

(A) Jack Link's "Wild Side Tips"; (B) Wendy's "Smart Square"; (C) Aaron Stewart.

HORNET'S AARON STEWART PARLAYS INNER CHILD INTO ANIMATION CAREER

# TOYSTORY

BY RAE ANN FERRA

> It would be hardly discourteous to say that Aaron Stewart has a naïve quality about him. Nor would it be discounting his talents. In fact, it's precisely this characteristic that enables him to create an eye-catching, character-based body of work.

He counts children's books and toys among his chief inspirations. So much so that the 32-year-old native of Wichita, Kansas freely admits that the growing size of his toy collection is an ongoing example of marital negotiations: when his wife said, "No more toys" Stewart said, "We gotta move to a bigger place."

Combine this youthful focus with a sharp wit and his goal of making himself laugh and you start to understand how randy penguins, which he stealthily created for VH1, figure into Stewart's headspace.

After getting his start with VH1 (escaping reprimand for slightly lewd content), Stewart signed to New York's *Hornet* in 2003. Since then, he has plied his colorful and simplistic animations for a growing number of clients including VH1, MTV, Jack Link's, Discover Card and Wendy's, for whom Stewart created an on-going series of spots featuring a square burger in a round world.

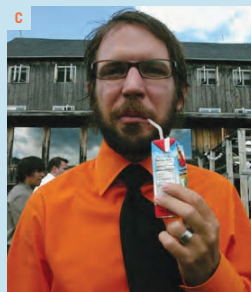
As for the war of the toys, it appears he's winning. Along with his directing career, he's parlayed some cute drawings of dogs into a line of graphic pillows ([www.pillowpillowpillow.com](http://www.pillowpillowpillow.com)) and plans on developing a line of toys.

**I went to Parsons [School of Design in New York] for illustration.** I got into animation because After Effects had just come out and we were all playing with it. Until then I had never really wanted to do cel animation. I don't have the patience for that.

**I've always been a fun, naïve, relaxed person.** I went through [a period] where I got really serious. Like when I was in school, I wanted to do more serious [paintings] that were shocking or were trying to make a serious statement. It just never worked. I tried to make a painting realistic and with tons of emotion and attitude. And then I guess I just realized that man, this sucks. I'm not doing it. I started doing things that were more from my head, this kind of happy stuff, and I realized that people responded to it more. It

made me feel better too. I felt that it came out a lot more naturally for me.

**Now I just keep trying to think about what made me laugh as a kid.** I don't want to create something where people go, "Oh my god, how'd he do that?" I want to capture people with the thought of the project so that they go, "That was smart and creative".



**My wife, who was then my girlfriend, worked at VH1.** At the time [2001] they didn't do any animation; they were very serious until they got these new creative directors. They wanted to do these holiday spots but had very little time,

so they asked me. It was so rushed that no one even looked at them; whatever I did just went on air.

**It was a new style for them.** I had kung fu reindeers and penguins dancing, but they were dirty dancing. The spots went on TV and then I got a call from the CD saying, "Did we just see penguins having sex on TV?" From there they asked for more.

**The thing with VH1** is that when they come to an artist they don't want you to do the same style again. I have a certain look and sense of humor, but [the VH1 work] helped me branch out. I did that for about a year and that's when *Hornet* called and got me the [MTV Instructoart] spots.

**I love drawing characters.** I also like things to be a little choppy and funny and

simplistic. There was a time that I tried to overwork things, then I realized [you should] only put on the screen what you need to sell the story. As for my sense of humor, I just like to entertain myself.

**For Wendy's, [the creatives] had the whole idea worked out,** but they didn't know what they wanted stylistically. We had many different pitches and tried to get their ideas out, but then they saw [a film] I did, "Bugs'N Love". It has simple characters that come on screen and then walk off. They said, "That's it". They wanted the most simplistic world.

**The difference between broadcast and commercial work** is that with broadcast they don't have any time to tweak it. At first I thought [Wendy's] was going to be so easy because it was simple animation – but it ended up being as much work as anything else because they had a lot more input. But the whole idea was to still keep it very simple and effortless. Wendy's took a big risk. I always said they had big cajones.

**Something simple doesn't mean it's "simple".** It takes a lot of time to simplify something. As simple as a drawing is, it sometimes takes me days to get to it by taking it apart. In a magazine spread, when you're turning the page you need to look at that picture and understand the meaning instantly. It's a principle I apply to my animation – no matter how complex the story is, I still want the viewer to be able to understand it right away.

**In terms of advertising, I'm just going with the flow.** At the moment, I want to develop toys. I'm a really big toy enthusiast. We're in the process of creating pillows of some dog drawings I had.

**Everything always starts off for the fun of it,** but then if you're lucky enough that people like what you make and it takes off, then that's great. I never want to approach a project, be it animation or whatever, thinking that people are going to love it and it's going to be the biggest thing. Even if people say that, I don't want to listen to it. I just want to make it, entertain myself, hopefully my friends will like it and that's enough. ●