

MUSIC ALIVE!™

Music Education for Today's Generation

COOL CAREERS



Jeffrey Lesser is the man behind the music of one of the most innovative children's television programs, *The Wonder Pets!*

But he actually started his career in film, working as a negative matcher and eventually a sound man on a few movies. "I really enjoyed doing sound for films, but I felt it took a back seat and I wanted to work where sound was treated more substantially," Jeffrey explained. So he got a job at a recording studio where he learned how to record and edit music, and then transitioned to engineering and producing.

Eventually Jeffrey left the studio and independently produced albums for top artists like Barbra Streisand and the Chieftains. After expanding his skills with television work, he continued to make records but then found his fantastic current home in TV land. Jeffrey spared some time just before his weekly recording session to fill us in on what he calls his "unique, wonderful existence."



Jeffrey Lesser Music Producer & Musical Director, Little Airplane Productions, Inc.

What drew you to your job at Little Airplane?

I love surrounding myself with music and working with musicians and composers. With *The Wonder Pets!* I work with a live orchestra every week. And the show reminds me of how amazed I was at the music in the Warner Bros. cartoons I watched as a kid.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

Somehow I must have gotten a little bug for this type of work early on, because in 4th or 5th grade I was on the audio-visual-aid squad. I went around to classrooms and threaded [the film] projectors. Also, my school subscribed to radio stations that broadcast educational shows. When a teacher would order a show, I was the one in the office flicking buttons on a little console to tune the radio station into the classroom.

What's your musical background?

Music was alive in our household. My mom was a piano player, and my family used to gather around the piano and sing songs together. That really had a terrific impact on me. I took piano and guitar lessons as a kid, and I was in several choirs and singing groups. I went to a high school that specialized in music and art where I learned about music history, music theory, and what a conductor does, and I actually conducted an orchestra. And in college I was in a rock-and-roll band. I've used all those things constantly throughout my life.

What are your primary responsibilities at Little Airplane?

Basically, anything that involves sound comes through me. For *The Wonder Pets!* I'm the production sound mixer: I mix all the shows. I produce the music. I record the orchestras. I recommend and choose many wonderful Broadway composers to write for us. Overall, I have my fingers in a lot of areas in the making of *The Wonder Pets!*

What skills and training are necessary for your job?

Knowing how to deal with people and their moods is very helpful. Being a good listener, I'd say, is number one—I know that many producers are very gifted at talking and directing, but it's another gift to listen to what people are saying to you. Whether they are super-experienced or new and naive, everyone has something to offer. Also, knowing how to play a musical instrument and how to read music is always of value.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

I never get tired of hearing my work. The thrill never goes away. When I went to see *The Lord of the Rings* and heard some of the music that I recorded and mixed, it was just great. And, of course, having *The Wonder Pets!* on TV is wonderful because you can walk up to almost any 4-year-old in the country and sing, "What's gonna work?" and they sing back, "Teamwork!" It's very satisfying that kids know those melodies. **MA**

—VERONICA DOMINGUEZ-GARCIA

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LITTLE AIRPLANE PRODUCTIONS (LESSER); MATT PEYTON/NICK, JR. (SEBIL & LESSER WITH KIDS); COURTESY OF NICK, JR. (PETS AND BACKGROUND).



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Pet Sounds

The Music of *The Wonder Pets!*



At first glance Nick Jr.'s *The Wonder Pets!* might seem like nothing more than "kids' stuff." But listen carefully and you'll realize that there's something very sophisticated about this TV show: the music. Each of the two episodes that make up every show is actually an operetta with its own original score recorded by a live orchestra. Little Airplane Productions, the show's creators, granted us access to their studio so we could give you the inside scoop on how it's created.

Each *TWP!* episode follows the heroic adventures of Linny the guinea pig, Tuck the turtle, and Ming-Ming the duckling—three classroom pets who travel to far-off places to help baby animals in trouble. First the writers develop a script, which is always kid-tested, and then storyboards are created. Always staying true to the region where the *Wonder Pets* travel, music producer Jeffrey Lesser selects a composer who is highly regarded in the desired musical genre. For an episode where the *Pets* head to India, for example, Jeffrey helped recruit top Bollywood music directors Salim-Sulaiman (a.k.a. the Merchant Brothers) to write the score.

The composer works from the script. He or she incorporates the show's theme songs into his original work and delivers what's referred to as a "composer's path," a demo of an entire episode performed on just piano and voice. Because the demo is done in real time and contains real melodies, the animators draw an animatic (animated storyboard) to the music to nail down

the timing. Then sound engineer Steven Rebolledo uses the demo to direct and record all of the actors' parts. If needed, the producers find actors from the relevant region rather than having an American actor imitating a foreign accent. Once the actors' vocal tracks are created, they are sent to the animation crew to be lip-synched to the characters in the animatic. Then it's time to record the music!

The show's orchestra has woodwind, brass, string, and percussion sections featuring talented musicians who have played in the New York Philharmonic and for hit musicals like *The Lion*

minute score.

That may seem like plenty of time, but there are lots of takes to go through and frequently the crew finds itself cutting it close. While watching monitors playing an animatic of the episode, the orchestra will first play the entire score to get a feel for the music. Then the score is recorded in segments; the orchestra will play individual measures, lines, or a page of music to make sure the notes are played correctly, the timbre and timing are right, and the best performance is captured. Once Jeffrey feels he has

what he needs, the orchestra will do one final complete take. Then comes the editing stage where the best takes are chosen and mixed and matched to sound like one continuous take. Lastly Jeffrey adds sound effects to the music for the final mix, which is then brought together with the final animation.

If you can believe it, this is the short version of the process. From concept to completion, it takes 35 weeks to finish not each show, but each 11½-minute episode! That means that in any week there are at least 20 episodes in different production stages—one episode in the early writing stage, another in the sound-effect stage, another being recorded, and so on. But even though it's a lot of work, just like the *Wonder Pets*, the Little Airplane crew uses teamwork to get the job done. **MAJ** -VVG



(Left to right) Creator Josh Selig, *The WP!* kids, and Jeffrey give Linny and gang a musical life.

King. For the Bollywood episode, sitar and tabla musicians were added to maintain the spirit of the region's music. Every week during production the conductor, the orchestra, and sometimes the composer gather in the studio, where Jeffrey and Steven have only three hours to record an episode's 11½-

LISTEN TO... "Hold On, Pigeon" from *The Wonder Pets!*