



BIO: JIM HENSON

Jim Henson (1936–1990), an extraordinary artist and visionary, invented unique worlds and characters that remain just as vivid, original and fresh today as when they were created. A television pioneer, an innovator in puppetry, technology and visual arts, and a performer who literally brought to life some of the most memorable characters ever—including the world's most famous frog, Kermit—Jim Henson's impact on entertainment, education and culture continues to this day.

Born September 24, 1936 at King's Daughters Hospital in Greenville, Mississippi, Jim was the second son of Paul and Betty Henson. Jim spent his early years in Leland, MS where his father worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Throughout his youth, Jim had an interest in art and, later, television. He was particularly close to his maternal grandmother, an avid painter, quilter, and needleworker, and he visited her often. She was supportive of Jim's 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 Henson family moved to Maryland. There Jim, often with his older brother Paul, experimented with a variety of artistic techniques- experiments which eventually led Jim to the very latest visual media, television. In 1954, while still in high school, Jim 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 along with his assistant, fellow University of Maryland student and future wife, Jane Nebel, introduced many Muppet mainstays-music, snarky humor and innovative technical tricks (such as eliminating the puppet stage and using the television itself as the proscenium). Perhaps most memorably, the show featured an early version of Kermit the 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 *Today*. Jim also 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 *Today* and an ever-growing list of commercial clients, Jim sought out the talents of master puppet builder, Don Sahlin and young puppeteer, Frank Oz. Together, they helped develop the Muppets's first nationally known character, Rowlf the Dog, who appeared regularly on *The Jimmy Dean Show* from 1963 to 1966. Having established a group of talented collaborators, including producer David Lazer, Jim continued to pursue his career in puppetry and 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 film techniques, leading to greater innovations with the Muppets.

In 1966, a public television producer named Joan Ganz Cooney, began work on a ground-breaking educational children's television show called *Sesame Street* that would premiere in 1969. Based on Jim's creative reputation, Cooney asked him to create a family of characters to populate *Sesame Street*. These characters—Ernie and Bert, Oscar the Grouch, Grover, Cookie Monster, and of course the 8-foot-2 Big Bird—continue to entertain and educate today, more than 35 years later. Working with Children's Television Workshop (recently renamed Sesame Workshop) on *Sesame Street*, Jim also had the opportunity to continue experimenting with film techniques. Together with his talented team, Jim produced more than two dozen live action and animated shorts that are still teaching children how to count, learn the alphabet and master other educational concepts.

Sesame Street demonstrated the Muppets's undeniable appeal to children, but Jim strongly believed these characters could entertain a much wider family audience. After years of trying to sell the idea for *The Muppet Show*[™] in the U.S., Jim finally received backing from a London-based television producer, Lord Lew Grade. In 1975 production began at Grade's ATV Studios, and soon the world was introduced to a new family of unforgettable characters, such as Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear and Animal (performed by Frank Oz); The Great Gonzo (performed by Dave Goelz); Scooter (performed by Richard Hunt); Lew Zealand (performed by Jerry Nelson); and Rizzo the Rat (performed by Steve Whitmire). Hosted by Kermit the Frog, accompanied by the musical meanderings of Doctor Teeth and the Electric Mayhem Band, the Muppets were joined each week by an international pantheon of great guest stars, from Gene Kelly and Rudolph Nureyev to Steve Martin and John Cleese. The success of *The Muppet Show* naturally led to Hollywood, where the Muppets starred in six feature films: *The Muppet Movie*, *The Great Muppet Caper*, *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, *Muppet Treasure Island*, and most recently *Muppets From Space*.

During the 1980s, in addition to making Muppet movies, Jim brought two remarkably original fantasy films to the big screen, *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*. Inspired by the exquisite and intricate artwork of British illustrator Brian Froud, these films challenged Jim to create new kinds of three-dimensional characters with advanced movement abilities. In development for five years, *The Dark Crystal* utilized the talents of scores of designers, builders, technicians, and performers from across the globe. The result: a phenomenal showcase of puppetry and animatronics. Jim and Brian Froud collaborated again on the feature film, *Labyrinth*, which was produced by George Lucas, and starred David Bowie and future Oscar-winner Jennifer Connelly. Like *The Dark Crystal* before it, *Labyrinth* gave Jim a unique opportunity to take animatronics and performance to a new level. The multi-talented staff that helped create these two films formed the basis for what is now known as Jim Henson's Creature Shop. Founded in 1979, with offices in London as well as Los Angeles, Jim Henson's Creature Shop continues to set industry standards in animatronics, performance and performance technology.

Throughout the 1980s, Jim also created memorable television series and specials, including: *Fraggle Rock*, *Jim Henson's 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, and was one of the world's first multi-nation international television co-production.

Jim Henson's Muppet Babies was awarded four consecutive Emmys for "Outstanding Animated Program."

Jim Henson's The Storyteller and *Jim Henson's Greek Myths* were two original series conceived by Jim to convey the metaphoric richness of ancient stories. Based on authentic folk tales and myths, many of the episodes were written by Academy Award-winning writer/director Anthony Minghella. Combining a strong, literary base and magical visual effects and animatronics by Jim Henson's Creature Shop, *Jim Henson's The Storyteller* and *Jim Henson's Greek Myths* are a rare combination of ancient tradition and modern technological artistry.

Jim's last project was *Muppet*Vision 3D*, a short multi-media film and interactive attraction, which he directed and which currently runs at custom-made theaters at Disney's Hollywood Studios theme park at the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, and at Disney's California Adventure in Anaheim, California.

On May 16, 1990, after a brief illness, Jim Henson died in New York City. With his keen ability for drawing together a strong team of performers, artists, and collaborators who shared his vision and creativity, Jim ensured that his work and unique creative vision would continue. Through The Jim Henson Company, his work continues to captivate and entertain a global audience.

Source: The Jim Henson Company (www.henson.com)