

# “Creativity flows quite naturally”

A CONVERSATION WITH JOSH SELIG\*

**Small Potatoes. Where did you get this idea from?**

**Selig:** The *Small Potatoes* started with the name “Small Potatoes”. I always said that was just a great title for a show. Small potatoes obviously has the double meaning of something that is not that significant but also an actual small potato. We thought that we would explore different ways of looking at potatoes.

We assigned one of our designers the task of sculpting some clay potatoes and they were adorable. We loved the potatoes so we went on and we had to do all four. We decided it will be a band of 4 singing potatoes and then we went ahead and redesigned them a little bit in Photoshop, cleaned them up a little bit, and they became a band (Ill. 1). In my mind, I always wanted them to be sort of “The Beatles of preschool television”. We wanted them to explore different genres, we wanted them to have a good sense of humor and we wanted them to have sort of all the trials and tribulations that any band would have.

**Potatoes are not really something you think of first for preschool TV.**

**Selig:** Well, the thing that I really loved about the concept of *Small Potatoes* was that the potatoes were a symbol for a preschooler, in that potatoes are not particularly formed. They’re not that well-defined and yet there’s something quite beautiful and very simple about a potato.

To me they were a great metaphor for a young child

and they’re full of potential. We wanted to explore that potential in the series. As you’ve seen, they dress up in all different kinds of costumes, they go to crazy places.

**Did you already have a first picture in your mind or a first drawing or sound?**

**Selig:** I definitely wanted them to be singers. To me that was very important because there was something very funny about potatoes that formed a band.

It was only later that we talked more about stories and we started developing the relationships between the characters but we really wanted them first and foremost to make music videos. So each one really represents a different genre of music. We have a Motown one, we have a Hip Hop one, we have an ‘80s hair band episode. We really wanted to explore music and riff on music and poke fun at ourselves and the way trends come and go because the potatoes are very trendy. Each

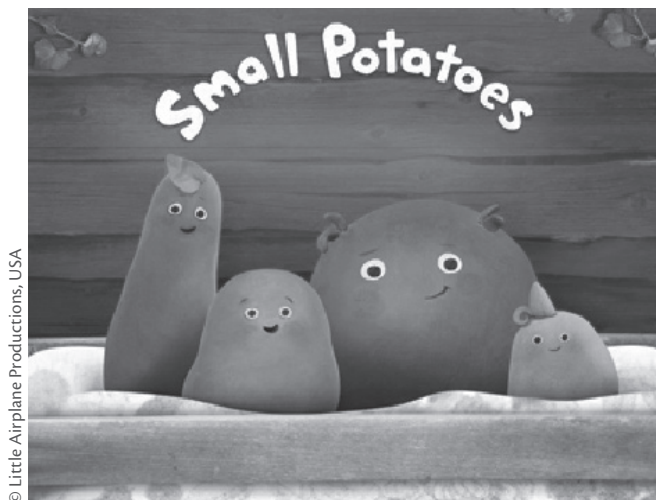
episode really represents sort of the look and feel of that period of music and music videos.

**There is this wonderful song “I am a potato”. How did you come up with this?**

**Selig:** Well, that one is autobiographical and I wrote that song. The song is definitely about me and I wrote it very quickly and it just sort of worked. It just sort of felt right ...

I do think I feel the simplicity about being a human that that song captures and we certainly have very complicated minds so we make our lives very hard often by, for example, valuing things that are out of our reach and chasing things that we will never have. I think there’s something in that message of self-acceptance that really resonated for me at the time and I think still resonates for me. Maybe you can’t jump too high and maybe you’re not a movie star or maybe you’ve never written a bestseller. But

whatever, you’re you, and that’s a beautiful special thing and that’s really what the potatoes are about. And that is sort of the heart and soul of the *Small Potatoes*. It’s potato Chip singing about the fact that there’s nothing that exceptional about him but that he has very deep feelings and that makes him quite special (Ill. 2). And I think that’s true for all people. It’s true for babies, preschoolers, adults.



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Ill. 1: *Small Potatoes* is an animation series featuring 4 potatoes. As a symbol for preschoolers they sing songs about feelings and everyday subjects in different music genres

## INTERVIEW

So, there's something very fundamental about that song, that phrase, "I'm a potato and we're all potatoes." It's really a song about the commonality of being a person. And even though we all sort of have different jobs and drive different cars, we're really basically the same. I think the sooner we accept that, the easier it is to be comfortable in life and in one's skin. To me, that's the truest episode.

*And then comes this awesome moment when you suddenly see the musicians. How did you get this idea?*

**Selig:** I'll tell you the honest truth: it was while traveling. I was on holiday in Mexico and I was traveling with a friend and we were in a van for a 3-hour drive on a road in Mexico and I had the song playing in my head and it was very dark night and I started just imagining the whole video. At a certain point, the musicians appeared and it happened quite organically and so I just made a few notes in the van.

The other moment that happened which surprised me a lot was when the background becomes an animated garden of flowers that take over the frame (Ill. 3). I wasn't even sure if we could achieve that. I'm really not an animation person so I drew out a very rough storyboard on the back of business cards and I brought them back home to New York and I shared them with the team and I was like, "Can we do this? Is this possible?" There were budget questions because we had to shoot live-action kids and we had to figure out some technique for making the flowers grow in a way that looks natural. But we really were able to crack it, to solve it.

I think that's the great thing about having a very great talented team around you and you can challenge them with creative problems and they can find solutions that work. I couldn't be happier with the way that particular video turned out, in particular, the relationship between the live-action and the animation. I think it really flowed well.

*How did you come up with the music?*

**Selig:** We work with a great musical director at Little Airplane, Jeffrey Lesser. So he and I worked very closely and we talked about the different genres we wanted to explore. We talked about how they would work both musically and visually. We drew upon some great composers in New York. Folks like Billy Lopez and Michael John LaChiusa contributed songs. So we really had a wide variety of composers that were involved. I wrote some, Jeffrey wrote some. It was really a fun project. Everybody got involved, different people got to direct different episodes within the studio.

We all just sort of adopted these 4 characters and we had a relatively short production schedule which sometimes is very helpful because the ideas just tumble out. There's not a lot of time to second guess. Often, the best creative ideas die in committee, when people talk about them too much. On *Small Potatoes*, we had no time to talk about them – we had to deliver. We really moved very quickly and as a result, there's a real spontaneity and a kind of organic quality to the videos.

*In general: what do you think, where do great ideas come from?*

**Selig:** I wish I could tell you, but I can't. They happen quite naturally. They happen almost constantly and I think they happen to everybody. I think what happens with people that end up working professionally in a creative field is they just become more accepting of those moments and they make note of them and they write them down.

For one person, it's just a daydream. For somebody else it becomes a television series. It's the willingness to capture your daydreams and your thoughts and write them down and then put some energy to making them something someone else can appreciate. That could be a puppet show, it could be a painting, it could be a novel, it could be anything.

When I'm making a show, I feel like I'm capturing a very small piece of that and sharing it with others. And it's a very satisfying experience. It feels good to make it and it feels good to share it and it feels good to have other people talk about it. Even if sometimes they don't like it. It is still interesting to have people get involved with something that was, at one point, just a thought in your mind. It's really one of the most exhilarating things that I think you can do. And it's something that I really love doing. I feel very fortunate to have a career that allows me or gives me a good excuse to do it every day.

*In Small Potatoes, some of the creativity comes out of using new media technology.*

**Selig:** We are very active with social media with *Small Potatoes*. We launched the Facebook page which is not unusual for companies to do. But what happened on our page is that one day, one of the fans who happened to be a teenager said, "Can you turn me into a potato?" So, I went to our designers and I said, "Is this possible?" and they were like, "That's easy." So, they took the photograph of this kid on Facebook and turned her into a potato. We posted it that same day and the page just exploded with requests. We knew that something was happening here that was quite unique. So, we started making a lot of potato avatars that were based on the kids' photographs and then we started getting a lot of family requests and family portraits and we just fulfilled as many of these as we could every day and we do it now, every day, we still make potato avatars. What happens is they circulate quite naturally throughout Facebook because people then use them as the avatars for their page.

Right now we have over 1.8 million Facebook fans which is extraordinary since we don't have a company handling our Facebook page. We just do it ourselves in-house. It is just something

Screenshots from *Small Potatoes*  
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Ill. 2 and 3: Potato Chip sings a touching song about what he is (a potato) and not (a tomato etc., left), what he can't do (jumping jacks), but that he has deep feelings when sharing things with others (right)

we all sort of update during the day. I do it myself on the weekends. I cover the Facebook page, I post a few times. I think Facebook for teenagers is almost like a radio station. It has this ability to have back and forth interaction and we're constantly getting requests like "Can you make a pop star into a potato? Can you post the Mona Lisa as a potato?" and all the things that they want.

Because we do all the work in-house at Little Airplane, we have the team there and it's really not a hard thing to respond to those requests. I think that this sort of back and forth between content creator and audience is a relatively new phenomenon. In the old days, you could certainly after a season say: "Hey kids, what do you think we should make an episode about next season?" But the lag between when that suggestion was made and when content was produced could be another year because production takes so long. But with design, especially still images, it's very easy to turn something around quickly and share it through the social media networks.

So that's been a really interesting new experience for us as a company and it has definitely driven a lot of activity for us as a business. For instance, we made a *Small Potatoes* movie and we did it in conjunction with Disney Junior. We included 200 custom potatoes of Disney Junior fans that they requested into the cast of the film. So, they became extras.

You could, in effect, watch your kid as a potato in the film.

#### *What is your secret recipe for productivity?*

**Selig:** I don't think that there is a secret recipe. If there is a secret recipe, it's not trying too hard. It's not overthinking it. The people that I know that struggle the most with their creativity are often the brightest people. The brighter ones tend to overanalyze. They tend to be too aware of work that was made before them. They tend to be too aware of what they're saying through their work and as a result they become very self-conscious. They tighten up, you know. They'll write a paragraph and they rewrite it 4 times before they get to paragraph 2. Their mind and their intelligence ends at being their biggest adversary.

I think creativity flows quite naturally. It's not unlike having an appetite for a meal. I think you have an appetite to make something. I think the more people can simply allow that – very much like the way children do when they are given a bunch of paints – the more you can just play and enjoy the creative process without self-consciousness, without worrying that your friend or your neighbor, your family member is going to criticize you. I think the more fun you have the better the quality of the work is.

There's this great Picasso quote that says that he spent his entire life learning

how to paint like a 4-year-old. I think there's a lot of truth to that. There's a spontaneity in young children that most adults lose. I think, for me, when I'm in the zone of making something, it's a very private, free place.

I definitely feel vulnerable like anybody else when I share my work and I want people to like it like anybody else. In the making of it, it's a very sacred spot where I don't allow other voices in. I don't hear any critics – other people nor myself. I just trust that that particular thought or idea wants to come into being. My job there is to chaperon it safely into being.

Whether it's going to be a good idea or a bad idea, I don't know. I don't really care. I just feel like my job is to make sure that it actually gets born and shared with the world. If I can help it along by adding some great music or some great design or some great animation then that's part of my job, too. Making sure this thing is really well-cared for. Right up until the moment that it gets delivered to a network or to the kids. ■

*\*Josh Selig is founder and president of Little Airplane Productions, New York, USA.*

