

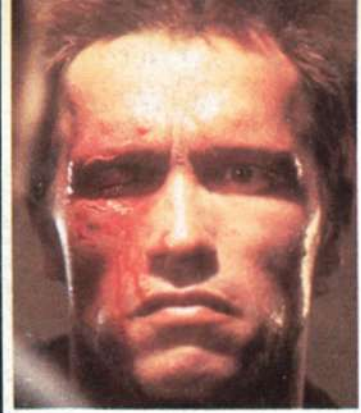
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Marshmallow Menace

The slightly unusual career of Billy Bryan—a.k.a. Mr. Stay-Puft

By R.H. Martin

Children usually do like puppets, and Billy Bryan was no exception. Particularly, he remembers being fascinated by Topo Gigio, the little Italian mouse who was a frequent visitor on the old Ed Sullivan show, and the Muppets. So, after seeing a TV documentary entitled "The Muppets on Puppets," he picked up a few of the basic techniques demonstrated on the show, and began improvising with foam and glue.

"It probably would've ended right there,"

he recalls, "except that, when one of my mother's friends heard that I had made a puppet, she said, 'Oh, good; you can give a show at my children's party next week.'"

Bryan being in the middle of a crop of seven kids raised in Bedford, Massachusetts, he had plenty of siblings to collaborate with him on his first few shows. "When my Dad

Before publishing this photo, we promised to point out that Mr. Bryan has an adorable wife and two lovely children!

noticed that I had neglected my studies and had made a few dollars, he was a bit disgruntled," Bryan confesses. "He said something like, 'Oh, great, you'll be a puppeteer for the rest of your life and make \$12 a week'—which was what I had made that particular week. So, for awhile, I was not totally abated, but abashed."

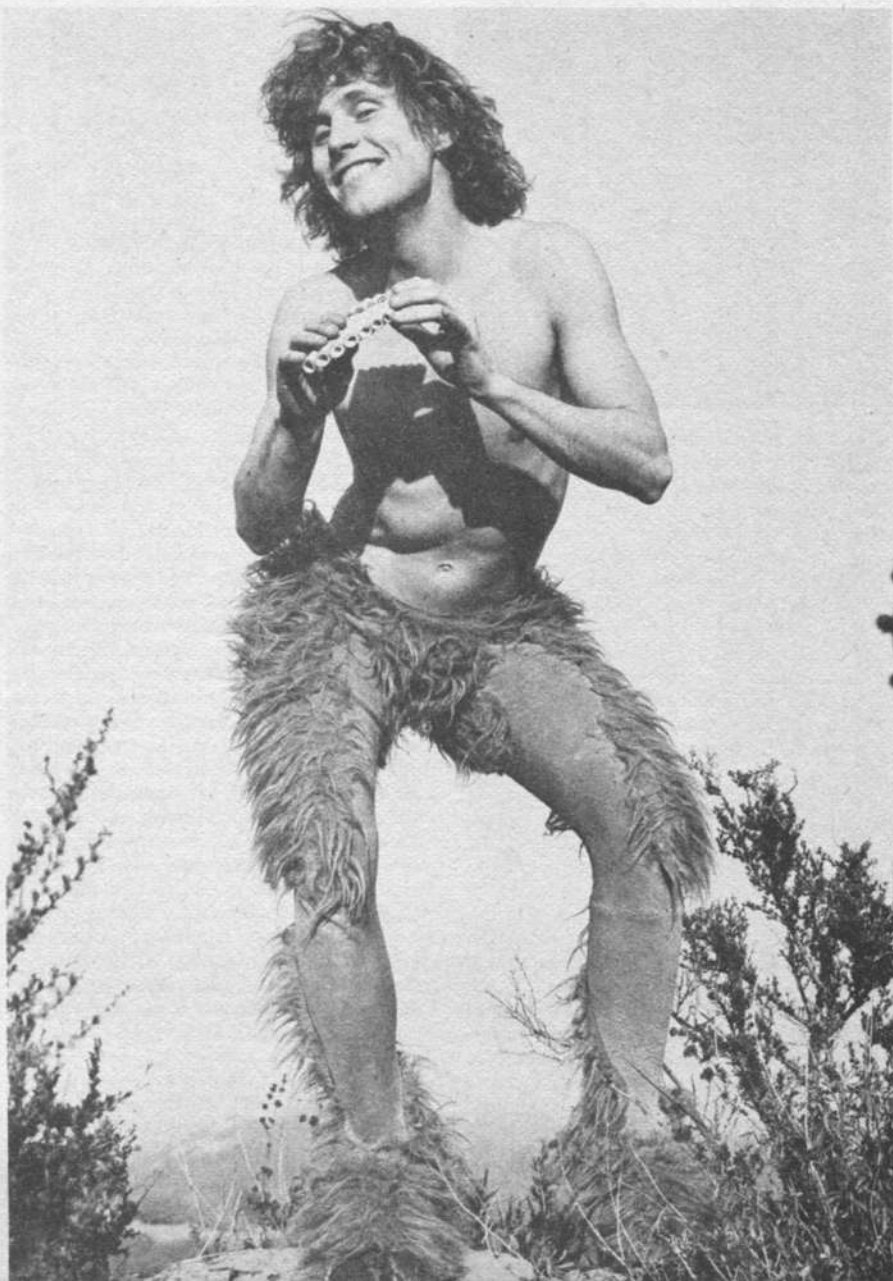
Other interests took over, including some work as a silversmith. But Bryan soon returned to gluing foam, when a friend of his at Syracuse University requested a man-sized plant-suit for a plant food commercial he was directing for film class. Bryan thought of the project as challenging fun, more than as any sort of career move; still, the root-legged, leaf-armed, flower-headed creation was the start of an unusual career in foam costumery.

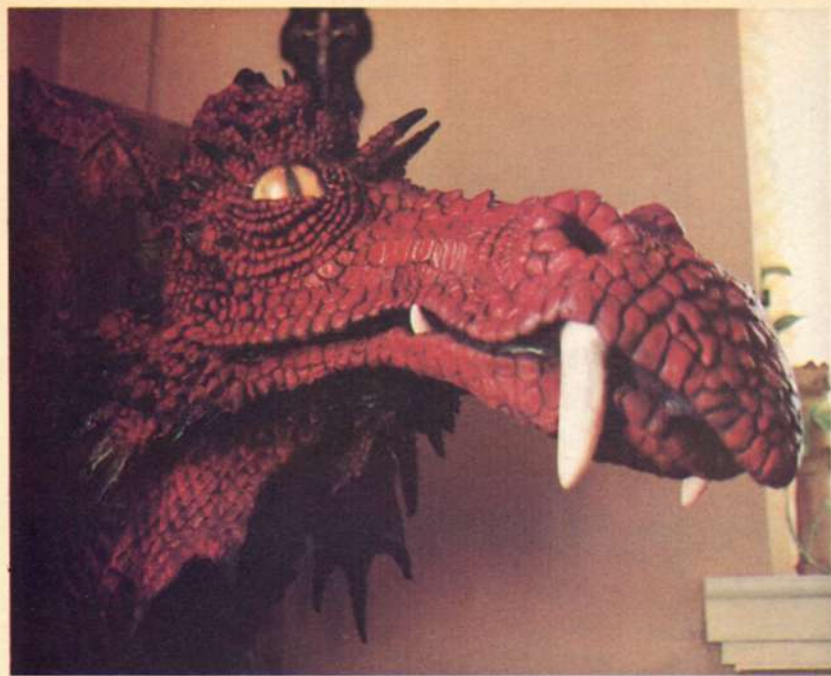
After college, Bryan headed west, finding employment at L.A.'s Fantasy Fair, an outfit specializing in atmospheric costumes. It was there that Bryan had his first brush with real fame, building giant banana and ice cream cone costumes that were commissioned and worn by Elton John for one of his Madison Square Garden concerts.

Soon after, Bryan made the rounds of the networks, seeking even greater glamor and fame. "I didn't get a job when I interviewed," he recalls, "but there was a sudden emergency—'Disco Duck' was making a guest appearance on a variety show at NBC and needed a new body. Apparently, the body they had was all fiberglass, and just wouldn't do. It was a very quick, one-day job, but I wound up working there for five years. I still have my Disco Duck T-shirt around here someplace."

Bryan's most bizarre work at NBC was done for the Johnny Carson show. "I made a lot of strange costumes that were worn either by a very shapely lady or by Carson himself. There was a giant medfly, a purse that was shaped like Karl Malden's nose—something you should never leave home without—and there were a whole lot of requests for strange brassieres, for instance a bra made out of 'bacon' (actually strips of painted foam) that was supposed to be Miss Piggy's bra. There was also a stone jockstrap, but I can't remember whose that was supposed to be.

"There were a few things we did that never quite made it to the air. The most painful example was a six foot tall head of Johnny Carson, sculpted in foam. I was just about finished with it, when word came down that he had decided that the sketch simply wasn't





A likeable dragon named Long-Grin, and Bryan's NBC elephant, fleetingly glimpsed in *Incredible Shrinking Woman*.

funny. Carson does that a lot—even on the show, you'll see him rip up a card because he's decided that a particular gag just won't work. But of course, I wish he'd seen the head.

"When there weren't special projects to be worked on, they wanted me to fill their closets with things they might be able to rent. One of those was an elephant costume that showed up later in *Incredible Shrinking Woman*; there was a scene in a closet where they used it as an oversized toy, shaking maracas.

"After five years at NBC, I figured it was time to graduate. Television is very demanding, a lot of the jobs are done quick-and-dirty to meet deadlines. And they had fewer things for me to do as the number of musical variety shows being produced went way down." It was also clear that Bryan had gone as far as one could go sculpting foam for a network.

Opportunities seemed less limited for an artist-entrepreneur working for the movies.

Bryan worked for about a month at Disney Studios on a fantasy project called *Trick or Treat*. The story concerned a group of children who stumble into an other-worldly Halloween party in an old haunted house. Bryan had started creating costumes for the film's whimsical creatures when the project was cancelled. "It was a project of Tom Wilhite's," Bryan says. "*TRON* was also his, and when that didn't do as well as hoped, Wilhite was sort of shuffled off. . . ."

There followed a stint at the shop of Sid and Marty Krofft, who will no doubt always be remembered as the creators of *H.R. Puffenstuf* (who could forget Witchie-Poo?). At the time, the Kroffts had an eye on the legitimate stage, with a Broadway show project and a country music stage show in the works. Only the latter came to pass while

Bryan was at the Kroffts. Starring Irlene Mandrell—the sister of Barbara and Louise—the latter was designed to back up the country chanteuse's lack of singing abilities with such sure-fire gags as a man-sized cactus that would chase her across the stage while she attempted to sing "The Tennessee Waltz." The Kroffts' Broadway show is still in development.

Bryan was then contacted by Don Post Studios for a job supervising the manufacture of about 150 special costumes to be worn by the cast of *Dune*. In Frank Herbert's novel, the inhabitants of the desert planet Dune must wear special "still suits" that recycle the moisture that is usually lost through the body's normal functions. "The suits were designed by Bob Greenwood," says Bryan, "and he came to Post to have them cast in rubber. We explained to him that solid rubber suits might not be such a good idea for a



Left, the candy creature creates havoc on the miniature set which, right, is transformed, via FX cinematography, to the concrete canyons of uptown Manhattan.





Toasted! And Manhattan is spared death by sugar shock.

cast working in the middle of the desert. We showed him that we could make it from individual foam pieces, and that it would be lighter. We thought we had him convinced—until he told us to cover the foam with rubber."

Bryan began a small industry one day by wearing what he called his "thinking cap" to the Post studio one day—a rubber hat shaped to the contours of the human brain. "Don looked at it, and said, 'Hmmm...'" Soon afterwards, the Crazy Craniums were hatched.

Crazy Craniums, which you lucky readers can own for only \$12 postpaid (see crass commercial ad), are the unfortunate outcome of a combined brainstorm between Post and Bryan. "My favorites are the knucklehead, the pop-top and the brain," says Bryan, who further reveals his own successful attempt to perpetuate his personal fame.

"At one point, I thought Don had figured it out when he said to me, 'All these hats have your name on them.' I asked him what he meant, and he said, 'Look—they all have a bill.' But I don't think he realizes that, on all of those brain hats, the convolutions spell out my name—'Billy' up one side, and 'Bryan' up the other." Bryan's initials can also be found encribed on the "stinky" model (popularly known as "shithead").

Bryan's major opus in marshmallow started with a phone call from Linda Frobos, a fellow foam sculptor he had met at Kroffts' and whom he had hired for the *Dune* project. "She asked me how I would go about building a marshmallow man suit. I thought she was asking me for her own information, which I freely supplied; then a couple of days later I was called in to speak with Stuart Ziff about doing the Mr. Stay-Puft suit for *Ghostbusters*."

Achieving versimilitude in a marshmallow man suit was not the easiest task ever handed a young foam sculptor. The first suit built sag-

ged unmercifully, resulting in a bottom-heavy Mr. Stay-Puft, with folds appearing in the crotch area that sharply resembled a vagina. That was not the sort of laugh being sought for the sequence, so it was back to the drawing boards.

At the suggestion of higher-ups, Bryan built one suit with a fiberglass core; as he expected, the suit lacked the sense of marshmallow-y buoyancy so essential to Mr. Stay-Puft. As schedules were growing short, Bryan requested permission to derive an all-foam solution to the Stay-Puft problem. Given a single day, he quickly built a Mr. Stay-Puft built of light foam glued around a central core of denser, heavyweight foam. It worked.

Because the suit was assembled and sculpted from foam sheets, built up in layers, there were seams to be hidden; all of these were carefully located in the rear, out of camera range. For the sequence in which Mr. Stay-Puft is toasted, a dozen burnable suits were built, some of these with seams placed in the front, to allow filming from the rear.

Mr. Stay-Puft's heads (one that smiled, one that expressed dismay) were sculpted by Linda Frobos, with moldwork by Gunnar Ferdinandsenn and Richard Ruiz. The internal mechanics to allow a range of expression for the buoyant behemoth were built by Steve Dunham, Tom Culnan, Lance Anderson and the ubiquitous Steve Neill. Assisting Bryan in the construction of the many burnable bodies were Etsuko Egawa, Terry Hardin, Bart Daniels, Mark Tyler and Eric Fiedler. "And I hope you'll mention Mark Wilson," says Bryan. "He didn't work on the marshmallow man, but he was the guy wearing Onionhead, and he didn't even get a credit!"

Bryan wore the marshmallow suit for all of Mr. Stay-Puft's non-burning sequence, gaining some limited vision through the marshmallow man's mouth. A network of cables



The first manned mission into Cartoonland!

controlling the head's mechanics trailed behind him as he received stage directions from a walkie-talkie. "The batteries tended to wear out pretty fast, though," he says. "So, a lot of the time, directions were relayed to me by a guy shouting as loud as he could."

The burn sequences were especially dangerous, since any kind of foam produces poisonous gases while burning. Filmed outdoors, in the effects facility's parking lot, the burning sequences were performed by Brad Crouch and by Tony Cecere. The stunt suits were made of flammable foam surrounding a core of fire-retardant foam, and the stuntmen were on oxygen lines while performing the burn.

Bryan is reasonably happy with the results on screen, except perhaps the all-too-obvious use of shaving cream to simulate a rain of melted marshmallow after Stay-Puft's demise. "I saw the rough cut with Randy Cook, and his comment was, 'Patently shaving cream,'" Bryan says.

But such trivialities will not dim Bryan's pleasure in his most significant credit to date; and he is now looking forward to bringing another cinematic fantasy creature to life. That is Long-Grin, a sympathetic dragon featured in a screenplay of the same name, written by Travis Pike. The project, currently in the development stages, will be done, says Bryan, "with a little bit of humor, a little bit of adventure, a little bit of fantasy."

Mr. Stay-Puft looks on in dismay prior to his sticky demise.



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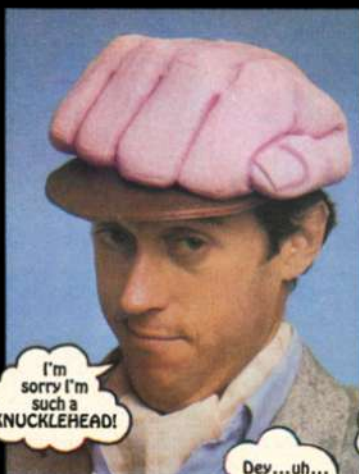


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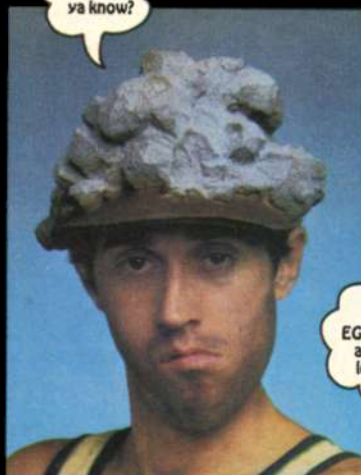
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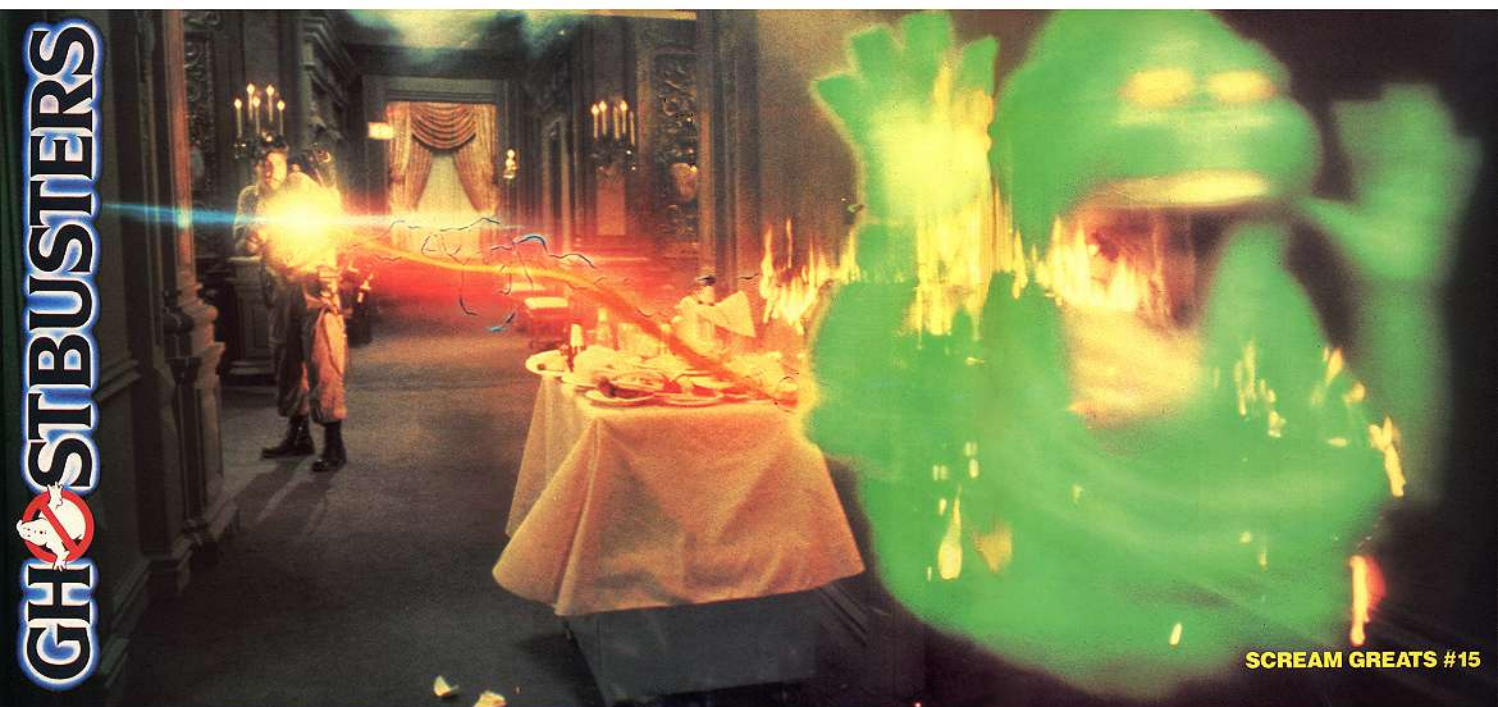
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