



## **Being Different Can Pay Off**

By *Theresa Danna*, N2Arts Correspondent  
Inside the Brain of Entertainer Fred Newman

It seems every class has a weird guy who is a master mimic, making strange noises and living on his own alien planet. Maybe you are that guy. If so, what are your chances of turning your personality into a career in performing arts?

One such nerd/geek, Fred Newman, used his uniqueness to create a lifelong career as an actor, writer, composer, musician, and comedian, winning awards such as the CableACE and an Emmy.

Fred's accomplishments include: voice acting for animated TV shows and movies, such as the Disney/Nickelodeon series *Doug* and the Academy Award-winning *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*; on-camera acting, writing, and sound effects for PBS children's programs *Between the Lions* and *Reading Rainbow*; songwriting for Disney Channel's *PB & J Otter*; and, most recently, touring as an ensemble actor and sound effects man for the long-running NPR radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*, starring Garrison Keillor.

"Fred can bring whole large audiences to their knees with, say, a school of demented dolphins hijacking a submarine while carrying a boombox playing Stevie Wonder," Keillor said. "He gets into sound effects pretty intensely, and he can make food come out of people's noses."

"I knew from the get-go that I was an odd person," Fred recalls. "I didn't quite fit in." While growing up in predominantly white LaGrange, Georgia, in the 1950s, Fred preferred to hang out with the older black storytellers in places such as Jack Fling's *Cash 'n Carry Grocery*, where he discovered the magic of storytelling.

Up until his teenage years, Fred was a loner, spending more time watching from the sidelines of the playground than being in the middle of the action. "I saw how kids got hurt from teasing, and I tried to help them feel better."

Fred learned how to use humor instead of fighting back when other kids bothered him. This tactic turned out to be great training for his future career. "Whatever it is that people tease you about, go there," Fred says. "That's where you'll find your gifts. That's where your vocation is. That's where your heart is. Find out what makes you different than the herd. Don't deny that. Whatever makes you special, or whatever you feel inadequate about, kiss that monster."

When Fred was feeling the pressure to fit in, he got support from teachers, who encouraged him to express himself through writing poetry or drawing.

"I finally became comfortable with myself around age 16," he remembers. "I had mostly female friends, because they were more accepting than guys. Once I felt accepted, I could be myself."

Although he did not know it at the time, Fred had a learning disability called dyslexia. This caused him to be a slow reader and have some memory problems. But once he realized he was dyslexic, which was when he was in college, he was able to understand himself even better. "My dyslexia forced me to compensate in other ways. It has made me more creative."

Some other keys to Fred's success are that he did not make decisions based on money. "I decided by what made my heart leap. I always assumed that the money will follow." He also does not believe in failure. "The word error comes from King Arthur's errant knights, the seekers of truth. Sometimes you have to make many attempts, and that can be frustrating. But there are no failures, just learning experiences."

Fred had gotten an MBA from Harvard Business School and started working for Newsweek magazine in New York city soon after graduation. While still at Newsweek, Fred realized he was "not a good corporate person" and decided to write a book about something he was good at - creating sounds with his mouth and voice. One day, Fred told his boss that he was stepping out to the men's room, but, instead, he slipped out to audition for The David Letterman Show. He won a spot on the show and has never looked back.

Now, more than 20 years later, his book - MouthSounds: How to Whistle, Pop, Click, and Honk Your Way to Social Success (Workman Publishing) - has been reprinted 10 times and is scheduled for an updated release in Fall 2004. The revised version will include a CD-ROM with video clips of Fred demonstrating how to make certain sounds.

Musician Dan Sawyer, who has written about 200 songs with Fred over 10 years, says that he is "a true Renaissance man, extraordinarily talented." Dan continued, "Fred is a great singer, lyricist, and songwriter. He's a joy to work with. He seems to live in this world of sound that most people don't live in. And he's never afraid to be silly."

For young people who are interested in an entertainment career, Fred says that the best preparation is to "have a meal together each night with your family and tell a story."

---

*Theresa M. Danna has a master's degree in professional writing from University of Southern California. She lives with her noise-nerd son and can be reached by email at [theresadanna@theresadanna.net](mailto:theresadanna@theresadanna.net)*

© Copyright N2Arts