

Clokey, Art. Foreword. *Gumby: The Authorized Biography of the World's Favorite Clayboy*, by Louis Kaplan and Scott Michaelson, Harmony Books, 1986, pp. 1–6.

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# Foreword

BY ART CLOKEY



Gumby was a by-product of an art film I made in 1953, called *Gumbasia*. In *Gumbasia*, I filmed geometric and amorphous shapes made from modeling clay of many colors. These shapes moved and transformed to the background rhythm of jazz.

I wanted to avoid as much as possible the distraction of any recognizable forms in *Gumbasia*. It was an experiment in pure movement, where the whole plane moved out in different shapes this way and that. *Gumbasia* was filled with movements that, when put together, created a feeling. For instance, there was a shot showing a ball rolling through clay arches and the next shot showed the ball going over a little hill. You begin to *feel* the movement. In the early 1970s,



**Gumbasia. Geometric and amorphous shapes moved and transformed.**

*Playboy* used that scene in a feature called "Sex in Cinema." (I could never understand why.)

Sam Engel, a major movie producer, had asked to see my film. I had met Sam because, at that time, I was tutoring his son in English and Latin at Harvard Military Academy (now Harvard School) in Los Angeles. "This is the most exciting film I have ever seen in my life!" Sam said. When Sam comments that a film is exciting, God listens; otherwise He might miss out on something big!

We immediately formed a partnership. Sam had just finished a film starring Burt Lancaster and Sophia Loren, and my repressed libido was turning out fantasies of helping to direct Sam's next picture, with Sophia, Marilyn Monroe, or Jayne Mansfield. I soon learned, however, that I would turn in my libido for a box of clay. Since Sam had another son who was about three years old, he was interested in the quality of children's fare on television. He could see that my trimensional animation process would be perfect for children's films. Imagine my disappointment at his suggestion that I work on a clay figure instead of Sophia's!

I trudged home to do my asexual as-

signment, never having dreamed that I would be involved in making movies for children—prepubescent children at that! For weeks I played around with clay—molding many shapes and colors, looking for the right figure. Although it could never compare with the "casting couch" routine, tabletop modeling became a fascinating challenge to my imagination.

Clay is the basic medium for creative conception of new forms. It's malleable and it changes every time you touch it. You push and mash it, and a lump turns into something, just like magic.

I set out to create a shape and size that were functionally practical from the film animating standpoint. Animating clay for hours under hot lights created a problem: I found it necessary to have a shape and size that were easily reproduced, so that a fresh figure could be substituted as the old one became dirty and completely misshapen through excessive manipulation.

Part of the idea behind *Gumbasia* was that everything in life is based on geometric forms. Gumby and Pokey are close to that. They are simple forms and combinations of those forms. If you roll some white clay into a ball, slit it in half, and place each on a side of Pokey's head, you have his eyes. And when Pokey's eyes bug out, they come out as rods.

Gumby's shape is simple but I didn't want him to become a phallic symbol. We put a little bump on his head to give him the bump of wisdom that the Buddhists have. The only difference is that they have it in the center and Gumby's is over to the side. Actually, the real inspiration for this bump came from my early childhood. In the living room of my grandfather's farmhouse in Michigan hung a framed photo enlargement of my father, taken when he was eighteen. It showed a cowlick on one side of his head that looked like a large bump. I was so amazed by it.



***Early Gumby and Pokey models. I found it necessary to have a shape and size that were easily reproduced.***

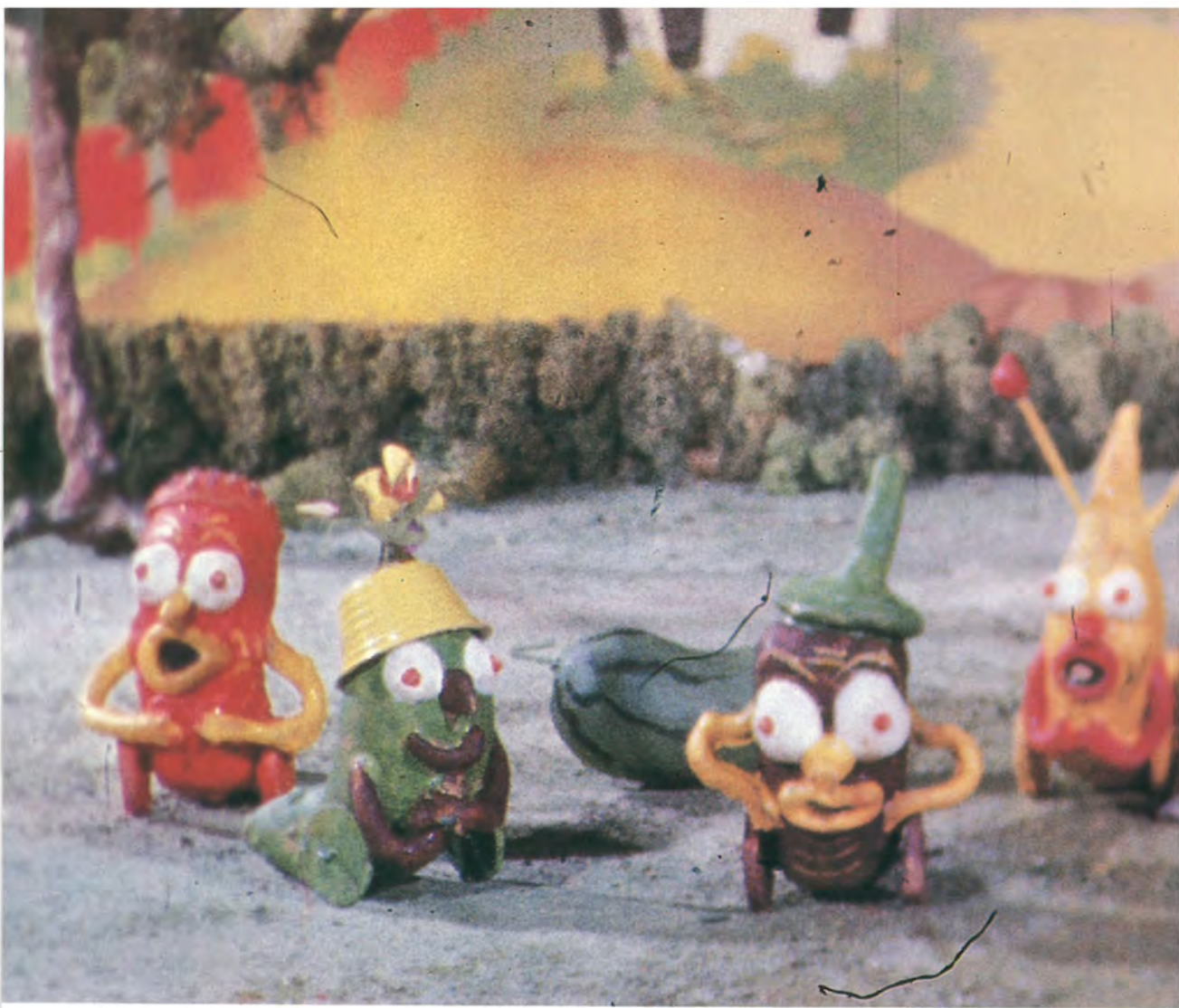


***Arthur Farrington, Art Clokey's father. We put a little bump on his head to give him the bump of wisdom.***

If you superimpose an outline of that portrait over Gumby, you will see that the heads coincide perfectly.

As for size, I finally settled on a seven-inch Gumby, as this turned out to be the easiest to work with. Rolling out a large slab of half-inch-thick clay, I was able to create a number of Gumby bodies in a few minutes with a homemade "cookie cutter." The arms were rolled separately and cut from lengths of long snakelike pieces of clay. Soft wire was inserted into both the arms and the body to give needed rigidity. The eyes were little disks of white clay, cut and bent for various expression changes, and the pupils were tiny balls of red clay that stuck to the white disks. These balls were easily rolled about to create a variety of expressions. The eyebrows, mouth, and nose were made of yellow stringlike pieces that stuck to the green body.

Green with a hint of blue was what I chose for Gumby's color. Imagine a luxuriant field on a bright day when the green



**The Zoops. *I developed no formulas.***

grass picks up just a pinch of blue sky. Gumby looks like a fat blade of grass. I am sure Walt Whitman would have been pleased. Pokey, on the other hand, is all earth—orange and black. Pokey is skeptical and down to earth, as opposed to Gumby, who has both feet on the ground but his head in the clouds.

As for Gumby's name, I had learned the term "gumbo" as a child in Michigan. During the rainy season, before they had pavement through the farm country, the roads got very slippery and mucky. My father would come home and tell us that he had "gotten stuck in the gumbo" on the farm. From my years of studying Latin,

I knew that the diminutive of "gumbo" is a "Gumbino" or "Gumby," and the mother was "Gumba," which is the female declension in Latin. "Gumbo" is the masculine. Seven years of the language and that's the only way I ever used it.

Later, I created the characters of Prickle and Goo, who were inspired by my association and friendship with Alan Watts. One day he said rather humorously that there are two kinds of people in the world, the prickly and the gooey. The prickly are the rigid and uptight, and the gooey are the easygoing and flowing. I then decided to make two characters who symbolized these two types. One was a spiked dino-



saur, called Prickle, and the other was a little blue mermaid named Goo. The female is more gooey and the male is prickly. (Please keep your chuckles clean.)

I took the Gumby pilot to Tom Sarnoff at NBC, who was immediately charmed by the character and by the style of clay animation. He signed me to produce a series of *The Adventures of Gumby*. Roger Muir, the producer of *Howdy Doody*, agreed after seeing the film that it would be a winner, and decided to introduce Gumby on his show. Gumby then graduated to his own show, *The Gumby Show*, with Pinky Lee as the emcee. Pinky Lee may have chafed under that title; I think



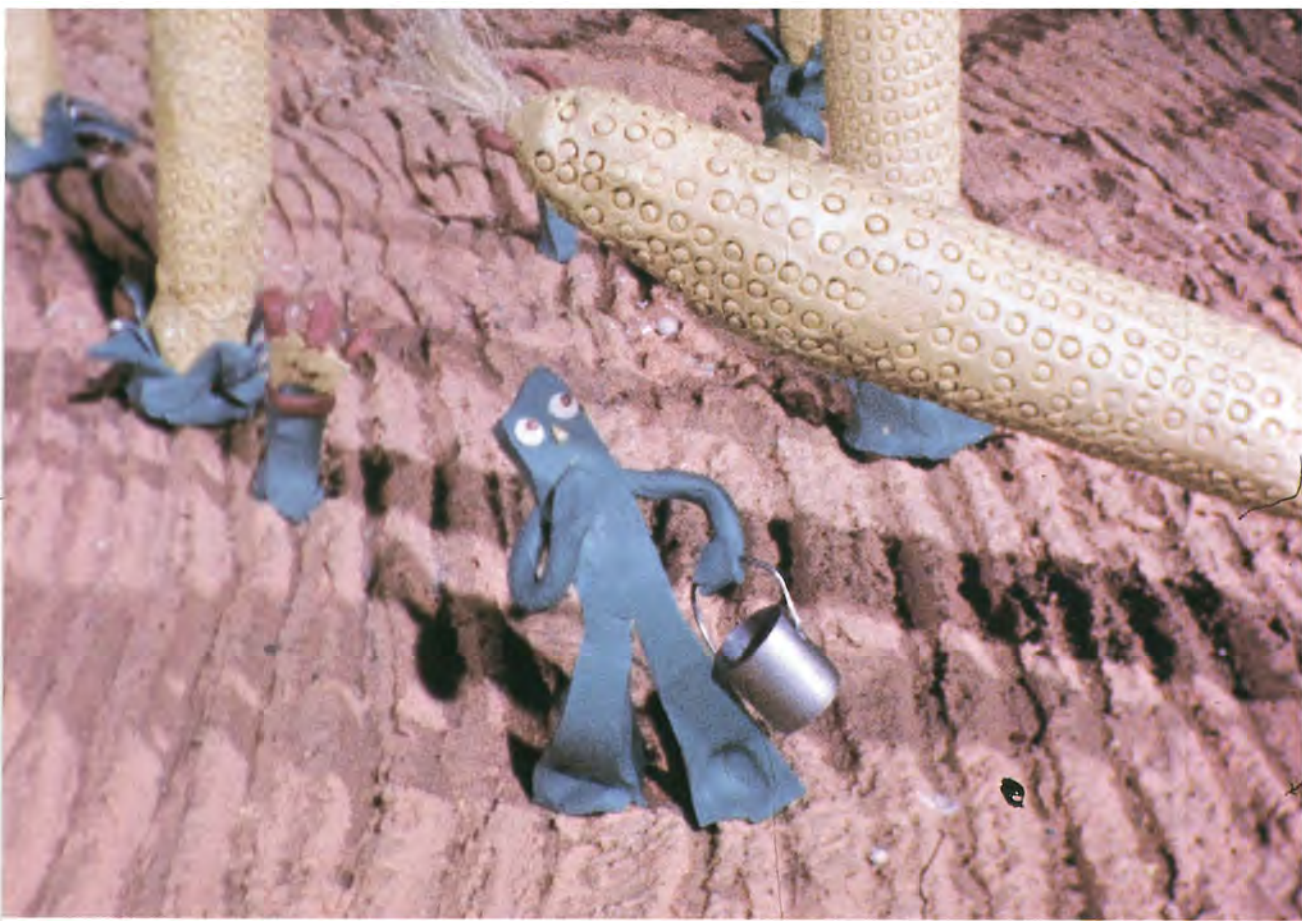
**Art Clokey and friends. The strongest thing I ever took was coffee or orange juice.**

he resented playing second fiddle to a piece of clay.

NBC gave me complete artistic freedom, which is something almost unheard of now at a network. I would just fantasize and daydream. Some of the people I meet today say that I must have “taken something” to do all those surrealistic things in Gumby. I have to tell them that I never did. I never smoked marijuana or took psychedelics while making the films. I was very afraid of drugs all my life. I didn’t know anything about them. The strongest thing I ever took was coffee or orange juice.

Sometimes I would tell my children bedtime stories and turn them into Gumbys. I developed no formulas. Each episode was a separate creation. I never knew what the next episode was going to be about. The love I had for my children rubbed off on those stories. I was just enjoying creating.

I think one of the reasons for Gumby’s appeal is that it has the spirit of love—for my children and for children of any age. Kids like Gumby because all the details aren’t filled in for them. Gumby is more sensuous than cell-animated cartoon characters because he appeals to more senses than cartoon characters do. Kids can put themselves into it and imagine all kinds of



**The Fantastic Farmer. *He might get smashed but he always comes back.***

things with Gumby. They are fascinated by this simple gingerbread-man-like figure who could do almost anything.

The most recent resurgence in Gumby's popularity started in 1979, when my wife, Gloria, and I went to India to see avatar Sathya Sai Baba. Sai Baba can materialize objects out of thin air; you can't believe it unless you see it. Strings of beads and gold rings just come out of his hand. I stood there with Gumby and he did this circular motion with his arms. I could see the sacred ash coming out of his hand. He plopped it right on Gumby, and when we came home things started to happen. The episodes started appearing on TV again, sales of the Gumby toys began to pick up, and then Eddie Murphy did his Gumby skit on *Saturday Night Live*. My son Joe came to me and asked why I let Eddie Murphy do that to Gumby. I told him that

you have to understand humor. Gumby has to laugh at himself too. Gumby is a symbol of the spark of divinity in each of us, the basis of the ultimate value of each person. Eddie Murphy instinctively picked up on this when he asserted, "I'm Gumby, dammit!" When people watch *The Adventures of Gumby* today, they get a blissful feeling. After years of being grown up and crushed by life's downers, we yearn again for that Gumby high.

And how does Gumby feel about his renewed popularity? Well, he really doesn't have a reaction; he accepts it. He says that everybody is unusual and exciting and interesting, and everybody is like him. There's no situation Gumby can't handle. He might get smashed, but he always comes back.

Gumby loves you. We love you. That's about all I can say.