

TRIBECA FILM AND COPPER POT PICTURES PRESENT  
I AM BIG BIRD: THE CAROLL SPINNEY STORY



**PRESS NOTES**

**Release date – May 2015**

**PR CONTACT:  
Tribeca Film**

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## **I AM BIG BIRD: THE CAROLL SPINNEY STORY**

### **Press Notes**

**“Big Bird is the most popular children’s character in the world and I think that’s largely due to Carroll.”**

**Jim Henson, creator *THE MUPPETS***

### **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

For 45 years, Carroll Spinney has been beloved by generations of children as the man behind Sesame Street's Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch - and at 80 years old, he has no intention of stopping. A loving portrait of the man in the yellow suit, *I AM BIG BIRD* features extraordinary footage of Spinney's earliest collaborations with Jim Henson as it traces his journey from bullied child to childhood icon. And as the yellow feathers give way to grey hair, it is the man, not the puppet, who will steal your heart.

### **LONG SYNOPSIS**

Carroll Spinney has been *Sesame Street*'s Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch for over 40 years. He's dined with heads of state, won Emmys and been named a living legend by the Library of Congress. He's handpicked a successor who has waited, quite literally, in the wings, as his understudy for almost 20 years. But while Carroll's peers have long since slipped into cozy retirements or pursued other dreams, he has held on with no intention of retiring.

Yielding the Bird would mean saying goodbye to characters that are a true expression of his soul, characters that he loves and cherishes like his own children.

Pure love runs through Carroll's life: he found it first in his mother, a woman who not only handcrafted his first puppets, but who also sacrificed her own body to protect Carroll from a savage beating from his father. When Carroll's first marriage to a woman “embarrassed” by his career ended in divorce, Carroll would find Debra, the love of his life. And then there was Jim Henson, who grew from boss to friend and whose death shattered Carroll. The unconditional love that envelops Carroll's life—and which is captured in the hours of home video culled for *I AM BIG BIRD*—is the true secret to Big Bird's popularity.

But that popularity has begun to wane. In the face of stiff competition from other entities vying for children's attention, *Sesame Street* had to go younger. The shift saw writers begin to explore other characters and when Elmo emerged, Big Bird was supplanted and his relevance was challenged. Suddenly, Big Bird was in fewer scripts. TV and movie cameos featured Elmo instead of the Bird.

Still, Carroll has been a constant presence for over 40 years, his path weaving through American history like that of *Forrest Gump*. And, as seen in the 2012 presidential election, Big Bird is still beloved—and protected—by people throughout the world. Even if Elmo sells more plush, Big Bird remains close to the hearts of children and grownups everywhere because he radiates love. And though it was Jim Henson who conceived him, it is Carroll who brings that intangible quality to Big Bird and makes him the character that continues to captivate audiences 45 years after his debut.

Carroll can't say goodbye to Big Bird because he *is* Big Bird. His experiences shaped Big Bird's soul; Big Bird's soul has guided people around the world.

Using current interviews and never-before-seen home videos capturing intimate moments from his life and career, *I AM BIG BIRD* peels away the instances that inspired his creation of characters that have influenced generations of children. And, as the yellow feathers give way to grey hair, it is the man, not the Muppet, who will teach us the greatest lesson of all: how to love unconditionally.

*I AM BIG BIRD* oscillates between the past and present, both showing Carroll on set today as he transforms himself from an unknown white-haired puppeteer to the six-year-old, 8-foot tall bird known the world over and using never-before-seen home movies from Carroll's personal video library to illustrate how he became the man that became the Bird. These moments include:

- Jim Henson, Kermit the Frog perched atop his hand, playfully teasing Carroll in the familiar, comforting voice of the green amphibian. Such footage shows just how close the two were before Henson's untimely death, which still brings tears to Carroll's eyes.
- Carroll's selection, then subsequent rejection, by NASA to join the *Challenger* crew in 1986. Instead of boarding the shuttle, he watched from the studio as the astronauts, including his replacement, Christa McAuliffe, perished in the disaster.
- Intimate time between Carroll and his family, which captures a side of Carroll known only to his closest friends. The grainy, aging film footage beautifully captures the nostalgia of the deep, lasting love shared between Carroll and his wife Debra.

*I AM BIG BIRD* also uses current-day interviews with friends and colleagues who've worked closely with Carroll over the years, including, but not limited to:

- Matt Vogel, the apprentice that Carroll handpicked nearly 20 years ago. In the 18 years he has been Carroll's understudy, he has grown from apprentice puppeteer to accomplished show director. But he still studies Carroll's every move in hopes that he can live up to his mentor's legacy when the time comes.
- Frank Oz (Cookie Monster, Bert, and more) and the late Jerry Nelson (*The Count*), who, with Carroll, formed a remarkable group of artists that vaulted *Sesame Street* to iconic status.

- Jane Henson, whose interview gives new insight into what Jim Henson saw in Carroll, who was a relatively untested puppeteer at the time he was hired. Mrs. Henson's interview for I AM BIG BIRD was one of the last she gave before her death in 2013.

As the film gently weaves between past and present, it becomes clear just how deep of an impact Carroll Spinney has had throughout the world.



## **I AM BIG BIRD: THE CAROLL SPINNEY STORY** **PRODUCTION NOTES**

I AM BIG BIRD was largely funded by a 2012 Kickstarter campaign. The project set its goal at \$100,000, a mark which it surpassed handily. 1976 backers pledged \$124,114 to a campaign that offered rewards including original art by Caroll Spinney, a group video chat and a dinner in New York with the legendary puppeteer.

Caroll and Debra Spinney's home archive consists of thousands of photos and hundreds of hours of footage on every format available since the inception of film. The filmmakers went through each tape, laboriously transcribing and logging each clip.

In addition to being Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch, Caroll Spinney has a fascinating history in the entertainment business. He first broke into the industry while he was an airmen for the United States Air Force, stationed at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, NV. There, he had a show on a local access channel owned by Howard Hughes. When his show was unceremoniously cancelled because Caroll was transferred abroad, Caroll returned to his first love: cartooning. He penned a strip about military life for the Air Force called "Harvey." After completing his service, he shared top billing with Judy Valentine on *Judy and Goggle*, a children's show airing on WHDH Boston in which he played Goggle. From there, Caroll and Judy joined *Bozo's Big Top*, where he performed a number of walk-around characters and continued to do puppet shows. Until he began on *Sesame Street*, all of the puppets Caroll used on television were built by his mother.

Among the many awards and honors Caroll Spinney has received are four daytime Emmys, two Grammys, a Library of Congress Living Legend award and, in 2006, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

In 1979, Caroll Spinney traveled to China as part of the Bob Hope special *On the Road to China*. It was the first American production to shoot in China after the US established relations with the country. It was also the inspiration for the seminal *Sesame Street* special "Big Bird in China," which was written and directed by Jon Stone based on an idea from Caroll and Debra Spinney.

The first season of *Sesame Street* featured three regular puppeteers: Jim Henson, Frank Oz and Caroll Spinney. Though Oz occasionally returns to set for cameos, Caroll Spinney is the last puppeteer who works on the show.



**I AM BIG BIRD: THE CAROLL SPINNEY STORY**  
**CREDITS**

Directed and Produced By	Dave LaMattina & Chad Walker
Written By	Dave LaMattina
Cut and Shot By	Chad Walker
Music Composed By	Joshua Johnson
Executive Producer	Clay Frost
Camera B Operator	Tyler Walker
Additional Camera	Mike Bozzo
	Dave LaMattina
	Clay Frost
Additional Sound	Jim Nogueira
	Eugene F. Steward
Additional Footage	Victor DiNapoli
Make-Up Artist	Roberto Baez
Assistant Editor	Tyler Walker
Production Assistant	Ellie Martino
Design and Animation	Christopher Siemasko
	Bryan Cox
Additional Color	Seth Boyden
	Anastasia Owad Siemasko
	Sidney Marra
Additional Design	William Krause
Score Mixer	Matt Ward
Music Editor	Anthony Loomis
Score Preparation	Celeste Monteith
Audio Post Production By	Great City Post
Managing Director	Steve Simons
Supervising Sound Editor/Re-Recording Mixer	Ian Stynes
Sound Editor	Daniel Heffernan
Digital Intermediate By	Company 3
DI Colorist	Rob Sciarratta
DI Producer	Katherine Andrews
Distribution Advisory Services Provided By	Preferred Content
Sales Agents	Kevin Iwashina
	Abby Lynn Kang Davis
Legal Services Provided By	Sloss Eckhouse Lawco LLP
	Jerry L. Dasti, Esq.

Legal Consultant  
Clearance Counsel

Bozo's Big Top Footage Courtesy Of  
Sesame Footage Courtesy Of  
Henson Footage Courtesy Of  
Photos Courtesy Of

Michael L. Abitabilo  
Donaldson and Callif, LLP  
Chris L. Perez, Esq.  
Larry Harmon Pictures Corp.  
Sesame Workshop  
Jim Henson Foundation  
Ira Berger  
Gary Boynton  
Gary Miller  
Bill Pierce  
Robert Fuhring  
William R. Daly  
Lianzi Ouyang  
Debra Spinney  
Jon Baker  
Puppeteers of America



## **I AM BIG BIRD: THE CAROLL SPINNEY STORY BIOS**

### **ABOUT COPPER POT PICTURES:**

Copper Pot Pictures has been producing documentaries and other film content since it was founded in 2007 by Dave LaMattina, Chad Walker and Clay Frost. The trio came together with the goal to make meaningful and inspiring documentaries. Their first feature, *BROWNSTONES TO RED DIRT*, was completed in 2009. Copper Pot followed up *BROWNSTONES* with *KEI*, a short documentary that followed Major League Soccer star and war refugee Kei Kamara as he returned home to Sierra Leone to play in a critical match for his national team. *BROWNSTONES TO RED DIRT* and *KEI* each found success on the festival circuit, playing at places such as the San Francisco, Sarasota, Tallinn, Bermuda and Seattle International Film Festivals, among others. In addition to preparing the release of *I AM BIG BIRD*, Copper Pot is currently in post-production on *WE MUST GO*, a documentary about the Egyptian national soccer team.

### **Dave LaMattina – Director, Producer and Writer**

Dave graduated from Boston College with a degree in Communications and went on to get his Master's in Film at USC's School of Cinematic Arts. After enduring as much L.A. traffic as he could stand, Dave headed back east to put his skills into practice. He has experience directing all over the world on a variety of different shoots and projects. Having spent time writing for commercial clients and working in development with Hollywood studios, Dave also functions as Copper Pot's scribe.

### **Chad Walker – Director, Producer and Editor**

Chad's skills as a director were born out of ten years of editing everything from big budget Hollywood features to small, indie passion projects. He moves behind the camera on CPP's docs and commercial shoots, pulling double-duty as director and editor. Chad honed his skills in the world of animation, helping edit blockbusters like *Rio*, *Horton Hears a Who*, *Epic* and films from the *Ice Age* franchise for Blue Sky Studios.

### **Clay Frost – Executive Producer**

Clay graduated from Central Connecticut State University with a degree in Entrepreneurship. Before Copper Pot, Clay enjoyed a successful career in the corporate world focusing on Sales, Corporate training and, eventually, management. Always eager to put his Entrepreneurship degree to the test, Clay jumped at the chance to form Copper Pot with Chad and longtime friend Dave. His real world experience, degree and eagerness to learn a new industry has helped Copper Pot function smoothly on the operational side of their productions.