

Jamie Ambrose profiles Americans resident in the UK

ROUNDABOUT



Prodigious beginnings

For one young expatriate, London is only the latest in a series of steps up the ladder to success

AT first glance, it seemed just like many letters I received regarding this column. "Dear Jamie," it began, "I recently became aware of *The American* and took a very close interest in your column."

Yeah, right, I thought cynically and the next line will say you're a perfect candidate for it (forgive me, but it was early morning — not the time of day when I'm feeling at my most charitable).

Sure enough, the next sentence confirmed my suspicions: the writer felt he would be good copy material, and he proceeded to outline his career, which I skim-read between sips of my daily caffeine fix.

STEVEN FISCHER

Writer, creator, producer.
From: Baltimore, Maryland.
Age: 21.
In UK since: July 1991.
British favorites: The TV commercials.
Pet peeves: The buses and the weather.
Most missed: Friends of my own age.

"Blah, blah blah . . . children's books, television and radio shows, comic strips . . . humm, not bad, could write him up at some point . . . came to London in '91 at age 19; met Steve Melendez — very nice — trying to launch an animated children's series . . . blah, blah . . . interest from the BBC and Warner Brothers . . ."

At that point, the caffeine reached its destination. I blinked (several times) and started reading again — this time, consciously — and some rather startling facts began to sink in.

For a start, the author had written a children's book at 17, not something one generally associated with teenage boys. When no publisher would take it up, he formed his own company at 18, and it was printed a year later. That in itself made me sit up and take notice, but more was yet to come.

"If he came to London in 1991 at age 19," I muttered to Small Dog, "then the oldest this guy could possibly be now is 21 — and he's already made connections with Steve Melendez, not to mention the BBC and Warner Brothers."

Her eyes fixed firmly upon my breakfast cereal, Small Dog remained unimpressed by this revelation. For those of you who are equally unfazed, let me explain that the name "Melendez" almost means more to me than Warner Brothers — mainly because it rolled out on the credits every holiday season after "A Charlie Brown Christmas". Not only were various Melendezes responsible for the show itself, but, if memory serves me correctly, one of them also wrote the

accompanying piano score, the main theme of which became the most popular request of my entire fourth-grade repertoire.

No doubt about it: anyone who could create a cartoon character, publish it in his own book, start film negotiations and meet Steve Melendez, all by the age of 21, deserved definite investigation. Without further ado, then, I telephoned Steven Fischer.

Blue dog for better values

"Actually, I just turned 21 in June," he admitted rather sheepishly, but I quickly learned that age is probably the only thing Fischer is sheepish about.

He isn't brash or a braggart, however; he is simply a determined and very friendly young man who has definite ideas about what he wants from life. What sets him apart is that he took steps towards his goals much earlier than most.

"It all started, career-wise, when I was a junior in high school," Fischer began. "I realized that in a couple of years I would be kicked out of the

comforts of high school — the routine, the schedule and everything — and I got scared that I was going to have to start *life!* So I figured I'd better start doing something really quick."

That something was a children's book featuring "Bluey", a precocious blue dog. Fischer came up with the idea because of his dissatisfaction with the shape of modern values.

"I guess it has to do with my views on priorities," he explained. "The priorities of America and the world in general, well, they seem screwed up to me. Our future leaders are obviously going to be our children of today, so really it was written as an educational thing. I wanted to use the book to teach morals and values."

Fischer's original concept was for the standard children's book format: full colour, hardback, and packed with big, bright pictures. When a year of writing to publishers produced no contracts, however, he had to rethink his designs in order to opt for self-publishing.

"For a hard-cover, full-colour book, printers were quoting figures like \$100,000.00 for a print-run of 500 copies or so. That was way over my budget!" he laughed. "One of the printers, though, said that if I went to paperback and black-and-white, it would be a lot cheaper: around \$2,000.00. So I started thinking, 'Well, what kind of books are paperback and black-and-white?' The first thing that popped into my head were things like *Garfield* and *Charlie Brown*."

Thus, Fischer re-worked Bluey into a comic strip and, with the help of the family lawyer, drew up articles of incorporation for his own company.

"After that, I spent nine months putting everything together, while still going to high school and working and things. The books came back from the printers in April of 1991."

Which, as it happened, was only two months before Fischer and his parents were due to move to London (his father works for the federal government). This left the young author just eight weeks to market his product before changing countries.

Learning by experience

"Everything about this



Steven Fischer.

publication was learning as I was going along," he admitted, "but that's really how I learn best.

I don't really learn too well by sitting in a classroom and reading about other people doing things; I have to experience it myself. Once I had the books back from the printer, my first thing to do was call up all the local newspapers and basically do what I did to you: just say I had this story which might make an interesting topic."

Via the local press, school lectures, and a barrage of phone calls to stores and libraries, Fischer managed to sell all of his 500 copies, give or take a few damaged ones.

"I made about half of what I put out, which, I think, is pretty good," he said. "I knew I was going to take a loss, but that wasn't the point. The point was to get me out into the public, and for the public to know what's going on."

So much for the Stateside part of the saga. Next came the opportunity to live in London which, Fischer describes as "the most incredible thing that could happen to me".

"I was in a position where I could have free room and board and still be living in a capital of the world," he reasoned. "I could start knocking on publishers' and producers' doors

— things I would never have been able to do where I was living in the States."

Which kind of blows the ungrateful-youth-of-today image all to heck. This is one young man who knows when he's got it good, and, from all accounts, is doing his best to make the most of it.

"My goal is to get to a position where I can produce and publish my own creations, and make a living doing it," Fischer stated. "I don't have any worries about whether it's comic strips, books, or television; I want to do it all. I want to have something of my own and be able to support myself for the rest of my life. I've taken a whole bunch of avenues: sending children's books to publishers, comic strips to editors, radio shows to radio stations, and TV shows to TV stations."

"And you ran into Steve Melendez along the way," I added.

"Oh, that was *amazing!*" the boy-wonder replied — with, I'm glad to say, genuine enthusiasm. "I was in a library in Uxbridge, looking through reference books, and I came across a listing which read 'Melendez, Bill, Productions'. I thought, 'I wonder if that's the same one who did *Charlie Brown?*' Sure enough, it was, and I just freaked because I grew up on *Peanuts*;

they were the greatest thing for me. So I went to Steve Melendez, who is operating the European division, and we went from there."

Fortune-seeking, Hollywood-style

It sounds for all the world like one of the old Hollywood "boy-makes-good" stories.

Young Steven Fischer phones veteran producer Steve Melendez, who invites the former to his office, likes his ideas, and then acts as a mentor by pointing him in the right directions.

The first thing Fischer had to learn was how to write scripts, as opposed to manuscripts. When he asked how to go about it, Melendez told him to study scripts in the British Film Institute library. After a great deal of reading, Fischer tried his own hand at script-writing.

"The first scripts I did were really... *horrible!*" he laughed.

The American

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Roundabout

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"But Steve bore with me and, as time went on, I got better.

"We started working on Bluey from square one, writing proposals about productions and things: this is the stuff we were sending around. Well, actually, I was," explained Fischer. "Steve is the kind of guy who points me to a door and says, 'This is the door you want to knock on', then he leave it up to me to make the decision to knock

on it, make the sales pitch, and everything. So I've been working with this proposal, mailing it around to different studios all over the world."

Both the BBC and Warner Brothers have expressed interest in Bluey, the latter wanting to see a pilot film. There's even a fellow in Spain who wants to direct the project, and a company in Germany willing to act as distributor; basically Fischer has everything arranged but the cash.

"That's pretty much it," he admitted, "it's always this 'money' issue. Now we're

Echo

by Linda Hart

THIRTY-FIVE Americans who arrived in London on Aug. 14 were not ordinary tourists, for after a few days of seeing the

looking for different ways of financing this further."

In the meantime, however, Fischer has been taking care of other business, such as college night classes. For the past month, he has also been working as a general "gopher" at Elstree Film Studios — a job he obtained after two hours of hanging around the studio bar and asking anyone who would listen for a job.

Clearly, the lad is not one to let grass grow under his feet. As I write this, turning to his original letter for reference, I see that there are two items we didn't even have time to discuss in the interview: one is a radio variety series Fischer created that the BBC is interested in; the other is a children's book Barron's Educational Books in New York is discussing with him.

It is the following paragraph in the letter, though, that really, to my mind, sums up Steven Fischer's enthusiasm about his career goals. "And particularly, the one thing I want to do is learn as much about the film industry as I can. Going door to door and experiencing the joys and pains of acceptance and rejections, is one way, and another is trying to find work in established companies."

Something tells me that, in whatever he decides to do, the acceptances will by far outweigh the rejections.

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