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Marc Summers interview: Former double dare host remembers the golden age of Nickelodeon

February 21, 2014 Melissa Zimdars Arts & Entertainment, The Tube 1 comment

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If you want to revel in all that is Nickelodeon and learn more from Klickstein and Summers in person, FilmScene, in conjunction with Prairie Lights, is hosting a free Nick Nostalgia Night on Feb. 25 at 8 p.m. — Illustration by Ben Mackey

Have you ever wondered what Nickelodeon slime consists of or how it got the nickname Gak? Well, in Mathew Klickstein's new book, *Slimed! An Oral History of Nickelodeon's Golden Age*, such questions are answered by the people who created and starred in the network's most iconic programs like *Clarissa Explains It All*, *Double Dare*, *The Ren & Stimpy Show* and *The Adventures of Pete & Pete*. While every generation nostalgically believes they had the best music, movies or television (and there are more than a few people looking through rose-colored glasses in this book), the stories in *Slimed!* do capture a special period in television's history.

I recently talked with Klickstein and Marc Summers, the host of *Double Dare* who earned the title "Godfather of Nickelodeon," about *Slimed!*, the golden age of the network and why

former Nick kids seem to hate Nickelodeon of today.

From 1988 to 1993, Summers hosted *Double Dare*, a trivia and obstacle course show, and *What Would You Do?*, a stunt show that had kids eating hamburgers with honey or ice cream with ketchup and regularly featured people getting pied in the face. "I loved *Double Dare*," explained Summers, "but I never understood *What Would You Do?* I swear to God, I thought it was an odd program ...

"It was so much fun going to work every day, on that set, with those people. It was just a party and we never had one bad day. We were playing television. We had zero supervision so it was like being in a frat house. It put Nickelodeon on the map, it put me on the map and it opened up new genres of television for kids."

In *Slimed!*, many of the interviewees joked about working for a kids channel and not actually liking children, but Summers' situation was a little different. "My deal was I never wanted to host a kid's game show. It was never of any interest to me whatsoever, but I couldn't seem to get on television hosting anything. So, when I finally got offered a show and it happened to have children on it, I went, 'Here is how I'm going to approach this: I'm pretending they're not kids.' I felt like I was Pat Sajak or Alex Trebek. I treated them like grownups ... I never did cute voices or pretended like I was a Grandmother talking to her grandkids."

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In his show, Summers often did impressions of famous actors in order to appeal to adults. "It was me showing off what I could do," he said. "My favorite part of any appearance or walking down the street was when a grownup would come up to me and say, 'I watch the show every day for that one thing you do for me.' When I was doing Jimmy Stewart or Ethel Merman impressions ... referencing Ed Sullivan, I knew not a kid in the studio or watching had any idea what the hell I was doing, but they thought it was funny. They thought I was just some crazy guy doing weird voices ... After a while, when we saw it was catching on, we purposefully wrote in adult things that weren't offensive. We got away with a lot of stuff because the network wasn't even watching the show!" Summers' impressions, along with other notorious battles between network censors delaying episodes of *Ren & Stimpy*, exemplify how Nickelodeon's programming often worked on two levels, catering to kids as well as parents.

Summers frequently speaks out about the fact that he believes Nickelodeon to be going in the "dumper," which led to TMZ calling him "Angry Marc Summers." "No, I'm not angry," countered Summers. "That's just TMZ doing their thing ... I'm the least angry human in the history of the world. I've had a charmed existence. I've got to do what I've wanted my whole life." Summers continued, "And I know Nick is not working because, for some reason, they are afraid to go back to their roots. Why they wouldn't put a game show on today, like we did, makes zero sense. The management there doesn't get it. They keep putting animated shows on and there are no live human beings for kids to identify with. In my opinion, it's just not a good network anymore."

Summers often pinpoints Nick changing after 2000. "When I was there, they didn't want to do merchandise. We turned down a million dollar deal for a *Double Dare* cereal ... Now, when you walk in, the first question is, 'What is the merchandise? What can we sell? How many plush dolls can we put together? How many DVDs can we sell?' as opposed to worrying about the programing."

Klickstein echoed a sentiment similar to that of Summers, pointing out the differences between what he calls "Golden Age" Nick and contemporary Nick. He argues that the channel is no longer transgenerational, whereas "Golden Age" Nick, and shows like *Ren & Stimpy* and *Pete & Pete*, also appealed to stoner college kids and parents.

To prove his point, Klickstein asked me, "Do *you* know what's on Nickelodeon right now?" anticipating a "No." But as a television scholar/addict, I replied in the affirmative and listed a couple shows, to which he said: "Well, you are weird." Yes, yes I am.

According to Klickstein, Nick has become much more like Disney, more aspirational and too patronizing, as opposed to featuring the average misfit, braces-wearing kid like Nick was known to do. Even so, I asked him about his description of '80s to early '90s Nickelodeon as a "Golden Age" because that phrase frequently, and in my opinion needlessly, gets used to describe different periods of television's history.

"Aside from my own personal preferences and the fact this era was marshaled by Gerry Laybourne and her group," explained Klickstein, "the shows during this era were 'truly' golden, I believe, because they were the foundation shows of Nickelodeon. Say what you will about *Hey Arnold!* or even *SpongeBob*, but the fact remains that without the first three Nicktoons—which all came out together—there would be no *SpongeBob* or *Hey Arnold!*, or even *Dora*. Without *You Can't*, there would be no green slime or the sense of the network's "on the side of the child" mentality ... "

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Klickstein does acknowledge that "Golden Age" is a subjective term. He's even received some flak from people for not talking about Pinwheel (Nickelodeon's original name as a community channel on the nascent cable service, QUBE), or for not including newer programs, like *Spongebob Squarepants*. But he feels that programming through the '80s and early '90s, slime and Marc Summers, are most emblematic of Nickelodeon. Klickstein continues, "As the author, I'm glad I get to put my foot down and say this [time period] is the Golden Age [of Nickelodeon]. Forevermore it will at least be discussed in that way, and I'm really happy about that."

Overall, the book is much less about the channel, or even the shows themselves, and more about the people who made it all happen. Klickstein even became a little emotional sharing his experience of getting to know everyone while interviewing for *Slimed!*. "They are funny, fascinating and strange. They are such unique individuals that have a lot to say about art, politics, life, diversity, political correctness ... I realized at some point that this book was more for them than for us. I sort of made a yearbook for them that ... would resonate with Nick kids today."

Since *Slimed!* is so much about individual experiences, including a good amount of behind-the-scenes gossip, I asked Summers for some Nickelodeon dirt not included in the book.

"I think there was a little promiscuity going on behind the scenes," said Summers. "I remember coming to the set one day and asking for a particular person, and was told, 'They're not here.' I asked, 'Why?,' and they said, 'There's a little problem. Somebody got pregnant and they're trying to take care of it.' I was so focused on the show that I didn't realize there were escapades going on. Were there drugs happening? I suppose there were. The term 'Gak' came from our crew. That was a street term for heroine, but Nickelodeon didn't know it and marketed this product called Gak while we were laughing our asses off."

I wondered whether Summers would ever get back into kid's TV but the chances seem slim. "Not that anyone is going to ask me, but if they brought back *Double Dare* ... changed management and did like a one hour special, would I do it? In a nanosecond."

Ultimately, and despite his dislike of contemporary Nickelodeon, I don't think Summers is an angry guy, but he will become one if people continue asking him about his OCD in relation to the experience of being slimed on *Double Dare*. "It didn't affect me. It didn't bother me. It was never ever ever ever—and you can never write enough evers—an issue!" Summers continued, "People just want it to be a problem."

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About Melissa Zimdars

Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, specializing in all things television.

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One thought on "Marc Summers interview: Former double dare host remembers the golden age of Nickelodeon"



Mathew Klickstein February 22, 2014 at 7:33 pm - Reply

Thanks for the nod to our book, Little Village! Hope to see everyone at the upcoming Nick Nostalgia Night (FREE!) at FilmScene on Tuesday, Feb. 25. 8pm - 10pm. (Did we mention FREE?)

Also check out more of the book at <http://www.SlimedTheBook.com> !

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