

Sidedoor (S10E01) – The ‘Gentle Anarchy’ of the Muppets

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Sunae Park Evans has touched some pretty important pieces of clothing.

Sunae Park Evans: *George Washington's uniform, and Ben Franklin's costumes, and Lincoln's suit. And it's kind of a lot of different people.*

Lizzie: *Wow, so you touched the fabric that touched Abraham Lincoln's skin?*

Sunae Park Evans: *I know, isn't it so amazing?*

Lizzie: Sunae is a costume conservator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. And 'costume' is basically museum-speak for 'clothing.' So when a first lady's ball gown or a boxer's gloves or an actor's legendary cowboy hat come to the Smithsonian to be preserved for all time, they usually wind up in her workshop. But the things she receives aren't always in great shape.

Lizzie: Like a few years ago when someone dropped a bag on her pristine lab table. She pulled it open and saw what looked like a pile of orange dust and gunk, and some metal parts that once held everything together.

Sunae Park Evans: *This is like a pipe kind of holder.*

Lizzie: *Oh! Oh yeah. Like that's what you find in the ceiling of an unfinished basement. [laughs]*

Sunae Park Evans: *Right. Right.*

Lizzie: I've since learned she was pointing to a hose clamp, for those of you in the know.

Sunae Park Evans: *And then this is the duct tape.*

Lizzie: *That's duct tape?*

Sunae Park Evans: Yes.

Lizzie: Oh my gosh, it is duct tape!

Sunae Park Evans: Yeah.

Lizzie: This bag contained the remnants of a puppet named Sam. He was the central character in a 1950s TV show called *Sam and Friends*—one of the earliest puppet shows on television. He had a wooden head, and his body was made from polyurethane foam. You know, like the yellow stuffing inside your grandma's couch, or an old car seat. But by now, this foam was *old*.

Sunae Park Evans: And so it becomes really kind of soft and then smelly, and then something like a sticky kind of a feeling, and then become hard.

Lizzie: Oh, it gets, like, crusty on the edges.

Sunae Park Evans: Right.

Lizzie: So Sam was in rough shape. And he wasn't alone. Remember, the show was called *Sam and Friends*, and one of those friends was this guy ...

Sunae Park Evans: So this guy is made of a green coat.

Lizzie: Sunae showed me a puppet made out of an old winter coat. It's got these buggy eyes.

Sunae Park Evans: These eyes were made by ping pong balls.

Lizzie: Ping pong balls?

Sunae Park Evans: Ping pong balls.

Lizzie: And the mouth was made from an old shoe sole.

Sunae Park Evans: Like a leather shoe sole.

Lizzie: What?

Sunae Park Evans: And then they bent it in the middle, and then that was made for the mouth.

Lizzie: *Oh wow! And what about the—what's coming out of its butt?*

Sunae Park Evans: *I know. That's like a jeans, child's jeans. Because the hand has to go into it anyway, so they kind of tried to hide the hand and ...*

Lizzie: *Oh, I see. So it's like a sheath for the arm, but it's just a kid's jeans.*

Sunae Park Evans: *Right. Yes.*

Lizzie: This guy with the jeans up his derrière, the ping pong eyes, the shoe mouth and green coat body is actually a puppet you've probably heard of.

Sunae Park Evans: *So this is Kermit the Frog. The original made by Jim Henson. The first one.*

Lizzie: Kermit. The Frog. The OG. Before Kermit ever appeared on *Sesame Street*, *The Muppet Show* or in any of the Muppet movies, he was kickin' it with *Sam and Friends*, a local TV show in Washington, DC. It's the show that launched Jim Henson's career and made puppets a mainstay of American entertainment.

Lizzie: So this time on Sidedoor, we set the time circuits back to 1955, to the puppet show that started it all. What did Jim Henson's zany and frankly unhinged characters tap into that continues to resonate around the world nearly 70 years later? And what does it take to keep these hastily-hewn puppets—most of which have seen an explosion or two—preserved for generations to come? It's Muppet time after the break.

Lizzie: If you grew up watching TV in the '70s or '80s, you really couldn't escape Jim Henson's puppets. They were everywhere! From *Fraggle Rock* ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, *Fraggle Rock*: [singing] Let the music play. Down in Fraggles Rock!]

Lizzie: ... to *The Muppet Show* ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, *The Muppet Show*: (Kermit) Listen, I really feel bad about this, but I have a special announcement.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, *The Muppet Show*: (Waldorf) Hey, maybe we've gotten lucky at last.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, *The Muppet Show*: (Statler) Yeah, maybe tonight's show has been canceled.]

Lizzie: *Muppet Babies ...*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Muppet Babies: (Fozzie) Who's in here?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Muppet Babies: (Gonzo) Nobody in here but us chickens. Bok bok bok.]

Lizzie: And of course, *Sesame Street*.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sesame Street: (Kermit) L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S ...]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sesame Street: (girl) Cookie Monster! [laughs]]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sesame Street: (Kermit) Cookie Monster isn't a letter of the alphabet. It goes Q, R, S, T, U, V ...]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sesame Street: (girl) T, U, Cookie Monster. [laughs]]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sesame Street: (Kermit) Next time Cookie Monster can do it with you. I'm leaving.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sesame Street: (girl) I love you.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sesame Street: (Kermit) I love you too.]

Lizzie: But with all these different shows, there was always a common thread.

Ryan Lintelman: *There is this very diverse group of characters who are all, you know, working towards their dreams. And, you know, there's always this message of acceptance and love and friendship.*

Lizzie: This is Ryan Lintelman, a self-described "pop culture nerd." More importantly, he's curator of the entertainment collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Like so many people in America, he grew up watching *The Muppets*.

Ryan Lintelman: *You know, I wasn't like the biggest fan in the world, but I think for a while my favorite movie was *Muppets Take Manhattan*.*

Lizzie: Really?

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Ryan Lintelman: Yeah. [laughs]

Lizzie: If you weren't like Ryan and didn't grow up watching The Muppets, or you didn't have a TV or you're Rip Van Winkle and you've just woke up and you're still wondering what the heck is a Muppet? Well, this is how Homer Simpson explains it ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Simpsons: (Lisa) Dad, what's a Muppet?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Simpsons: (Homer) Well, it's not quite a mop and it's not quite a puppet. But man! [laughs] So to answer your question, I don't know.]

Lizzie: The term 'muppet' is actually a mash-up of the word 'marionette' and 'puppet.' And muppets are usually eccentric and furry. Some are so big they take two people to operate. Big Bird is just a person in a gigantic yellow bird suit—more like a mascot than a puppet. This is how Miss Piggy reacted the first time she saw Big Bird.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Miss Piggy) Holy maracas!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Big Bird) Oh, hi! I'm Big Bird.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Miss Piggy) Huh, no kidding.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Big Bird) I'm a friend of Kermit's.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Miss Piggy) Oh!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Big Bird) Yeah, we both come from the same neighborhood, Sesame Street.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Miss Piggy) Oh, isn't that the cute little children's show with puppets?]

Lizzie: And the person behind it all, the creator of The Muppets, Jim Henson, a man whose name is synonymous with puppets—or muppets. But for all his muppet mastery, Jim Henson didn't start off wanting to be a puppeteer.

Craig Shemin: *The only reason that he got into puppets was because he wanted to work in television.*

Lizzie: This is Craig Shemin, author of the book *Sam and Friends: The Story of Jim Henson's First Television Show*, and president of the Jim Henson Legacy. He says TV was relatively new technology in the 1950s when Jim was just a teen, and young Jim was mesmerized by it.

Craig Shemin: *And there was a TV station that was looking for a young puppeteer to do a spot on a weekly show that they were doing.*

Lizzie: Jim was still in high school, but he applied and got the gig. And the fact that he knew nothing about puppets or puppetry didn't seem to bother him at all. He got a book out of the library, and started making puppets with whatever he found lying around—like his mom's old green coat, ping pong balls, the sole of a shoe. And he was enjoying himself! So when that show got canceled, Jim packed his puppets into a trunk and lugged it across town to another TV station called WRC, where the station executives said ...

Craig Shemin: *"Here, take five minutes." It was in the evening news.*

Lizzie: The show was a five-minute filler at the end of the local newscast. And Jim was given carte blanche to do basically whatever he wanted. By now, he was a student at the University of Maryland, and he knew he would need help with this new show, so he roped in a classmate named Jane Nebel. They called the show ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: Sam and Friends!]

Craig Shemin: *So when he got started with Sam and Friends, you know, he just had these five-minute segments. He had this entire sound library that he could draw on at WRC, so in the earliest days of Sam and Friends, those five minutes were spent with these crazy, like, absurdist sketches where the characters would dance around and lip sync to comedy records or funny sounds, and there was—it was just pandemonium. There was no real idea of what this was supposed to be.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Kermit) I'm sorry, I loused it up. Let's start the thing over.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (choir) [singing] I'm sorry, I loused it up. Let's start the thing over.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Kermit) No, no. Let's take it again from the top.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (choir) [singing] Top? On top of Old Smokey. All covered with snow.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Kermit) You're singing the wrong song!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (choir) [singing] You're singing the wrong song.]

Lizzie: If you watch the sketch, you'll see Kermit is the one trying to keep everyone in line. But if you know Kermit, you know that that is not his voice.

Craig Shemin: *At the very beginning, none of the puppets spoke. They only lip synced to the music.*

Lizzie: The first few puppets were basically blank slates—mouthpieces for whatever record they were lip syncing to. They didn't have strong characters of their own, but after a couple of years of doing the show ...

Craig Shemin: *Jim became comfortable using his voice, and started making up voices for the characters and they had more dialogue.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Kermit) You know how when a news man is giving his news he's so self-controlled and precise? Well, we want these two guys just to relax and enjoy a couple moments of pleasant conversation. Here first we have ...]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: [recording] Chet Huntley, NBC News, New York.]

Lizzie: This is Kermit interviewing a puppet pretending to be news anchor Chet Huntley, but the puppet is actually just lip syncing to a recording of Chet's voice.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Kermit) Why don't you just call me Kermit, and I'll call you—uh, well what would you like me to call you?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: [recording] Chet Huntley.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Kermit) Oh, okay, Chet Huntley.]

Ryan Lintelman: *That's where you kind of started to see a more developed sense of humor, and something that's like a unique Muppet voice that comes through.*

Lizzie: Little by little, the puppets develop their own voices, and the most distinctive of all these voices was Kermit's. Many people have said that Kermit's personality was strikingly similar to Jim's.

Craig Shemin: *Jim really didn't define Kermit as an alter ego, but he did say it was the character that he was the most comfortable performing.*

Ryan Lintelman: *Kermit, you know, stepped in as the sort of leader of the group who tries to keep this band of crazy characters together, and I think that Jim started to kind of like see that as his role too.*

Lizzie: Now remember, Kermit was just one character on a show called *Sam and Friends*.

Ryan Lintelman: *Obviously, Sam is the ringleader of this whole operation. He's kind of the most human-looking of the puppets that were on Sam and Friends.*

Lizzie: But Sam had a hard wooden head and couldn't change his expression, sort of like a ventriloquist dummy. Kermit's face, on the other hand, was as flexible as a sock puppet. He was full of expression, which made him really fun to watch up close. And *this* was Jim Henson's stroke of genius—an accidental stroke, maybe.

Ryan Lintelman: *He realized that if he made the puppets very flexible instead of the more wooden marionettes and that sort of thing, that they could interact with each other and with the audience in a new way.*

Lizzie: Just by changing the shape of his hand, Jim could change the expression on Kermit's face from excitement to disbelief to the expression that can only be described as "Hmmm." Without realizing it, Jim and Jane were taking puppetry to a new level.

Craig Shemin: *If you look at puppetry in the early days of television, a lot of those people had been doing puppets the way they'd been done on puppet theater and stage.*

Lizzie: Puppet shows on TV at the time were like *Howdy Doody*—an actor on a stage holding a ventriloquist dummy. Or the popular puppet show *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*.

Ryan Lintelman: *They are always, like, kind of on a stage with a proscenium that creates this ...*

Lizzie: *What's a proscenium?*

Ryan Lintelman: *That's like the arch that goes around a stage. So if you're in a theater, you know, you see there's that arch that—you know, it creates this different world. There's a reserve, right? That you're not part of what's happening on the stage.*

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Lizzie: What Jim and Jane did was to play to the cameras instead. By zooming in on just the puppets, the viewers at home were totally immersed in the puppets' world.

Craig Shemin: *Jim was able to just use the camera to hide the puppeteers. It made the puppets look like they were more real.*

Ryan Lintelman: *These are like life size. They're looking right at you. You can totally suspend your disbelief.*

Lizzie: This revolutionized puppetry on television. Jim Henson later said quote, "When I began on television, I really didn't know what I was doing. And I'm sure that this was a good thing, because I learned as I tackled each problem of puppetry. If you study, if you learn too much of what others have done, you may take the same direction as everybody else."

Lizzie: Because he didn't really know the rules, Jim was breaking them left and right, creating an entirely new type of puppetry with entirely new types of puppets.

Craig Shemin: *There was a country boy named Moldy Hay. Harry the Hipster, who's a favorite of mine. There was sort of an uptight announcer type named Chicken Liver. Mushmellon, who's a really fluffy marshmallow-y kind of looking muppet.*

Lizzie: There were about a dozen total on *Sam and Friends*, including a snakey puppet named Icky Gunk and a purple skull named Yurick. And if you think these characters sound weird, imagine what people were thinking back when the show first aired. If you traveled back in time and plopped yourself down in front of a television in the mid-1950s, the first thing you'd notice is that TV was pretty basic.

Craig Shemin: *Most of what was on television locally was either kiddie shows that were repackaging old movies, or ...*

Ryan Lintelman: *A lot of adaptations of radio shows, right? So formats that were popular there. Like westerns, like detective stories.*

Craig Shemin: *Or news. So you didn't really have just a straight entertainment program.*

Lizzie: That's where *Sam and Friends* stood out. It wasn't news, it wasn't an old movie repackaged for TV, and it was *not* meant for kids.

Ryan Lintelman: *I think Henson struggled his entire life with the idea that everybody thought that he was a children's puppeteer or a children's entertainer. And that was not what he set out to do, and certainly not with Sam and Friends.*

Craig Shemin: *Kids would watch it, but it was more aimed at young adults, and a lot of college students got into it.*

Lizzie: And you know if college students are into it, it's probably weird and subversive—which it was. Jim and Jane did whatever wild stuff they felt like doing on that particular night, but it might have been a little too far out there because after just a few months, WRC decided ...

Craig Shemin: *Oh well, we're just gonna take it off the air.*

Lizzie: They canceled it! And that's when they learned what Washingtonians *really* thought of Sam and Friends.

Craig Shemin: *There was immediate outcry.*

Lizzie: *Really?*

Craig Shemin: *And within days, tons of letters came into the station, and the show was put back on the air.*

Lizzie: *Wow, so people really loved it.*

Craig Shemin: *Oh yeah. Yeah.*

Lizzie: Over the next few years, Jim embraced his place as a puppeteer. And he told his business partner—by now also his romantic partner—Jane ...

Craig Shemin: *We're gonna keep doing this show. We are going to make it official. We're gonna form a legal partnership, and we are going to incorporate and we're going to get married.*

Lizzie: *Oh, wow!*

Craig Shemin: *Yeah.*

Lizzie: *Just throw that one at the end.*

Lizzie: Remember kids, there are many ways to propose marriage.

Lizzie: *Sam and Friends* expanded from DC to Baltimore, won a local Emmy, made fun of politics and spoofed the biggest shows of the day.

Craig Shemin: *They did a parody of Gunsmoke, which was the biggest Western at the time, so they did Punsmoke.*

Lizzie: Oh!

Craig Shemin: *About a marshal who was afraid to go out and face the bad guys.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) Well Marshal Billy, what in the world are you doing under the desk?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Marshal) I was tying my shoelaces. Did you hear shooting just now?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) But you wear cowboy boots, Marshal Billy. They don't have laces.]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Marshal) It wasn't an easy job, Chester.]*

Lizzie: But no matter what the sketch was about, many had one thing in common ...

Craig Shemin: *A lot of sketches either ended with one character eating the other, or another character exploding.*

Lizzie: Oh my gosh!

Lizzie: Like for the final show, the cast of *Sam and Friends* went out with a bang. By this time Jim had been making *Sam and Friends* for years and he was ready to move on to other projects. So for the last episode ...

Craig Shemin: *It started as just talking about the fact that it was the last show. And then Kermit sang a very sweet song called, "I Come For To Sing."*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) [singing] Some come to laugh, their voices do ring. But as for me, I come for to sing.]*

Craig Shemin: *The song was just about a humble guy who just comes to sing, and at the very end Harry comes in ...*

Lizzie: *The Hipster?*

Craig Shemin: *Yeah.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Harry the Hipster) Oh, was that it?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) Hmm?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Harry the Hipster) That was the last song?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) Yeah.]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Harry the Hipster) And this is the last Sam and Friends show?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) Yeah. After all, we've been on the air for about seven years now. It's time we tried something else.]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Harry the Hipster) We're not gonna do the show anymore?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) No.]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Harry the Hipster) Oh. Well then, I guess we won't need that pile of scenery that's in the hall.]*

Craig Shemin: *And boom, he starts blowing up stuff.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) Hey, what are you doing?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Harry the Hipster) I just blew up the scenery. We won't be using it again.]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: *(Kermit) Now wait a minute ...]*

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[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Harry the Hipster) And we sure don't need that costume wardrobe.]

Craig Shemin: *Kermit's like, "Some of that stuff doesn't belong to us!"*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Harry the Hipster) Anybody want this lighting board and these old spotlights?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (woman) Yes!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Harry the Hipster) Anybody in the control room?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (woman) Yes!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (Kermit) Hold it, Harry!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sam and Friends: (woman) Help!]

Craig Shemin: *And, you know, the whole place is just here are these explosions all over the place while Kermit's trying to stop them.*

Lizzie: After *Sam and Friends*, Jim and Jane move to New York. And in the late '60s, they created a new show called *Sesame Street*. They brought in a team of puppeteers—or muppeteers, as they're known—and they created a brand new cast of puppets.

Craig Shemin: *And I think Jim thought that mixing those puppets with the *Sam and Friends* puppets really called out how primitive the *Sam and Friends* puppets were.*

Lizzie: Kermit was the only one from *Sam and Friends* to make the leap to *Sesame Street*. But even he got a makeover. Here's Jim describing Kermit's new look on *The Dick Cavett* show in 1971.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Dick Cavett Show: (Jim Henson) His whole body has changed a great deal since, you know, the early one.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Dick Cavett Show: (Dick Cavett) Why has it changed? Is it a matter of diet, or what is it?

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Dick Cavett Show: (Jim Henson) Yeah, well it's not really diet. No, I'd say a matter of progressing, you know, in the direction of better looking frogs, I suppose. [audience laughs]]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Dick Cavett Show: (Dick Cavett) Hard to tell where Kermit leaves off and you begin.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Dick Cavett Show: (Jim Henson) Yes, I've noticed that too.]

Lizzie: Sam and the rest of the friends fell by the wayside—or literally fell onto the floor for Jim and Jane's kids to play with.

Ryan Lintelman: *I mean, that's even, I think, something that the Hensons, early on at least, didn't understand, right? I mean, the idea was that the Sam and Friends puppets were, like, under his desk and kind of got kicked around and the kids would play with them.*

Lizzie: Jim Henson brought the same qualities that made Kermit such a hit to all of his puppets. His dozens of expressive characters fueled multiple TV shows, movies, and became beloved by Americans of all ages. Jim Henson would eventually become a household name because he created characters people connected with.

Ryan Lintelman: *Everybody can see themselves in one of the characters, that they're very relatable.*

Craig Shemin: *We enjoy seeing the vanity of Miss Piggy because we know that there's something of Miss Piggy in us. So I think that Jim really succeeded in creating characters that are very real to us.*

Lizzie: Now after 40 years, the *Sam and Friends* puppets are being recognized as the ones who started it all, and that's how they found themselves singed and a little worse for the wear at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Sunae Park Evans' workshop. But could she bring them back to their rough and rowdy days? We'll have more on that after the break.

Lizzie: When the *Sam and Friends* puppets came to the Smithsonian in 2005, Sunae Park Evans was like, "I work with Abraham Lincoln's top hat and Martha Washington's dress. I don't usually deal with hipster puppets."

Sunae Park Evans: *So I had to think about that. What am I supposed to do? And, you know, I have no idea.*

Lizzie: Sunae didn't grow up watching *Sesame Street* or *The Muppet Show*. She says there were puppet shows on TV in South Korea from when she was a kid, but not with characters like Icky Gunk, Moldy Hay and Chicken Liver. They were a little more realistic.

Sunae Park Evans: *Like, you know, human and kind of a family kind of a thing, but not with these characters.*

Lizzie: *Not a bunch of weird monsters?*

Sunae Park Evans: *[laughs] No. All the names are really funny too, you know?*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: And Sunae quickly found out that her task of preserving these puppets was a much bigger deal than she'd originally thought. See, the *Sam and Friends* puppets weren't actually being donated to the museum. The Jim Henson Company was loaning them for a temporary exhibition. And the museum folks were thinking, "Maybe if we do a good job, they'll give them to us for good."

Sunae Park Evans: *So our curators in the museum really wanted to get them. So I know we have to really do a good job.*

Lizzie: *So this was kind of like a trial period in a way.*

Sunae Park Evans: *Yeah, exactly. That was kind of the situation, yeah.*

Lizzie: *Whoa, high stakes!*

Sunae Park Evans: *[laughs] I know. But you know, only thing, we were all excited because they were so cute.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Except Chicken Liver, who looks like a giant booger. I'm just kidding, Chicken Liver, you're perfect the way you are.

Lizzie: Sunae knew she needed all the help she could get, preferably from a muppet expert. So she made a call to this person.

Bonnie Erickson: *My name is Bonnie Erickson. I've been involved with Jim Henson and his work for many years.*

Lizzie: Bonnie is the creator of one of the most iconic Muppets of all time: Miss Piggy.

Bonnie Erickson: *She's carved out of foam, which is a real process to begin with. It's hand carved with first of all something like a carving knife, and then it's all by little manicure scissors.*

Lizzie: *Wow!*

Bonnie Erickson: *And the way we smooth them out is to go to a belt sander.*

Lizzie: *A what?*

Bonnie Erickson: *A belt sander.*

Lizzie: Like Michaelangelo said about his statue David, he was already complete within the marble, I just had to chisel away the surrounding material. Well, Bonnie says Miss Piggy's personality and attitude were always there, she just had to release the pig.

Bonnie Erickson: *She was sassy when I carved her.*

Lizzie: And she has been sassy ever since. Here she is sassing Martha Stewart.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Martha Stewart) She's back this morning for another holiday visit, and luckily we're not dressed alike this time.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, The Muppet Show: (Miss Piggy) No, we're not. We're not. I wouldn't be caught dead in that!]

Lizzie: Sunae had clearly gotten in touch with the right person, but she and Bonnie were coming at this job from totally different perspectives. Bonnie was used to working quick and dirty—literally tossing muppets.

Bonnie Erickson: *I mean, we're used to taking these puppets off once they were off screen, throw them in a corner and get the other one out of the box and put it on the puppeteer's arm.*

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Lizzie: And Sunae was used to slowly and meticulously fretting over every thread and fiber during a preservation. I mean, she literally made me put booties over my shoes before I could come into her workshop.

Sunae Park Evans: *So if you can wear on top of your shoes. Bootie. Little booties, yeah.*

Lizzie: This was quite a new world for Bonnie.

Bonnie Erickson: *I was there on my first meeting in her workshop. There were several other people around. We were talking about the puppets that had come in. And I knew I had to use archival materials, right? So I said to Sunae, "Sunae, do you have an archival safety pin?" At which point everyone in the room cracked up with laughter. I soon figured out there is no such thing as an archival safety pin. [laughs]*

Lizzie: To get started preserving and posing these puppets, Sunae had to figure out what could be salvaged. The outsides of the puppets weren't so bad. But the insides ...

Sunae Park Evans: *It was sticky and crumbling, so we just had to get rid of them.*

Lizzie: So Sunae started getting rid of all the stuff inside the puppets. She gutted them. And then came the hard part: she needed to build the puppet bodies. She approached the preservation of Kermit the same way she'd preserve Benjamin Franklin's suit: by creating a mannequin the exact shape of old Silence Dogood's body. But ...

Sunae Park Evans: *My brain was so trained about the costumes, not for really this odd-shaped character.*

Lizzie: There are all sorts of books where you can read about men's fashion and postures in the 1700s. Not so many for obscure monster puppets.

Sunae Park Evans: *They look a little different, but I can make mannequins for them. And so they all came together.*

Lizzie: But it wasn't enough just to stuff the puppet—these muppets had personalities that came through in their gestures and expressions. Somehow, Sunae had to capture the attitude of these characters in a frozen position. She had to figure out how to make a soft puppet like Kermit look like he was permanently in mid-sentence. She created a foam clamp to put inside Kermit's head.

Sunae Park Evans: *My hand goes into the body without seeing.*

Lizzie: *So you had to reach all the way in this narrow puppet. You couldn't see what you were doing, and with your fingers maneuver this little clamp so that it would pinch the corners of Kermit's mouth from the inside so that he could smile?*

Sunae Park Evans: *Right.*

Lizzie: Sunae got Sam and all his friends smiling. Lined their bodies up so they looked right, posed all the puppets together and then took a photo to send Bonnie, proud to show off all of her hard work.

Lizzie: *What did you think when you saw that first photo?*

Bonnie Erickson: *Oh. Well, we went in and made some corrections. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Technically, the puppets were perfect, but they just didn't look like themselves. And that gets at the hardest part of putting puppets on display: they're not just objects, they're bizarre and absurd characters with distinct personalities. They shouldn't look stoic but like they're about to get shot out of a cannon or eat a bunch of cookies.

Lizzie: Jim Henson had died of an illness in 1990, so Jane Henson came down to the Smithsonian with Bonnie to help Sunae get these puppets posed right. They set out making little adjustments. Bonnie turned Kermit toward the center of the group to look like he's talking to the rest of them. Moved Harry the Hipster so he's hanging out in the background like that friend who always shows up even though they're not invited.

Bonnie Erickson: *And I remember Jane Hanson came in, and she wanted to fix Mushmellon. And she touched him and the front seam came apart.*

Lizzie: *[gasps]*

Sunae Park Evans: *Yeah, we were all crunching our eyes and stuff like that.*

Lizzie: By the time they were done posing the puppets, the difference was clear.

Lizzie: *You know, it really looks like the difference between a staged photo and a candid photo.*

Sunae Park Evans: *Exactly.*

Lizzie: Sunae and the team had done it. All 10 of the *Sam and Friends* puppets looked like they were ready to go back on air and blow some stuff up. Shortly after, the Jim Henson Company donated the puppets to the Smithsonian with a few other muppets, too.

Lizzie: *So you did it. I mean, you ...*

Sunae Park Evans: *I know! I'm so proud. [laughs] And then I'm like a puppet conservator now. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *You became the authority.*

Sunae Park Evans: *Right.*

Lizzie: Even though Sunae and her team had no idea if the *Sam and Friends* puppets would be donated to the Smithsonian, Craig Shemin says Jane Henson had a pretty good idea all along where they would end up.

Craig Shemin: *Jane knew that she wanted these characters to come home to Washington, DC. It was her who guided them back to DC. And, you know, it was important to her for people to see where Jim started.*

Lizzie: Just a high school student with a dream to be on television and the imagination to back it up—and some friends he made along the way to help make it happen.

Bonnie Erickson: *A lot of us who worked with Jim have called him the gentle anarchist. He never stopped playing around. I think he challenged himself, and I think he had a passion for it. And I think he would encourage everyone to—you know, you have a muse, use it.*

Lizzie: Jim Henson created dozens of characters over the course of a long career, beloved by entire generations of viewers in the US and the rest of the world. At its height, *Sesame Street* played to 240 million people weekly in over 100 countries. Ryan Lintelman, curator of the American Entertainment collection, says ...

Ryan Lintelman: *My favorite object in the entire collection is the original Kermit, because ...*

Lizzie: *Really?*

Ryan Lintelman: *I think it's an amazing piece.*

Lizzie: *The whole collection?*

Ryan Lintelman: *Yeah, yeah.*

Lizzie: If you go and see the original Kermit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, you'll see the ping pong balls Jim used for eyes, the jean leg coming out of his rear end, the shoe that was used for a mouth.

Craig Shemin: *If people see the simplicity that these world-famous characters started from, I think it can inspire people, the next generation of creators to come up with something really, really big. And you just have to sort of start simple. Jim used to say, "Simple is good." Well, and then he'd go on and figure out the most complicated way to do something. [laughs]*

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: To see some photos of all the different puppets we have at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, or to learn more about *Sam and Friends* check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at SI.edu/Sidedoor. We'll also share a link to Craig Shemin's book, *Sam and Friends: The Story of Jim Henson's First Television Show*.

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Sunae Park Evans, Ryan Lintelman, Bonnie Erickson and Craig Shemin. Special thanks to The Jim Henson Company for some of the archival audio featured in this episode.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant.

Lizzie: Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you're listening on the Spotify app, comment and tell us your favorite Muppet or Jim Henson creation. I can say with certainty we have our fair share of *Labyrinth* fans on this show [clears throat] Jess Sadeq.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor (@) si.edu. And if you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship (@) prx.org.

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Lizzie: *You've got a great Kermit voice.*

Sidedoor (S10E01) – The ‘Gentle Anarchy’ of the Muppets

Craig Shemin: *[laughs] When I used to work for The Muppets, and I was writing, that was—you know, when you're writing the characters, you'd be like—you'd be talking like Kermit while you're doing—my Kermit's not that great, but ...*

Lizzie: *Oh, it's great. I want to hear more of it. [laughs]*

Craig Shemin: *And when you would write for Miss Piggy, you were like, "Kissy kissy." So you'd always be doing, "Ah, Kermit. This is Gonzo the Great." So you're always sort of talking them through while you're writing the scripts so you know the characters are gonna sound right.*