

**EPISODE 98**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:09] JG:** Welcome to the Portfolio Life. I am Jeff Goins. So have you ever felt like the work that you're doing is not important? Do you sometimes feel like an amateur who is pretending to be a professional but never going to get there? If I'm honest, I feel like this way all the time and so what I do is I turn to biography.

I like to read biographies of artist, writers, entrepreneurs, people whom we know, recognized as successful and I like to read about their life as it was happening. What were the questions and struggles that they faced when they were becoming the person that we know them as today? And one of those people that I recently become fascinated with is Jim Henson, the co-creator of the Muppets along with his wife, Jane.

In general, just an interesting person who led a pretty amazing creative career and I recently read a biography about Jim Henson and was amazed of all the things that he accomplished, things that I'd forgotten. The fact that he was one of the founding members of Sesame Street and then of course, The Muppets, then Fraggle Rock, The Dark Crystal which was a favorite from my youth.

All these amazing things that at the time did not feel like safe bets, in fact they were really, really big gambles. But before all of that, Jim Henson was a young man who was certainly talented but also filled with self-doubt. The same kinds of doubts that you and I have about ourselves and about the work that we're trying to do.

So in this podcast, we talk about that. Andy, my co-host and I will talk about how do you deal with doubt of yourself and how do you breakthrough and find your calling when you're just not sure about yourself? So this is a little bit of a different approach to how we're doing the podcast. I hope you enjoy a more laid back approach and let me know. Leave me a comment in the post, on the blog at goinswriter.com, leave us a review, let us know what you think of us changing it up.

Here's my conversation with Andy.

[EPISODE]

**[0:02:30] AT:** Jeff Goins, thanks for joining us today.

**[0:02:33] JG:** You're welcome.

**[0:02:34] AT:** So we're going to talk about Jim Henson and sadly, some people don't probably know who Jim Henson is, so can you refresh them?

**[0:02:42] JG:** Oh gosh yeah, I guess that's true. Jim Henson was the founder of the Muppets, the creator of the Muppets and the Muppets are mostly on Sesame Street and movies. My favorite Muppet movie is Muppet's Christmas Carol.

**[0:02:57] AT:** How many are there?

**[0:02:58] JG:** Oh gosh, I don't know.

**[0:02:59] AT:** I can only think of three.

**[0:03:00] JG:** There's a bunch because they've done like holiday movie specials and Muppets take Manhattan.

**[0:03:09] AT:** Okay, four.

**[0:03:11] JG:** Yeah.

**[0:03:11] AT:** I've seen the caper one.

**[0:03:13] JG:** Yeah, that's one.

**[0:03:14] AT:** They've got to go get the big diamond.

[0:03:15] **JG:** The Great Muppet Caper.

[0:03:17] **AT:** And they throw the peanut butter to the Dobermans.

[0:03:20] **JG:** I don't remember that one. I don't know.

[0:03:21] **AT:** That's how they got the Doberman dogs to not attack them, they threw peanut butter at them.

[0:03:26] **JG:** Okay.

[0:03:28] **AT:** Quick, that's a bonus tip. Bonus tip.

[0:03:30] **JG:** I didn't really grow up watching the Muppets a ton. I watched Sesame Street, yeah but we did watch The Dark Crystal which is this weird avant-garde fantasy movie that Jim Henson directed, which turns out his magnum opus but it wasn't profitable until years after it hit the theatres.

[0:03:51] **AT:** Is that like a pre-requisite of a magnum opus? It can't be successful in itself. It has to be appreciated later?

[0:03:58] **JG:** Yeah, well it's true for a lot of things it seems. The Great Gatsby was that way of Scott Fitzgerald that was not his money maker.

[0:04:05] **AT:** Yeah, I've heard about that, about that book.

[0:04:07] **JG:** Yeah.

[0:04:08] **AT:** So Jim Henson created the characters?

[0:04:10] **JG:** The Muppets, yeah and he got his big break first with commercials using Muppets to sell products on TV and he made good money at that and then, he had a show. He had a

puppet show on TV and then after that, Sesame Street was a big thing and the Sesame Street launched what became The Muppets and he got a lot of flak for that because Sesame Street was a non-profit thing and so they don't have any commercials.

That's why you have the, "Brought to you by the Letter A or W", or whatever. It was a non-commercial thing. It was a public TV thing, PBS and so when he did The Muppets and used Kermit who was on Sesame Street to promote a product at one point, he got flak for it and people were like, "You can't use Kermit to sell things," but anyway, I mean he launched the Muppets and then did different things and something that a lot of people don't know about him, I didn't know this until I read a couple of books about him, is towards the end of his life, he was working on a theme park.

**[0:05:16] AT:** Really?

**[0:05:17] JG:** Yeah.

**[0:05:18] AT:** That would have been wicked like weird.

**[0:05:20] JG:** Right.

**[0:05:21] AT:** Like Trippy.

**[0:05:21] JG:** Yeah, so he was kind of Walt Disney. Lots of people compared him to Walt Disney, he didn't like that but kind of like that. He was always working on the next thing and I heard a quote from him recently. He says, "It takes 10 years in show business to get noticed for something," and he was talking about The Muppets. Once the Muppets became a sensation where they were bestselling films, huge, huge brands...

**[0:05:47] AT:** Yeah, I remember merchandising. If I had the animal, right? The animal t-shirt, yeah.

**[0:05:54] JG:** He was pretty strict about that too. He didn't want to be super commercial and so when he finally said yes to merchandising that was a big deal.

**[0:06:01] AT:** Well it was a sweet shirt and he probably approved it. It was awesome.

**[0:06:05] JG:** Yeah, he was really strict about that and didn't let anybody slap his logo or characters on a product. It had to be made well.

**[0:06:16] AT:** So what was the 10 year thing, 10 years in the business?

**[0:06:18] JG:** He said, "It takes about 10 years to get known for something and get good at it," and so at the point that the Muppets were doing that, where there was like the Muppets record that was outselling a Beatles record the same...

**[0:06:31] AT:** Straight up, yeah, that was great. That was a great album. I'm old enough to remember this stuff.

**[0:06:35] JG:** "Mana-mana", yeah.

**[0:06:38] AT:** My kids and I sing that still.

**[0:06:40] JG:** Right, so at that point, he goes, "By the time —" it takes about 10 years to get known for something and get the industry, the show business industry to appreciate you but by that time as a creative, you're already onto your next idea.

**[0:06:52] AT:** I've heard that again and again.

**[0:06:54] JG:** And I totally related to that but yeah. So I mean that's who Jim Henson is. That is sort of his big picture story and I was reading this biography called *Jim Henson The Biography*, I have it right here, by Brain Jay Jones and I noticed the story in there that I never heard before and what happened was this. Jim Henson got into puppetry kind of accidentally. It was in the 1950's as a kid, he saw a TV and this was still a fairly new invention like there were thousands of them out in the world not hundreds of billions of TV's and he saw it and he's was like, "I got to get one of those" and at the time, adjusted for inflation, a TV costs \$2,000 and the Henson's were not wealthy people. They weren't poor, but they...

**[0:07:49] AT:** A car probably costs the same amount.

**[0:07:51] JG:** Yeah, they weren't super wealthy and he was like, "I want one," and he book says when Jim put his mind into something, he got what he wanted so they got a TV and from a very early age, he wanted to be on TV. So he started learning puppetry. He has a creative family. Grandma was really creative and would play the piano and was really artistic and he got some of that from her.

So he started making sock puppets and stuff but at a very early age, he wasn't into puppetry, he was into TV, he wanted to be on TV and he saw puppetry as a means to that end. So in high school, he started doing this and there was this opportunity to try out for this show and he did it with a friend.

**[0:08:39] AT:** Puppetry?

**[0:08:40] JG:** Yeah, a puppet show. It was a talent show and they were looking for a puppeteer and he did it and it worked and he was on TV for a little while and he went to college and he was starting to do this. It's like, lots of breaks and he love making the puppets and also performing them.

**[0:09:00] AT:** Yeah because that's the other thing, he physically made these things right?

**[0:09:05] JG:** And he was copying. There was a well-known puppeteer at the time, a guy named Burr Tillstrom and he was basically copying what he was doing and later on, he and Henson would become friends. But the reality was, the thing that Henson has known for his creating puppets that are life like where you don't know where the puppeteer is and making things look natural.

Like when they did the Muppets, the first Muppets movie, Kermit rides a bike and when that came out, people's minds were blown. They're like, "Is the puppet really riding the bike? How is it working?" And then there's a part...

**[0:09:39] AT:** I just wish people could see here, you mentioned it now but I remember as a child seeing that. I thought Kermit was fake but apparently, he's real.

**[0:09:48] JG:** Right, so I mean that's what they were trying to do is they were trying to master their means and take it to places that they never had been before and so what he did was what all artists do. I think he stole from his predecessors, he stole from his influences but then he did something better. He innovated with it and so that's what he did.

He stole from Burr Tillstrom, he was just trying to get on TV and it works and in college, he and his friend, Jane, who later becomes his business partner and wife, they start doing these shows together on public television, local TV and they move around all the time. They're before the news or after the news, they're early evening, late night but it's working and he's getting paid. He's getting paid well for it.

And when he starts doing this, he's making like \$40 grand a year doing this and then he starts and tries, like today's money, and then he starts attracting big brands, coffee companies, companies that want to like a meat company, like a lunch meat company or something and they want to use puppets to sell their products and this hasn't really been done. Puppets are mostly been for kids.

**[0:11:00] AT:** Yeah like this is more traditional, you've got to pitch man, right? "You should buy so and so and so," you know what I mean?

**[0:11:05] JG:** That's right and he had seven seconds to create commercials and so, Jim and Jane started creating commercials for these big brands and by junior year of college, I think I am getting all these details mostly correct — read the book. By junior of college, by the end of his junior year, he is making the equivalent of \$750,000 a year off of these commercials.

**[0:11:30] AT:** What was the seven seconds part, I didn't follow that?

**[0:11:32] JG:** So he had seven seconds to make a commercial. That's how short the commercials were.

**[0:11:37] AT:** So it's seven seconds of communicative message.

**[0:11:39] JG:** Yeah and so he loved blowing things up and so he had these — they had this client called Wilkin's Coffee and so they created these puppets, Wilkins and Wontkins and Wilkins loves coffee while Wontkins doesn't like coffee and sets it like a nice guy and a grumpy old man and the grumpy guy says, "I don't like coffee." Wilkins go, "What would you do for a couple of Wilkins Coffee?" He's like, "I don't like coffee," and so he shoots him in the head. It's really sort of bizarre.

So he would shoot the puppet in the head and he'd point the gun at the camera, at the audience and basically say, "Do you like coffee?" And so what he was doing because he wasn't super comfortable with commercialism was he was making fun of the commercial while he was getting paid to do it and the thing is they loved it. Wilkins loved it because it was tongue and cheek and it was self-referential and it was like, "Hey, we're not taking ourselves too seriously," and people loved it, and it worked.

And so what they did with the Wilkins coffee thing is they basically licensed the commercial where they had these puppets saying, "Well do you want Wilkins Coffee?" And other coffee companies, they licensed it to other coffee companies and they would just change the overdub but Jim was such a perfectionist that he would often have to go back and redo it so that it looked like they were saying something other than Wilkins. But the point is, he created one thing, one commercial and then he started licensing it to all these other places.

**[0:13:06] AT:** That's like a meme. If you can take a picture of a little boy that says, "I got this," but you just switch the words, yeah that's really interesting.

**[0:13:16] JG:** So when I read that, that Jim Henson was making \$750,000 a year as a junior in college that sort of struck me. I was like, "That's weird."

**[0:13:28] AT:** Doing the art that he liked means satirical and making this puppets by hand.

**[0:13:35] JG:** Right, yeah and he was starting to make better and better puppets that are more and more lifelike and they had all these techniques with how they used their hands in the mouth

and how they scrunch it up and if you can envision Kermit sort of like scrunching his lips, you know what I'm talking about. How they use their hands to make...

**[0:13:52] AT:** Yeah absolutely.

**[0:13:53] JG:** ...facial gestures, so this was fairly innovative. Anyway, but Jim was always an artist and he never thought that puppetry was the thing and I find it interesting because there are so many people who like you say, "How did you get into that thing?"

**[0:14:07] AT:** Did you say that "puppetry wasn't the thing"?

**[0:14:09] JG:** It wasn't the thing for him. He didn't want to do puppetry remember? He wanted to get on TV and puppetry was the means to the end of getting on TV. So he didn't care about puppetry as the end, it was the means and often, I hear people say that like, "I became an entrepreneur not because I wanted to start a business, or because I wanted to do this, I wanted to help people," or, "I became a painter because I lost my job," or whatever.

You hear all of these pivots where people thought they're going to do something and they end up doing something else. I always think that's interesting. So here's what happens, junior year Jim Henson is the solution with the whole thing. He goes, "What's my legacy? I'm getting people to buy coffee." He doesn't even drink coffee. He didn't even like coffee and so he was doubting himself and his work and he just thought, "Maybe we'll just close this up and I'll go do something else. I'll go paint."

So he and Jane, they're partners in this, they're working on all these commercials so they're really busy and summer between his junior and senior year, he takes off. He goes to Europe. He gets a friend to sort of fill in for him and so the friend and Jane kept the business going and Jim says, "I'm out of here." He's going to shut everything down but he gets his clients to say, "Look, if you just have somebody else do this, you can just go and do your own thing. We'll still pay you."

He's like, "So I can go to Europe and you could pay me money and I don't have to work? Okay." and so he goes to Europe and travels with a friend for a little while and then friend has to — he's

in the Army or something. He has to go join the military and so he travels through France and Germany and everywhere he goes, he tries to catch a puppet show and one of the things that he notices is that puppetry which is this age old art, very old if you think of stories like Pinocchio.

People have been puppets for a long time, hundreds of years and the thousands of years, a long time. And so he sees all these puppet shows and he notices that in America, puppets are for kids but in Europe there are these puppet shows where there's adults there, lots of adults and he realizes that this is something that's an art form that can touch a lot of people and it's not just a kid thing.

It's not trivial and at the time, he doesn't really think of doing puppets for kids is a meaningful thing. And his whole life, this would be an important theme is that puppets are not for kids, they're for everyone. If you watch a Muppet movie or watched a Muppet show, the jokes are very adult. That they like to blow somebody up and so the kids laugh but the adults got the inside joke.

**[0:16:50] AT:** Yeah, I'm just thinking here the parent or a person who's enjoyed Toy Story and things like that but the ones that we really like are Monsters Inc. or the ones that we go, "Hey, the kids love this, but as a parent, this is awesome," right?

**[0:17:04] JG:** Yeah, Pixar does that really well. Disney has done that well and not done that well. I think it's doing it better now. Walt Disney certainly thought that. He created Snow White and nobody had ever seen anything like that before so it was not for kids. It was for everyone. Adults went and saw that. It was incredible and it was a classic fairytale that people knew.

So Jim goes to Europe. He sees that that adults are watching puppets and he goes, "Oh, so I can be an artist and I can do this commercial thing too. Like I can do art, I can be an artist and also be an entrepreneur." So he goes back home with this renewed sense of purpose and confidence. He marries Jane, they're not even dating at the time.

They both have other fiancés or significant others and they dump those people. He says, "I just think we need to go into business together and we should probably get married," and for him,

going into business and being married, they are one and the same. He never saw life and work as separate and later on, this probably led to some tensions between him and Jane.

They ultimately divorced later on in life but remain good friends and she helped him build all of it but he kind of comes with this business/marriage proposal like, "We need to be partners for life." So they start Muppets Inc., and as they say, the rest is history. So what I love about that story is here is guy who wants to be an artist and the thing that he is doing feels like a lesser art. How many of us feel that way? Like you're working a customer service job or you're waiting tables.

**[0:18:49] AT:** Yeah but it's not art, right?

**[0:18:50] JG:** Yeah, you are doing this thing and it's like, "But that's not my art" like I was talking to a friend who's running his multimillion dollar empire, this online business and all he wants to do is be a standup comedian.

**[0:19:04] AT:** Is this person you Jeff?

**[0:19:06] JG:** No.

**[0:19:08] AT:** Okay, I didn't think it was you.

**[0:19:09] JG:** But it's interesting, we all have these secret aspirations. I wish I could do this, this would really be the thing and sometimes, the answer is to quit all that stuff to go do that or to build a bridge to slowly pivot towards that thing overtime, we've talked about that before. But sometimes, the calling, the thing that you're supposed to do is the thing that you're doing, you just have to go get some sort of outside perspective as Jim Henson did. See it differently, experience something that validates this like, "Yeah, this is a meaningful thing". This isn't just for kids, this isn't just to make a buck, you can do something great with that.

**[0:19:47] AT:** So unless you do customer service because we've all been on a call where they read the script right? But we also know these other companies that make customer service an art. So are you saying that we should try to inject our art into where we are first?

**[0:20:03] JG:** Yeah maybe? I think if you look at the Jim Henson story, you see a few lessons. The first lesson is what you're doing might not be as insignificant as you think it is. The second thing is, you need an experience that shifts your perspective sometimes in order to have that awakening. The third thing is, if you're going to do something, if you're going to work customer service, if you're going to run an online business, if you're going to be a standup comedian, you better treat that thing like it's your art, like it's your calling.

That's what I think bothered Jim so much. Here he was making a ton of money, \$750,000 a year. It's an incredible amount of money and ultimately goes, "I don't care about this. This isn't meaningful. It's just making a buck off of a sock," and they were more than socks. It didn't feel meaningful to him until he saw somebody doing it in a different way and he goes, "Oh, I can bring meaning to this. I can bring art to this. I can do something that is going to change the world through this."

All of a sudden, he starts doing really interesting work. A few years later, the Sesame Street opportunity comes along and at the time, Jim Henson is just a guy who uses puppets to sell things on commercials. Then he does Sesame Street and he loves it because here's an opportunity and this is a kid's show and he goes, "Oh our puppets are not just for kids" but he goes, "But this is an opportunity to make an impact. I see this as an opportunity to bring art to this in a way that creates meaning."

Eventually after that, he stops doing commercials entirely and just starts doing the Muppets stuff but he was never to sum up to this guy. I mentioned The Dark Crystal, I mentioned the theme park that he wanted to do and I think when I look at that story, that early trip to Europe when he was young, I think that was a paradigm shifting event for him and that third lesson to me is really powerful. If you're going to do something, make it an art.

You can, as Jim Henson did for the rest of his career, you can do things that are commercial, that make money, that fund the more artistic endeavors. You can do the Muppet show or the movie or the merchandise that brings in revenue that you can then put towards more of your passion projects like The Dark Crystal which for a long, long time was not profitable. But the beauty of art, great art is that it endures and so if you make money doing one thing so that you can go make art doing something else, you can create enduring work.

I think at the end of the day, that's what we want to do, is not just be happy with our jobs but not just be satisfied with the money that we're making because I think Jim Henson was plenty happy. He was plenty satisfied in terms of "I have enough of everything," but he wasn't making meaning and I think we want to create enduring work. I call that art, you call it whatever you want and the way to do it I think is to do what he did.

Gain some sort of perspective that's going to change the way that you look at the work that you do or change and for him, it was do or die. It was like, "I'm either going to get a renewed sense of this is what I'm supposed to be doing, or I'm going to quit and go paint," and he got that revelation but sometimes you don't and then you've got to quit and find something where you could be proud of what you're creating but I don't think you ever have to be ashamed of, "If I do this thing to make money so that I can do this thing that will endure."

I think the problem with a lot of us is we get stuck in the thing that makes money. We try to make more money and more money and so on and people compared Jim Henson to Walt Disney for a long time and he didn't like that because he felt like he was exercising restraint. He wasn't Walt Disney. He was Jim Henson and he didn't have this huge empire. He had a small empire. He has something that he felt he could control the quality and Walt Disney is that name, that brand is so much bigger than one person.

So I like both of those guys and the work that they've done but I love the restraint like, "I'm not going to get caught up and we're doing this to make money so we can do this to make more money so we can make more money." That got Disney in trouble and really is what spawned Pixar. Pixar could have belonged to Disney early on if they would just have listened to John Lasseter. They didn't do that and they were too concerned about creating okay movies that sold well and they realized that, "Oh, if you create incredible movies, they sell really well. You can do both."

So I think most of us are tempted to get caught up in the, "Well I want to make money so I can make more money so that I can make more money," and we're all just trying to — most of us are just trying to get along to pay our bills. But I think the challenge is why are you making that money, like you're making the money for what? I think the thing is to make art.

**[0:24:50] AT:** Yeah, so Henson made his art, he made money and then he made more art and then he made more money, right?

**[0:24:56] JG:** Yeah and a great book about this that really turned me on to Jim Henson was before this book, *Jim Henson The Biography* by Brian Jay Jones, I read a book called *Make Art Make Money* by Elizabeth Hyde Stevens and it's basically the business lessons from Henson's career. It's pretty interesting.

**[0:25:14] AT:** Awesome. Thanks man.

**[0:25:15] JG:** Yeah.

[END]