

## Return to Pancake Mountain

By Roger Moore, May 24th, 2007

### Part One: International Sheep of Mystery



With a style that veers between downright rude and merely impudent, Rufus Leaking isn't your usual music reporter. He began an interview with funk legend **George Clinton** by introducing him as the "42nd President of the United States," and spent most of the time asking him where he thought he could park the Mothership in downtown Washington, D.C. He virtually forced **Wayne Coyne** of the Flaming Lips to join him in a karaoke version of Starship's "We Built This City," even though neither of them actually knew how the song went. He gave members of Cypress Hill an impromptu anatomy quiz, compared singing actress Juliette Lewis to Corey Feldman, and **confused Bright Eyes' Conor Oberst with Frank Sinatra** (Bright Eyes, Blue Eyes, whatever). Yet musicians have clamored for a chance to appear on his obscure, low budget television show, whose roster of visiting talent could give the Lollapalooza, Coachella and Roskilde festivals a run for their money.

Who is this man? Actually, Rufus Leaking is a puppet with an identity crisis. Self-described on his website as an "international sheep of mystery," he's sometimes described in media accounts as a goat puppet. Whatever his barnyard origins, he's the host of a wonderful Washington, D.C.-based children's television show called **Pancake Mountain**, presently on hiatus while its creator, film producer **Scott Stuckey** (grandson of the **roadside snack empire's** founders) revamps its format and tries to expand its reach. Previous episodes are **available on DVD**. Let's hope Stuckey succeeds, because at its best, Pancake Mountain celebrates the simple pleasures of making a joyful noise, or at least a tremendous racket. In one of the inaugural episodes, D.C. punk pioneer Ian Mackaye used the show to introduce **the Evens**, his pop-savvy duo with former Warmers drummer Amy Farina. The Evens' "**Vowel Movement**," a charming ode to "six important letters," makes you wonder what might have been if **Fugazi** and Minor Threat had smiled a bit and performed in matching jumpsuits.

### Part Two: Of Mice and Moose

Pancake Mountain features cute and sometimes edgy sketch comedy, with an underachieving cast of regulars (including the badly misnamed Captain Perfect, Billy the Screaming Kid, and a clueless advice guru named Joey), and musical guests in unusual situations. You might see **Bob Mould** in the role of a corporate stooge, **Built to Spill** refusing to hawk a fictitious brand of sugared cereal, or rude banter with a very surly Henry Rollins, who introduces himself on a **promotional clip as "TV's Punky Brewster."** But the show's signature moments come in its riotous and literally all-ages dance parties. Refreshingly absent from these are any attempts to dumb down the music for the pint-sized audience.



Some of the show's inspired performances have come from rock acts that have a kid-friendly sense of whimsy, including **Shonen Knife's** time-worn Japanese Ramones tribute, "**Twist Barbie**," and my four-year old daughter Amelia's undisputed favorite, a silly and amazing **Fiery Furnaces** ditty called "**Mouse House**,

**Moose Hoose**" that with any justice ought to inspire the biggest dance craze of the Zeroes. But more surprisingly, the show seems to have an energizing effect on performers not usually known for their childlike antics. Freed from the burden of being the anthem-makers of their generation and flanked by a gaggle of tiny percussionists, members of the **Arcade Fire** used their Pancake Mountain performance to take "Wake Up" to **soaring new heights**. On another episode, roots heartthrob **Jenny Lewis**, who apparently doesn't own any long dresses, channeled her inner Dusty Springfield to harmonize with the **Watson Twins** on what has to be one of the sultriest performances ever captured for an audience averaging under four feet tall.

Moments like these are right in line with Pancake Mountain's mission statement. As the show's website explains, Pancake Mountain "aims to bring back what got us **passionate about music**. We want to be able to tear down the barriers that make music pretentious and boring...We like to have fun, we love new music, and we need an excuse to act really silly and call it our job." Given the show's location, Pancake Mountain also provides a great showcase for D.C.'s own musical intelligentsia. Fugazi drummer Brendan Canty composed Pancake Mountain's vaguely Esquivel-like **theme music**. Episodes have included D.C. Go-Go funk band **Uncalled 4**, as well as **Ted Leo** serenading a Harry Potter lookalike with a **hilarious falsetto version** of "The Wheels on the Bus" before getting down to his well-chiseled melodic punk on "Little Dawn."

### Part Three: Rock Against Kid Rock

Pancake Mountain is far from alone in attempting to provide a fresh slant on music aimed for children. Former Del Fuegos leader **Dan Zanes**, They Might Be Giants, and a retooled kid version of **Devo** have become mainstays of the children's music market in recent years (children, apparently, have as many uncontrollable urges as adults). Even the **Mekons'** iconoclastic Jon Langford fronts his own children's band, the **Wee Hairy Beasties**, which also includes fellow Mekon Sally Timms. Popular parents' music blogs—notably, **The Lovely Mrs. Davis Tells You What to Think** and **Zoogobble**—provide useful information for moms and pops on the range of musical options, and even provide an annual "**Fids and Family**" critics' poll that's consciously modeled on the *Village*

*Voice's* "**Pazz and Jop**" poll. Much more dubiously, there's a virtual cottage industry featuring watered-down "lullabye" versions of parents' favorites ranging from Metallica and the Cure to Radiohead and Coldplay, which seem geared to reassure parents of their own supposed coolness much as the Baby Einstein series reassures parents of their supposed intelligence.



Even in this crowded field, though, there's nothing quite like Pancake Mountain, which delivers its music and loopy sensibility straight up without much worry about whether it's meant for little kids or overgrown ones. Drawing inspiration from the Chicago-based dance show **Chic-a-go-go**, the show has its own spirit and style. In some ways, Pancake Mountain is a throwback to a more freewheeling era of

children's television programming, when shows like the **Banana Splits** and the various projects of Sid and Marty Krofft combined a surreal sense of adventure, respect for the breadth of children's imagination, and pretty good taste in music. (I don't know what Bob Marley was doing on Saturday mornings in the late sixties, but try listening to his "**Buffalo Soldier**" sometime right after the **Banana Splits' theme song**. Oy yoy yoy!) Still, Pancake Mountain's sensibility is also very modern, not some psychedelic nostalgia exercise. Its occasional animations are subtle and affectionate, including a **favorite among dads** (and daddytypes.com) called **Blueberry Boy**, which makes me think of my own son. And while the show mainly has its musical roots in the domestic alternative and punk scenes, it's also open-minded enough to have featured the trans-global beats of **M.I.A.** alongside the likes of X and Deerhoof.

### Part Four: Dance This Mess Around

Pancake Mountain has been around for several years, and I discovered it during what is shaping up as the critical third phase in my development as a musically obsessed father of two small children. In the first phase, when my oldest child was still an infant and therefore unable to tell me her actual preferences, I shamelessly interpreted my own taste as hers, reading vindication into her every twitch and move as I played my favorite music ("Honey, look at the way **Amelia** is moving her nose to the squawky parts in John Coltrane's **Meditations**! I think she's going to play saxophone!") In the second phase, which started when Amelia turned into a very opinionated toddler, I got slapped with the humbling realization that someone like Raffi, a guy who sings unironically about bananaphones and baby belugas and little ducks, knows some things about sparking youthful imagination that I hadn't figured out yet. I started tolerantly listening to "her" music and sometimes even liked it, even though I occasionally wanted to pull out my hair.



The third phase, which is a work in progress in Amelia's fourth year and will probably last the rest of our lives, is a more complicated process of give-and-take. I now take it as a given that I will love some things she really can't stand, and vice versa. We will share the things we love and sometimes passionately disagree. But then there are wonderful moments of synchronicity that make it worth the headaches, where the generations between us fall away and we connect in magical moments of rhythm and rhyme that could, and have, come from just about anywhere.

We've had these moments as Amelia twirled in costume to the climactic moments of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker suite, chanted to the "bow-wow-wow-yippie oh yippie-ay" chorus of George Clinton's "**Atomic Dog**," and waited for the guitars and drums to kick in on the Kinks' "**Animal Farm**." We've had them as Bob Marley told the story of three little birds and **Israel Kamakawiwo'ole** took a worn-out "Wonderful World" sailing over the rainbow. We've had so many of these moments with Beatles songs that Amelia has assigned everyone in our family Beatle names (and for the record, I am John, my wife Paula logically is Paul, Amelia herself is George, and our little drummer boy Matthew is Ringo). We will continue to have these moments with **Serge Gainsbourg's** zany songs, at least until the kids learn French and discover he was a lecherous creep. It's all about timing.

And the best thing about Pancake Mountain so far is that it's providing a terrific opportunity to share moments like these over some of the loudest and oddest music I also happen to passionately love. As I was at the computer early this morning thinking about how to conclude this piece, Amelia climbed into my lap and started requesting her favorite clips from Pancake Mountain. "**Mouse Moose! Mouse Moose!**" she shouted until I played the Fiery Furnaces song about five consecutive times. After breakfast, when a neighbor boy dropped by for a little visit, she knew just what to play him. Aping the ridiculous and awesome moves of the Furnaces' Eleanor Friedberger, Amelia twirled around the room, flapping her hands over her head to make the "moose" sign, and uniting herself with generations of Moores who have discovered the foxtrot or jitterbug or twist or pogo at just the right time to matter.

Right then, Amelia's impromptu Pancake Mountain party helped me rediscover what it takes to make me still care about dancing my way through **this mess** we call music. If I ever get to the point where music can't move me enough to make me want to flap my hands over my head, not caring about whether I look ridiculous, it will be time to hang it up and close this site down. Until then, I'm going to agree with **Emma Goldman**, who famously said that "if I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."