



Am I Blue? Absolutely

Donovan Patton, new host of *Blue's Clues*, immerses himself in kid stuff

"I'm a little bit nervous," says Patton (with Blue, right, and bathing in bubbles in Brooklyn).



In his Brooklyn apartment there are telltale clues that Donovan Patton's life has changed significantly. It's not just that his three roommates now refer to him as "Mr. TV Actor." Or that he brushes his teeth with *Blue's Clues* toothpaste and dries himself with *Blue's Clues* towels. "We all have *Blue's Clues* towels," says roomie Jonathan Murphy, 24, a film graduate student. "And we all sit down and watch the episodes. We're all in our 20s, but we sing along and have a good time."

Ditto the 8.5 million other viewers of *Blue's Clues*—mainly preschoolers ages 2 to 5—who know the 24-year-old Patton as the enthusiastic new host of the six-year-old Nickelodeon hit. Actually they know him by his character name, Joe. "Donovan was a little too

NICKELODEON

Out of the Blue

After six years, founding host Steve Burns trades his handy notebook for a guitar



Then: Blue's best buddy (in '99) ...

"The coolest people I've ever met in my life have been 4-year-olds," says Steve Burns. So why did he hang up his rugby jersey and close the notebook in which he has scribbled guessing-game clues since *Blue's Clues'* 1996 debut? Burns says he'd had a vision of himself turning into the next Fred Rogers, the venerable PBS children's host who retired last year. "Mister Rogers is a noble thing to be," he says, "but I was very unsure I wanted to do this forever." On his last show Steve told his young fans he was

going off to college. In fact, Burns still isn't sure about his future. Single and a resident of Brooklyn, he maintains a Web site (www.steveswebpage.com) to counter rumors that he died and is working on a children's book. In 2000 he also shaved his head and last winter cut an album, *Songs for Dustmites* (still being shopped), with his favorite alternative rock band, the Flaming Lips. His hair was still growing back when Burns taped a nostalgic revisit to *Blue's* for its 100th episode, airing June 10. "It was like putting on the most comfortable shirt you ever had," he says. "It's like, 'Aaahh, I remember this.'"



... and now: "All I'm doing is having the time of my life," says Burns (striking some dissonant chords at home in Brooklyn).

hard on a preschooler's tongue," explains executive producer Traci Paige Johnson. Besides, she says, "he looks like a Joe," the amiable kid brother of *Blue's* original host, Steve Burns.

It was Burns's decision to pack it in two years ago (see box) that sent the producers scrambling for a successor. Patton, then a struggling actor and part-time waiter, was among 1,500 who applied. "He's obviously very young," says Burns, 28, who performed with Patton at his audition, "but the energy was right there. We did dual Christopher Walken imitations. I remember going to the producers and saying, 'I want him.'"

So did they. "Donovan," says *Blue's* co-creator Angela Santomero, "is such a preschooler. To him, everything is new and exciting." Patton agrees. On the set, where the host tapes his episodes against a blue screen (animators will later add sets, props and characters, including the floppy-eared title canine, Blue), "they have all these toys for me, like Nerf guns

and Nerf basketball," says Patton. "And there's not a kid in the place. So I get to be a kid *all* of the time."

His mother, Darlene Curtis, 50, campaign manager for a California branch of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, isn't surprised. "He always had a great imagination growing up," says Curtis, whose marriage to Michael Patton, 51, an architect, ended when Donovan was 3. (Both later remarried.) Her son, an Air Force brat who spent part of his youth near a base in Germany, recalls walking the dog with brother Casey, now 26 and an Air Force paramedic, "and pretending to be Vikings. I wanted to be different things each week." At Casey's urging, he enrolled in drama classes in his middle school in Las Vegas, where the family moved when Donovan was 12. Taking his first bows onstage, he says, "something in my soul clicked." In his junior year he transferred to Michigan's elite Interlochen Arts Academy.

After graduating in 1996, Patton continued taking acting classes in

Manhattan while getting by with odd jobs from book clerk to video deliveryman. "I lived on popcorn for a month at one point," he says. "If a roommate would make too much spaghetti, I'd give puppy-dog eyes so I could eat their food."

The dog days ended in May 2000, when he landed the *Blue's Clues* gig. But because each effects-laden episode takes 8 to 10 months to complete, Patton (with Burns introducing him) did not make his TV debut until April 29. Since then, "my everyday life hasn't changed much at all," says Patton, who is single and has yet to be mobbed by toddlers on the street.

So is he feeling blue? Nah, just a little gray. "My clothes haven't gotten any cleaner," Patton muses with a laugh. "I'm sort of wondering: If you're on television, shouldn't your clothes always be clean? I'm going to talk to the Laundromat people about that."

- Michael A. Lipton
- Amy Bonawitz in New York City