

Education follows the music

'Schoolhouse Rock' creators visit HSHS

BY JOHN V. PENNINGTON
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Three was a magic number Wednesday at Hot Springs High School.

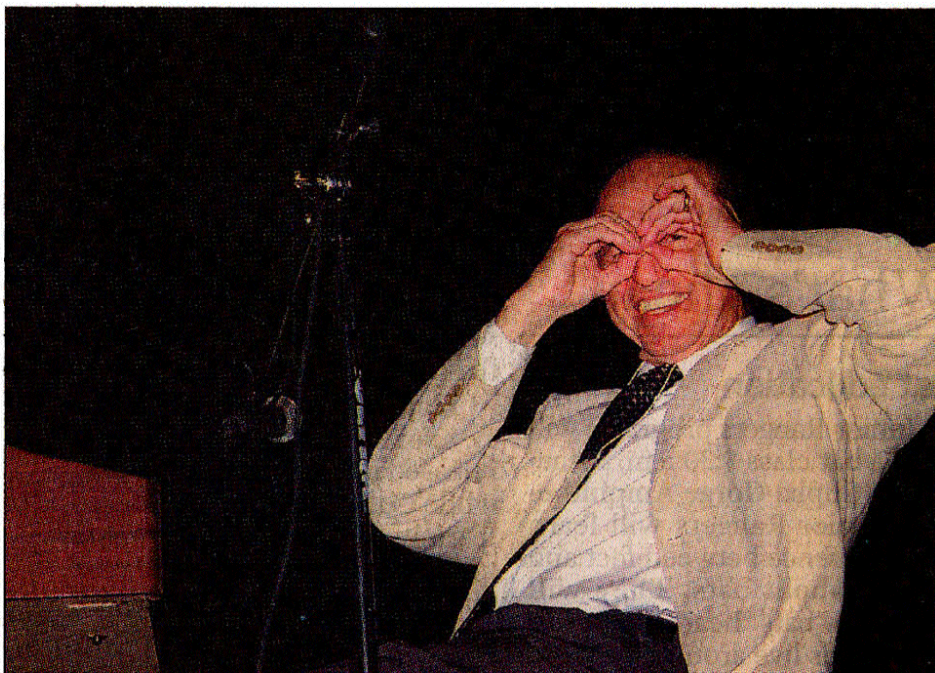
A standing-room only crowd packed the Mackey Theater to hear live renditions of "Schoolhouse Rock" songs such as "Conjunction Junction," "I'm Just a Bill," "Figure Eight," "The Preamble" and "Three is a Magic Number," performed by the series' music director, Bob Dorough.

Dorough was accompanied on the stage by the series' executive producer, George Newall, who brought the series together in 1971, and Odvard Egil Dyrli, emeritus professor of education at the University of Connecticut.

The three men presented the opening session, entitled "Schoolhouse Rock: Lessons Learned for the Web Generation," of the 10th annual Hot Springs Technology Institute.

More than 1,200 educators from across the state listened to the story of how the historic television series was created.

The demand was so intense Wednesday to see the "Schoolhouse Rock" creators that two big screen televisions were set up in the school's



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SCHOOLHOUSE ROCKER Bob Dorough, music director for ABC Television's "Schoolhouse Rock," shows that a figure eight turned on its side represents infinity, after singing "Figure Eight" Wednesday during the Hot Springs Technology Institute.

cafeteria to broadcast their 90-minute session, via closed-circuit, to those who could not fit into the theater, said Hot Springs School District Technology Director Don Benton.

Kicking off the presentation was Dyrli, who was speaking at HSTI for the seventh year. He said it was "a dream come true" to bring the "Schoolhouse Rock" creators to his "favorite conference in the world." Dyrli said that every educator and their students could benefit from "Schoolhouse Rock." A quick scan of the audience found several 20- and 30- somethings who may have grown up watching the series in

cereal-stained "jammies," he said.

Newall, who also is a composer, wrote "Unpack Your Adjectives," "Energy Blues," "Them Not-So-Dry-Bones" and the series' newest song, "I'm Gonna Send Your Vote to College" (explaining the electoral college) for the recent Disney "Schoolhouse Rock" 30th Anniversary Edition DVD.

He said it is astounding how many people thank him for the three-minute cartoons, which ran Saturday and Sunday mornings on ABC, telling him what an important part of their lives "Schoolhouse Rock" became.

The idea for “Schoolhouse Rock” came from the late advertising executive David McCall who noticed that his children “couldn’t remember the multiplication tables, but they could remember all the latest Rolling Stones lyrics,” Newall said.

“So he thought, ‘well gee, if we could make the multiplication tables into lyrics,’ that could work.”

Asked by McCall, chairman of the New York’s McCaffrey & McCall advertising agency, to find someone to make that happen, Newall, who was still playing jazz piano on weekends himself, consulted his friend jazz pianist Billy Taylor (now Dr. Billy Taylor of public television fame). It was Taylor’s bass player, Ben Tucker, who recommended Dorough for the gig.

When he got the news, Dorough said he hit the math books, putting together the series’ first song, “Three is a Magic Number.” “When I got the amazing commission to set the multiplication tables to music, my spine was tingling, but I thought ‘you better do this right,’” he said.

Armed with Dorough’s song and a storyboard drawn by the series’ cartoonist, the late Tom Yohe, it was time to pitch the series to a “wet-behind-the-ears,” 27 year old, Michael Eisner, who was vice president for children’s programming for ABC, Newall said.

With the blessing of animation legend Chuck Jones, the father of Wile E. Coyote, Road Runner and Pepe le Pew, Eisner approved “Schoolhouse Rock” for the airwaves, Newall said.

It was Yohe’s sense of animation design that put the project over the top, he said. “I’d like to give Eisner 100 percent credit, but what Eisner

did after he saw Yohe’s storyboard and heard the song, was turn to Chuck Jones and ask ‘what do you think?’ Jones said ‘buy it, as long as Tom Yohe draws it.’”

The series debuted on the weekend of Jan. 6-7, 1973, with “My Hero Zero,” Elementary My Dear,”

“It helped define a generation. You can go to people of that certain age all over the country and they know all the songs.”

Odvard Egil Dyrli
Emeritus Professor
University of Connecticut

“Three is a Magic Number,” and “The four-legged Zoo.” Newall said he and his “Schoolhouse Rock” collaborators have learned a few things from the series. The cartoons were effective because they were provocative, alliterative, repetitive, and analagous, he said.

The most provocative film in the series was “Little Twelvetoes,” which grew out of Dorough’s fertile “second head,” Newall said. The story was about a spaceman with 12 fingers and toes who counted by 12s instead of 10s. he said.

At first, Eisner was not too keen on the idea, Newall said, thinking it might be too complex for young viewers. But after being reassured by consultants from New York’s Bank Street College of Education that part of learning is being challenged by unconventional ideas, Eisner enthusiastically bought into the idea.

One of the prime examples of the power of alliteration Newall cited was “Conjunction Junction” which Dorough wrote (in addition to all the

multiplication songs). To illustrate, Dorough started singing the song’s first line and stopped suddenly. The crowd continued without him, singing the next line -- “...what’s your function.”

Repetition’s role in the series’ approach to teaching was illustrated with “Lolly, Lolly, Lolly, Get Your Adverbs Here.” Newall pointed out that although its alliteration is not linked directly to the learning proposition, the way “Conjunction Junction” is, “Lolly” is like a memorable cover to a good book you’ve enjoyed. “You know, you see that book and damn, you want to pick that thing up and read it again.”

Lynn Ahrens’ “Nervous System” is a prime example of using an analogy to teach students about science, Newall said. The song compares the spinal cord to a telegraph line, Dyrli said.

The analogies in that song are “so effective” that major medical schools use it to explain the nervous system to pre-med students.

Newall said the fact that “Schoolhouse Rock” was aired on a major television network also increased its effectiveness. “About twenty times more kids learned from Schoolhouse Rock’ than from ‘Sesame Street...’ Mostly because public television just never got the huge audiences we did in those days.”

The institute will feature Jill Hill and Todd Hudson, special agents in the FBI’s Little Rock office, today. They will tell educators how to keep children safe from predators in internet chat rooms. For more information about the conference, log on to the internet at <http://hsprings.dsc.k12.ar.us/hsti>.