



**BOB BONNOIL**

PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB BONNOIL

**TIM GIRVIN**

PHOTO COURTESY OF TIM GIRVIN

**CARYL GLAAB**

**MICHAEL COTTEN**

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# BRAIN STORM

**PROJECTION DESIGNERS DISCUSS THE CREATIVE MOMENT:  
WHERE DO THE IDEAS COME FROM?**

**By Bob Bonniol**

Bob Bonniol of Mode Studios has his hands in a lot more than projection design. This year, he produced a DVD shoot for Journey.

One of the questions I often get asked at the Live Design Projection Master Classes at LDI is: Where do the ideas come from? What is the genesis of the first design idea? I have given the topic a great deal of thought. Perhaps the best thought was my first impulse: Go find some highly creative friends and ask them. Boy, did that take the pressure off, but seriously, it points at a fundamental belief I have held. Usually, the first idea, the first creative impulse, is the best. But where does it come from? What do you do with it? And when is it time to *stop thinking* about the design, the cue, or the concept? I gathered some of my favorite designers (and friends) for a virtual roundtable discussion: Caryl Glaab, production designer for Blue Man Group; Michael Cotten, production designer for the recent gargantuan *Hannah Montana Best of Both Worlds Tour*; and my good friend Tim Girvin, one of the foremost designers of brand environments and interactive architectural spaces, as well as creative signage, public displays, movie posters, and book covers (he's sort of prolific that way). I am pretty fortunate to actually be friends with all of these guys. So, here's how it went...

**Bob Bonniol:** When you start a project and begin to think about it, how often is your initial idea the one that gets manifested? Any idea where that idea comes from?

**Michael Cotten:** My first idea is often the most impractical, grandiose, and ridiculous take on the problem. However it is usually also the best idea, and if I can complete it, is the most successful.

**Caryl Glaab:** For me, there is something about the first impression that happens when you hear or read about a project that only happens once. More often than not, for me, that first idea or impression ends up taking shape. I think that it is the purity of that first impression that usually holds the initial spark. It's like those word association games, when someone asks you to "say the first thing that pops into your head when you here the following word." Maybe it's conscious or unconscious, free association—not sure. I usually take that first idea or association as far as I can. Even if I continue to work the idea, and it morphs or associates into others, there always seems to be strong relationship somehow to that initial spark.

**"I feel it is like casting a line into the water and hoping for a bite. The trick is knowing the best place to fish."**

**—Michael Cotten**



Tim Girvin worked on design developments for the film *Beowulf*, noting, "The blink design factor is based on intuition, bounded by long exploratory in the history of the letterform over the last 4,000 years."

**Tim Girvin:** I think that, at this moment, something rather amazing happens, in terms of cognition. The cogs, whirring, ignite and fire up fast, fresh and immediately clinging to the challenge. And what comes of this opening energizing to the challenge is the best stuff because the memory, the thinking, the assessment, the circulation around the problem at hand, at mind—all the tools—are fast, sharpened, first lit, and the fire is bright. That spark and flint crackling makes a good metaphor.

In the beginning, I think that it's possible to see more, explore more, sense more, in that opening modeling, rather than what happens when we've had the passage of letting everything settle in. By then, are we gnawing at the challenge? Is the challenge gnawing at us? I believe that this later phasing, when you've been working around a problem for a long time, it's a different kind of thinking. And there might be some good things there. But it's a different kind of review.

For me, when a problem, a design challenge is presented, I walk around it in my mind, assessing where it might be, where it might live, and what paths might I take to think about how to solve it. I

do that—visualize walking around it, almost dimensionally, spatially. And I can see things differently. It's like when you crest at the top of a hill, the opening visage is surprisingly expansive. And I believe that the beginning intuitive space is like that. You get there, and it's wide open. There's something about the opening of anything that's fresh. It's something about the reflective character of how that works. The idea is freshly realized. So are you. The vital, in play.

**CG:** In a collaborative situation, the process is usually a little different, but it can be very exciting to have your the initial impression passed around and then spark something in others, creating more of a flow state of ideas, that will, in turn, give you another initial impression or idea.

**BB:** How much do you trust your gut creative instinct?

**TG:** I trust my intuitive sense entirely. That doesn't mean that I'm always right. Rather, that it's the intuitive answer. And it surely doesn't mean that clients are always saying, "Wow, that first idea of yours is really the best." But I believe that intuition

and sensing things are aligned, that intuition is all about sensing and that sensing is fundamental to human experience. What happens depends on how aligned are you to your sensing—leading to an intuitive answer. You walk along to an encounter, you meet someone, and you sense where he or she might be. Your impressions are holistic; they're all gathering content and revelation. Discovery streams. Answers flow. Insights rebound.

**CG:** I trust my gut instinct completely throughout the process. I can always feel it when something is clicking, working, either during its development or after.

**MC:** I usually learn, after a project is completed, that my first idea was the correct one.

**BB:** **Totally true, or, at least, I agree. Is the gut instinct something that happens for all of you, or do you really have to feed your creative engine before you start producing interesting, beautiful, and useful designs?**

**TG:** Useful—I like how you've aligned that idea. Useful, interesting, and beautiful—I think that I do, and I'm sure everyone does, circulate in creative absorption, all the time. As a designer, a creative, you're all ways on.

And that's about feeding the constant hunger of curiosity. You're always hungry, so you're looking for themes that are about answers. What I mean is that, I find myself exploring some thread that I'm

looking to answer, it will somehow inform how I think about design. The thread, the human pattern of exploration, strings you there.

So maybe you are thinking about how a story might be told in the context of sound and space, without imagery. And you keep walking around that. Some part of your mind is ratcheting that space, working that problem. Then a grouping of answers appears, and you roll onward. What's next? What's the new thread? In looking back, however, at being a creative for 30-plus years, working as a designer, what I've found is that I'm still working on things that, in variation on theme, are still in play, now. It's not stopped.

**MC:** I fuel my creativity with travel to other cultures that have little idea about what I do. I visit Berber tribesmen in Morocco, remote villagers in Guinea, and Maasai reserves in Kenya. I also enjoy discussions with my peers in other fields and disciplines.

**BB:** **If you have initial gut, instinctive creative flashes, how do you record them and beginning to work with them? Are you a notebook scribbler? Do you make big galleys full of referential stuff? Do you storyboard? What's your process?**

**CG:** Manifesting the initial idea can take a variety of forms for me. I will almost always draw something or collage something, just for my own purpose and process, not necessarily for commu-

**"I think that it is the purity of that first impression that usually holds the initial spark."**

**—Caryl Glaab**

nicating the idea. I do tend to pull different kinds of reference materials together, again just for my own purpose, looking for ways to visually represent the idea. If those elements help to communicate the idea externally, then I will use them. After this phase, I try to find the best form to communicate the idea, and depending on the nature of the project, it could be storyboards, animation mock-ups or animatics, photo shop images, etc.

**MC:** My sketch process is usually pencil on paper, and then scanning the sketch into paint programs to add color and texture. I am trying to retain the rough edge and inspiration in the sketch)

**BB:** **And you have that extremely sexy Wacom tablet/monitor. That thing is the bomb. There's nothing like drawing directly on screen.**

**MC:** Indeed.

**TG:** Seems like it's all of these things for me. I am a scrapper, not a scraper, a scrapper. Gathering scrap—mindful, referential stuff—I gather little bits of things and put them together. They are thematic things, like texture, light, pathways, darkness, and then back to light—the human form, the form moving, the shadow, the cast of light on the texture, light revealing.

So I shoot and gather imagery that aligns with that exploratory, and I keep going back to it, over and over again. And I'll build that into journals or into digital strings. I'm thinking that the outline for the photos, now, is about 16,000 imagery galleries, and it's not completely organized, but there's some form there.

When I design, I work in that context of storyboarding or gallery sequences, like a framing or procession. Being a book designer, I tend to see things like that. And that spread of thinking works well to the notion of retail and built space progressions and process—finding the way. Or "wayfinding," as we environmental designers call it. How do you get there, and how do you get out of there? Gallery, sto-

Michael Cotton was production designer and video content designer for the Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus *Best of Both Worlds Tour*.





Caryl Glaab's work is readily recognizable in the many Blue Man productions he has led as artistic director/video designer since 1990.

ryboard, sequencing, journals—it all works.

Now I find myself (there's a line: *find my self*) taking the imagery that I shoot—the drawings that I do—and bringing that *into* the work. There's an interesting new alignment for me, between the creative explorations that I'm doing in my space of the personal and the work of the professional. You are *here*; you are *there*. You make your way. The lines intertwine. There's a new weaving in those discoveries.

**BB:** Do you ever get to a stage where you consciously put down the tools and say "enough?" Why? Do you feel this is short-changing? Or is it maybe preventing homogenizing?

**MC:** Knowing when to say when is difficult. I would like to learn that skill better.

**TG:** I think that you can get tired of a problem. If you work it too long, then you might get exhausted with the exploration and expression. Some people

**"At this moment, something rather amazing happens, in terms of cognition."**

**—Tim Girvin**

live in that space of working a problem to death. I don't thrive there. My attention span is too short. I can focus, but I'd rather drill in to find the idea and less to continue meandering. And that's okay, too.

**CG:** I do believe that ideas can get over worked or too often stirred, and I tend to realize that, at a certain point, where the development actually starts going backward, it starts getting worse and not better. Overworking the idea usually works against

that initial spark that we discussed. I don't think this is the same thing as striving for perfection. That, for me, is more about iteration or nuance and tweaking.

I also do often get to a point where it is clear that what I am looking at is what it is, and that may line up with what I had in my head or it may not. When it doesn't, I tend to recognize that and just let the idea dictate. As far as letting go of an idea, that one is sometimes easy for me, but sometimes, I will need to really work it for a while before finally acknowledging that it isn't going to work. Sometimes, it is really obvious that, in execution, the idea is not holding up.

**MC:** I think creativity comes from somewhere outside of one's consciousness. It is tapped or glimpsed briefly and then goes into hiding until the next time. I feel it is like casting a line into the water and hoping for a bite. The trick is knowing the best place to fish. **LD**