

# Jim Henson

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James Maury "Jim" Henson (September 24, 1936 &ndash; May 16, 1990), was the most widely known puppeteer in American television history. He was the creator of The Muppets and the leading force behind their long creative run in the television series Sesame Street and The Muppet Show and films such as The Muppet Movie (1979) and The Dark Crystal (1982).

Jim Henson was born at King's Daughters Hospital in Greenville, Mississippi, on September 24, 1936, the second son of Paul and Betty Henson. Jim spent his early years in Leland, where his father had an assignment with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He remembered spending countless happy hours, alone and with friends, exploring the shorelines of Deer Creek, not far from his parents' house. Throughout his childhood, Jim Henson had an interest in both art and television. Young Jim was particularly close to his maternal grandmother and visited her often at the family home in Maryland. As an avid painter, quilter, and needleworker, she was supportive of his artistic efforts and encouraged him to use his imagination and to take delight in the world around him.

When Jim was in the fifth grade, the Hensons returned to Maryland where Jim, often with his older brother Paul, experimented with a variety of artistic techniques. In 1954, while still in high school, he began his television career performing puppets on a local Washington, DC Saturday morning program on WTOP-TV. The following year, as a freshman at the University of Maryland, he was given his own twice-daily, five-minute show, Sam and Friends, on the local NBC affiliate, WRC-TV. Jim's first performing partner was Jane Nebel, whom he met at the University, and who later became his wife. Sam and Friends introduced many Muppet mainstays music, snarky humor, and technical tricks. The show also introduced the most famous Muppet of all Kermit who was not yet a frog.

The success of Sam and Friends led to guest appearances on such national network programs as The Steve Allen Show, The Jack Paar Show, and The Today Show. At the same time, Jim began making hundreds of humorous commercials for sponsors throughout the country. In 1961, as Muppets, Inc. grew, Jim and Jane brought on puppeteer and writer Jerry Juhl, who would become one of Jim's major collaborators. The demands of national television appearances brought Jim and his family to New York in 1963.

With weekly appearances on The Today Show and an ever-growing list of commercial clients, Jim sought out the talents of master puppet builder, Don Sahlin, and young puppeteer, Frank Oz. They worked together to develop the Muppets' first nationally-known character, Rowlf, who appeared regularly on The Jimmy Dean Show from 1963 to 1966. Having established a group of talented collaborators, Jim Henson was able to pursue his career in puppetry and develop his strong interest in filmmaking.

Between 1964 and 1969, Jim produced several experimental films including the award-winning Time Piece, Youth '68, and The Cube. These projects expanded Jim's knowledge of various film techniques, leading to greater innovations with the Muppets. In the mid-1960s, Joan Ganz Cooney, a public television producer, began work on Sesame Street, an educational children's show that would premiere in 1969. Based on Jim's success in creating short, funny puppet pieces, Cooney asked him to create a family of characters to populate Sesame Street. These included Ernie and Bert, Oscar the Grouch, Grover, Cookie Monster, and of course the 8-foot-2-inch Big Bird.

Working with Children's Television Workshop on Sesame Street also gave Jim Henson the opportunity to continue his experiments with film techniques. With his talented team, Jim produced over two dozen live action and animated shorts to teach counting and other concepts. Sesame Street illustrated the Muppets' appeal to children, but Jim's goal remained to entertain a wider, family audience. After years of promoting the idea for The Muppet Show, Jim finally received backing from London-based television producer, Lord Lew Grade. Production began in 1975 at Grade's ATV Studios. There, such unforgettable characters as Miss Piggy and Fozzie Bear, performed by Frank Oz; Gonzo the Great, performed by Dave Goelz; Scooter, performed by Richard Hunt; Lew Zealand, performed by Jerry Nelson; and Rizzo the Rat, performed by Steve Whitmire, were born.

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Hosted by Kermit the Frog and serenaded by Doctor Teeth and the Electric Mayhem, the Muppets, along with weekly guest stars, demonstrated the breadth of Jim Henson's humor and imagination. The Muppet Show family of characters have starred in five feature films: The Muppet Movie, The Great Muppet Caper, The Muppets Take Manhattan, The Muppet Christmas Carol, and Muppet Treasure Island. In addition to the Muppet movies, during the 1980s, Jim Henson also brought two fantasy films to the big screen. The Dark Crystal and Labyrinth, both inspired by the artwork of British illustrator, Brian Froud, challenged him to develop elaborate three-dimensional characters with advanced movement abilities.

The Dark Crystal was five years in development, using scores of designers, builders, technicians, and performers from across the globe. Jim Henson's compelling story and Brian Froud's imaginative vision produced a phenomenal showcase of puppetry and animatronics. Jim Henson and Brian Froud collaborated again on the feature film, Labyrinth, starring David Bowie and produced by George Lucas. Production of Labyrinth provided Jim Henson another opportunity to make technological advancements in the field of animatronics. The extensive multi-talented staff that worked on these two films formed the basis for what is now known as Jim Henson's Creature Shop, which began in London in 1979.

During the 1980s, Jim Henson continued to create memorable television specials and television series such as Fraggle Rock, Muppet Babies, Jim Henson's The Storyteller, and Jim Henson's Greek Myths. Fraggle Rock's Fraggles, Gorgs, and Doozers sang songs celebrating friendship, brotherhood, and peace. Muppet Babies, awarded four

consecutive Emmys for Outstanding Animated Program, continues to delight audiences today. Jim Henson's *The Storyteller* was an original series conceived by Jim Henson to convey the metaphoric richness of ancient stories. All of the episodes were based on authentic folk tales, with Academy Award-winning writer/director Anthony Minghella writing several. With a strong literary research team in combination with the magical visual effects and animatronics produced by the Creature Shop, Jim Henson's *The Storyteller* and Jim Henson's *Greek Myths* are rare combinations of ancient tradition and modern technological artistry. On May 16, 1990, after a brief illness, Jim Henson died in New York City, but his prolific work continues to entertain a global audience through the activities of The Jim Henson Company.

Jim Henson had the keen ability of drawing together a strong team of performers, artists, and collaborators who shared his vision and creativity. Led by the Henson family, The Jim Henson Company has dedicated itself to continuing the work that they and Jim had so successfully accomplished over the years. We continue to marvel at Jim Henson's characters on television and in the movies, and in Jim's last project, the special installation of *Muppet\*Vision 3D*, a short film attraction he directed for a custom-made theater at Walt Disney World's Disney/MGM Studios Theme Park. To this day, the award-winning animatronic work produced by Jim Henson's Creature Shop sets industry standards while bringing previously unseen worlds to life. As a brilliant innovator, Jim Henson sought to stretch the capabilities of advancing technology. As a preeminent popular artist, he contributed to the diverse visual vocabulary of the twentieth century. And as a performing genius, he brought delight and wonder to international audiences.

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#### TELEVISION

Tales of the Tinkerdee

Youth &rsquo;68

The Cube

The Muppets on Puppets

Hey Cinderella

The Great Santa Claus Switch

The Frog Prince

Muppet Musicians of Bremen

The Muppet Valentine Special

The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence

Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas

The Muppets Go Hollywood

John Denver and The Muppets: A Christmas Together

The Muppets Go to the Movies

Of Muppets and Men

The Fantastic Miss Piggy Show

The World of the Dark Crystal

John Denver and the Muppets: A Rocky Mountain Holiday

Inside the Labyrinth

The Muppets - A Celebration of 30 Years

The Tale of Bunny Picnic

Jim Henson's The Christmas Toy

Puppetman

Down at Fraggle Rock: Behind the Scenes

A Muppet Family Christmas

Sesame Street: Twenty and Still Counting

The Muppets at Walt Disney World

The Muppets Celebrate Jim Henson

CityKids

Mr. Willowby's Christmas Tree

Gulliver's Travels

MOVIES

Time Piece

The Muppet Movie

The Great Muppet Caper

The Dark Crystal

The Muppets Take Manhattan

Labyrinth

The Witches

The Muppet Christmas Carol

Muppet Treasure Island

Buddy