On staying curious

Mystery Science Theater 3000 creator Joel Hodgson discusses the pleasure of making things, why he sees himself as a designer more than a writer, being fair in collaboration, and his trick for letting ideas emerge.

April 26, 2021 –

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2579 words.

Tags: <u>Design</u>, <u>Comedy</u>, <u>Television</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>, <u>Beginnings</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Inspiration</u>, <u>Success</u>.

You've done *Mystery Science Theater 3000* for over 30 years. Often when people have a long-term project, they can get sick of it or burnt out. Have you ever had those moments? How do you maintain the excitement for doing the project?

MST is very unique to me because it's got all the things I love; even camera effects and puppets and all those things are blended into it. There's always something I'm interested in pursuing, that I'm curious about. I worry when people talk about what they're passionate about. It seems like a trick to ask, "What are you passionate about?" And then I'm going to write that down and then sell you shit. I don't really like to talk like that, but I have to say there's enough pieces of *MST* that I'm curious about and I think when I came back to it, like six years ago, when we brought it back for the first time, I was treating it like, "Oh, *MST* is really flexible. *MST* really keeps moving and I want to do as many looks with it as I can while I'm working with it."

There's this playbook that it can go into the future, if it's meant to. That's kind of my job. We did it at Netflix and, to me, that was kind of the high-end version because it was such a big platform. Some people loved it and some people, in their minds, were going, "Well, we liked it when it was a little bit more sketchy." That's going to happen. We'll go back to that, too.

Is having it pop up in different places was a way to keep it interesting for you? Suppose it had been on the same network the entire time, maybe you'd approach it a different way. I like the idea of the show's concept being a container for all these ideas and you can give it different looks and it's still essentially the same project.

Yeah. There's a fair amount of people that just want to consume riffs, right? "Give me more riffs. Give me riffs …" Whatever reason. That's really fun in itself. It's this ever-changing puzzle that's fascinating and fun to do. Of course, the secret of it is that I'm not doing very much of it myself. It's really about collaborating with a lot of people and being able to make it so that, whatever creative stake is when you're making something, whatever that is, I want that to be available to them. That's when everything is most available to a creative person.

It reminds me of comedy. There's a really fun thing with comedy where people who make it are really careful about how they describe themselves because if you call yourself a comedian, it's just kind of peculiar. I never say that. It makes me uptight. It's kind of like there's this decorum that comics have where they don't refer to themselves as comedians. It's this forbidden language that if you talk like that, you're probably not a comedian. It's weird but I think creativity is a little bit like that, too, where you never want to position yourself as a super creative person, but more of a person who is solving problems and being fair. I mean, being fair is a huge part of what I'm trying to do the whole time.

There are such big fans of the show. Do you ever feel like that alone is a collaboration? I was reading the comments on <u>the new Kickstarter campaign</u> earlier, just seeing people with their thoughts, what they want to see, what they want. Do you take that into consideration too? Or is it too many cooks, if you start thinking about reading the comments?

Most of it's great and there are only a few things that trigger me and it's usually these people that just want to tell me what movies we should riff. They ignore that you have to have a lawyer. They ignore that you have to go to a studio and say, "We want to riff on your movie." We actually do it in reverse, where we don't go into shopping for movies and then talk to lawyers. We find movies that are available and have a big list of them and cruise through those. We know if we invest the time to screen them and look at them and really consider them, there's a pathway to get it. I guess I just never explained it to them.

Now they'll know, which is good. If they read the interview, they'll get how it works.

That's true. I think what's really interesting is we've learned so much doing the Kickstarter, it's really wild. Six years ago, everybody who got involved had a previous experience with *MST* and were long time fans. Now it's like almost half are new people because of what we did in the last six years, the live tours and the shows on Netflix. That's one way of collaborating. It's almost like we have this chance to alert the fan base and go, "Hey, there's a bunch of new people here. How do we want to behave around them? Who are we now? What's happening?" The people who like *MST* are incredibly great people and they're very forgiving and they're amazing in that regard. It goes back to your other question with these different looks, they're always really forgiving. Like, "Yeah. Come on. It's great. Do it. Do your thing. Go for it." That makes it much easier.

Have you ever had a film that you chose and felt like, "We're going to do this" and you start trying to make riffs and it just doesn't work out and you have to admit, "Ok, we're not getting anything funny out of this"?

Yeah. That happened with *Manos: The Hands of Fate*, which is one of our most famous titles. You know, back in the day we didn't even really watch these movies all the way through. At lunch we'd screen them and look at them and kind of go, "Yeah. This looks awesome. Let's do it." But when we finally got *Manos* and really watched it all the way through, I got really concerned.

It was one of those things where I felt like should I say something? I'm in the writers room and I'm going, "Should I acknowledge that this may be an unriffable movie? Should I say that or is that irresponsible as the showrunner?" Or the creator of the show. You know?

After a while, everybody else started to say, "Holy shit. This is tough, man." There's something special about that movie. There are some unique production elements that made it extra strange for people … Have you seen *Manos*?

Yeah

Manos has this real troubling … There's some true horror in that movie that I think is a complete accident based on what I know about the filmmaker. You're sitting there going, "Does this guy know what he's doing? Because this is really creepy. This is truly disturbing." I think that's why *Manos* is so popular. It's almost like … We usually get our sauce on the movie … In that case, *Manos* got its sauce on us. I remember going, "Should we just throw this out? It's so weird and nothing is sticking." We learned a lot from it because it became so popular. It made us reiterate the theme back where we were really acknowledging how bad the movie was and really acknowledging how hard it was. You can forget that part of the premise because you're working so hard to make it funny that it's really good to remind people like, "Wow. This is tough. This is hard. Thanks for coming along on the journey."

You mentioned you have a ist of potential films you can cross off and go through. How do you separate the titles so you know which is which? How do you decide when to use a certain one? Like, "OK, I'm in the mood to collaborate with this one today"?

We're doing that now, and we do it in threes. We just got funded for the first three episodes and so we landed

the first three movies and they have a composite quality to them. It's a composite, it's kind of like making a wine with a bunch of different grapes to get a good wine. You can look at the three together that we just cleared, and that's like the first brace. Then the second brace, we'll do the same thing again. Whatever the atomic weight is of a movie, we're trying to balance it with two other movies, so when they see them like three at a time, they'll all balance out.

You were saying when someone is a comedian they don't want to call themselves a comedian. I know that early on, obviously, you were on the show and you stepped off camera. If you had to label yourself, do you view yourself as a writer or a comedy writer or if you had to tag it somehow?

I'm not really comfortable with that label. I think designer is much better for me. Just that I have to think about how all the pieces flow together. We do a ton of visual development. We just went through a period where we generated hundreds and hundreds of images. We have to start the show immediately, I had to have just this brace of images I could show people instead of describing it. The written word, you just … People get lost. I've never seen two people interpret a document the same way. If a picture is there, it anchors it.

We had to do the entire world of the show remotely. Everybody's going to be at home, everybody is going to have a green screen and a camera ring and monitors and lights. I had to make sure we felt like you could use that and assemble the show and still present the world of the show. It meant we had to break out a few little ideas that could allow us to manage that. We can't think like, "Oh, we're going to go to Raleigh Study in LA, build these sets, and shoot everybody." It got a little bit fractured.

Production design is really important in the context of how the show is made remotely. Those are all the things that I feel obliged to understand and feel comfortable [with] and that's the stuff that's hardest because you have to drag everybody along with you. That's my biggest obligation. The most shameful thing for me would be creating a show that couldn't be made. I take a lot of pride in that I understand how all this stuff is made and realize that we can do it and so whenever somebody paints me as, "He's just frivolous and he just is imaginative and he's going to paint himself off a cliff," I really get offended because I go, "This is a really inexpensive show." Our shows are $350,000 for 90 minutes. It's like, give me some credit here. That's the worst thing you could say to me, "You're unrelated to reality." You know? It makes me cuckoo.

There's one other thing I deliberately brought with me to show you about my creative process and that is I'm one of these cats who just does notebooks, right? I use it every day. I take notes. I do a bunch of drawings and stuff. It's just trying to mess around and solve things. This is how many notebooks I got from COVID, there's like 16 of them from the last year. That's kind of my spring board for ideas. If I feel a need to draw something then that means I feel pretty secure about it and I'm interested in it and so if it remains or if I keep drawing, that's an indicator that I want to do more with it. That's kind of my trick with letting ideas emerge.

Do you save all the notebooks? Do you have all the ones from the past?

Yeah. I got them all. This is 184 so I'm coming up on 200 of them. I started in college. Basically, everything that's in *MST* started out in these notebooks.

It's interesting, the idea of the archive and keeping good archives. When I was a teenager, I made a zine and it was just a cut and paste kind of thing and I was a teenager so I didn't think about it but my mother saved them all and I'm so thankful she did, that I have all of those. Following the path is interesting. Have you ever done a drawing on computers or you like to keep it to the notebooks?

It's really funny. I've done Photoshop for like 20 years. For whatever reason, though, I think because I'm on a laptop and it's kind of like they upgraded Photoshop enough so it's hard for me to use. I do a ton of cut and paste stuff. I do like that aesthetic so I'm trying to keep that intact. For whatever reason, I just like it better, but it's really old-fashioned, man. It's not the way the kids do it.

My wife is an architect and she's always drawing on computers but she's recently gone back to drawing on paper. She said she can feel the space a lot better that way and figure it out. She kept getting a bigger and bigger

screen to try and replicate it. You realize it's a lot easier to just have a huge piece of paper and lay it down on the kitchen table and do it that way. There's something about the laptop, it's very flat and it's very small.

I mean, it is a pursuit of the pleasure of making. You have to do it in a way that pleases you and this is the way that has emerged for me. I guess I'm a bit of a Luddite so I just don't use the computer the way I'm supposed to. Now that I got my shots we're starting to move back into our office, but this has been really great creatively. There's much less time spent going to get lunch and doing all the things you do when you're at an office. It's that thing where it's just different ways of making it and then when I'm done, whoever the next person is, they'll be able to go, "Well, they did it this way and they did it this way and they did it this way. I can borrow things from each of these to make a function right now." It just is good for the audience to accept the change, that change is always going to be a part of it.

Joel Hodgson Recommends:

"Five books I'm looking at right now…"

The Fantasy Worlds of Irwin Allen by Jeff Bond

Move On Up: Chicago Soul Music and Black Cultural Power by Aaron Cohen

The Hard Stuff: Dope, Crime, the MC5, and My Life of Impossibilities by Wayne Kramer

The Passion Economy: The New Rules for Thriving in the Twenty-First Century by Adam Davidson

The Death of Expertise by Tom Nichols.

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<u>Vocation</u>
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