



Hello, It's Me

Dispatches from a Pop Culture Junkie

By Helen Marketti

Pop culture historian Chris Epting has a series of books that shares the fun, the memories, the anecdotes and the signs of our times. His most recent publication, *Hello, It's Me* takes the reader on a trip through generations of music, television, hobbies and fads that mark our territory of time.

The title, *Hello, It's Me* is from the song by Todd Rundgren. "For me, that title just fits," said Chris. "It's like when you meet up

with someone, it's personal. I love that song. I wanted to write the book, not only share my experiences, but to also trigger the memories of others so it would spark their favorite song, places and people. I figured if I titled the book using a nostalgic song then people would want to pick it up. That way you have a running start."

Throughout the book, Chris shares stories from childhood through today of what was going on around him. "You never know who you are going to meet or what is going to hap-

pen. You have to keep your eyes open to what is going on around you," said Chris. "People walk down the sidewalk and most of them are looking down. You are then missing a great show of life because there is always something happening around us."

Chris grew up in New York and so he was able to see many celebrities. "Back in the late 70s and early 80s, I could easily approach people for interviews," said Chris. "Some celebrities were even listed in the phone book! That's how simple and innocent the time was then. You could do things like that and have access to people. There's no way to have that access now."

For a junior high school assignment, Chris had to write a piece about an actor of his choice. He chose Fred Gwynne who had played Herman Munster on the television series, *The Munsters*. Instead of only writing a paper about Fred Gwynne, Chris went a step further to try to meet him in hopes of interviewing him in person. This was a sample of the innocent times as Fred Gwynne's name and telephone number was listed in the directory. Chris called the number and Fred answered. Chris explained his school assignment and Fred said that he would be happy to talk with him. Chris went to his house and conducted his first ever celebrity interview. "Fred was great to talk to but he had such a foul mouth with his language. He didn't mean it in a malicious way. It was just the way he talked. So of course, I couldn't include the inappropriate language into the report. I wanted to protect

his image because he was one of my icons. I totally sanitized it to make him look like this kindly ole gentleman."

Another childhood tale is meeting actor, Jack Haley who played the memorable Tin Man in the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. "We saw him in Sardi's, a restaurant in New York, and my mom said that we couldn't bother him but it was Jack Haley from *The Wizard of Oz!*" said Chris. "This was 1974 and I was fascinated with film history so I had all of these technical questions for him about the movie. I had to meet him so I went over to his table. He was so kind and gracious.

He gave me his address and told me to send him my list of questions and I did. In a few weeks, an envelope arrived for me and Jack had responded to all of my questions in a typed letter. He even included production still photos for my twin sister and I, which he autographed. I will never, ever forget that. He was the greatest."

Why is it that we are drawn to remember songs, celebrities, movies and even products from our youth? Chris tries to explain, "As the times have changed and technology advances, more things are exposed to us. Even in the early days when television was all the rage. I think we are drawn to the things we remember and associate with our youth because they are our security blankets, of sorts. We like to hang on to early memories of favorite songs, movies, first date and so forth because life was simpler then. We didn't have to be as responsible as we do when we get older. Those kinds of things are cultural touch stones because they represent innocence."



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There are many celebrity stories in *Hello, It's Me* that involve musicians, actors, and sports figures. There is a very moving story about basketball great, Michael Jordan who took the time to meet a very ill little boy. "That story is one of the center pieces of the book," explains Chris. "Michael was an incredible figure to this little boy. He spent time with him and I knew it was a special moment that I would write about one day. If everyone saw what I saw, you would learn a lesson in human decency. The little boy passed away two weeks after that. It is one of the most moving stories in the book."

Another moving story is of rocker, Jimmy Sullivan (a.k.a. The Rev) who was the drummer for Avenged Sevenfold. He passed away in January of 2010 at the age of 28. Chris Epting knew Jimmy's father and because of the personal connection was able to write about Jimmy in the Huntington Beach Independent (California) where Chris has a steady column. "It put me in touch with a new audience of young people who were fans of Avenged Sevenfold. The fans, who were mostly teenagers, were writing very heart felt notes to me. They were thanking me for writing about Jimmy," explains Chris. "I took the time to answer all of these notes in the same way I would answer my own kids. I was trying to answer them in fatherly terms on how to cope with loss and express grief. It put me in touch with this teenage community. I was friends with Jimmy and his family so I was writing articles from an insider's perspective because I had the support

from his family. I had a special rapport with these young kids who were looking to me to keep them informed of what was going on with Jimmy's family and the band. The notes these kids were sending were pure and honest; the way you write when you're a teenager. They inspired me. I think I learned as much from them as they learned from me. Fans still contact me from all over the world. When articles catch fire like that, it shows what writing can do."

Another unique element to *Hello, It's Me* is that when possible, Chris has some entries from the actual musicians, actors and sports figures who were discussed in the book to compliment the original story. "I thought that it would bring in a different angle with different voices. I thought it would be fun to be given a firsthand perspective from the person. The premise of the book was to make the readers feel like they were there too for all of the events. Too often people are caught up in now and forget where we were. I would like my books to have people reflect on their own experiences and memories then it shows they have chartered their own course."

For more information about Chris Epting, please visit: www.chrisepting.com

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