

In a certain sense, the story begins with Franz Johnston. Thirty five years ago, maybe more. Like many of his former associates in the Group of Seven, he travelled in the Far North and knew both the cold country's splendour and the fantastic Eskimo legends that it inspired. As he told them to another artist, Adrian Dingle, one of those chilling tales in turn inspired, of all things, a comic book, *Nelvana of The Northern Lights*. One of many Canadian comics, the "Canadian Whites" as they were known, it enjoyed brief popularity during the war years, only to be long since lost and forgotten.

Some thirty years later though, three young film artists, Michael Hirsh, Patrick Loubert and Clive Smith paid tribute to those Canadian Whites. It wasn't the first time that they had worked together, but it was the beginning of a formal association known as (what else?) *Nelvana Limited*. Hirsh recalls that he and Loubert "were looking for things to do and discovered Canadian comic books. They had been done during the Second World War and were the only comic books in our history. There were characters like Johnny Canuck, *Nelvana of The Northern Lights* and *Dixon of the Mounted*. . . . We bought all the rights and wrote a book (with Clive doing the design and illustrations) for Peter Martin Associates, *The Great Canadian Comic Books*. . . . That was the beginning of *Nelvana*. . . . 1971 . . . the book, the film (*The Canadian Comic Books*) and an art show for the National Gallery of Canada (*Traditions in Canadian Comic Art 1941 - 1945*) which toured the country for two years. . . .

Jock Brandis, Michael Hirsh, Rowesa Gordon, Clive Smith and Patrick Loubert – all Nelvana characters

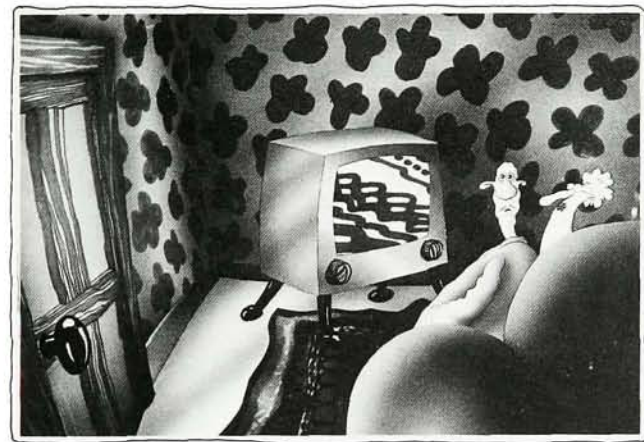
An auspicious debut, to be sure. The book, with *Historical Perspective* by Alan Walker and *Afterword* by Harold Town, isn't simply a timely response to that recent popular wave of nostalgia (nostalgia being the Madison Avenue invention that it is). Rather it is, quite literally, an affectionate *look* at a lamentably short-lived and yet often unique Canadian institution. And no doubt, it would be most effective when read in light of the film or gallery show. Intended or not, there's a lot of humour here (as there is in all of *Nelvana's* work). It's evident both in the comics themselves and in the curious circumstances which allowed them to flourish for a time. And presumably as a direct result of the book and a chapter entitled *The National Gallery of Canadian Heroes*, some of these comic book characters have gone on in various aberrations to star billing in film (Patrick Loubert's feature *125 Rooms of Comfort*) and theatre (Ken Gass' *Factory Lab* production of *Hurray For Johnny Canuck*). Who knows what they've started here?

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It's an unusually ambitious first project and clearly reflects the many resources which Hirsh, Loubert and Smith have each brought to *Nelvana*. They've moved freely in various disciplines of the arts before settling for fame, if not (yet) fortune in the fantastic world of animation.

Admitting that “we’ve done a lot of things along the way” Michael Hirsh speaks of his own early interest in “films that combined animation and live action. Mixed media. Films that were very helter-skelter”. The same interest led him, most often in the company of Pat Loubert and almost as frequently with Peter Dewdney (who’s still an associate, acting as a technician and plasticene animator for Nelvana) through a number of adventures in and out of the film world. He considers their work in plasticene animation, first with Cineplast (for *Sesame Street*) and then with their own company, Laff Arts (for OECA and the CBC) as an apprenticeship of sorts. “It was an easy and inexpensive way to learn the basics of film making, to develop directing and writing skills.” Although Hirsh and Loubert have strayed on occasion and of necessity into radio work (for the CBC) and writing, they’ve always returned to their first inspiration.

Clive Smith’s initial involvement in film had somewhat different motivation. Like many English art students at the time (the mid sixties) he went on the road as a musician with, variously, *The Crazy World of Arthur Brown* and an early version of the *Bonzo Band*, *The New Jungle Orchestra*. “When I got into animation, it was a big accident. I



From “Zounds of Music”

needed some money. I thought animation was just moving packages around (pixillation) and that it would be good for a few months.” Nine months, in fact; a short tantalizing initiation into animation work, followed after a time back on the road, by a persistent invitation in 1967 from Al Guest Animation to come to Toronto for a year. And true to the old story, he has been here ever since, working as an animator and later as a designer, first and briefly with the Guest Group, then Cinera and finally freelance.

The three came into contact, indirect though it was, while Hirsh and Loubert were working with Jack Christie on his experimental feature *Voulez-Vous Couchez Avec God?* over a three year period in the late sixties. Unknown to all, Smith was on the sidelines, quietly offering helpful advice on the matter of the film’s special effects. And when Hirsh, Loubert and Christie subsequently formed Laff Arts, Smith was called in to create designs and characters for their projects. Nelvana was but a step away. Smith remembers: “I was doing work from the outside for them. They were simply another client . . . We were getting into things together, working more and more at the conceptual stage of jobs . . . They were going to break away from Laff Arts . . . So we formed a new company and struggled from there”.

Ah yes, the struggles. Although Hirsh now refers with some affection to the “First One Hundred Days” Smith puts it a little more bluntly: “Anyone with their head screwed on the right way would not have formed a

company without any capital at all. I would never do that now, because you’re going to go under twenty or thirty thousand dollars . . . It’s a much better idea to have the money available, so that you can actually make it work for you, than to go gradually into debt. We’re gradually pulling out of that now.” Loubert summarizes Nelvana’s growth, perhaps seriously perhaps not: “When we first started, we could lose only five thousand a year. Now we can lose twenty.” Apparently in the world of high finance, that’s called progress.

But progress, such as it is, hasn’t come without hardship. They can laugh at the memory now, but Smith admits that “living on thirty a week and forty a week and fifty a week and then sixty a week . . . it’s really crazy”. Affluence has a very definite affect on lifestyle. “You find yourself in situations where you would go to lunch with a client and you would have about two dollars in your pocket. You would end up at some extravagant place and have to fake your way out of the situation. The people you’re with are used to that. They live on a completely different level. And yet at some point you have to meet in order to negotiate and talk on the same level. Invariably, it’s theirs.” Away from clients, life centred around *The Orpheum* in the Bathurst-Queen neighbourhood of downtown Toronto. “There’s a cinema with all the seats broken down. And for seventy-five cents you could see three big features. Right across the street, there’s a restaurant of the same name . . . It was something like sixty cents for a four-course meal. It was a terrific environment, a real atmosphere place. We did a lot of writing there . . . Had to . . . Our first studio, the old Laff Arts building, was about forty degrees in the winter.” However, that has all changed. Presently, Nelvana’s offices are housed in some ten rooms of comfort on the second and third floors of a three story walkup in the King-Spadina area of the city. As for culinary delight and entertainment, “we’ve moved up to the Spadina now . . . And go to the Roxy”.

They’re in the fourth of the “five years at least, that it takes to set up a company like Nelvana”. From the beginning, it has balanced its existence on the projects which are distinctly their own at all stages, on commissioned work and on the services that their experience and resources allow them to offer to others. There have been documentaries, including *Lyle Leffler: Last of the Medicine Men*, *Robert Markle: A Portrait of Woman* and of course *The Canadian Comic Books*. And there are the children’s films. “We’ve done ten of these children’s films, which people really like. But they don’t know what to do with them. They don’t fit into any particular slot . . . They’re all really exciting because they involve children, often in writing and performing . . . Most of them include some animation and some live action. There are different ways of combining the two, all of them exploring different uses of animation as a means of narrative. Some are strictly fantasy sequences. In other cases, the live action is fantasy . . . They’re all original stories. We haven’t taken any standard fairy tale type story. It’s an area that few people are working in.” Hirsh has directed four, *Smile-A-Day*, *Birds of Music*, *The Adventures of Mr. Pencil*, and *The Happy Chalk Dog*. Loubert is responsible for the other six, *Wild Goose Chase*, *Waltz in Mounted Time*, *Mr. Rubbish’s Children’s Tour of the Big City*, *The Great Ciccillo*, *Battle of the Alphabet* and *Zounds of Music*. In addition to taking the lead in *Mr. Pencil*, Smith has added animation to all but two, bringing the films’ visual imagery, evident even in the titles, to life. “They’re an exciting combination of fantasy and reality. The two seem to mix quite well for children . . . Right now we’re trying to package the ten films into a children’s feature film which could play theatres during the holidays and Saturday matinees. It’s going to be called *The New Mother Goose*.”

It's hard to miss a Nelvana film. Each begins simply with small circle of yellow, a spotlight as it turns out, followed quickly by a curious little animated character who wanders purposefully out into the glare to act as Master of Ceremonies. There's just the right suggestion of Vaudeville. And in a way, that slightly old fashioned spirit is the one element common to the work of Hirsh, Loubert and Smith both in and out of Nelvana. They've an obvious love for *characters*, whether the crazy and colourful pen creations of Smith's imagination, the wonderful people in the children's films, the real-life Lyle Leffler (an eighty-four year old charmer who still sells his Native Oil medicine to anyone who'll swallow it) or Les Barker, the creator of Johnny Canuck and one time artist of the Canadian Whites, who became the central figure in Loubert's first (though not last) script for *125 Rooms of Comfort*. Nelvana seems to collect these characters. Theirs is a taste for the esoteric and happily they handle it with a sense of humour. Whatever else their films may or may not be, they are entertaining.

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"We're into an old style of film making." A producer at Nelvana might well be the writer, director and editor on any one of his projects. But the personal touch has its disadvantages. Smith admits: "Everyone is doing everything and it's not the ideal way to work". And although expansion could change the situation in the near future (Smith has already taken on an assistant, Rowesa Gordon) Hirsh cautions "We're not a factory, grinding it out. We do a lot of product but it's all hand crafted . . . Together, we've developed a style that people can identify . . . I think our problem has been to create a market for that style".

For a Canadian company like Nelvana, that's a particularly difficult problem. "We've got to produce for this small audience where we get paid a very small amount of money. And yet we've got to produce a quality that's competitive with the Americans. Because they use Canada as a dumping ground . . . They take out a hell of a lot of money that they don't put back . . . We're also competing against the National Film Board. They practically give their films to schools and libraries. We'd be doing a far better business if we weren't competing against someone who's giving it away." An unfortunate case of Hooker's Law.

Not that they haven't met with some good fortune. They've had assistance, individually and collectively from time to time, their first grant coming from the Province of Ontario Council for the Arts some six months after they started and their first group grant from the Canada Council within the last year. The rest has been a simple matter of hard work. Hirsh recalls: "We did our thing with the Canadian comic books and that brought us a lot of advertising. We had articles and a lot of promotion and publicity in every major newspaper and magazine in the country. We figured, well okay, now we can sit back and work will come to us . . . It never happened . . . It took us a while to realize that we had to keep plugging away".

And they continue to plug away, knowing that this could be their most eventful year yet. *125 Rooms of Comfort*, although not directly a Nelvana production, is available and very deserving of distribution. Similarly, *Voulez-Vous Couchez Avec God?* will finally see the light of the silver screen. And *The New Mother Goose* is being readied for an Easter release. So they've evidently taken only their name from Nelvana of the Northern Lights. Legend, as Franz Johnston told it, gave Nelvana the power to disappear when things got a little too rough. That's not something that Hirsh, Loubert and Smith would want to take too literally . . . □



Nelvana on Sprockets:

Designing a program logo is somewhat like matchmaking. You try to marry a visual image to a show and you must please both sides of the family – the producer and the audience. You worry about everything from choice of colours to subject, design, style, pacing and soundtrack, hoping that the logo will complement the program itself.

In the case of "Sprockets", producer Julius Kohányi asked for something which evoked film-making in a dynamic way for a series including a wide variety of subjects and styles in independent Canadian cinema. He specifically asked for a photo montage of Canadian filmmakers at work. We were able to depict some thirty filmmakers, cut to the beat of the percussive track, in the twenty seconds of the opening logo.

The closing logo is an experimental multi-media film illustrating a variety of cinematic devices. Opening with live action, we watch some young filmmakers with Super-8 cameras from the POV of a cameraman's eyepiece (replete with field markings) filmed from a van driving towards the kids. Next, we see the children's POV – as the van turns the corner. The next scene is again from the POV of the van as a series of black and white stills animated with overlapping dissolves evolves into a cartoon of a movie theatre's marquis flashing "Sprockets" while a delivery man enters – overloaded with film cans.

In the space of twenty seconds our film features full animation, animated stills and live action – the production headaches were immense!

In order to shoot the cameraman's POV with field markings we had to use a fast stock (7242) in the middle of a sunny day to achieve proper depth of field. The camera was mounted behind a large pane of glass used as a matte. The area between camera and glass plate was flagged off from light to prevent subciliary reflections. At the beginning of each take, we had to stop traffic on two streets and cue our ten-year-old filmmakers – this shot required twelve takes to get right. The field guide markings on the glass plate greatly complicated the shoot since any jiggling of the camera would cause the markings to jiggle and ruin the effect. Jock Brandis had to avoid the supergrip we had planned on using, lash the camera on a tripod to the van floor and shoot through the driver's glass window.

The animated stills sequence posed another interesting production problem. We had two choices: either to shoot on a motorized Nikon or onto 16mm film using an Eclair. We opted for 16mm to best match the real focus and effect of movement, since the Nikon would put everything into sharp focus. From our 7242 original, Quinn Labs prepared a contrasty black and white negative and we selected every eighth frame for printing onto acetate cells. The cells were then painted and the final cell transformed into a completely painted frame with the animation executed on cell overlays.

Sprockets' Logo production by Nelvana, CBC Producer: Julius Kohányi. Opening Logo director – Michael Hirsh, Closing Logo director – Clive Smith. Cameraman – Jock Brandis; Animators – Clive Smith, Val Lapsa; Inker – Rowesa Gordon; Editor – Michael Hirsh.

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