



It's not every day that you wake up before dawn to jump on a video call with six puppets. [Aimee Knight](#) meets the [Electric Mayhem](#) to talk their new TV show, music and the good ol' days... for as long as she can keep their attention.

by **Aimee Knight**

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Aimee is a Big Issue Staff Writer. She's also writing a book about the Muppets' cultural impact.

I

land in the Zoom room like Dorothy touching down in Oz. My screen is abuzz with pink, purple, orange and green blurs, caused by the six Muppets bounding around the frame (quite a feat, since they don't seem to have legs). They natter affably with one another while scrambling into position. "Hold on!"

"Cover this up!"

"This might be disturbing!"

"We're not ready!"

I start to wonder whether this is a comedy "bit" – you know, just cheekily ribbing the hapless journo at 6am for laughs, *wocka-wocka!* – until they all turn in unison to look at me. Only two

of them have eyeballs, but they're staring at me, for sure.

"I'm Aimee from *The Big Issue* in Aus—" I explain, but my intro soon gets lost in the troupe's hootin' and hollerin', as fervent as it is earnest. "Oooh!"

"Aimeee!"

"Hiii!"

"Heeey!"

"Wooow!"

"Al-riiight!" their ringleader announces, his gold tooth glinting under the studio lights.

Any journalist will tell you that it's tough to manage an interview with six participants. It's harder still when your subjects happen to be your childhood heroes. But when they're made from foam, fleeces, ostrich feathers and faux fur? Baby, that's a recipe for mayhem – Electric Mayhem.

I'm here with counterculture icons Dr Teeth and the Electric Mayhem, best known as the house band on *The Muppet Show* (1976–81). The hard-rocking, soft-hearted musos have long played second fiddle to Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy and their first-string colleagues. Now they're finally getting their moment in the spotlight: starring in their own series, *The Muppets Mayhem*, newly launched on Disney+. If your memories of the band are a little hazy, allow me to introduce them.

Up front on vocals and keyboard is Dr Teeth, who sounds like he lives on whisky and gravel, and whose speech is prone to fanciful flights of over-complication (you'll get used to it). On bass and backing vox is Floyd Pepper, a hippie with fluffy orange mutton chops and a lazy Southern twang. His partner in art and romance is lead guitarist Janice, always ready with a Valley Girl catchphrase ("fer shure, rullyyy") and flower-power optimism. Then there's the enigmatic Zoot – sax is his axe – whose little blue body may be present, but his consciousness is roaming the astral plane. Mop-topped trumpeter Lips is the band's most transient member, joining the line-up on and off since 1980. And last but not leashed is Animal: the crimson percussionist beloved for his rhythmic diction ("Eat drums! Eat drums!") and chaotic-good nature.

As it happens, I'm writing a book about the Muppets, for which I've interviewed many of their human conduits: the writers, designers,

puppet builders and performers who give the foam-rubber jokesters life. While I'm very much at home talking *about* these characters, this is my first time speaking directly *with* them. And though the vibe is undeniably hectic (I don't know how Kermit does it!), part of me suspects this whole thing should feel more surreal. Yet it's surprisingly easy to suspend my disbelief and buy into the close-up magic show unfolding on my screen, as the expert puppeteers work seamlessly just below frame. The challenge, for me, is keeping up with the cross-talk.

I'll pose a question to Dr Teeth, and get a response from Floyd. Lips' Louisiana drawl is so comically thick, Janice has to translate. It strikes me that, individually, the band members can be hairbrained, hyper-energetic and/or wildly naive. But as a unit, they are more than the sum of their fuzzy parts, supporting each other with trust, care and respect. In Teeth's words, they are a "pure rock-tocracy", in which everyone's voice is heard and valued. Closing in on 50 years together, their obvious bonds and playful rapport also make them kind of like a family. It's this crossroads of creativity and domesticity that inspired their new show.

The Muppets Mayhem finds the band on the road in the US, thriving on the freedom of perpetual van life. They've been touring for decades, with no desire to shift gears, until aspiring record exec Nora (YouTube personality turned actor Lilly Singh) shows up. She informs the motley crew that they owe their label an album, and chaos ensues as she tries to steer the Mayhem onto the charts, and into the 21st century.

A rollicking musical comedy, the 10-parter is fuelled by the Muppets' trademark amusements. There's silly wordplay; celebrity cameos from the pop cultural past and present (who else could ring in such an eclectic spread as Lil Nas X, Morgan Freeman, Paula Abdul and Ziggy Marley); and the gang's patented sense of meta-humour, as they wink at the camera – both figuratively and literally – with self-aware charm. Crucially, though, the series stands apart from many recent Muppet vehicles.

In contrast to 2020's *Muppets Now* – which took the gang's classic variety show format of sketches and interviews, and moved it to a virtual desktop setting – *The Muppets Mayhem* is shot like a straight comedy-drama (apart from one episode riffing on the rockumentary *The Beatles: Get Back*). Grounded more or less in reality, with none of the human characters acknowledging the puppets' polyester heritage, the series touches on such themes as self-fulfilment, chosen family and childhood abandonment. In doing so, it reveals the complexity of the Mayhem's members, whose backstories have hitherto been under-explored. I ask the band how it felt to be trusted with this introspective material, and Floyd replies, "Let's just say that some of us took the material better than others." At the back of the group, red hair starts to rustle. Yikes. I think I got someone's hackles up.

"Som-bre? Sin-ceedere?" cries Animal in his signature staccato style. "Nooo! Loud! Wild! Maaay-heem!" he bellows, before bounding off in a frenzy as his compadres watch on. "Oh, wow!" says Janice, befuddled.

"There he goes," says Teeth. His lavender-tinted specs levitate of their own accord as he watches the band's red menace doing zoomies in the middle distance. "Don't get him started."

My worst nightmare is coming true, I cringe internally. I've accidentally upset a Muppet.

Floyd, being the closest thing the band has to an Animal wrangler, calls back their beast of burden and feeds him a treat. "Good boy," Janice coos, turning the mishap into a wholesome exchange.

"Watching the series," I say, grappling for the reins, "Animal, it was actually you who made me cry." A chorus of sincere *aaaws* follows, and Floyd ushers Animal toward the camera. "Get up front," he encourages.

"Wut I do? Wut I dooo?" Animal asks like a kid who's grown accustomed to being told off.

"Naw, you didn't do nothin' wrong," says Floyd. "She wants to talk to you," says Teeth.

Animal heavy-breathes down the lens as I explain how his backstory as a foundling brought me to tears.

In episode three, a flashback shows a wide-eyed, snaggle-toothed baby Animal, locked in a cage and left on Floyd's doorstep with a note reading, "KEEP". Then, in the present day, Animal imprints on the band's self-appointed manager, Nora, in whom he senses a kindred orphaned spirit. (Later, Animal acquires pet bunnies, which he dotes on with total affection – a reminder that seemingly scary monsters sometimes have big, sad hearts.)

As the season progresses, the Muppets' endearing naivety teaches the humans around them how to be good, kind and joyful in a world that favours the opposite. The felt-and-glue weirdos are often more honest, authentic and *real* than their flesh-and-blood counterparts. If this sounds too sappy or "after-school special", don't be mistaken. Though the gang presents, at times, as childlike, the show is not, strictly speaking, for kids – at least not exclusively.

There's always been some confusion wafting in the cultural consciousness around the Muppets' target audience. Preschool staple *Sesame Street* (1969–present) has a lot to answer for: in the early 70s, the Muppets' creator, Jim Henson, struggled to get an adult-oriented series greenlit in the US. The powers that be just couldn't see how Kermit and company would interest adults. Eventually *The Muppet Show* and so on proved them wrong – but, to some extent, the idea that the Muppets are kids' stuff still lingers.

With tongue in cheek, *The Muppets Mayhem* leans into the band's mystique as burnt-out, psychedelic rockers. Many jokes will sail over children's heads, unless they are across the filmography of writer-director Kevin Smith of Jay and Silent Bob fame (or, in an even slimmer niche, Sir Peter Jackson's 1989



THE ELECTRIC MAYHEM, ROCKING FOR ALMOST 50 YEARS

puppet exploitation joint, *Meet the Feebles*). This is not to dissuade parents from watching it with little ones: a live concert takes place in *Minecraft*, and there are some delightful moments of magical realism, care of Zoot's newfound telekinesis. Just be ready to maybe explain to greener viewers who Cheech and Chong are.

And, of course, what would an Electric Mayhem gig be without music? The show blends covers of pop and rock hits by the Beatles, the Beach Boys and Joe Cocker alongside originals by 4 Non Blondes' Linda Perry, and a re-recorded version of the band's touchstone groove, 'Can You Picture That?', from *The Muppet Movie* (1979). Out now on luminous coloured vinyl, the soundtrack doubles as the Mayhem's debut album, creating a sonic bridge between the show's story-world and our real one, with the Mayhem acting as analogue tour guides, reaching a felted hand across the digital divide.

Given the show's blend of old and new, past and present, vintage and virtual, I ask the gang if they ever get nostalgic, and what kind of feelings that brings up for them?

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," says Floyd, mulling over the question. Dr Teeth jumps in, "I often feel a tingling sense of nostalgiafacation whenever I see some of our more classical performances."

"I'm with ya, Teeth," Floyd chimes. "Anytime I see us on *The Muppet Show* or in our movies, it makes me long for those good ol' days when rock was young." Attuned to his master's voice, Animal nods along.

"You know, we love where we are today," says Janice, "but it's nice to remember where we all came from."

"Niiice," echoes Animal.

Couldn't have said it better myself. ■

THE MUPPETS MAYHEM IS STREAMING NOW ON DISNEY+.

My worst nightmare is coming true. I've accidentally upset a Muppet.



PHOTOS BY @DISNEY, MITCHELL HAASETH/@DISNEY