

*The Home Forum.*

# Meet the man inside Big Bird...



ON PBS-TV's "Sesame Street," few neighbors have less in common than Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch.

Big Bird is a cheerful 8-foot, 2-inch bird with a squeaky voice and lots of energy. Oscar is a pint-sized green grump who lives in a garbage can.

These two very different characters are both played by one man. For nearly 35 years, Caroll Spinney has been Oscar and Big Bird.

Sometimes he's inside Big Bird, moving Big Bird's wings with his left hand and his beak with his right. Other times, he's hiding behind Oscar's garbage can. Occasionally, he plays both characters at once!

Mr. Spinney recently wrote a book for grownups. It's called "The Wisdom of Big Bird (and the Dark Genius of Oscar the Grouch)" (with J. Milligan, Villard Books). He recently came to Boston to talk about the book. He brought along his wife, Debra – and Oscar the Grouch.

Oscar spent most of the visit in his luggage or sitting quietly on the hotel-room desk with his feet hanging over the edge. Eventually, Spinney put his hand inside Oscar's body and made him say Oscar's favorite grouchy line: "Have a rotten day!"

Spinney thought up Oscar's personality and voice while riding in a New York City taxi with a driver from the Bronx. As soon as Spinney got in the cab, the driver growled, "Where to, Mac?"

Spinney still thinks about that cab driver when he speaks like Oscar. Oscar is much older than Big Bird, but much younger than, say, Count von Count. The Count is "hundreds of years old," Spinney says. (He's played by Jerry Nelson.)

At first, Spinney and Big Bird's creator, Jim Henson, thought of Big Bird as a goofy, klutzy character. He would trip over



**CAROLL SPINNEY:** He has spent nearly 35 years on TV – without showing his face.

trash cans. But Spinney changed Big Bird's personality to be more like the kids who watch the show. Big Bird went to day care and learned the alphabet with them.

Big Bird's life on "Sesame Street" has changed as new residents moved in. First came Aloysius Snuffleupagus. For years, no one except Big Bird could see Snuffy. Everyone told him Snuffy was imaginary. Now everyone can see Snuffy.

Then came Elmo. Today he's the most popular character on "Sesame Street." At first, Spinney says Big Bird was a little jealous of Elmo, but now they are buddies. Next season, they will be in more episodes together. (Sometimes, Spinney drives to work with Kevin Clash, who plays Elmo.)

Big Bird gets plenty of attention, too. As

Big Bird, Spinney has appeared all over – in China, on many TV shows, at the White House, and in awards ceremonies with movie stars. He has even conducted orchestras. As Oscar the Grouch, he once shared a stage with Britain's Prince Charles.

But without his costume on, no one knows who Spinney is. That's OK with him. It's more important that fans recognize his puppet characters, he says.

Spinney first became interested in puppets when he was a kid. He made money in junior high and high school by doing puppet shows.

Lots of people recognize Spinney when he talks like Big Bird or Oscar – in or out of costume. One time he stuck his head in a garbage can at an ice-cream parlor and began speaking in Oscar's voice. All the kids in the shop ran over, thinking that Oscar was inside.

Usually, though, Spinney says he doesn't like to be the one to tell kids that Big Bird isn't a real person. His own grandson, whose first words were "Big Bird,"

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ED BAILEY/AP



## ...and Oscar the Grouch, too!

RICHARD DREW/AP

### Fun facts about Big Bird, Oscar

**Big Bird almost went backward**

- Big Bird is covered with 4,000 real feathers from white American turkeys. The feathers are dyed yellow-orange at the base and a lighter yellow at the tip. Each feather is attached to the costume individually.

- Big Bird's head is the original one, though his eyes are repainted regularly.

- His legs are a pair of pants made of orange-dyed fleece, with the feet already attached – like footed pajamas. A pair of loafers is built into the foam feet.

- When he's not on-camera, Big Bird's feet are covered by slippers to keep them from getting dirty. They're not just any slippers: His current pair are green with floppy bunny ears.

- Muppet originator Jim Henson got the idea for Big Bird from a dragon "walkabout" puppet he made to shoot a TV commercial. (In the commercial, the dragon destroys a prop kitchen while preparing a Chinese dinner. One of the special effects was a flame thrower!)

- The knees of real birds bend in the opposite direction to human knees. So Henson planned to have Big Bird's operator put on the costume back to

front. That way, the bird's knees would bend the "right" way. (Caroll Spinney is so grateful that he hasn't spent 34 years going backward.)

**Oscar the Grouch is a bath mat**

- He's made from white bath mats that were sewn together, then thrown in a washing machine with green dye.

- Oscar is still the original green puppet, though an earlier orange version was retired after the first season. How did Oscar explain the fact that he'd changed colors? He said he'd vacationed in Swamp Mushy Muddy. It was so damp there, he turned green overnight.

- Oscar's trash can may look small on the outside, but he claims to have a ballroom, an elephant, a goat, a pig, a swimming pool, and a race track inside.

- Oscar pretty much stays in his garbage can, but Mr. Spinney did manage to move him around in live concert shows and the "Follow That Bird" movie (1985). Spinney wore a "walkabout" garbage-man puppet that appeared to be carrying Oscar's garbage can.

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called Spinney's house asking for Big Bird until he was 10 years old.

Although he may look silly, Big Bird has an important job. Millions of children around the world have learned their numbers and letters from him. They have also learned important lessons about being kind. "Big Bird helped along [kids'] learning with his learning," Spinney says.

Oscar's job, on the other hand, is more to make kids laugh. But he also teaches by counting his garbage.

Being Big Bird isn't easy. Spinney has to peek between his feathers to see the other actors in a scene. He can't see much. To help him out, Spinney has a tiny television inside Big Bird's huge costume. The TV shows him what the camera sees. So Spinney is looking at an image of what Big Bird looks like on TV. He sees what viewers are seeing. It takes some getting used to.

Spinney also has a script inside his costume. Before he goes to work at a TV studio in New York, Spinney carefully cuts and folds his script so it will fit inside his costume.

Spinney puts his right hand in Big Bird's beak way over his head. His left hand is in the left wing, but he can move the right wing, too. A piece of fishing line tied to the left wing runs through a plastic ring under the beak to the right wing. By tugging on the line tied to the left wing, Spinney can move the right wing, too.

Spinney calls Big Bird a "walkabout," not a puppet. That's because he walks

around in the costume.

Oscar, though, is a puppet. Spinney needs to hide when Oscar appears. He puts his hand in Oscar's head. He moves Oscar's eyebrows, mouth, and eyes with his fingers and thumb. When Oscar is happy, his eyes widen. But Oscar doesn't like to admit that he's ever happy.

Spinney says he enjoys being such different characters. "A lot of my heart, spirit, and soul has gone into him," Spinney says of Big Bird. But after playing Big Bird all day, he likes to switch to Oscar.

Spinney can even play both characters at once. He stays in Big Bird's costume while an assistant operates Oscar. He can

— speak both characters' lines from inside Big Bird. Or he can tape-record Oscar's lines, and the tape is played back as the scene is filmed.

Spinney says he thinks of Big Bird as his child and sometimes forgets that Big Bird is not a real person. In real life, he says he's more like Big Bird than Oscar. His

wife, whom he met on "Sesame Street," says sometimes Spinney can act grumpy like Oscar — when they're stuck in traffic.

Even after playing the characters for so many years, Spinney says he still has fun at work. He'd like to play Big Bird for at least six more years, which would make an even 40 years in the role "That's a nice long time to play a 6-year-old," he says.

Just in case, someone else on "Sesame Street" has learned to play Big Bird. But Spinney can't seem to find anyone who can play Oscar equally well. Any volunteers?

**Seth Stern**

### A NEW YORK CAB DRIVER GAVE SPINNEY THE IDEA FOR HOW OSCAR SHOULD SOUND.



RICH MESSINA/THE HARTFORD (CONN.) COURANT/FILE

**AT WORK:** Big Bird chats with Peter Jennings (top) for a TV special. Photo at right shows (l. to r.) Martin Robinson (he plays Telly Monster and Snuffy), Dave Rudman (Baby Bear) and Caroll Spinney, in Oscar the Grouch's garbage can on the 'Sesame Street' set.

