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## Boulder's Mighty Fudge Animation Studios celebrates 10th anniversary

Vince Darcangelo  
Posted: 04/24/2009 04:44:00 AM MDT

It's been a decade since animator Patrick Mallek founded Mighty Fudge Animation Studios in the spare bedroom of his old condo. These days, Mighty Fudge operates in a honest-to-goodness studio in east Boulder, and that's not the only way in which Patrick says the company has "grown up."

In recent years, Mighty Fudge has placed a cartoon on national television and been included in a major animation compilation. Last year, the adult-oriented animation studio actually earned a Children's Choice Award at the Blue Plum Animation Festival in Tennessee for its musical short "The Stink Bottom Boat."

It's a new frontier for Patrick, his wife Kim, who serves as producer, and the rest of Mighty Fudge, who are currently developing two television series and a feature film.

This month, Mighty Fudge celebrates its 10th birthday. It's a good time to look back at how the company thrived during one technological revolution (the move to online publishing) and is surviving another (the saturation of free online video).

But as Patrick, 40, says of his cartoon vision, "It was never about today. It's always been about the future." So it seems like a better time to look ahead at future Fudge productions.

### Pre-baked

Patrick's foray into publishing began with homemade zines and handmade comics. His first effort, in 1990, was a series of comic books following the adventures of Ganjamon. He distributed the books to close friends.

He also worked in the music business. A native of Detroit, Patrick was living in Michigan at that time, and he often partnered with a high school friend, Dave Riepe. Riepe would produce and promote music festivals in Michigan, and Patrick would handle the artwork and marketing.

"He was the creative visionary behind those to really wrap up the event in a nice pretty package," Riepe says. "We've very often worked on each other's projects over the years. That's essentially how we became friends. That's what started our relationship."

The partnership has lasted over two decades and two states. Both would later relocate to Boulder, and Riepe, who now runs the Outdoor Cinema Networks, founded Boulder Outdoor Cinema.

Patrick has designed the posters for Boulder Outdoor Cinema the last eight years.

"He can get very creative," Riepe says. "It's always a fun surprise what he sends over to us."

Surprised is how Patrick left a number of book publishers when he pitched them ideas for one of his earliest creations, Slimmy Jim -- a talking penis with a penchant for mischief. Patrick created Slimmy Jim in the mid-'90s, before he'd delved into the world of animation. His concept for Slimmy Jim was as a -- ahem -- pop-up book. Until he pitched the idea to a number of publishers, that is.

"I got a lot of, 'What? No way can we publish that,'" Patrick says. "That's what pushed me online."

Slimmy Jim came to life as an online slideshow, and it was the start of bigger things. It inspired Patrick to learn Flash animation, and in 1999 he launched Mighty Fudge, which he describes as a "punk rock counterculture mechanism." The timing was perfect, as online publishing had taken hold and emerging high-speed Internet connections facilitated faster streaming of movie files.

### Fudge fest

It didn't take long for Mighty Fudge to establish itself as the area's best-known animation studio. It became a staple at local showings of Spike and Mike's Sick and Twisted Festival of Animation, a touring festival of subversive and comedic animated shorts. It's where Patrick says he cut his cartoon teeth.

"Sitting in (Denver's) Bluebird (Theater) and watching your film die at Spike and Mike 10 nights in a row will learn ya," he says. "Then you come back next year and hit a home run."

Mighty Fudge hit a home run with "My First Boner," a musical short that was a nod to the educational Saturday morning "Schoolhouse Rock!" cartoons -- except Patrick's was about an adolescent boy waking up with his first erection. It was an immediate hit with audiences, and Spike and Mike made it a staple of their national tour. It later appeared in the 2005



Patrick and Kim Mallek, owners of Mighty Fudge Animation Studios, pose with characters from their...



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Spike and Mike DVD anthology, "Caught in the Act." Mighty Fudge was also hired to design an intro movie for the festival.

The national exposure led to other work, and in 2007 Mighty Fudge animated the comedy short "Britney's Having a Breakdown" for Premiere Radio Networks Comedy. The video nabbed more than 1 million hits on MySpace and was broadcast nationally on the CW television network.

The studio has been active locally, as well. Mighty Fudge made two music videos for Denver rock band Dressy Bessy, one of which, "Girl You Shout," made rotation on MTV2. Mighty Fudge's partnership with Boulder Outdoor Cinema included annual screenings of the studio's tamer cartoons.

But with Mighty Fudge cartoons, even the tame ones bring their share of controversy.

"Controversial is a good word to describe Pat's art," Riepe says. "It can be very upsetting to some people. He's looking to push buttons and make people think. Or to push buttons just for the sake of pushing buttons.

"There are definitely a lot of people who really enjoyed it," he adds. "There are others who weren't very pleased with it. More the conservative crowd."

And though it may be a far cry from Sick and Twisted content-wise, Mighty Fudge has been involved with the Boulder International Film Festival since its inception. Two of Mighty Fudge's comedy shorts featuring Magnetic Squirrel -- a hard-luck rodent who swallowed a magnet that gets him into all sorts of hi-jinks -- have appeared in BIFF, and for the past three years Patrick has served as BIFF's animation director.

"He is so much fun and funny and just a dynamic personality that really fits into the film world," says Robin Beeck, executive director of the festival. "He's got a partner (Kim) who's got a lot of talent. They complement each other quite a bit."

Patrick and Kim's most recent short was the award-winning musical "The Stink Bottom Boat."

Their first foray into children's cartoons was originally intended to be a family affair.

"It started out as just a gift to our nephews and nieces," says Kim, 40. "It came out so cute."

So cute that they submitted it to a number of festivals, and it has been so successful -- nabbing an approval rating from the Coalition for Quality Children's Media -- that they are currently developing it into a TV show.

Ironic for a studio that first set up shop to produce a cartoon about a talking penis.

"Our longtime fans were laughing that we were doing a kids' film," Pat says. "The 'My First Boner' team made a kid's film."

#### **Taking the pLunge**

It's all part of the maturation process. Ten years on, Mighty Fudge isn't resting on its past success. The studio is currently working on its most ambitious project to date: an animated feature film titled "the pLunge."

"It's a time period piece," Patrick says. "It's a love triangle about three Gen X'ers who think they're all going in the same direction, but they're not. It's a dark romantic comedy."

Or as Kim says, "I think it's about Pat's life."

It incorporates a lot of early 90s culture, such as music zines and coffeehouses, centered on a murder-mystery. It's all presented in an animation style they refer to as "Hanna-Barbanime" -- a cross between classic Hanna-Barbera cartoons and American-style anime.

"We're hoping that we can offer a fresh perspective for Hollywood," Patrick says. "And it's a smaller world. There's no reason that a small animation studio in Boulder can't make a feature film."

Beeck agrees.

"I love the idea that he's moving toward feature films," she says. "He's got the talent and the drive. He's very passionate about his projects, and if anybody can pull it off, it's him."

The Gen X crowd has long been the audience for Mighty Fudge. The studio bills itself as producing "Saturday Morning Cartoons for Grown-Ups!" A generation of kids weaned on Scooby-Doo and the Laff-A-Lympics has grown up to become regular viewers of Fox's Sunday-night Animation Domination block, featuring "Family Guy" and "American Dad," and Cartoon Network's edgy-toon showcase "Adult Swim."

"Generation X was the first generation to say '(forget) you' to Disney and go to Spike and Mike and watch 'The Simpsons' and 'South Park' and Adult Swim," Patrick says.

He is optimistic that "the pLunge" will make it to the big screen due to a rise in animated feature films that are marketed toward adults, like "Persepolis," "Sita Sings the Blues," which appeared at this year's BIFF, and "Waltz with Bashir," a 2008 Israeli animated documentary about the 1982 war in Lebanon.

"Those are heavy concepts," Patrick says.

"the pLunge" may not be as heavy in tone, but will certainly be marketed toward adults.

"It's an animated film and there's not a talking walrus in it," he says.

#### **Future Fudge**

More info on the film is available online at [www.grungeplunge.com](http://www.grungeplunge.com), but Patrick says advanced Web technology can be a double-edged sword for aspiring animators. On the one hand, it allows the artist to reach a wider fan base. On the other, outlets like YouTube have acclimated consumers to getting video content for free -- which means animators aren't getting paid for their effort.

"I think it comes down to the expectation of the audience. The audience doesn't expect to pay for content," he says, likening the struggles of animators to that of newspapers. "People have been reading newspapers for free online. They're not going to pay to read newspapers."

Despite garnering more than 1 million viewers with 2007's "Britney's Having a Breakdown," and having it appear on national television, neither Mighty Fudge nor the short's producers made a nickel of profit.

"If you told me in high school that a million people would see my work and I wouldn't make any money off it, I'd say you

were crazy," Patrick says.

The byproduct of this is that animators make one or two cartoons for no money before becoming frustrated and moving on to more profitable things. There are enough aspiring animators to fill the void left behind, but the result, he says, is quantity, not quality.

"We've become a society of one-offs," Patrick says.

Mighty Fudge was recently in talks with a "high-profile company" to create a series of animated shorts, but with the amount of money they were being offered they couldn't even afford to hire the voice actors, let alone make a profit, he says. They would have lost money on the project, so they turned it down.

Rather than upping payment, companies such as this will just find someone willing to do it cheaper, Patrick says.

"It's going to come down to money, not how many people see your cartoon," Patrick says. "Where's the incentive to make another?"

In this "society of one-offs," the secret to Mighty Fudge's longevity, he says, is that it's always been bigger than just one cartoon or a gimmick.

"What has allowed us to stay is we weren't just creating one-offs on the Web. We were creating a brand," Patrick says. "We're trying to put a vision behind our projects. It's not about getting rich and famous. It's about not having to get a night job."

So far, so good. Kim, who has always been active behind the scenes, has been working full-time with Mighty Fudge for the past year, and together she and Patrick have gotten a lot of commercial work, including graphic design jobs for Wal-Mart and Earth Balance.

"We have commercial work now," she says, but adds that even that is tenuous these days. "Lots of media companies are struggling right now."

The Malleks know that talent and good marketing will get them far in the entertainment business, but a few good breaks are necessary as well. While animation is widely popular, it's also dominated by a handful of producers. Seth MacFarlane has two cartoons on TV, "Family Guy" and "American Dad," and another debuting in the fall. Long-running shows like "The Simpsons" and "South Park" are still on the air, and Mike Judge, creator of "Beavis and Butt-Head," has a new cartoon debuting in May, just as his popular show "King of the Hill," the second longest-running American cartoon in history (behind "The Simpsons"), is ending its 13-year run.

Hopefully, persistence will pay off.

"The people who hold the cards bet on a sure thing. Then when the sure thing starts to backfire, they look for a fresh thing," Kim says. "We hope we're standing in the doorway when they do."

So Mighty Fudge will continue to do what it's done for 10 years: produce high-quality cartoons. It will also continue to push into new realms, such as children's cartoons and feature films. The future is wide open, and Patrick says he hopes to produce three to five films in the next 10 years.

Kim has a complementary goal.

"I see myself running a big organization," she says.

Patrick adds, "Hopefully it's this one."

Congratulations!Great work.

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