

## George Newall, a Creator of 'Schoolhouse Rock,' Dies at 88

He was the last surviving member of the team that produced the educational cartoon for ABC-TV that informed Generation X.



By Sam Roberts

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George R. Newall, an advertising executive who was the last surviving creator of "Schoolhouse Rock," the animated musical snippets that taught young Generation X television viewers grammar, math, civics and science for a few moments during otherwise vacuous Saturday-morning commercial programming, died on Nov. 30 at a hospital near his home in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. He was 88.

The cause was cardiopulmonary arrest, his wife, Lisa Maxwell, said.

"Schoolhouse Rock," series, which ran from 1973 to 1984 and was revived in the 1990s, used quirky cartoons and upbeat music to furtively transform rote learning into euphonious fun during regular programming and before the government, in the 1990s, mandated that stations broadcast a modicum of educational and informative fare.

The show won four Emmy Awards.

The series spawned books, recordings, live singalong shows and a nostalgia cult that will mark the show's 50th anniversary next year when the Walt Disney Company presents a prime-time television special; rereleases "The Official Schoolhouse Rock Guide," written by Mr. Newall and Tom Yohe; and publishes an adult coloring book featuring all of the program's characters.

Among the show's perennial favorite songs were "Three Is a Magic Number," celebrating tripods, triangles and even a couple producing a baby; "Interjection!" which depicts a cartoon character getting stuck in the posterior with a big needle; and Mr. Newall's "Unpack Your Adjectives."

"Schoolhouse Rock" originated in the early 1970s when David McCall, president of the McCaffrey & McCall advertising agency, complained to Mr. Newall, a creative director there, that his young sons couldn't multiply, "but they can sing along with Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones."

Could Mr. Newall put the multiplication tables to music? he asked. Mr. Newall's search for a quirky musician who might help led him to Ben Tucker, who played bass at the Hickory House in New York, which Mr. Newall frequented regularly.

"I asked Ben, and he said, 'Oh yeah, my partner, Bob Dorough — he can put anything to music!'" Mr. Newall told The New York Times Magazine in 2018.

'He told me Bob had written a song based on the words on the mattress tag that say, 'Do not remove under penalty of law;'" Mr. Newall recalled. "So I brought Bob in, and David gave him the assignment. He came back about two weeks later with 'Three Is a Magic Number,' and we were all knocked out by it."

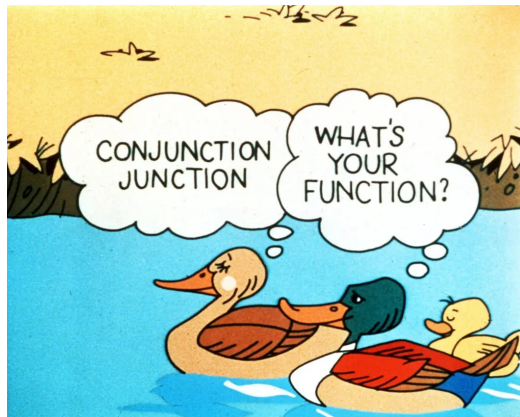
The song inspired Mr. Yohe, the agency's art director and a cartoonist, to start doodling. What was originally conceived as an educational phonograph record morphed into a series of three-minute films that the creative team presented to Michael Eisner, then the director of children's programming at ABC, a client of the agency.

Mr. Eisner happened to be meeting with Chuck Jones, the immortal Warner Bros. animator.

"After we played the song and Tom showed them the storyboards, Eisner looked at Jones and said, 'What do you think?'" Mr. Newall told The Times in 1994. "And Jones said, 'I think you should buy it right away.' It was probably the quickest deal in television history."

The first season was followed with themed series on grammar, government (to coincide with the American Bicentennial celebration), science and computer technology.

In 1976, Carol Rinzler wrote in The Times, "The 'ABC Schoolhouse Rock' animated bits, which teach math and reading concepts and, this year, American history, are a joy. It's worth sitting in front of your TV all morning to catch the one in which the Constitution is set to music."



Three-minute "Schoolhouse Rock" cartoons like "Conjunction Junction" tried to teach children grammar, math, civics and science. ABC Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment Content, via Getty Images

Mr. Eisner later became chairman and chief executive of the Walt Disney Company, which acquired "Schoolhouse Rock" in 1996 (including new segments produced in the 1990s with J.J. Sedelmaier Productions) when it bought Capital Cities/ABC.

Mr. Newall and Mr. Yohe were the executive producers and creative directors of the original episodes and worked with other collaborators. Mr. Newall composed 10 of the songs.

In 1996, Atlantic Records released an album featuring alternative musicians like Moby (who croons a brassy version of "Verb: That's What's Happening"), and in 2002 the Disney Company issued a DVD of all the "Schoolhouse Rock" episodes and a timely lyrical explication by Mr. Newall of why some states in a presidential election are more equal than others.

In 2013, Mr. Newall spoke about the show and Mr. Dorough performed "Schoolhouse Rock" songs at a free concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington.

Mr. Yohe died in 2000, Mr. Dorough in 2018.

George Robert Newall Jr. was born on June 17, 1934, in Lakewood, N.J. His father was a builder. His mother, Louise (DeNyse) Newall, worked for the school board in Brick Township.

After attending Point Pleasant Beach High School and serving in the Army’s 11th Airborne Division Band at Fort Campbell, Ky., Mr. Newall graduated from Florida State University with a bachelor’s degree in music composition in 1960. He moved to New York City, where, starting in a mailroom at \$50 a week, he worked for a number of ad agencies, including Ogilvy & Mather and Grey.

At McCaffrey & McCall, he conjured up the Hai Karate brand of men’s toiletries for Pfizer with an advertising campaign that parodied the industry’s customary romanticized appeal to raw sexual passion by including self-defense instructions to fend off libidinous women.

In 1978, he and Mr. Yohe started a company to produce animated educational programming. They won another Emmy for “Drawing Power,” an animated series for NBC, and awards for cartoons that promoted nutrition, cartoons that urged young viewers to read (“When You Turn Off Your Set, Turn On a Book”) and cartoons that were praised for being neither sexist nor racist.

In the 1980s, Mr. Newall joined Wells Rich Greene, where he produced TV commercials in which Alan Alda pitched Atari computers.

Mr. Newall is survived by his wife, the artist and singer Lisa (Chapman) Maxwell; a stepson, Lake Wolosker; and his sisters, Jessie Newall Bissey, Kathy Newall Hogan and Anne Newall Kimmel.

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