixture of open schedules, who knew who and interests, Mr. Grady and Mr. Zekley soon found themselves as 1/2 of the Yellow Balloon (Mr. Grady was the drummer). In an attempt to add some mystique to the band and allow it to be heard purely for it's musical abilities, Mr. Grady wore a disguise every time the band played. For a while anyway.

dFX: Can you offer a few memories of the Yellow Balloon?

DG: I would work during the week portraying Robbie on "My Three Sons," and on weekends, I would hop on a plane and travel to the city where the band was performing. To keep my identity a secret, I would wear a wig, mustache, shades and a big hat. I was on drums & harmonica, and sang too. One weekend, we were gigging in Denver, onstage for at least two hours. All sweated up while playing my harmonica, the fake mustache fell off. Immediately I was recognized by the fans, who stormed the stage and ripped off my wig.

The jig was up...

The jig is most certainly not up though on Don Grady's composing career. It will be interesting to watch him react and work to the new changes in entertainment mediums as they come along. You can hear Mr. Grady's latest animated endeavors when Disney's The Lion King Special Edition DVD is released in 2003.

<http://www.digitalmediafx.com/Interviews/don-grady.html>