

**This interview with
PAUL WILLIAMS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 2, 2021**



Library of Congress: I'm pretty sure this was the first time you were ever asked to write a song for a frog. How were you first approached to be involved with "The Muppet Movie"?

Paul Williams: I was a fan before I was an employee. I was a fan like the rest of the world. And, like people of every age around the world, I would tune into "Sesame Street" from time to time to get an update on our humanity. So that was my first introduction to the Jim Henson. I had seen him years before on Ed Sullivan with his dancing slinky.

But it really started when I went over to the England to do an episode of "The Muppet Show." And I met Jim and all those amazing Muppeteers. There's a line in a song we wrote for Gonzo that best describes the feeling: "There's not a word yet for old friends who've just met!" It was like finding a family. The wonderful wisdom of Jim Henson with his sweet combination of silliness, calm and kindness...especially kindness.

While we were shooting the show, Jim asked if I'd like to write the songs for a Christmas special, based on a children's book, that he was about to start work on, "Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas" [1977], and I think that that was my "audition" to work on "The Muppet Movie."

It ["The Muppet Movie"] was a remarkable opportunity. And a huge project for the Muppets; it was going to be their debut on the large screen. So much was at stake.

I knew that the music had to be really elegant and that it needed someone with a little class—and that wasn't me—so I turned to Kenny Ascher. Kenny and I had just written most of the songs for "A Star is Born." I knew he'd be perfect.

To write for Kermit, to start, I knew we needed a really meaningful "I am," song. A song that spoke of his inner life. "This is who I am" and then we would be off and running. I mean [the movie] was a "road" movie like with Hope and Crosby only with Kermit and Piggy off and on the road to love.

Jim Henson gave us such a glorious sense of trust. I remember after a very early meeting, I walked with Jim to his car and I said to him, "This is important stuff." And I told him that I'd

stay in touch with him and keep him informed and give him a sense of the songs as we went along.

And he said, “Oh, Paul, that’s not necessary. I’ll hear them in the studio when we record.”

And I was stunned, thinking, “That’s how much he trusts me.”

After many years, I’ve come to realize that he not only trusted me but he also trusted his own instincts. He trusted all his collaborations with everyone. I mean, he was the leader; he was Jim Henson. But he had that confidence and delivered his opinions and guidance with my favorite human quality, the elegance of kindness.

LOC: Writing a song for a film is different, I assume, from writing a song “just” for the radio—a “stand-alone” song, so to speak—as a songwriter, what all do you have to take into account when you are writing for a larger story?

PW: Of course. If it’s a stage musical or a film, you really have two tasks. The songs should advance the story or give us information ... insight into the inner life of the character.

It’s very organic with me: I hear words in music in my head all the time. It’s a curse and a joy!
[laughs]

I started out as an actor. I was so short though I looked like a kid until they put me next to a real kid and then I looked like a kid with a hangover! But my working as a songwriter on a film is like my work as an actor: I kind of like becoming the character. [I ask myself,] “How does it feel to be Gonzo or Piggy or Kermit?”

I have always felt that Gonzo and Piggy and Kermit are absolutely individual and separate from their creators. If I’m discussing something with Frank Oz and Jim and they’re holding Piggy and Kermit, then there are five of us in the conversation.

LOC: I wanted to ask you what I call a “craft” question: When do you write? Is it in the morning or the afternoon? At home? In the studio?

PW: I started out as a contract writer for A&M Records. I worked with Roger Nichols. I’d go into my office every day and I wrote lyrics every day to the music that Roger wrote every day. That’s how I started.

You know, I think I’m as passionate today about music as I ever was, maybe more so--and I play at it more than work at it these days. Sometimes I feel like a messenger for some unseen voice. It’s not all about me. That’s the kind of peaceful acceptance 31 years of sobriety will give you.

I think, more and more, I give in to my unconscious. Richard Bellis, a wonderful composer told me, “Remember: You’re not procrastinating, you are percolating!” The process of songwriting is sort of like that thing where suddenly you can’t remember a name or the title of your favorite movie or actor and then, in the middle of the night, suddenly you’ll be like “Thomas Mitchell!” or “Susan Hayward!” and your wife wakes up and says, “Why are you talking about Susan Hayward?” But it’s like that, our unconscious continues to deal with the process. It’s like all these cartoon characters are in my brain going through the index cards of my memory....

Right after I first got sober, I was asked to write for “The Muppets Christmas Carol” [1992]. In the middle of my own spiritual awakening I was given the chance to write about a man who is also having a deep spiritual awakening. It was a gift from the universe. I looked at the scene: a

shot of a door opening and a shot of these feet trudging through the snow and all these little creatures that seem to grow colder as Scrooge passes.

Later, I wandered out into the park and spoke to, as I call him, the “Big Amigo” and gave the task to that unseen creative voice. I picked up a crime novel by Lawrence Sanders and ignored the task. A few pages into the book I picked up my little recorder and without thinking sang ...

*When a cold wind blows it chills you
Chills you to the bone
But there's nothing in nature that
Freezes your heart
Like years of being alone*

The lesson? Sometimes I do my best work when I get out of my own way.

LOC: There have been many heartfelt covers of “Rainbow” over the years. Do any especially stand out for you?

PW: There are so many beautiful covers. It’s always wonderful when some proud father sends me a video of his little girl singing “Kermie’s song.” It’s like seeing the future of the song. It’s what I call a “heart payment.”

Sarah McLachlan—with that beautiful voice—did a wonderful rendition. So many beautiful versions of the song... Willie Nelson has recorded it a couple of times.... In fact, we sang it together for one of my albums! To stand before a microphone and trade lyrics with one of the greatest songwriter storytellers that we’ve ever heard...that’s a bucket-list moment.

LOC: Why do you think the song has endured so?

PW: It’s written for the heart from the heart. I believe it’s the essence of Jim Henson via Kermit, that is so touching.

I think the gift of it is that the song says every problem is an opportunity. And I’ll give you an example of that! Kenny and I really wrote ourselves right into a corner with the opening lines: “*Why are there so many songs about rainbows? / And what's on the other side / Rainbow's are visions/ But only illusions and rainbows have nothing to hide!*”... OH CRAP!

So we had to come out of that. So what sort of happens, in the song, is that Kermit steps off the podium, so to speak, and sits down with the audience from that moment on.

*So we've been told and some choose to believe it
I know they're wrong wait and see
Someday WE'LL find it
The Rainbow Connection
The Lovers, the Dreamers and Me*

He shares the beauty of believing. An act of faith. And accident! And it’s all a gift.

