MY LIFE AND TOYS

A ~~FILM~~ BOOK BY

BRIAN LEVANT

PHOTOS BY JOE PELLEGRINI

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FOREWORD

by Jensen Karp

There is a very fine line between collector and hoarder. My wife reminds me of this every time I purchase a new vintage Milhouse action figure on eBay. And she's not wrong. I am at least self-aware enough to understand her concern and realize I'm walking that line like a skilled, somewhat adrenaline-addicted, circus tightrope performer. And I don't blame her for the worrisome look every time a package arrives at the house that poorly hides a visible outline of a bespectacled yellow cartoon character, because she doesn't know the origins of my obsessive ways. Like that young teen in the infamous PSA, busted by his father for stashing weed, when asked who taught me how to do this stuff. I have only one answer: I learned it from watching you, Brian Levant.

Just out of high school, I was lucky enough to score an internship for Brian while he was prepping *The Flintstones in: Viva Rock Vegas*. He already had a storied career in the business, with stops on iconic TV shows like *Happy Days* and *Mork & Mindy*, and had become a go-to director for kids' movies in the Blockbuster Video era. It was a dream come true to be working on the Universal Studios lot, giving alts on jokes (even when not asked) and hearing sentences like "executives' notes suck" for the first time. I drove to work every day smiling, excited to see what I'd be learning next, only quitting once I stumbled upon a radio contest that led to a million-dollar recording contract with Jimmy Iovine, but that's a different book. No, literally. It's a different book.

But what I learned most during that opportunity, which to the outside world may have just looked like fetching coffee and making copies, was something more valuable than anything I'd learn studying film at USC the next year. It was the ability to make your lifelong passions your job.

Brian somehow has been able to take his personal, even childhood, interests and will them into existence as successful gigs. Collecting toys isn't just a hobby for Brian; it's been a creative endeavor, a source of influence and a building block to his signature aesthetic. It would be difficult not to address the serendipity of a guy who started his world-renowned toy collection with a few Flintstones figures, later becoming the director who would introduce them to the big screen. Or that he'd somehow find a way to make *Jingle All The Way*, an entire movie about buying toys (which still seems insane).

I remember visiting his house for the first time, which once you experience this book, you'll understand looks like if a teenager found thousands of genie lamps, and I felt so inspired. My own endless hours of walking the aisles of Toys "R" Us, even as an adult, COULD professionally pay off—and finally, here was the proof.

This book is more than just beautiful pictures and Brian's unbelievable stories disguised as a time capsule. To me, it's a guiding light for another idiot intern to feel empowered enough not to give up collecting for a 9 to 5. It's evidence that you don't really have to grow up to be an adult. You just have to let it work for you.

I hope my wife reads this.

Jensen Karp is television writer and producer and owner of LA's pop culture epicenter, Gallery 1988. He is the author of Just Can't Get Enough, *which chronicles his own love for '80s toys and* Kanye West Owes Me $300, *a memoir of his somewhat infamous collapse in the music industry as the rapper Hot Karl.*

I was a little boy who loved to make up stories. Soon I began to fancy myself a writer. In third grade, I submitted my first jokes to local kids shows (none were ever used) and created a comic book called *The Blue Streak*. I wrote sketches for our Cub Scout den to perform. I edited my class and Sunday School newsletters. I wrote sports for my high school and local weekly paper. At Camp Indianola, I rose to editor of the Wednesday Totem Pole (the editor of the Sunday Totem Pole was NPR's Scott Simon). In college, I wrote short stories and occasionally, other people's papers. By 23, I had my first network writing credits. There would be countless drafts of hundreds more episodes and features. For years I bolted myself to a typewriter in small spaces and willed myself to let it be the vehicle through which my imagination would translate to words. Throughout this journey, there has been only one problem—I M A TERrIB[L TYPISTT!!!

I have valiantly battled the keyboard and occasionally can zip through a thought. However, far too much of my time is spent correcting errors. "Why," you might ask, "can't he perform this simple function that teenagers can execute at fifty words a minute using just their thumbs?" I just can't get all my fingers to cooperate. My seventh grade typing teacher, George Uramkin, gave up on me about the third day of class. I was branded a "key peeker," incapable of blindly guiding said fingers up or down from the "home row" A-S-D-F-J-K-L. So, while the rest of the class, especially those who were taking piano lessons, were blazing through text and typing portraits of President Kennedy, I couldn't even get my "quick brown fox to jump over the lazy grey dog."

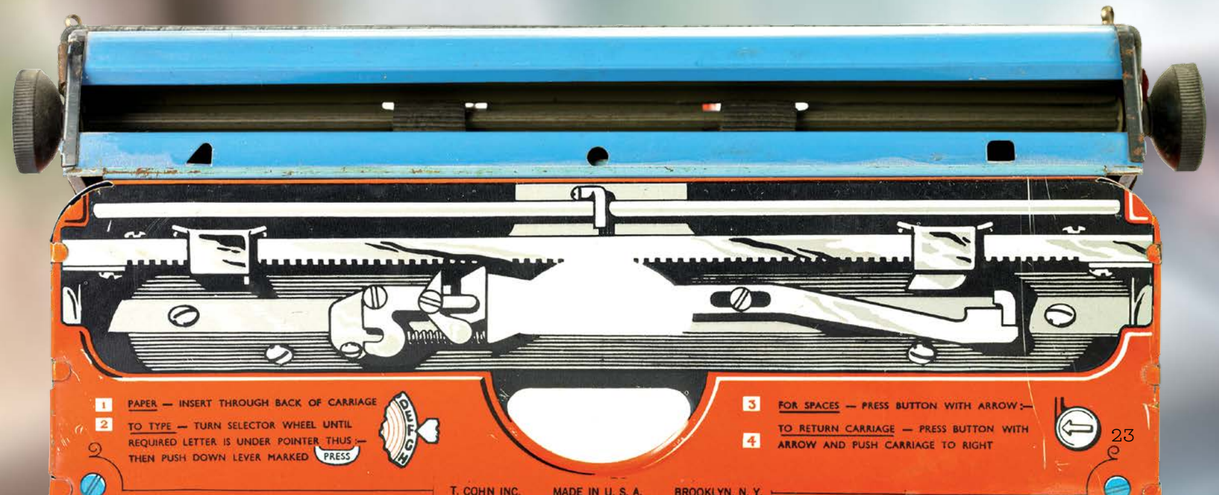
I can catch, throw, hit or kick any kind of ball, but I've just never been able to get my fingers to work independently from my head. I tried for years to learn to play the guitar without success and the act of typing has become a plodding Sisyphus-like process wherein two fingers on each hand and my right thumb betray my brain. But my frustration with the machines didn't begin in Mr. Uramkin's classroom.

It began when my parents, with big smiles, surprised me with a TOY TYPEWRITER! This was a real breakthrough. A typewriter was a "smart kid" toy. If you got a toy typewriter or a Gilbert chemistry set or a motorized Erector Set, it was aspirational. It meant your parents thought you might amount to something, to know that they could see you as a writer, a chemist or engineer, then maybe you could imagine yourself as one as well. It also meant you weren't getting The Great Garloo you really wanted. I think the other important factor that drove my early interest in writing was my grandmother's neighbor in Miami Beach, Mrs. Beatrice Alpert.

Mrs. Alpert was the first "collector" I ever knew. She was a fascinating woman. Mrs. Alpert had unique objects (like a grain receipt from King Tut—chiseled on stone in hieroglyphics) and interesting stories from her travels around the world. While our grandmother was out and about playing Mahjong or going to luncheons, my brother Guffy and I spent hours with our octogenarian pal. She taught us to fish, made us Rice Krispies treats and her delicious chocolate cake. Once she took us to the Seminole Indian reservation, where we actually saw a man wrestle an alligator. But what truly mesmerized me was the fact that she grew up in Elmira, New York, where she was best friends with a little girl whose family summered on the next farm over. Her name was Jean Clemens…you probably are familiar with Jean's father, Samuel—better known by his nom de plume, Mark Twain. At the time, I was already a huge fan and I read Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer's adventures over and over. They still provide a timeless portrait of boyhood, coupled with thrilling adventure, sharp social commentary and Twain's unique humor. Mrs. Alpert had autographed copies of those books and others that Twain had written and published "just for the kids in the neighborhood." In a "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" sense, I stood barely two steps away from one of the greatest writers who ever walked the earth…and staring endlessly in the glass case housing Twain's treasures, somehow, made it feasible to aspire to be a storyteller.

And that's how you get a toy typewriter for your birthday. Though shiny with beautiful details, my tin toy typewriter didn't need the kind of imagination a toy stove required—it actually worked! Sort of. The keyboard was just for show, actual typing was accomplished by an arduous process of turning a dial to the desired letter then pressing it with a lever causing one letter at a time to be printed somewhat crookedly on a sheet of paper that never got lined up evenly. It was a slower process than when Twain was typesetting for the Hannibal Journal in his early teens. Typing and writing, forever linked, turning ideas into words, one letter at a time. That toy typewriter was the perfect introduction to a lifetime engaged in this slow, painful, frustrating, creative battle. It should be noted that Twain squandered most of his literary fortune underwriting the "Paige Compositor," a complicated, mechanical typesetting device that was completely unreliable. But, I like my stories to have a happy endings, so…

For years, I reverted to writing with a Sharpie on a legal pad…but eventually it all had to be typed up. Finally, I realized that since I loved collaborating with other writers anyways, I would team up with partners who, unlike myself, had mastered the keyboard's dark arts. Mark Twain decreed that his assembled autobiographical writings could not be published until a hundred years after his death. They were released in 2010 and immediately shot to the top of the bestsellers list. Mrs. Alpert lived well into her 90s and is fondly remembered by my family. In fact, recently, my cousin Karey sent me Mrs. Alpert's chocolate cake recipe. It was as good as I remembered it.



When the lights came on, there were tears in their eyes. Though they were well into their 80s, they leaped to their feet and threw their arms around me like a son returned from war. And, in a way, I was their child. After all, we *were* all practically raised by them.

Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera spent their long, long lives doing little more than trying to make people laugh. They succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. They were the kindest, gentlest and easily the most fulfilled people I'd ever known. I'd been entrusted with translating the crown jewel of their empire, *The Flintstones*, primetime's first animated series, from a 1960s cartoon into a $50 million, live action, Steven Spielberg-produced film. And throughout the nearly two-year production process, I had been looking forward to this very day when I could show them our tribute to their creation.

As boys, both Hanna and Barbera fell in love with the great silent movie clowns who had a tremendous influence on everything they did. Fred & Barney, they insisted, were a tribute to Laurel & Hardy (not lifted from *The Honeymooners*?), Huckleberry Hound's stone-faced slapstick was descended from Buster Keaton. Their show's endless chase scenes were cribbed from the Keystone Cops, and the Little Tramp's constant run-ins with the law while pursuing his next meal became the model for Tom & Jerry's, Pixie & Dixie's and Yogi & Boo Boo's entire careers.

So, after creating iconic animated shorts for the lofty Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for more than 15 years, MGM closed its cartoon studio in 1957, leaving Hanna and Barbara without a home. They swallowed their pride and became the undisputed animation kings of pee-wee TV.

The Flintstones was a bold move to change that perception. The primetime, half-hour, animated sitcom merged the blustery "everyman" William Bendix personified in *The Life of Riley* with Buster Keaton's *Three Ages* caveman.

Bill and Joe tapped a geyser of inspiration that somehow, effortlessly, portrayed a fun-loving satire of modern life in the Space Race/Kennedy-era but set in a world where man and prehistoric beast lived in utter synchronicity. They created a Stone Age society of constant delights from their imaginative visual punditry that hilariously reflected 20th-century suburbia.

The show was an immediate hit for ABC, triumphing over the years against everything CBS and NBC threw at it from Clint Eastwood's series, *Rawhide*, to *Sing-Along with Mitch*. Plus, it drove a merchandising bonanza that would help grow Hanna-Barbera into an empire. Now I could be critical and point out that the writing paled compared to the visuals, and that the episodes themselves never matched the promise and energy of the main title driven by Hoyt Curtin's

iconic theme song (the same could be said of most Hanna-Barbera shows—nobody did it better). But when *The Flintstones* premiered on September 12th, 1960, like most of America, I didn't give a damn. It was original, it had a unique spirit, a great cast including gravel-voiced Alan Reed as Fred, Jean Vander Pyl as Wilma, Bea (*The Burns and Allen Show*) Benaderet as Betty, and Mel (Bugs Bunny) Blanc, the man of a thousand voices, who used two of them for Barney and Dino.

That night I became a lifelong fan. When I started seriously collecting TV toys and memorabilia, I started a Flintstones collection. In 1992, I had maybe forty Flintstone toys and most of them were pretty un-unique—but that's what I snapped a Polaroid of to take to my initial meeting with Spielberg.

Now, I'm sure, you're asking the same question most people did at the time: "How the hell did *HE* get in a room with Steven Spielberg?"

Years before, uber producer Joel Silver had enlisted Warner Brothers, Jim Belushi, and *Die Hard* scribe Steven deSouza to try a live action *Flintstones*, but it never got off the launch pad. So, while filming the movie *Always*, Spielberg walked past one of its stars, John Goodman, at lunch and exclaimed, "You should play Fred Flintstone!" John confided to me that he answered with a polite smile, but thought to himself, "Oh yeah? And how'd you like a knuckle sandwich?"

Spielberg found a much warmer welcome from his "Fievel" mouse collaborator, David Kirschner, who was running Hanna-Barbera's new feature division, Bedrock Productions…and a deal was hatched.

As legend has it, Goodman signed on (it's hard to say no to Spielberg) but was tied up most of the year with *Roseanne*, so for four consecutive years, Spielberg's production company, Amblin, developed a different script and met with a bevy of A-list directors to shoot *The Flintstones* during John's summer hiatuses…but again, it didn't come together—and that turned out to be a good thing for *The Flintstones*, as during the interim, CGI special effects came of age with the production of *Jurassic Park*. Kathy Kennedy (then of Amblin—today she runs the Star Wars empire) was determined not to let the project spend another year in the tar pits of development. That ticking clock might've caused Amblin to lower their employment standards enough to consider me.

In the fall of 1992, I'd heard that Amblin was looking for someone to do a rewrite of their current script, but of course, by the time word had trickled down to me, the job was long gone. But to my amazement, and due to *Beethoven's* recent success, they asked if I'd be interested in meeting about directing the film.

So, weeks later, during their lunch break while shooting *Jurassic* on the Universal back lot, I was ushered into the office of one of the finest filmmakers of all time. For weeks, I'd done nothing except focus on how I could capture the appeal and


A SPANNER IN THE WORKS


HERMAN MUNSTERS
LILY MUNSTERS
POW
ROBIN BOY WONDER
DICK GRAYSON
I'M
MOE
LARRY
CURLY
MEMBER
MICKEY MOUSE CLUB
JAMES BOND
"FREE AT LAST"
I LIKE
Scars
HAS EVERYTHIN
BUSTER BROWN

If I'm being completely honest, I wasn't the biggest Scooby-Doo fan in the world. By the time it premiered, I was sixteen, I had wheels, a girlfriend and I spent fewer and fewer Saturday mornings in front of our first color TV. Still, for the next forty years it was hard to escape the clutches of Mystery Incorporated. While the likes of *Frankenstein Jr.* and *Atom Ant* were banished to the Hanna-Barbera junkyard and Huck and Yogi had been reduced to bit players on the *Laff-A-Lympics* – Scooby refused to be put to sleep. Between 1969 and 2020, Shaggy, Scooby, Daphne, Fred and Velma have racked up an unparalleled longevity, morphing through the decades under eighteen different titles spanning everything from *A Pup Named Scooby-Doo* to *Scooby's Laff-A-Lympics* – over forty feature-length animated films, a CGI feature and four successful live action movies…two of which I directed.

I had been approached to helm the first theatrical film, but I found the script, which had originated from Mike Myers's attempt to paint *Scooby* with the same affectionate/parody brush he used on his *Austin Powers* films. Though Myers had de-camped and the studio clung to many of his ideas, like the group having had a major falling out and broken-up and headed into what I felt was "iffy" family film grounds – stealing the souls of children. At one point I blurted out, "can't we just start at the beginning and have them all be in college and end up using the school's 'ride board,' they end up in a run-down van with a crazy hippie and his Great Dane – and on their way to Daytona Beach for spring break, they encounter a mystery, bond as a unit and solve it?"

The Producer's response was to ask me if there was any way I could wrap my head around the existing story. I just couldn't see it. Others did and they made a very successful, well-cast film and a sequel. So, years later, after *Are We There Yet?*, I was getting a little frustrated as "sure-fire" projects kept going up in smoke, then I heard that the Cartoon Network was planning a new live-action *Scooby-Doo* series, to be kicked-off with a two-hour movie, detailing the origin of the group.

With my Hanna-Barbera bonafides, I moved right to the front of the line of potential hires. Although at my first meeting, I was forced to dance around the fact that I had suddenly forgotten Daphne's name, Warner's exec Matt Bierman embraced my ideas for being faithful to the franchise without being moored to its every convention. I wanted the group to be a foursome (five with Scooby) who meet with absolutely nothing in common, finding courage, comfort and friendship in one another while battling the unknown.

And just as we were getting set to revise Dan and Steve Altiere's script – an eight-month long Writers Guild strike struck and everything stopped. During the strike I tried to brush up on my *Scooby* and I thought a lot about Joe Barbera. He had died only three years before. Like so many of the major animators, he lived a long, active life. He was 95 and still very cool. In 1994, Joe published his autobiography, *My Life in Toons* and he sent me a copy with a beautiful inscription. In the book, Joe wrote how CBS Saturday Morning honcho Fred Silverman wanted to do a show called *Mystery House*, filled with the stuff that gives kids nightmares. The network bosses were extremely wary.

After creating artwork that drew on influences from radio's *I Love A Mystery* to Oz's Cowardly Lion and the groups of hippies Joe used to see tooling around L.A. in psychedelic-painted vans. He also wrote that originally, the addition of a dog was primarily for merchandising and comic relief…but soon it became obvious that, in the tradition of Fonzie, Edd "Kookie" Burns and Urkel, a supporting player became the focus of the series and by featuring an easily frightened canine cast member, the concept became acceptable to CBS's top brass.

The cherry on the sundae was provided by Silverman. While on a plane, he heard Frank Sinatra's tune, "Strangers in the Night" and Sinatra's refrain of "Scooby-Dooby Doo, Da Dooby Doo…" Silverman came up with a title that answered the musical question: "Scooby-Doo: Where Are You?" Whether or not Hanna & Barbera liked the title or not they went along with it, because when the network is pitching you titles, you've hooked them. The show would run for seven seasons on CBS before, like Fred Silverman, moving to ABC.

The strike ended and along with it, the possibility of a series after someone finally noticed that it would cost more money for a computer generated Scooby than they had naively expected to make each episode for. Happily, the film remained and the Altiere brothers went back to work armed with a slew of new ideas, ramping up our supernatural action. We then began casting.

Since our new template called for a high school-age Mystery Inc. and our budget eliminated the possibility of hiring "a name," we read over 300 kids, but when each of the four we ultimately cast first walked through the door, I knew each of them would land the role before any of them had said a word. What Robbie Amell (Fred), Hayley Kiyoko Alcroft (Velma), Kate Melton (Daphne) and Nick Palatas (Shaggy) lacked in age (they were between 15 and 20) and experience, they made up for in enthusiasm and effort.


Dick Boy
TOXIC
NON


MAIL
TURBO MAN
It's Turbo Time!

MY LIFE AND TOYS

Brian Levant, the producer of television classics like *Happy Days* and *Mork & Mindy* and the director of the blockbuster films *Beethoven*, *The Flintstones*, *Jingle All the Way* and *Are We There Yet?*, presents highlights from his massive toy and Pop Culture archives.

My Life and Toys is a colorful love letter to the characters and artifacts that chronicle our civilization's tastes, childhood obsessions and entertainments of the past century. Levant gives a backstage tour of his long career and encounters with icons ranging from Groucho Marx, Buffalo Bob Smith, The Lone Ranger, Spielberg, Arnold, Ice Cube, the Cleavers, Elizabeth Taylor and Captain Kangaroo all the way to Scooby-Doo.

Featuring over 1,000 arresting photographs by acclaimed commercial photographer Joe Pellegrini, *My Life and Toys* brings new life to the objects old, new, tiny, giant, shiny and battered, characters familiar and obscure—assembled over a half century of collecting, along with one-of-a-kind props, photos and designs from his hit projects.

My Life and Toys is a joyous, iconic, time-traveling voyage for both the young and the young at heart.

"The only thing more fun than reading my old *Happy Days* pal Brian Levant's terrific book would be actually getting down on the floor and playing with your favorite of these incredible, classic toys. Though eventually your folks would tell you to put your stuff away because it's past your bedtime and then you'd be stuck with that chore instead of just closing the book and turning the light out. So, there's a pretty good argument that there is NOTHING more fun than having your own copy of *My Life and Toys*."

– Ron Howard
Director, *Splash!*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *The Beatles: Eight Days a Week*

"*My Life and Toys* is a compelling time capsule that shows off Levant's museum-worthy collections, plus his autobiographical anecdotes convey decades of collecting passion through a career that has been influenced by pop culture and, in turn, gone on to influence pop culture itself."

– James Zahn
Senior Editor, *The Toy Insider*

"Readers will be blown away by *My Life and Toys*' beautiful design and photography. The book takes you on an unbelievable visual ride and joyous adventure."

– Tony Dow
"Wally", *Leave it to Beaver*
Director, *Babylon 5*

My Life and Toys **| Brian Levant | Arts, Comics, Collectibles**
September 13, 2022 Release | $85 | 464 pages with two 8-page gatefolds
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More than 1000 original color photographs | ISBN: 978-1-943876-18-1

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