



ALL THE GANG:
THE MUPPETS NOW

KERMIT'S GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Kermit the Frog tells Aimee Knight about his secret for staying young, his advice on how to create harmony – and what being green means today.

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In May this year, the world's most famous frog celebrated the 65th anniversary of his television debut. Sheesh! Time flies when you're having fun, and time's fun when you're having flies. In Kermit's case, it's both.

Since 1955, Kermit the Frog has starred in eight feature films and nine TV series. He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and an honorary doctorate of Amphibious Letters from Southampton College. He's best known for teaching several generations about the healing power of hope. Today, he and his ragtag pals the Muppets await the premiere of their new Disney show *Muppets Now*.

But for all the decades and accolades under his felt, Kermit doesn't look a day over 30 – a marvel he attributes to a “Dorian Green-type situation”. He reckons the secret to ageing well is actually quite simple: soak daily in swamp water, play the banjo to relax and spend lots of time with friends. “Try it,”

he says. “But be forewarned, the swamp water may turn you green.” And you know what they say about bein' green...

Before Kermit was green – and, for that matter, even a frog – he was but a humble, bit-playing lizard on a black-and-white skit show called *Sam and Friends* (1955-61). He then spent the swingin' 60s paying his dues on late-night TV talk shows before growing his signature frill and moving to *Sesame Street* in 69. Mr the Frog really hit the big time when his vaudevillian variety program *The Muppet Show* (1976-81) sent that star soaring, and his celebrity has since been, more or less, evergreen.

But in 2020, Kermit and his troupe are ready to do something new.

Muppets Now is a six-part sitcom in which the gang's bespectacled gofer Scooter rushes to upload hot new Muppet content for the dot com. Like *The Muppet Show* and *Muppets Tonight* (1996-98), it's a show-within-a-show. Each episode features three segments – a game show, a cooking show and a talk show – all of

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them unscripted. As celebrity guests like Seth Rogen, RuPaul and Linda Cardellini improvise with the likes of Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear and Gonzo the Great, hijinks naturally ensue.

“It may be hard to believe,” says Kermit, “but we’ve always worked with a very detailed script before this.” For the Muppets, he says, a screenplay is like a GPS. “We don’t look at it much, but it’s nice to have around in case we get lost. Which happens a lot.

“With *Muppets Now*, we threw caution and the script to the wind. Sure, it’s challenging, finding your way with pages blowing in the wind, but we used our wits, our talents, our experience and a lot of very good editing and strong duct tape to create a new kind of Muppet entertainment,” coming soon to Disney+.

Over the years, Muppets have made magic on screens of all sizes, but this is their first original title for a streaming service. Is it the foam-rubber equivalent of Martin Scorsese’s

The Irishman? Would Kermit, like his contemporary, get hopping mad if he thought folks were watching it on their phones? “I’m not as demanding as [Scorsese],” he says. (He suspects that’s why Marty never moved forward on their project *Raging Bullfrog*.) “You can watch *Muppets Now* anywhere, on any device... But it’s really best when you watch it with friends and family. There’s safety and laughter in numbers.”

And while this is the Muppets’ first streaming show, it’s certainly not the first time Kermit’s worked a stream. “As a tadpole, I started in ponds,” he says. “But as soon as I dropped my tail, I was working streams.” Sources say this is where he first met filmmaker, artist and friend, Jim Henson.

Born in 1936, James Maury Henson was raised in rural Mississippi. There are clear parallels between his early life and that of his amphibian avatar. Both grew up around creeks and swamps, nurturing a fondness for nature, music and quiet contemplation. Both found their calling in film and TV, where each would lead a company of raucous performers, keeping proceedings rolling by treating their teams with respect, understanding and compassion.

Journalists often asked Henson if Kermit was his alter ego, and *The New York Times* once quoted him as saying, “I suppose... But he’s a little snarkier than I am – slightly wise. Kermit says things I hold myself back from saying.” The frog, along with Henson’s other conduits like Rowlf the Dog and Dr Teeth, helped the mostly serene, peaceful puppeteer channel a little trickster energy, especially when paired with creative partner Frank Oz.

With sensational comic timing born of a once-in-a-lifetime bond, Henson and Oz vivified such enduring characters as Ernie and Bert, The Swedish Chef (Jim performing the head and voice while Frank provided the live human hands) and – cue the music – Kermit and Miss Piggy, whose tempestuous romance has spawned news headlines, gossip columns, fan fiction and feature films. In 1984, it culminated in a puppet-studded wedding: the centrepiece of *The Muppets Take Manhattan*. Despite the scene featuring a real-life celebrant, Kermit has always insisted that the ceremony was purely fictional.

Piggy, however, spent the following years convincing her press and public that their wedded bliss was bona fide. Perhaps tiring of the frog’s perennially cold feet, in early May 1990 Piggy announced that she was leaving Kermit, as per her publicity campaign “The Pig of the Nineties”. But the roll-out was paused



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a few days later when the Muppet family was struck by a loss that no-one saw coming.

In the early hours of 16 May, Jim Henson died from complications caused by a bacterial infection. Aged 53, he was survived by five children, hundreds of collaborators, countless fans and one frog left grieving for his absent other half. Kermit’s first public appearance after Henson’s death was in the CBS special *The Muppets Celebrate Jim Henson* (1990). He closed the show, saying, “We’ll be seeing you soon with more Muppet stuff because that’s the way the boss would want it.”

So the Muppets carried on without their founding father, but Henson’s death stalled talks with The Walt Disney Company, which had planned to acquire Jim Henson Productions for US\$150 million. A revised deal came through in 2004 when Disney bought the Muppets, as opposed to Henson’s whole empire, for US\$75 million.

In those initial years after moving to Disney, Kermit and co were uncharacteristically quiet, save for a string of YouTube morsels, including their viral cover of Queen’s ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’. The gang finally returned to the big screen in 2011 with their seventh feature film, *The Muppets*, loved by critics and the public, then *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014).

Then in 2015-16 came an attempt to reinstate the gang as primetime staples, *the muppets*. The mockumentary series saw the characters stray a little too far from their path of childlike innocence, into the PG woods. With unprecedented focus on the Muppets’ personal lives, the sitcom lacked the wholesome whole-family appeal that made *The Muppet Show* appointment viewing, back in the day.

“So far the writers Disney has employed don’t know how to write for the Muppets,” Oz tweeted in 2018. “I imagine their hubris makes them believe they can. But the characters need writing that has depth and honesty.” Oz has not worked with the group since they moved to the House of Mouse.

Given the critical and audience responses to – specifically – the writing on recent projects, it seems an unscripted series like *Muppets Now*, laid literally in the hands of the performers, should see the Muppets put their best feet forward.

Wouldn’t Planet Earth benefit from a wave of Muppet mania right about now?

Back in April, Kermit released a new version of his cherished tune, ‘Rainbow Connection’, recorded live from the swamp where he appeared to be self-isolating. The video soon amassed more than a million

views on YouTube, with many users agreeing that Kermit was the only celebrity they cared to hear from in these tumultuous times.

Kermit’s other anthem, ‘Bein’ Green’, is a similarly poignant song that crystallises his sagely disposition. First performed on *Sesame Street* in 1970, it’s a delicate ode to introspection and self-acceptance. Fifty years on, what does bein’ green mean to the frog today?

“It still means spending each day the colour of leaves,” says Kermit. “But nowadays, it also means being part of a wonderful world where folks are really doing their best to keep the planet green. And that means a lot to me – not just as an amphibian, but as a spokesfrog for all species lower than people on the food chain.”

In this dog-eat-dog world, the Muppets are vectors of empathy and optimism. Of course, the diverse menagerie is prone to flights of fanciful madness, energy and imagination. It’s Kermit’s job to keep that Muppet ecosystem balanced, and he has some words of wisdom for anyone wanting to create harmony amid chaos.

“Stay calm,” he says. “Let everyone have their say. Listen. Then, try to figure out what’s going to make all these different voices and ideas come together. It works for us. And if it works with an odd assemblage of pigs, frogs, bears and whatever, it’ll probably work for you, too.”

We could ask why the Muppets remain relevant today, these felt and glue relics of a pre-CG landscape. Perhaps we should ask why they remain irrelevant today, still speaking to society’s oddballs and eccentrics (or “lovers and dreamers”). Nostalgia nudges us to believe that the grass – or the frog – was once greener, but you know what they say about bein’ green. In this cultural climate, *Muppets Now* is a chance for Kermit and friends to make another generation of free spirits feel seen.

To finish up, *Big Issue* vendor Rachel T from Sydney has a question for Kermit – one that truly distils the Muppets’ emotional purity: how can we help you smile more, like you helped us as kids?

“Just you asking that question made me smile,” says Kermit.

“When I started out, I had a dream of singing, dancing, making people happy and doing it with others who shared that dream. I’ve been able to live that dream for quite a while and it’s all thanks to folks like you.”

The lovers, the dreamers, all of us. ■

MUPPETS NOW PREMIERES 31 JULY ON DISNEY+.