



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

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## Media

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BY BRUCE MILLER  
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Filmmaker, author, cartoonist, radio show producer, television series producer, Emmy nominee. Artistically speaking, Steven Fischer has been a very busy person.

And now, the product of nearly two decades of his work has come to fruition in the recently published book "The Wonderful, Happy, Cartoony World of Steve and Bluey."

But the book is no ordinary collection of comic strips. Though it does contain a collection of Steve and Bluey comics, the book takes a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to make it in the cartoon business — interestingly enough from the cartoon character's perspective.

The spiral-bound book is illustrated with production stills, promotional pictures and other sketches chronicling the life and times of a cartoon actor's search for his big break in animated show business. The 212-page book is published by Blue Dog Productions, of which Fischer is the president and chief executive.

### Autobiography of sorts

For Fischer, the book mirrors his own life — at least for the past 18 years. Bluey and his cast of characters have been in Fischer's life longer than not, and his involve-

great line to say or he fit the look or the style," said Fischer. "He just developed on his own almost. Bluey just really stood out and took on a life of his own. It got to the point that Michelle and I couldn't think of doing a production without Bluey — he's like automatic. He was the star of everything."

That star, at least in Fischer's mind, was a small blue dog.

### A four-legged star is born

Fischer's first project with Bluey was in 1981, when he was 9 years old. During the next eight years, he and his sister collected such an extensive catalog of Bluey stories that by the age of 17, he was already thinking about going public with his Bluey stories.

Originally the idea was for a hardback, full-color, children's book geared toward kids just learning to read. Shopping the manuscript around for a year in 1989, Fischer sent the book to publishers like Scholastic and Harper/Collins, but it did not generate any interest. At the end of that year, Fischer decided that if he wanted the book published he would have to do it himself.

"When I started going around, getting prices for the original manuscript — the big full-color kids' book — I was getting price quotes from printers that were upwards of \$70,000 for a print run and that

"I spent the rest of 1990 and early '91 producing this book, this collection of comic strips, 'There's a Blue Dog Under My Bed,' and the first batch came back in April of '91," he said. "Actually, ironically, they came back on April 30, which was the day a dog that I had at the time was put to sleep. ... That morning we had her put to sleep at the vet and that afternoon I picked up symbolically this new dog that had been born into my life."

Within three months the 500 copies he'd had printed were sold for about \$3 each, but the revenue didn't even cover the publication costs.

The book ended up being the vehicle for his next artistic move, which was attempting to have the Steve and Bluey team made into a television series. Fischer contacted about 100 producers before he found one who was interested — and ironically it was one of the men who had produced the Peanuts films, Steve Melendez.

"I spent three years partnered with him on this project, 'The Steve and Bluey Show,' developing the proposal, shopping it around to all the big networks all over the place," said Fischer. "Nothing came of it — we never got a commission — but it introduced me to the world of television, which then introduced me to the world of film and video."

But film and video were still a few years off for Fischer. If television didn't work, he was going to try radio first — an Abbott and Costello-type show.

made two failed attempts to chronicle the life of Steve and Bluey while working on his other projects, but he couldn't find his voice. It wasn't until early 2001 that Fischer was finally able to devote all his time to the project. At the time, he was producing promotional films for TCI, such as his May 2001 documentary "Silence of Falling Leaves," which garnered the filmmaker an Emmy nomination.

Unemployed, but with a goal, Fischer focused on his book. By early fall the book was finished. He hopes the latest book further exposes Steve and Bluey to the public's eye.

Although Steve and Bluey have yet to contribute to their expenses, they provide Fischer with a map to life's journey. Living simply in a studio apartment, which serves as both his living quarters and his workplace, Fischer is not unhappy with the sparse furnishings in his apartment. In fact, he said it provides him with less distraction so he can focus on his work.

"As I learn more about this journey, and really it is — life itself, it's just a big journey — I'm discovering that more important than [money] is ending my life with a very complete catalog of finished Steve and Bluey projects — projects that honestly reflect who I was at the time that I made them," he said.

"I think that's very important. I think

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"Bluey found me — literally from childhood he's always been there," said Fischer. "I'm very proud to say there hasn't been a year that I haven't done something with Steve and Bluey. Literally every year, since 1981 ... there has been some sort of Steve and Bluey production in the works."

Fischer said as a child he and his sister Michelle would write and draw cartoons and then produce them as audio or video productions using a stockpile of characters of their own creation. But one character stood out from the rest and became the star: Bluey.

"Bluey never disappointed us — he'd always work; he always fit; he always had a

his own almost. Bluey just really stood out and took on a life of his own. It got to the point that Michelle and I couldn't think of doing a production without Bluey — he's like automatic. He was the star of everything."

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"When I started going around, getting prices for the original manuscript — the big full-color kids' book — I was getting price quotes from printers that were upwards of \$70,000 for a print run and that was way too much," Fischer said. "One of the printers said, 'If you take out all the color and made it a paperback and not a hardcover we can get it down to \$2,000.'"

"I started thinking, what kind of book is a black and white paperback? I started thinking about the collections of Peanuts comic strips and Garfield, so that's when I really started modifying the characters into a comic strip with the idea of collecting them and making them into a book."

Having modified the characters into a comic strip format, Fischer was able to get the strip published in the now-defunct community newspaper The Crofton Neighborhood Gazette during the summer of 1990. By the end of the summer he had enough strips to compile them into a book.

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But film and video were still a few years off for Fischer. If television didn't work, he was going to try radio first — an Abbott and Costello-type show.

"The radio show was developed and came out in '94, and in '96 I actually found a broadcaster to air the show," Fischer recalls.

While Steve and Bluey have been the stars of a radio show and the main characters in two books, they've also made an appearance in the courtroom. In December 1999, Fischer filed a \$30 million suit against Viacom Inc. alleging that Steve and Bluey, the characters of the Nickelodeon children's show "Blue's Clues," were based on his own Steve and Bluey.

A federal judge eventually dismissed his claim.

#### Time to focus

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his other projects, but he couldn't find his voice. It wasn't until early 2001 that Fischer was finally able to devote all his time to the project. At the time, he was producing promotional films for TCI, such as his May 2001 documentary "Silence of Falling Leaves," which garnered the filmmaker an Emmy nomination.

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"I think that's very important. I think what makes a book, or a film or music CD successful is the artist opening up and being very honest with who they are and what they're trying to say — being true to themselves.

"And if I can keep working on Steve and Bluey projects and complete them to a level that leaves me a better artist than I was when I started the project, then I think that I can end my life with no regrets and a sincere satisfied feeling. Along the way, if I can earn a living and make some money doing it — that's gravy, man — but if I end my life and I've not made one penny, but yet I have a catalog of a lifetime of work that's really good to me, I think that's even more valuable."