

On TV's 'Pancake Mountain,' Hot Bands Playing With Hip Tots

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Standing onstage in a near-empty 9:30 club on a winter's day, the members of the Arcade Fire, one of the hottest indie-rock bands of the moment, are tuning up, preparing to do Scott Stuckey a favor. Later that night the Canadian group will play for a packed house, but right now they are waiting patiently as an increasingly frazzled Stuckey herds a group of children and their parents onto the stage. The band members look on, slightly bemused, while Stuckey readies the kids, ages 3 to 11, to play along with the band.

After equipping the tykes with tambourines, maracas and drumsticks, he shouts last-minute orders to a crew of volunteers preparing to film the Arcade Fire performing a couple of songs with the children dancing alongside them.

"Do the kids have earplugs?" asks the band's sound woman. "It's gonna be loud."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, they've got 'em," Stuckey replies. "The kids are ready. Are you ready, kids? Let's hear it for Arcade Fire! Okay, okay, that was good. Now let's try it again."

It's just one more frantic moment for the creator of "Pancake Mountain," a thoroughly offbeat cable-access kids' show that might even be more fun for adults. A sort of slapstick "Sesame Street" that combines "Pee-wee's Playhouse" silliness with the inspired lunacy of "Monty Python's Flying Circus," the program also boasts an ultra-hip and ever-expanding musical guest list.

Produced in Washington, the show is a collection of bits and skits that are mostly funny and occasionally flat-out bizarre. For filmmaker and producer Stuckey, "Pancake Mountain" is a response to what he views as dumbed-down children's programming made toxic by an overdose of advertising and product placement. If his low-budget half-hour show can entertain kids without marketing to them, then Stuckey, the 40-year-old father of two teenage girls, will consider it a success.

He also relishes having a local show. A show whose stars are from around the way, like the go-go band UnCalled4, WTOP reporter Neil Augenstein and a slew of neighborhood kids and actors. Stuckey loves the idea that viewers might bump into one of the characters from "Pancake Mountain." "I mean, there's no way a kid walking down the street is gonna see Barney or the Wiggles, right?" he says.

Though the program can be seen only sporadically on DCTV (Starpower Channels 10 and 11 and Comcast Channels 5 and 6) or by purchasing DVDs from the show's Web site, PancakeMountain.com, Stuckey hopes it is intriguing enough for a larger outlet to take a chance on it. The impressive roster of musicians might be one way to help it do so.

With a growing popularity on the Internet and mentions on CNN and in Entertainment Weekly and Spin magazines, the show has increasingly become a playpen for bands looking to do something out of the ordinary. With just six episodes completed since its launch in November 2003, it already boasts appearances by the Fiery Furnaces, George Clinton, Scissor Sisters, Anti-Flag, Steel Pulse, Henry Rollins, Thievery Corporation and Bob Mould.

In one episode, Fugazi singer Ian MacKaye, wearing a jumpsuit no less, deadpans his way through "Vowel Movement," a charming, not to mention educational, song and video he created for the show with Amy Farina from their new band, the Evens. Fugazi drummer Brendan Canty wrote the "Pancake Mountain" theme song (the show actually took its name from the song) and appears with his kids in the title sequence. In another episode, Olivia Newton-John's "Have You Never Been Mellow?" is sung by singer-songwriter Vic Chesnutt, who slows it down to an impossibly sad warble. Other bands are now asking to perform on "Pancake Mountain" -- rather surprising, since Nielsen doesn't have a share number low enough to measure its audience and the bands aren't paid a cent.

"No one we have asked to do it has turned us down," says the exuberant Stuckey as he walks through the Glover Park offices of his Monkey Boy Studios, where, in addition to "Pancake Mountain," he produces advertisements and public-service videos. "How unbelievable is that? Bands are writing us and trying to get on the show."

The show's hip credentials and off-kilter comedy are reasons bands cite for wanting to take part. "They sent us a video and we thought it was cool," said the Arcade Fire's singer, Win Butler, following the 9:30 club taping.

One of "Pancake Mountain's" favorite recurring characters is Rufus Leaking, a goat puppet-celebrity journalist who has interviewed everyone from funk-music pioneer Clinton and punk-rock veteran Rollins to former presidential candidate John B. Anderson. At last year's HFStival, Leaking interviewed two clearly perplexed members of the rock-rap group Cypress Hill about their biggest hit, "Insane in the Brain."

"Uh, yes, I have a question for you," said Leaking. "What is my membrane, and how do I know that it's actually insane?"

"Artists are performing on Letterman and Conan O'Brien in New York City, then heading to D.C. to be interviewed by a puppet named Rufus," says Carla Parisi, an independent New York publicist who works with artists like singer-songwriter Nellie McKay and indie rockers Shonen Knife, who just taped a "Pancake Mountain" appearance. "The day there are no more media outlets featuring puppets and dance parties with children is the day I quit public relations." Rufus isn't the show's only star. There's also Billy the Screaming Kid (a kid named Billy who screams), and Timmy, a man-child whose lip-syncing is far worse than Ashlee Simpson's. There's also a neighborhood wise guy, Joey, who is actually neighborhood funny guy Joey Filosa. Filosa moved to Washington from his native Brooklyn 25 years ago and manages an Italian restaurant in Glover Park. In his recurring skit, "Ask Joey," he plays a spectacularly unhelpful answer man. When one toddler poses a question to him about clouds, he responds, "First of all, kid, I can barely understand a word you're saying."

Even Stuckey's father, Bill Stuckey, a former congressman from Georgia, has found a role on the show, as a boardroom heavy looking to make a few bucks selling cheesy "Pancake Mountain" souvenirs to the show's fans. "We're dealing with kids," he says in one scene, holding a cigar. "Nobody ever went broke underestimating the gullibility of kids."

Education -- actually learning things -- is not a "Pancake Mountain" priority. Or if it is, it's only in the silliest sense. In one skit, a German scientist -- okay, a guy in a lab coat with a bad German accent -- arrives at the answer to the central question that has plagued humanity for centuries: "How much vood vould a voodchuck chuck if a voodchuck could chuck vood?" His answer? "Seven." Hard to argue with that.

If Stuckey is the driving force behind "Pancake Mountain," he is quick to

acknowledge the volunteers, all friends of his, who contribute to the program. They are the graphic designers, camera people, writers and performers who make the show happen. "Almost everyone I know now who is working on this show, I've known for the past 20 years," he says.

Stuckey received his first camera when he was 8 and he's been making movies ever since: independent films, videos, commercials. He has also worked producing music with artists like Chesnutt and R.E.M. All along, though, Stuckey was looking for a project that would tap the creativity of the people around him and explore his fondness for the surreal and silly.

A story from his childhood:

Stuckey's grandparents founded the legendary Stuckey's restaurant chain that once dominated East Coast interstates. But when Lady Bird Johnson was first lady, she began the "Keep America Beautiful" campaign, part of which included the removal of highway billboards. That threatened the Stuckey's empire, and so Scott's mother took him across the street from the White House wearing a miniature Stuckey's billboard that read:

"Oh, Daddy, to your billboards I'm true, But Lady Bird has me all in a stew.

"Keeping America Beautiful sure is wise, But we all need to advertise.

"Can't I have my candy and eat it, too?"

Stuckey says his mother now worries this may have scarred her young son for life.

The show that inspires him the most is a Chicago-based cable access show called "Chic a Go Go." It is a plotless, skitless dance show for kids and adults. It seems to have no point at all. And Stuckey loves that. He writes fan e-mails to the show saying how great it is. No one writes back.

But perhaps more than "Chic a Go Go," his model is Andy Warhol's celebrated Factory in New York. Stuckey offers the comparison and then quickly downplays

it, worried that it sounds pretentious. But the idea clearly guides him.

"I love the Factory kind of environment," he says. "Everyone who was hanging out in the scene was trading ideas and sharing. I'd like to have some little kind of version of that here. Everywhere else it is so guarded, but here the scene is small and people seem very open. Artists sharing ideas is what makes it so special."

But wait, what about the kids? Isn't this show supposed to be for the kids? What do they care about Warhol's Factory?

Rest assured, there is plenty for the kids, especially the live dance parties, a huge draw for parents who are eager to bring their children to jump around to the music. Parents are alerted to the parties and music-video shoots by announcements on the show's Web site and a growing e-mail list.

Nikeesha Webb, who works for the Metropolitan Police Department, has brought her 11-year-old son, Kaliah Chapman, to all of the show's dance parties.

"It's a nice program for kids," she says. "It opens their ears to all different kinds of music. Other shows aren't that diverse."

"The Barney-type shows kind of wig me out and I think they wig out kids, too," says Matt Lawrence of the District, who brought his 3-year-old twin daughters, Lucy and Emma, to the Arcade Fire taping. "I'm more into the kids getting together with other kids and dancing to some good rock-and-roll."

Sales of DVDs are keeping "Pancake Mountain" afloat, but Stuckey wants to take his little-kid show big-time. Whether that will ever happen is another question altogether. The show will soon be available on public access channels in Seattle, Austin and San Francisco, and Stuckey says he has been talking to national cable channels as well.

So far none of the networks has called to offer a Saturday morning time slot. But then, maybe this isn't a Saturday morning kind of show after all. J-R Soldano, a graphic designer on Pancake Mountain and the voice of Rufus, wonders if an early-morning spot -- a very-early-morning spot -- might not be a better fit.

"Our ideal audience," he says, "just might be the post-David Letterman drunk twenty-somethings coming home from the bar."

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