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Old rockers revive careers playing for the pre-teen crowd

Musicians who once stormed the charts have switched to writing for toddlers: Old Macdonald has some hip new rivals



Victoria Segal

Harry Potter, Ratatouille, His Dark Materials, Toy Story ... as Generation X pass on their chromosomes, it's increasingly likely that their cultural tastes are likely to merge with those of their children. Yet while Ramones-logged Babygro's are widely available, when it comes to children's music, mums and dads who remember seeing Nirvana at Reading are still liable to have their spirit broken by endless rotations of The Wheels on the Bus. They aren't happy with If You're Happy and You Know It but they certainly want to stamp their feet at the thought of plush puppets or shrill cartoons singing sickly songs. They want an alternative.

In America credible children's music - or "kindie" as it's known - is already huge. They Might Be Giants and Devo have recorded child-friendly records while Dan Zanes, US star of the nursery set, has enticed anti-Teletubbies Nick Cave and Lou Reed to guest on his records. In Britain Belle and Sebastian and St Etienne have also released CDs targeting the sippy-cup massive. It's music that entertains kids while endearing itself to parents who refuse to believe that the pram in the hall is the enemy of cool.

Who better to provide this soundtrack than people who have actually lived the rock'n'roll dream? Neal Whitmore is a father of two who is half of the kids' music duo Green Means Go. With his musical partner Caroline Chan, a mother of three, the pair specialise in music the whole family can enjoy. In the Eighties, however, Whitmore was Neal X, the guitarist with the fishnet-decked electro-punks Sique Sique Sputnik, best known for their phallicentric hit Love Missile F1-11. "When my pop career ended I didn't know what to do," Whitmore explains, drinking coffee in Chan's North London kitchen, his hair still more exuberant than that of most 47-year-old dads. "Music is my first love and the idea of going to work in an office was total anathema, so doing something in music is totally enjoyable." He met Chan while taking his son to her children's singing group and suggested they collaborate. Three years later, they have released two surprisingly sophisticated records, A Day at the Seaside and A Day at the Zoo via their website, www.greenmeansgo.co.uk, and are currently working on a third farm-based opus.

The US entertainer Mr Ray toured with Meat Loaf and played in Bruce Springsteen's favourite New Jersey bar band before agreeing to play some songs at a nursery school where his wife was working. From there sprung television appearances, DVDs and three albums, including Family Ride. "I always had this rapport with kids," explains the guitarist formerly known as Ray Andersen. "I'm just a stretched-out seven-year-old!" He also

points out the unlikely creative freedom offered away from doctrinaire adult cool. "I have a song called Grandparents Love You - you could never do that in a rock idiom."

The new generation of indie stars also like the way making children's music is an unexpectedly adult pursuit. Whitmore expresses his relief at leaving his twentysomething angst behind. "It's one of the things I enjoy about not having to make records in the grown-up sense. Arctic Monkeys are 20 and they're making records for 20-year-olds. It's not for me any more. I'm a family man!"

The idea you have to grow up to get down with the kids is echoed by Jason Ringenberg, father of two tweenage daughters and the frontman of the Eighties country-punks Jason and the Scorchers. His "identical twin" is Farmer Jason, whose releases A Day at the Farm and Rockin' in the Forest push "ecology, being kind to animals and the importance of hard work". He comes down from mending the roof of his barn for this interview.

"Everything in my career I've always worked real hard at," he says. "I've struggled through the stuff all musicians go through but this has frankly been real easy. Especially because I've played in clubs most of my life, late at night, to mostly male punters."

Even bands still experiencing the cutting edge have embraced the potential of the children's market thanks to the Washington-based cable-access television show Pancake Mountain. This boundary-breaking idea bounced from the head of film-maker and producer Scott Stuckey. Each show is a mad "dance party" for the over-fives featuring live bands and a goat puppet called Rufus Leaking. It's an approach that has lured such unlikely acts as Arcade Fire, Bright Eyes and Deerhoof, with others queueing to appear.

For those who made a career out of rebelling, dealing with kids is oddly familiar. "I don't see much difference between a five-year-old and a drunk 35-year-old," laughs Ringenberg. "They behave in the same way and you need to handle them the same! Seriously, though, with an adult audience you can sometimes relax a bit: if you lose a roomful of six-year-olds, you've got real problems. They don't have any preconceived notions, like there's a stage that they're not meant to be on. They wander off with my harmonica."

Whitmore agrees that there's little difference between audiences who drink beer and those who drink juice. "I imagine the Camden Barfly on a Friday night is somewhat calmer than a load of toddlers falling over each other and screaming."

Yesterday's wild young things ultimately become today's responsible parents, however, and Whitmore is aware that many of the parents watching are aware of his lurid-haired, love-rocking past. "A lot of them know and think it's really cool and funny. I just think it's great to do both. If I was an actor it wouldn't matter. Look at Derek Jacobi on In the Night Garden."

Ringenberg also sees his past and present happily reconciled. "In the early days it was 'Hey, old Scorchers fans, I have a kids' record out!' but now it's 'Who were Jason and the Scorchers?' The bigger Farmer Jason gets the more skeletons will come out of the closet - the Scorchers were not boy scouts! But parents nowadays are relatively forgiving."

There are, as Stuckey says, accusations that "kindie" is merely smug parents trying to force their children to be cool. In his enthusiastic view, however, it's more an investment for the future, an insurance policy, a public service. Persuade kids to listen to decent tunes in their formative years and "There will be better music for all of us in the long run."

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