INTERVIEW WITH JOE MURRAY
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MODERATED BY KELLY LAKE

Joe Murray (b. 1961) is an animator and producer best known as the creator of *Rocko's Modern Life* (1993-1996) on Nickelodeon and Camp Lazlo (2005-2008) on Cartoon Network.

KL: Can we start by discussing your background and education? Back to when you were first interested in art?

JM: Well, my interest in art goes way back, to when I was four or five. I was drawing exaggerated drawings even back then. I think I've told the story before; my kindergarten teacher was surprised when my mother wasn't as well-endowed as I drew her because everything was always cartoony. So I started drawing when I was about five, but I was always a fan of cartoons and Walt Disney. That was the '60s and Disney and Disneyland and all the greats of Saturday morning cartoons were in the '60s. But I really wanted to be a comic strip artist more than anything, and comic strips were huge back in the '60s. It was like you were a rock star if you were a comic artist. So that's really what I started moving toward, and so I started sending cartoons to newspapers when I was about ten and by the time I was twelve, I decided to publish my own newspaper because no one was publishing my cartoons. So I made my own newspaper (laughs) and I sold it at school for a nickel. And I got some advertisers, too. And so I went along on this thing of being a cartoonist and I got a scholarship to an art college when I was fourteen and I went there for the summers and I got a job when I was sixteen doing caricatures at an amusement park. That was my first job. And then the advertising agency that handled the amusement park saw my work and hired me for the advertising agency to do cartoons for car ads and Wendy's ads and things like that. So I was more professional when I was fairly young, it was very nice. But it was when I was in high

school that I started looking into animation a lot more seriously. Ralph Bakshi had come out with *Wizards* and I remember I was really into it. And I started looking at all the alternative animation and the independent animation and I talked my art teacher into giving me this old storage space in the back that I could use as a studio and I talked some friends into helping me do some animation, but it never went anywhere. I think we finished three seconds of film before we graduated (laughs). But still, comic strips were where I wanted to be, so I kept trying to get syndicated with my comic strips and I would send them off and I would get rejected. But they were nice rejections. They weren't form letters, at least. And then one editor sent me a letter and said he thought I was trying to do too much with the comic and it was so limiting and they were starting to shrink, so he asked if I had tried animation because my stories were too big. And I was really pissed off and I said, "No." Actually, he called me on the phone to tell me that, which was really encouraging. But oh—back up a little bit. I opened my own studio when I was 21 doing some illustration work. And I started getting some design work as well and I kind of hired some people on, so I had a little business going, doing advertising illustration, newspaper illustration, magazines, whatever. I was in the Bay Area, so it was for whatever companies were buying my stuff. So I said, "This comic strip stuff isn't working out, but I have a good business and I'm happy, and I'm grateful that I can be a working artist and make a living off of it." I'm very happy about that. So, one day, I went to an independent animation festival, and this really sparked something in me. I was really into animation, so I looked into some local community colleges and one of them had an animation class, and I decided to try it out and see how it was. And I just fell in love with it. You talk about lights that go off...but it wasn't in a career sense, a professional sense, it was in a love sense, and an artistic expressions sense. I didn't even expect to make money off of it. I didn't even want to do it. I just wanted to do it. So this little tiny film I made when I was in the class, it was an exercise film, and it turned out pretty well, and my teacher said I should add sound to it. And this was the '80s, so things weren't the way they are now, where nothing is digital. I filmed it in 16mm on typing paper and I thought it was really awful. But so I added sound to it and she sent it to the Student Academy Awards and it won. Do they still have that?

KL: Yeah, I think they do. Is this *My Dog Zero*?

JM: No, this is The Chore.

KL: Oh yeah, that's right.

JM: So that really shocked me. And then it won a Focus Film Award, which is another student film award, then it got picked up for distribution through Spike and Mike and then it got into all these festivals. So I thought, "This could be something interesting here." So I started doing *My Dog Zero*. I took the money I got from that film and bought a video pencil test system, and it was like my teacher because my instruction wasn't that great at the community college, where we were really teaching each other. We would go in and steal—not steal, borrow—equipment from the film department because they had all the money and the animation department didn't have any money. And if we needed a camera stand we would find someone who was donating a camera stand to us, and it was a real ramshackle kind of situation. So I persuaded some other students to help me with *My Dog Zero,* and one of them was Nick Jennings[1], who became my right hand man with his art direction, and he did backgrounds for *My Dog Zero*. And I finished all the animation and I got a grant to paint the film and I couldn't find a decent paint company to do it the way I wanted it done. And this is painting on cels, if you can remember that (laughs). I didn't get that much money for painting the cels, so I took the grant money and I used it to buy food and coffee for students to come and help paint the film on weekends. So for twelve weeks we had a group of students that came there just to be fed and paint on the film. And I was going to give them a copy of the film on video, the cels, and all that. But while I was looking for grants, my accountant was handling the accounting in New York for an executive for Nickelodeon, and he says, "Joe, why don't you send me your film and maybe she can give you some money or something." So I had a pencil test of the film in its entirety and I sent it to this woman. I think her name was Sara Levinson[2]. I didn't hear back for the longest time, and I figured it was whatever, because I sent out a lot of things to try and get some money to finish the film. One day I got a call from Linda Simensky[3], who was in charge of Development at Nickelodeon, and she says, "We really like the film." And I said, "Great! Give me some money." And she said, "No, we're not gonna do that. We can't do anything with this film, but do you have any ideas for a series?" And I'm like, "Oh my God, I really don't," because at that time, TV animation sucked. It had gone way downhill in the '80s; it was awful. And I didn't really want to have anything to do with it, and I said, "Don't you want to do something with my film? I just want money to finish my film, I've been working on it for two years, I really want to finish." But she said, "We're really trying to do something different with the series." I and I said, "My stuff wouldn't be right for kids anyway." And she

[1] Nick Jennings worked as a writer and background painter for *Rocko's Modern Life* and currently works as a writer and art director for *Spongebob Squarepants*.
[2] Sara Levinson, the former president of NFL Properties and MTV Music Television, served as the EVP of New Business, MTV, Nickelodeon & VH1, from 1986-1991.
[3] Linda Simensky, current Vice President of Children's Programming at PBS, was employed in various production and executive roles at Nickelodeon from 1986-1995.

said, “Perfect! That’s good. We want something smart, we want something with edge. I don’t want it to look like anything on TV.” I said, “Let me get back to you,” and I started thinking about it. I talked it over with some of guys, and one of the guys goes, “You know, maybe if they start and they like it and they put it in development, you could just get some money to finish the film because you know it will never go any farther than that.” And I said, “Yeah, I know.” So I didn’t care about whether it sold or not, I didn’t care about whether it was going to be on TV—I never thought it was going to be on TV—and so I came up with Rocko as a concept. I just said to myself, if I could do anything on TV, if they were going to give me a half hour, how would I fill it? And so I did it; I sent it off and I expected to never hear from them again. I thought they would say it was say too strange, but actually she called, and it took a long time...it was like four months or something. And she said, “We want to put Rocko into development.” And so I didn’t know what that meant, but she was going to give me some money and it helped me finish the film, and every step of the way I kept thinking was the last step—it’s not going to go any further. So I wrote some outlines she said, “We like this. Let’s do a storyboard.” Alright, so we did a storyboard. And then she goes, “We’d like to make a pilot out of this,” and I go, “Oh my God, alright,” and so I pulled this producer in from (Colossal) Pictures[4], which was in San Francisco, so he did a budget, and so I took my crew of people and I hired a whole bunch of other animators and we filled up this building in Saratoga and we worked for three or four months on the pilot and we didn’t know what we were doing. It was so funny (laughs), it was crazy. And it was in Saratoga, which is a tiny town near San Jose and about 45 minutes south of San Francisco, and we would work all night and film what we had. We had a camera stand, and we would film it in the morning, and we would drive up to San Francisco without sleeping, watch it in a lab, watch what they developed the day before, make comments on it, come back down, try and sleep a little bit, and then start again. We had actually rented a motel room next door...we rented a room, where we would just kind of go and sleep and take showers. So again, it was another situation where we figured we’d make it and it wasn’t gonna go anywhere. We made some decent money on it, and I took all the money I made on it and put it in the bank because I was going to use it for my next film. I had already started writing my next film. Then it got picked up. It was pretty crazy. And then I was suddenly a television producer...yeah. But the road was kind of...it kind of meandered, but the thing I always stress about how I got there was that everything was done without

[4] (Colossal) Pictures, now defunct, was an entertainment development company that produced content for brands and networks from 1976-1999.

saying "I'm gonna be really successful at this," you know? I'm gonna have fun with it. That's all it was. I just wanna have fun. I don't need to be famous, I don't need to be rich, I just found something that I love, and it just went that way, I suppose because of what I put into it.

KL: And you write about that in your book[5]. And you talk about how animation—you list reasons you should not go into animation. You talk about money, fame, getting a boyfriend or girlfriend I think you mention--

JM: Yeah, definitely (laughs).

KL: And how it should be something that you really want to do. And in today's society, people seem to dismiss that mindset...colleges are starting to be viewed more as trade schools, where you train for something that will get you a job or make you money rather than something you enjoy. You talk about this in reference to animation, but do you feel it applies to other disciplines as well?

JM: Yes. And I'll just say this, because I talk to a lot of students. Usually in school environments, the schools are catering to those who are paying the bills, who are usually parents. Parents want stability for their kids. And I understand; I'm a parent. I know. You can go toward something that you think is going to be stable for you, but at some point down the road, you're going to find out—and there's always a chance you're going to fall in love with it—but there's a good chance you're going to find out it's not right. You climbed the ladder, but you put the ladder against the wrong wall. And I find that with art. All these type of careers, because it's really difficult. Parents don't want to see their kids go through that torment of loving something but not being able to completely make a living off of it. But I know hundreds and hundreds of artists who make a living off of it. But it's mostly because of the time and the passion they put into it. And it takes a lot. And if you're even on the fence about if it's something that you're unsure you want to do—it depends on why you're on the fence—but if you're not sure you're willing to put the work into it, then don't do it. Because the people I know just live, eat, and breathe what they do. And it's good to have a balance too, with relationships. But my mother always said, "You're never going to find a woman you love more than your drawing board." And I think that's kind of true, but I won't say that to my wife (laughs).

[5] *Creating Animated Cartoons with Character: A Guide to Developing and Producing Your Own Series for TV, the Web, and Short Film* (2010, Watson-Guptill Publishers).

KL: You were talking about when you were developing the pilot for *Rocko*, you weren't sure if it was going to go. *Rocko* was the fourth Nicktoon in development—were you cognizant of the other Nicktoons and how they were producing those? *Ren and Stimpy, Doug*, and *Rugrats*?

JM: We were almost at the end of the pilot before they debuted those shows. We didn't have any idea what was coming out.

KL: Okay. That's really interesting.

JM: But I remember when *Ren and Stimpy* came out. Because we were all like, "This is too weird, [we] can't see this on TV..." So we were all kind of going along, not thinking, but when we saw *Ren and Stimpy*, we thought we might have a chance. This [was] really cool stuff. This [was] really good. *Rugrats* and *Doug*, they looked a little different. They were a little soft for us. But I liked that they were looking different and I liked that they were taking chances. It wasn't something you normally saw on Saturday morning TV. In that sense, I liked that they were taking a risk and doing something different. But *Ren and Stimpy*, yeah, that was like a shockwave for the whole community. But The *Simpsons* had come out, I think, a year earlier.

KL: 1989.

JM: Yeah, or a couple years earlier. And that sent a lot of waves through the community for the independents to see something different, risky, edgy...so, there's like this new thing happening that made television look like it could be cool.

KL: And for this interview, we've all watched *Rocko* and you probably go to a lot of interviews where you talk about *Rocko*, but we wanted to focus on your views on how you run your own studio. You're involved in the practice of teaching animation, so we'd like to hear about your pedagogy and how you feel that the practice of teaching at the larger schools like CalArts and UCLA has changed since you were young. Also, what do you feel students are coming out of these programs doing well, and what do they need more work on, in terms of development or practice? Because these guys are in the animation program and it's interesting how UCLA's program is different from somewhere like CalArts. How do you feel these programs are producing animators?

JM: You're not in the program?

KL: I'm actually in the Critical Studies program, but my focus is animation, so I write a lot about animation. But they're[6] both actively involved in the production of animation.

JM: I can tell by their bleary eyes. You can spot animators (laughs).

KL: To simplify that question, what do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the top animation programs?

JM: This has actually been one of the reasons why I started doing the class that I do, and I was only going to do it once, but I realized that there is something lacking. And maybe this goes back to your thing about technical skills and the workforce, but there are a lot of animators who know how to animate incredibly and they know how to—it's the technical aspects of animation and how things move, you know, and with the CG you have to adjust how the computers are modeling and all that. But what I found a lack of was how to breathe life into a character and how to make him come alive. That's what I found was lacking. Because these students would just draw so incredible and they would have these characters that were so amazing but they didn't know what to do with finding a personality for them, how to make them come alive and participate in the story. And I found that really interesting because as you know, the story is it. Really, the characters are it. And the fact that my film was drawn with a felt pen on typing paper, the animation sucked—it wasn't about the animation. I mean, look at *South Park*. There's no animation there, but the writing is good, and the stories are good, and the characters are strong. That's going to be your soul. That's what I'm always talking about with these students. You've got to put the magic hat on it and make it come alive. Find the imperfections, find what are the ticks of that character. What are they afraid of, where did they come from, what turns them on and off. You've got to dial into that, even if you're not using that directly in that story, you know what's making it tick. And as far as a series is concerned, if you're developing a character for a series, it's like you want this character who goes out on stage, and you just sit back and watch and see how it goes. Because you're going to create a story structure, you're going to create conflicts and obstacles, and your character's personality is going to take off and make those stories happen. And that's really what happens in a series. You're not recreating the world everyday. The world is there, and you're finding your place in it. You're

[6] Seung Yoon and George Fleming, UCLA students who were videographers for this interview.

telling the stories of these characters like they're alive. And that's what I find is lacking. I find that there's...you know, they have character departments, but they're more character design departments. And I've actually talked to CalArts about doing a story and character class, and they're like, "We'll think about it." Alright (laughs).

KL: (To George) At UCLA there's the Writing for Animation course. Are there courses specifically designed for developing one particular character or several at a time?

GF: As of right now, I don't think so. The story guy, Bob[7], mentioned to them that he wanted to teach a class where they make a bible and figure out character, and I think that'd be rad. It would be nice if they got that to happen.

JM: Oh yeah.

KL: Do you think the presence of large studios affects it as well? It seems that at least in the program, the students are geared toward being employed by one of these large studios, but they don't think they'll be in a development capacity; they'll just be working in a wrist capacity. So it seems like there's a studio mentality at the schools.

JM: I think there's always a studio mentality in the schools because I mean... it is about establishing a skill, so they are more apt to say, "How are we going to fill up this factory?" But I guess it's a matter of preference of people hiring; how they want to fill those roles. I know people that hire for DreamWorks that like to have story background people. There are story development positions, but there are also storyboarding positions, and they like to have everything all together. It's all about what you have to bring to the table. But I still look at...I don't really trust the studios, you know. I don't. I think it's...it's flimsy. Because I know how they run. I know the people in charge, and I know how fleeting it can be. And there's a little oasis between the sand dunes (laughs) in projects, and sometimes it's a long time. They only hire you for a project usually, and when the project's done, you're looking for your next thing. It's very nomadic. And the salaries have gone down since I was there in the '90s. They've gone down. I was shocked when I did *Lazlo* and they wanted to pay people less than I paid them on *Rocko* and we ended up paying them more after because of my fighting on it, but there's still this thing of...I don't know. It's hard for me to see, as an artist, not developing everything you've got in terms

[7] Robert Skir, Adjunct Faculty, UCLA Animation Workshop.

of animation because of the art form. And now, there's not only independent film, but you've got the web coming on and leveling the playing field, and giving the studios a run for their money, and the studios see it. They know it's coming on. You've got, through technology, the ability to, and a forum to, and a place to do what you do; to create characters and create settings and create a film and put it out there. I just think it's limiting to just develop yourself for a studio situation. Sure, it's great to get a gig here and there, but it's not stable, you know. It's not. And what's stable is to find something...like, I just recently met Arin Hanson, who has a site, Egoraptor[8], and...you know that stuff?

KL: Yeah.

GF: Yes, it's great.

JM: He's good, and he gets millions of hits on his stuff, and he's got 850,000 subscribers or something, and all he does—and he was an animator who couldn't find work in animation—and that's how he started doing these films. And he did a film for Newgrounds and Pokémon and that sort of thing, and then blew up, viral. And this is all he does now. He does two films a month, and he lives off it, and he's very comfortable. He gets ad revenue from his site. And I mean, that's amazing for an animator. And as long as he keeps making those films he's not going to have a studio coming to him saying, "Sorry, we cancelled your show, you're out on the street, thank you very much." He's not. If he wants to keep it going, he can keep it going. If he develops characters that he can merchandise, he owns it. It's not like what I would have to do with *Rocko* and approve inflatable hats that were stupid because I didn't have a say in what they made with Rocko on it or with Lazlo on it. And I mean, I'm not complaining about the fact that I had two shows, I'm grateful for it. But it is something that they can say, "Thank you very much, thank you for coming," and take your character. And I call it putting it on a shelf, because you don't make any more, someone else has it. I'm a big advocate for what the individual can do.

KL: The digital makes it easier for animators to get their work out there. Do you think that the technology has taken away from character development? You talked about how you animated your early characters on paper with a felt pen. Do you think that it's a much different experience developing a character with soul when you develop it digitally?

[8] www.egoraptor.net

JM: No. I mean, it's just the tool. Personally, I do all my work in pencil first, then I scan it into my computer and then I use a Cintiq and do my films that way. I like pencil and paper; I'm kind of old school that way. I actually think that *Lazlo* was one of the last shows that used paper and pencil storyboards. Nobody else is doing that. But no, I don't see any difference. And I love it, how it's available for people to have. I have in my studio an audio recording setup. I've got a mic and Pro Tools and you can do voices. I brought Carlos [Alazraqui][9] into my studio and he was riffing and we were doing fun stuff. You can really go crazy with it and take a lot of chances.

KL: In terms of audio, since you mentioned it...with your two shows, you were able to retain a lot of the same staff that you used from *Rocko* and they came for *Lazlo*, including the voice actors. And something a lot of people talk about in animation is the use of professional voice actors, and you employ a lot of them. Tom Kenny[10], Carlos...what do you feel the professional voice actors bring to the table that an actor can't bring? Like, studios hire Will Smith or someone to voice a character. But your shows are different. What do they bring that a regular actor can't?

JM: There are a lot of professional actors who can do voice work, but it's completely different from live action work. And I don't want to get anybody in trouble, but my good friend who has a very successful show and had to do a feature, he did a feature, and had to hire a very high-level screen actress at the insistence of the studio. And she was not good. And it drove him nuts. But that's part of the beast, you know. In the DreamWorks environment, it's about selling the movie, and getting people to come in, and they come in because they see Jack Black, who I think is a great voice actor, and the thing about it in my case, which you do sometimes get with some of these actors, is that I didn't just want a voice actor, I wanted a comedian. I wanted someone with timing, and improv, and ad-libbing. So Tom Kenny and Carlos had never done a voice gig before, ever. Charlie Adler[11] had. Doug Lawrence[12] had never done voice work. They were all comedians. Doug Lawrence was a comedian and he had done some films. So we did everything on storyboard first and we would transfer the writing to a script but sometimes the script would get thrown out the window and we would just riff. And I recorded differently where I didn't want to be behind glass. I would sit inside the recording booth, inside the stage, and we could just come up with things. And they would go off. And it's also funny because I insisted we record ensemble. Because some people

[9] Carlos Alazraqui, voice of Rocko on *Rocko's Modern Life* and Lazlo on *Camp Lazlo*.
[10] Tom Kenny, best-known as the voice of SpongeBob Squarepants, voiced Heffer Wolfe on *Rocko's Modern Life*.
[11] Charlie Adler voiced various characters on *Rocko's Modern Life*, including Ed & Bev Bighead, Mr. Dupette, and Gladys the Big Hippo Lady.
[12] Doug Lawrence, a writer and director on *Rocko's Modern Life*, also voiced Filburt Turtle.

record whenever someone can come in and they do it by themselves. I wanted them to be together, because they perform for each other. It's like a peer thing; they just want to make each other laugh. So they're really on. We got so much great stuff. It kind of brings them in. My theory with *Rocko* and *Lazlo* was that it's being written all the way down the line; it's not like *Family Guy* where you have the writers write it and then that's the last time anything changes. In my structure, we had a couple writers. We would write a story structure in an outline form, it gets handed to the director, and I would sit in on those, I would story edit, it gets handed to a director or storyboard artists, and they change it, and they mold it, they do with it what they want to do with it, and I'd go in and work with them, too, and we'd find a new direction to tell the story. Then that is transferred to a script, then we go into a voice acting situation, and it still gets moved around. And then it gets moved to an animatic and it's still getting moved around, and I would sometimes draw new scenes when we were sitting in the animatic room. We'd scan them in and throw them in and I'd run downstairs to the recording booth, and Tom might be down there to record a new line or something, and then the animation directors would sometimes add some things. They were plussing it. It was getting plussed and plussed and plussed and the character designers and the prop designers are making signs with little gags on them. And everyone just felt part of the process, and I wanted everyone to be funny. I wanted the color to be funny. The color can actually be funny.

KL: So you just finished talking about voice work on the projects. You kept a lot of those voice actors, but you kept a lot of people who had worked in development, animators, etc. How difficult is that today because the industry is so nomadic? How are you able to retain those same people from your team?

JM: It's really a matter of if they're available. You know, a lot of directors in film like to use the same people over and over again, ad there's usually some kind of loyalty going on, if you had a good time working on a project before, you're gonna want to do it again. So I didn't have any trouble trying to lure people back.

KL: And the networks gave you the freedom to staff up the way you wanted?

JM: Yeah. The thing that I also talk about a lot is that working within a system of the networks and putting yourself in their shoes—how do you make them comfortable with what you're doing? John Kricfalusi[13] obviously didn't make people feel comfortable, but he's brilliant and I love John. But you know, I was a little bit of a loose cannon and pretty rebellious, but I kept the show on

budget and I kept the show on time, because that's when it's like, "Okay, I'll get behind what you're doing, as long as you're not losing money" (laughs). So when it comes down to—and that's why I wanted sole control over the budget, because you can move things around, you can say, "I want money here, but this is a waste of time..." and you'd be surprised how many line producers would fill a pocket that's not necessary. But this is necessary, and I want to spend a little extra money on this over here, and if you're doing it within the confines of your budget, they will usually say, "Okay, just do your thing," and then the show comes out and the ratings are doing well, and there's not much they can say. They'll come down on a show that's off the rails. That's when they start saying, "You're not going to hire this person, you're not gonna do this, that," you know, and that's the last thing I want. But I was also the production company on both of those shows.

KL: That's right, yes. The one thing I forgot to mention when we were talking about voice acting, is that you even did do your own voice work too, for Ralph Bighead on *Rocko*. And those episodes[14] are really self-referential and talk about the animation industry. And I know that in past interviews you've mentioned them as some of your favorite episodes of the series. Others?

JM: Hmmm...

KL: Or you can speak more about that one, too.

JM: (Laughs) No, I love so many of them. I love all the directors. And Steve's[15] shows were always really great...like "Fish and Chumps," because they were just storywise brilliant, always really funny. And Doug Lawrence and Robert Scull[16] did some that were just really crazy, like "Camera Shy," and the wedding ones, too, those are really great. "The Big Answer" and "The Big Question" with Filbert marrying Dr. Hutchison, they were just really strange. And "Who's For Dinner?" was a good one. That was a Mr. Lawrence one. We started doing some stories that really weren't ever done in kids' stuff. Its like, "We don't want to do anything about adoption or killing your offspring," they had something wrong with that; I don't know why. It was funny the things they had a problem with. Doug Lawrence did an episode[17] about Heffer swallowing a chicken bone and dying and going to Hell, but we couldn't say Hell, we had to say "Heck." And there were just weird things...and there were some thing they didn't understand what we were doing, and we just rolled along with that. So I love...what was the one where Mrs. Bighead comes onto *Rocko*—"Leap Frog."

[13] John Kricfalusi, creator of *Ren and Stimpy* and founder of Spumco Studio, was fired from Nickelodeon in 1992.
[14] "I Have No Son!" (1994) and "Wacky Delly" (1996).
[15] Stephen Hillenburg, creator of *SpongeBob Squarepants*, was a writer and artist for *Rocko's Modern Life*.
[16] Robert Scull was a writer and storyboard artist for *Rocko's Modern Life*.

That was funny. That was weird. Again, another situation where parts of it were censored. It wears a badge of honor. Oh, "Zanzibar!" the recycle show, which totally shocked the hell out of me that it would be something. It kind of came up as a joke because Dan and Swampy[18] who went on to do *Phineas and Ferb* and are the creators, they would write songs. They always wanted to do songs. And I kept saying, "No songs," and they would say, "Joe, Joe, just let us write a song," and I would say, "I don't want these guys singing." But we did a show[19] with Filbert as a lounge singer, which turned out kind of funny, but they wrote that song. And so I wanted to do a show around the environment, around recycling. That was always something of mine that had been a pat of the world, but I didn't want to stand on a soapbox and shove it down anyone's throat. And one of the writers says as a joke, "Why don't you do a musical?" because he knows how much I hated it. And one of the reasons I hated songs is because the recordings were a nightmare. Like when we recorded the lounge singer, oh my God, it adds like, three hours to your recording session and you have to get it right. But I thought that might be kind of funny. So we had another show that we were trying to get thorough the network that they didn't want to do, I can't remember which one it was, but they were starting to do The Big Help[20], so I used the show as a bargaining chip. "If you let this one go through"—I wish I could remember which one it was, because they didn't like it at all—"if you let this one go through, I have a musical"—they also loved musicals—"I have a musical about recycling!" And they go, "Oh, we love it!" (Laughs) And I said, "And I'll do it if you let this one go through," and they went, "Approved!" I went running back and I said, "We got it approved, but we have to do the musical." And it turned out really great. I really liked it afterwards. So Swampy and Dan wrote all the songs, and I had the idea of doing the Rex Harrison pile of garbage, he sings like Rex Harrison, like Dr. Doolittle...[In English accent] "He's not really singing, he's just talking in rhythm." So we did that, yeah. And you know what cracks me up is that on YouTube there's all these garage bands doing the "Recycle" song. It's really cool.

KL: Going off of "Zanzibar!" I wanted to ask you about your environmental advocacy. Because you write about it a lot in your blog[21]. In the animation department we always joke about how many trees are killed with all the paper everyone's using, and I wanted to see if you could talk about how you work your ideology into your art and how you feel the animation community can be more involved in those kind of efforts.

[17] Episode "Power Trip/To Heck and Back" (1993).
[18] Dan Povenmire and Jeff "Swampy" Marsh were writers and artists for *Rocko's Modern Life*.
[19] Episode "The Lounge Singer/She's the Toad" (1994).
[20] The Big Help is Nickelodeon's environmental outreach program

J***M:*** Yeah, there's a lot of paper involved in animation. I don't use as much paper, and there's just little things, like when I do my book, I want to make sure it's from sustainable forests, because I had an e-book before and one of the reasons I did that was because I told people "If you print it, put it on recycled paper," and all that. But these are all little things, but I think the big things are these big companies that do these little plastic happy meal toys and the kids stuff. I mean, really, all of this stuff, the mass-producing and consumer-driven stuff—and Steve Hillenburg is an environmentalist, and it just kills him the stuff that's out there. He's out surfing and sees a box of SpongeBob Fruit Roll-ups float by, just garbage. So we're basically just selling all this crap to the kids who are going to have to deal with it when they get older. And it's gonna get worse and worse and worse. And it's really the consumer machine, that's what's really driving a lot of it. And that's really where I really think that more companies can step up to the plate about how things are done. When is enough enough? And that's another reason why—I mean, it's nice to get the paycheck, Steve's not complaining about the paychecks he gets, but he doesn't need all that money, he'll be the first to tell you. But it's just a balance that should be made in entertainment. And there are some entertainment companies that kind of devote themselves to film projects that also have a good message and they're very...but I get it, I don't like stepping up on the soapbox and telling people what to do with their lives, but there's a gentle way of putting these ideas into the atmosphere and saying that this is the way that life can sustain itself. And myth, which is where storytelling derives from, had a lot of stories about how we work together to keep things going and how the earth is something that should be cherished. And I think that's gotten lost, a long time ago. So that's my thing. And if more and more people were independent with their stuff, they would have more of a say on what gets done and how it gests done. It's when they get sold to the big conglomerates that things kind of fall off.

KL: I wanted to ask you about your blog and the way you think the blogosphere has impacted artists and animation. I know that John K. keeps a couple blogs, too. But what do you want to do with it? And how can artists showcase their art using it, or should it be more of a means for writing and ideas?

J***M:*** I think one of the things about blogs is that there's connection between the artists and the one who appreciates the art, who participates in the art, that's what I like to say. Someone who watches is participating. You're in the

[21] www.joemurraystudio.com/blog

JM: Yeah, and you know, I can have some pretty dark moods, and I write about it, and you know, I'm usually a pretty private person, so it's very strange for me to do that, but for some reason, someone writing back and saying, "Yeah I know how that feels, you know, we're all artists, we go through these times, artistically, mentally," whatever. I think that's one of the things about it, is that we can all kind of talk to each other. You'd be surprised--I said something recently about how I don't want to do the blog anymore, and all these people wrote in and said, "No, please don't, I read all the time and it really helps me." But they help me, that's the weird thing. They all put something out there, and they'll give me some encouragement and keep me going, and it's weird and it's nice. And I feel really grateful about that.

KL: And you mentioned Kaboing, and I think it's really cool. It's really great that you have the interaction between the filmmaker and the people watching these videos. And was that funded through Kickstarter, or a variety of funding methods? Because I wanted to ask you about how the different ways technology has enabled animators to raise money for their films, because you talk a lot about animators retaining control over their own creations, so I wanted to see if you could talk about the advantages of doing that, the pitfalls of doing that, and just your perception of it.

JM: Yeah, well there are a lot of these new group funding sites that—Kickstarter is just one of them—and you know, the thing that was difficult with Kaboing was trying to find people that would fund it that didn't want to own everything, that's the big thing. That was always the deal breaker. "We'll give you this money, but we want to own these characters"...so I think I felt like I was hitting a brick wall with it, and again, someone wrote into the blog and said, "Why don't you try Kickstarter?" and I said, "It's worth a try." But what I didn't realize is it became this—everybody rallying around because it was an independent thing, we're sidestepping the gatekeepers, we're all the people who watch this stuff, we want to have something different come out and have a different platform to do it on. And what was funny is that I didn't get very much support from Kickstarter from the industry, even from other animators working in the industry. It was strange. It was all just people who watched, for the most part. And so yeah, I put it out there and I thought I'd give it a try, and I put together a budget, and I thought maybe with the money I put in, maybe if we have just $16,000 we could do a couple more episodes and try and get the thing launched and see what would happen and it would be just an idea

[22] An alternative channel intended to showcase independent animation and foster discourse between artists and viewers. www.kaboingtv.com.

to see how it would go. So I asked for $16,000, and I don't know if you know how it works, but it's kind of like PBS, but there's different funding levels and you get thank you gifts, and the most popular gift was at the $100 level, I would draw you a character and send it to you, so that was the major one, so after we got funded, for days I was drawing characters over and over again. So yeah, we ended up getting $20,000 instead, because it cost $3,000 just to do the thank you gifts. But I ended up putting in a lot of money anyway because it was just...I just wanted them to be really good, so I kept spending money. But as far as a funding vehicle, it works, it's a lot of work, it's not just putting it out there and saying, "Here's my project, give me money." You have to work it, and you might feel like you've burned out your contacts, but what you need is those contacts to send it to their contacts to send it to their contacts. It needs to be a tree. And I didn't know if we were going to go over the top with this or not, but I had one cartoon guy, and he had 5,000 email subscribers and so he waited until payday. I remember, he said, "Man, I'm going to blast this out on payday because that's when everybody gets loose with their money," so he sends it out to 5,000 people at the tail end of it and it went over. But yeah, you kind of find yourself...if you have people getting behind what you're doing as an artist and you want to do something different, people get behind it. They'll get behind it. And you have to offer good thank you gifts (laughs).

KL: There's a lot of people at UCLA who do that. A couple people took films to Sundance this year that used Kickstarter to reach their goals.

JM: That's great. There's a few of them that are doing it.

KL: I don't know of any animators in our department who do that.

GF: I don't think so, but I'm getting pretty tempted myself. It's getting to that point. The equipment is there, but when it gets to stuff we don't have...just working in that studio all day, it's nice to branch out every once in a while.

KL: I guess a final question—unless there were other things you want to talk about—I mean, we didn't cover much because it's a short interview—but you have your own family, and your own kids, and do they show inclinations toward art or being animators? And what kind of programs, animated or otherwise do they watch today, or did you watch with them when they were growing up?

JM: I don't let them watch cartoons.

KL: Really?

JM: (Laughs) You think I'm joking, don't you? Actually, they don't watch very much TV. My oldest, Daisy, is an amazing artist. She's 14, and she's incredible. Her mother is an artist as well, she worked on *Rocko*, that's how I met her, and she has it in her blood, but I think she thinks of animation as a bit too tedious for her. I think she has a little ADD for it and she wants a little bit more. But she's really into fashion. She wants to go to Parsons in New York, so she's already talking about it, trying to prepare me for it. I said, "You should really go to Art Center," (laughs)...but yeah, Parsons. They like *Rocko*; just recently they like *Rocko*. It was funny because I had them in '97 and then again in 2000 with my other daughter, so *Rocko* was still in the video stores on VHS and we used to go into the video store and they would be picking out Dora or something like that, and they'd be like, "Dad this sucks, it's not very funny." And I would say, just wait...But I would actually take it into consideration sometimes. But what I really loved was when we won an Emmy, the second Emmy, I brought my daughter Daisy to the awards, and she got to meet all these actors from *High School Musical* and stuff and she was pretty jazzed about that. Sharpay was pretty big and all that...but our category was toward the end, and when you win, you go backstage. I knew because we had won the year before, and it's this long gauntlet of press and all this other stuff, and you don't come out for a long time, and I started to look around and all I see are TV executives around me, and I'm like, "I'm not leaving my daughter out here" (laughs). So we won and I grabbed her and I brought her onstage with me, and I actually announced, "I brought my daughter out here because I don't trust leaving her with TV executives," and the whole place went up and loved it and was laughing, and Tom Hanks was up front and he was laughing, and I said, "Oh, I made Tom Hanks laugh!" So yeah, she went backstage, and that was like the best, just having a picture of her up onstage with me. That was really cool. But they don't watch a whole lot of cartoons. They tell me what they like, what they don't like. I keep up on things with them. They show me YouTube stuff all the time—"Dad, you gotta see Charlie the Unicorn!" So they have a really great sense of humor, too. Very funny. The other one likes to dance. That's her art.