

# It's a Wiggly Wiggly World



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by Paul Field

The great Australian singer/songwriter Paul Kelly once sang "From small things, big things one day come". This song title aptly describes the organic growth of The Wiggles over the last fifteen years. The rare confluence of their solid musical and educational background and an innovative approach has provided a unique sound and vision that has engaged young children around the world. Despite a history of knock backs in their career, there has been a positive side. Their songs are their own and because they have had to finance everything themselves, they own the rights to every song, video and album they have made which is a rare thing in the entertainment industry. The Wiggles story also centres on family and friends and it was my brother Anthony Field who had the idea and the enthusiasm to form The Wiggles.

Anthony is descended from strong and creative women. His great, great Auntie was "Queenie Paul" a famous performer at the legendary Tivoli theatre in Sydney. His grandmother Kathleen used to accompany the silent movies on piano in the mining town of Cobar while Anthony's mother Marie is a floral artist and gifted musician who made sure that all of her seven children were taught a musical instrument, perhaps hoping that we might be Blacktown's version of the Von Trapp family.

Anthony was the youngest of those seven children and so would occasionally do things to stand out from the pack. It is still talked about, in hushed tones, at St Bernadette's, how as a four year old child, the future blue Wiggle bit one of the nuns. There's a rather old testament view of this incident that says that the bite in 1967 might explain the trouble he's had with his teeth ever since. They'd probably medicate Anthony nowadays but instead his mother would play him music and sing to him as she had when he was 18 months old- "She loves you" and he would sing back "yeah, yeah, yeah". Further, she encouraged him to play music throughout his schooling, and so Anthony played the violin and eventually the guitar and in high school formed a band with his brothers and a few mates. Many of the experiences in this band would guide Anthony in the way things would be done once when he went on to form The Wiggles.

"The Cockroaches" toured for many years around the country in thousands of pubs and clubs. They were named by the *Daily Telegraph* in 1988 as the hardest working band in the country due to the number of shows played in the year. They filmed over a dozen music clips, performed in the movie *The Crossing* and the music shows *Sounds*, *MTV* and *Countdown*. Like ACDC sung in "it's a long way to the top".... getting ripped off and underpaid is part of life in a band. Bands suffered the "double dip" where an agent would get together with the entertainment manager from a club and tell the club that the band would be paid a fee, for example \$7,000, so the club would allocate that money for the night's entertainment. Both agents would agree to take a split (\$1,000 each) and then tell the band that their fee was \$5,000. The agent would then take his percentage of the remaining fee...thus double dipping. Bands only ever saw worksheets and so were rarely able to confirm the reality. When Anthony formed The Wiggles, they would avoid the rock agents and circuit and find alternatives to the traditional live circuit and take control.

Filming a rock music clip to promote a three and a half minute song would take up to three days and it was a very costly experience that would have to be paid back to the record company

and therefore the company controlled the process. The band was dressed for film clips by stylists who didn't know them. The Wiggles would look to do things differently when they filmed their videos. No one knew their audience better than them and because they would pay for their videos they took control.

Recording sessions were also paid for by the record company and this meant that they also had a lot of creative control over its look and promotion. Anthony and the group often felt powerless and distanced from most decisions made about their music. A family tragedy was the catalyst for a re-think and Anthony left "The Cockroaches" to go back to University.

Armed with a degree in early childhood education from Macquarie University and a couple of years teaching in a pre-school Anthony asked Murray Cook (a great guitar player) and Greg Page ( who had the perfect soothing voice) and his mate from "The Cockroaches" Jeff Fatt on keyboards to record an album of music for children.

The ethos of the first album and the many since is simple and harks back to their professional training in early childhood which emphasised the importance of seeing things from the perspective of a child. They completed the album like a university assignment and included a folder of paperwork explaining the educational value of the songs. It was important to find the right partner and the ABC was, and still remains, the home of early childhood in Australia. Fifteen years later, one of the songs from that album "Rock a Bye Your Bear" is performed on Play School as a children's standard which is the pre-school equivalent of having the Stones cover one of your songs.

At first The Wiggles filmed two clips in conjunction with the ABC to promote the album. They then had the idea to make a long form forty minute video featuring songs from the album which they would self finance. In essence they would be making a video version of the album. At this stage, no one did this. There was almost no money for the production so it would be a live switch of images with no post production editing. There was no stylist, the guys wore a sort of uniform with black pants and different coloured plain t-shirts. Apart from The Wiggles and their characters, the remaining cast of children was some of Anthony's many young nieces and nephews and the character costumes were made by some of the guys girlfriends. The Wiggles would perform a song with two cameras filming. At the end of the song they have the vision played back to check that the performance was fine and then move on. The guys had finished their first forty minute video in less time than it used to take to shoot a three minute music clip. Already things were looking better than the days of rock and roll.

The challenge was then to promote the album and video and so naturally live performing was the obvious option. The guys approached a theatre promoter in Double Bay and explained what they wanted to do. She didn't get it and told them flatly, "Look, there'll be no money in it for me and of course no money in it for you." And so in what would be a pattern over the fifteen years, The Wiggles would have to do things themselves. They knew how to stage simple shows but needed venues and promoters but wanted to avoid the agencies. They approached playgroups and pre-schools directly who would act as promoters and sell tickets to The Wiggles show. And so with a schedule that would make Willie Nelson blush The Wiggles traveled across the country for up to ten months of the year performing three to four shows a day.

Woody Guthrie was one of the greatest American folk singers and songwriters who penned the USA's unofficial national anthem, "This land is your land". And while Woody's songs were mainly for an adult audience, he was also a father and so wrote songs for his children. Guthrie discovered that what might seem an ordinary thing for an adult was something new and exciting for a young child, especially if he made a song about it. For example he sang about riding in a car.

Take you riding in my car, car

Take you riding in my car, car

Take you riding in my car, car

Take you riding in my car,

Windscreen wipers go swish, swish

Windscreen wipers go swish, swish

Windscreen wipers go swish, swish

Oh I'll take you riding in my car.

Woody spoke to those who thought he was wasting his time on lesser pursuits by writing for children. He said, 'you'll be healthier, you'll feel wealthier, you'll walk wiser, you'll go higher, do better and live longer here amongst us, if you'll just only jump in here and swim around in these songs and do like the kids do. What were The Wiggles songs about that were capturing the hearts and minds of young Australians? They were about the world of young children. While a song about eating might seem banal to an adult, eating food is a major event for a young child and certainly for a parent trying to feed them! So The Wiggles sing about hot potatoes, mashed bananas, cold spaghetti, fruit salad, vegetable soup and the importance of chewing your food!

As Murray and Anthony are former pre-school teachers, they approached the issue of food the same way that they would in a pre-school and so they promoted healthy eating and are still the only successful pre-school brand not to have licensed confectionary. They sought other opportunities. A one time sponsor of The Wiggles was Australian apple growers. For years they would have to pulp their undersized apples. That stopped happening after we were involved in a campaign to encourage children to eat a healthy snack- an Australian apple. Engaging the audience is a task for all performers. The Wiggles know that you will engage a child more successfully if you challenge them rather than tell them to do something. So The Wiggles ask in their song,

CAN YOU point your fingers and do the twist?

CAN YOU stand on one foot and shake your hands?

And of course every child responds in the positive and attempts it.

The Wiggles are aware that children learn from all of their experiences. A recent portrayal of the developing child considers the communicating child, the thinking child, the physical child, the social child, the feeling child, the creative child, the spiritual child and the aesthetic child. The Wiggles songs and programs are influenced by such awareness.

Empowering of children is a continuing feature of The Wiggles work. Hello everyone is a common opening to a Wiggles performance rather than "hello boys and girls" which unnecessarily separates children and has undertones of condescension. The Wiggles never play down to children and, when possible, children are asked for their opinions or advice, which may be acted on. Milan Kundera wrote that "happiness is the longing for repetition" and our audience loves to know what's going to happen. Children like what they know and they like it again and again. Jeff's penchant for falling asleep at any time is a source of great excitement for the children. They know they will be asked to wake him up by calling "Wake up Jeff" and would be disappointed if at a live show or in a video they were not given the opportunity. They know what they can do to alleviate the situation when Jeff falls asleep and they know what will happen when they do it. The Wiggles most famous routine came about because Jeff was the only Wiggle without a degree in Early Childhood studies and so Anthony was concerned about what Jeff might say to the audience and so he suggested that Jeff's contribution was to fall

asleep whenever they asked him something and the guys would ask the audience for help to wake Jeff up.....thus was born the most famous shtick in pre-school entertainment.

The Wiggles have always been inclusive and have performed songs in many different musical styles and from many different cultures.

Christine Anu joined with The Wiggles to sing a Torres Strait Islands song called Taba Naba Lechoo Yeladim is a Hebrew song, Balla Balla Bambina is in Italian Nochez De Paz is in Spanish And The Wiggles sing in Japanese about the coming of spring in Haru Ga Kita Alongside these songs from around the world, The Wiggles teamed up with Rolf Harris to do a wiggly version of Tie me Kangaroo Down Sport and instead of I'd love to have a beer with Duncan, The Wiggles sung "I'd love to have a dance with Dorothy" with Slim Dusty. When we filmed the clip with Slim there was a section of music where Slim was meant to dance and so we did a cut away shot of a dancers legs who was dressed in the same outfit as Slim. And so, through the magic of video, Slim appeared to be doing some nifty high kicks. At Slim's funeral, his wife Joy McKean told me that after seeing that video, a young child came up to Slim at one of his concerts and told him that he was a great dancer. She laughed and told me that he chuckled about that one for years!

The Wiggles had established a pattern of activity and a model for success. They would make a new album and long form video each year and tour around the country to promote it. By 1995 they had set records for video and music sales for the ABC and realised that to get to the next level of awareness they would need a TV series. Despite having sold record amounts of music and videos and live concert tickets they didn't receive much enthusiasm from those they approached. The Wiggles were told by a TV executive that "they didn't communicate well with children but that their music was ok". If they were to work together on a show then they would not be allowed to speak to the audience but only sing the songs. Instead of getting an offer they couldn't refuse, this was the offer they couldn't accept. And so The Wiggles had no other choice but to self-finance and create a TV series and find another partner. The show was eventually broadcast by Channel Seven and on cable with the Disney Channel who thought that the guys communicated fairly well indeed. The series won the ratings for its time slot. The Wiggles went from strength to strength with many awards for audio and video sales throughout the country and then they turned their attention towards the overseas market. The Disney channel was a great partner in Australia and organized for The Wiggles to perform in Disneyland, California where they were seen by a Dallas based company called Lyrick Studios; the creators of the iconic American character Barney the Dinosaur. Lyrick Studios loved The Wiggles and were interested in being the distributor for music, video and consumer products but were concerned that The Wiggles Australian accents might not work with the American audience. You may recall that the first Mad Max movie, starring Mel Gibson, was dubbed for the USA market as they did not think that the local audiences would understand the Aussie accents. Remember that at the insistence of American advisors many children's shows from the UK such as Bob the Builder and Thomas the Tank Engine were re-voiced for the market. And in the case of Thomas the Tank Engine they replaced the voice of the narrator Ringo Starr...yes, they sacked a Beatle! So what hope did the boys from Sydney have? The Wiggles explained that from an early childhood point of view our audience has no idea of the cultural origins of the way The Wiggles spoke, they would not know that we sounded Australian or that The Wiggles were not from America. If there was any comment, they would simply say "that's the way the wiggles speak". In what is a huge irony in the entertainment industry, Americans will often pressure you to look and sound like the rest of the country and then shortly after you launch will then spend enormous amounts of money to try and figure out how you can stand out from the rest of the pack. The Wiggles stood their ground and asked that Lyrick test their videos with children. They did so and watched Texan children dance to songs about wombats crawling and willaby wallaby woo! Lyrick signed the group. It was time to Wiggle in the USA.

Before The Wiggles secured TV broadcast in the USA, they would start the long road of promotion. In what seems like a scene from Spinal Tap, the guys performed in a Blockbuster Video car park to four people. Yes, from Small things, big things one day come. Their videos did not yet have widespread support and were released in the USA in boutique stores such as FAO Schwartz and Zany Brainy.

Lyrick were convinced that if people saw The Wiggles, they would love them and so they had The Wiggles do some live events with their icon Barney who was to perform a season at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. In what sounds like another Spinal Tap moment The Wiggles played the intermission in the Barney show but over the entire season over 90,000 saw them play and liked them. These parents then went to try and buy their video but couldn't find it in retail outlets and so went online. As a result, The Wiggles suddenly found themselves with two titles in the top ten video sales for on-line US sales for amazon.com. Someone at Wal-Mart looked at the charts, saw The Wiggles and asked who they were and why they weren't on sale at Wal-Mart. This is how The Wiggles got our videos into the mass market, through grass root sales rather than hype or a marketing campaign.

When The Wiggles first prepared to tour the USA, we were advised that we should go with a touring firm, one that toured children's shows around the country and so I travelled to Minnesota for a meeting. I saw a very large and beautiful stage set and asked what it cost from drawing concept to completion and I was told nearly one million dollars. The meeting was educational in that it was very clear that the cost of touring with such a company was prohibitive, if we toured then we would have been paying to do so, which was not an option. And so we found some people with touring experience and started in small grass roots venues such as church halls and 500 seat theatres in Brooklyn and New Jersey but not Manhattan as it was too expensive. Rather than having a set, we had backdrops and eventually some simple inflatable props. The shows sold out and so by the next tour, the tickets became a hot item and we slowly moved up to larger theatres every tour. So in this area we moved from Brooklyn to the Beacon Theatre and then eventually to Madison Square Garden Theatre.

Performing in the US has also been exciting because of some of the famous parents the guys have met who have brought their children to see the show. At one show at the Beacon Theatre, Jerry Seinfeld met the guys before the show. As Seinfeld took his seat we received a call to say that Robert De Niro, his partner and their son would like to come to the show and could we fit them in. And so on one side of the audience was Jerry Seinfeld and on the other Robert De Niro. Of course New Yorkers left them in peace as they took their seats. De Niro's partner smiled throughout the show and bounced up and down in her seat (yes we were watching them) while De Niro sat watching intently whilst eating popcorn. Murray did comment that it did remind him of the character in Cape Fear watching the film while smoking a cigar.

The logistics of touring The Wiggles are as big as some contemporary rock bands. We tour with two 54 foot trucks that carry production equipment and merchandise. There are three tour buses that carry thirty three cast and crew members and we employ 25 casual crew per city. In one month of touring, The Wiggles travelled nearly four thousand miles, performing 49 shows in fifteen cities to over 240,000 people. The Wiggles will have performed in 37 states in the USA this year.

A couple of years ago we met with some TV executives in the UK who told us that The Wiggles were too Australian sounding and that English children would not respond to The Wiggles songs and he advised us to cast and form a local group, otherwise we would have no chance. This guy was the head of Disney TV in the UK and had two assistants beside him and evidently some research to support his view.

Again, here was someone who doesn't know or understand a pre-school audience and he was wrong. The Wiggles recently toured the UK including Dublin, Manchester, Glasgow and London and Ireland playing before 45,000 people. The TV executive has since left his position and we have been successfully broadcast by Nick Junior in the UK for a number of years now. Touring is the most profitable thing The Wiggles do and The Wiggles sell around 1 million tickets per year around the world to their live concerts.

TV broadcast is the foundation of success and it reaches areas that you cannot through live touring. The Wiggles have made five TV series now which are broadcast throughout the country on the ABC. We are the first Australian pre-school property to shoot in high definition digital and have set up our own studio to film, a recording studio capable of recording in 5.1 surround sound and a post production suite so that we can record an album, shoot the video and edit it all in the one place. We've named the place Hot Potato Studios! Yes, Hot Potato studios "making HOT hits since 2006", "don't make a dud, trust the spud"! It is our aim to make productions other than The Wiggles for the pre-school market using the same team. Our first production is a sub brand, Dorothy the Dinosaur. Australia has a wonderful history of immigration which allowed for us to search and cast here in Australia a Latin American Wiggles for a TV series and this will be broadcast throughout Latin America on the Disney Channel. We have also cast a Taiwanese Wiggles and filmed a TV series and a number of videos. We have recently dubbed a Wiggles TV series with the introductions in Italian while the songs remain in English for the Italian market.

There have been further wiggly developments over the last year. The Wiggles have opened a play centre in western Sydney which is where families can go. There is a yummy yummy café with healthy food and reward programs for those who make healthy choices; there are party rooms, mazes and slides for children. Our first play centre in the USA opened in Dallas Texas a month ago and we plan to open many more in Australia and the USA over the next few years. With an Australian partner, Dreamworld (owned by Macquarie Leisure) we developed WigglesWorld at Dreamworld which is a Wiggles themed area inside a theme park. There is a Big Red Car ride and Dorothy's rosy tea cup ride and other attractions. No one had previously catered for children this young. This has been a huge success, research has shown that 45% of people who go to Dreamworld go to see Wigglesworld, and so Macquarie Leisure are developing a water theme park called White Water World which will open before this Christmas and will feature Wiggle Bay, another Wiggles themed area. As The Wiggles success has grown, they are still keen to contribute to the wider community The Wiggles have set up a scholarship at Macquarie University to pay for the tuition fees of an indigenous student to complete the Early Childhood Studies course at University! In 2006 The Wiggles have become involved with the Steve Waugh Foundation whose mission is to assist underprivileged children. The Wiggles are strong supporters of Don Spencer's Australian Children's Music Foundation (ACMF) whose mission is to create opportunities for children, particularly the disadvantaged, to achieve their full potential by encouraging them to participate in music. The Mary Mackillop Institute of East Timorese Studies have been working with The Wiggles to support early childhood development through the translation of The Wiggles music into the native language, Tetun, for the children of East Timor. In most recent years The Wiggles have emerged as the face of the new St Vincent De Paul advertising campaign. The most recent campaigns include the winter clothing campaign and encouraging people to be volunteers. Every year, hundreds of children and their families from The Children's Cancer Institute. come to see The Wiggles big show with their families in Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, Wollongong, Sydney, Newcastle and Sydney. The Wiggles have also been strong supporters of The Sudden Infant Death Association and are patrons of Foster Care Australia and the Bonnie Babes Foundation.

The Wiggles has grown from what was a simple idea to make a great album for children to being a part of the lives of millions of children across the world. It has seen four guys from Sydney take their music, stories and characters from Macquarie University to the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade in New York to filming on the Great Wall of China to the gigs they do at Hornsby R.S.L every year. Having been performing for over fifteen years, it will not be long before children who once were taken to see The Wiggles perform will bring their children to watch The Wiggles.

The beat goes on!

Paul Field

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