

# “The Rainbow Connection”—Kermit the Frog (1979)

Added to the National Registry: 2020

Essay by Craig Shemin (guest post)\*



*“The Muppet Movie”*

On April 14, 1980, Jim Henson and his daughter Lisa arrived at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles for the 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Academy Awards. Henson’s first feature film production, “The Muppet Movie,” had been released the previous summer, and the worldwide hit film received two Oscar nominations: Best Score and Best Original Song for “The Rainbow Connection.” For the film, Henson had prerecorded the song’s vocal performance in a comfortable Hollywood recording studio and then, on August 22, 1978, he squeezed his tall, lanky frame into a specially-built tank that was submerged in a CBS Radford Studio Center backlot swamp set repurposed from the “Gilligan’s Island” lagoon. With Jim’s arm stretched up through a rubber sleeve embedded within a fake log, Kermit was lowered onto the puppeteer’s hand. One of the most indelible movie musical sequences took shape as Jim puppeteered Kermit while simultaneously watching the performance on a tiny video monitor inside his makeshift bathysphere. For the Academy Awards, Jim was slightly more comfortable as he recreated his film performance for an in-theater audience of Hollywood’s biggest stars and an international television audience of millions. There was still a log for Kermit to sit on as he strummed his banjo, but no water.

The song--already beloved by many--seemed a shoo-in to win the Oscar. After all, the Academy honored another song about rainbows with the statuette back in 1940. But when the award presenters, “Xanadu” co-stars Gene Kelly and Olivia Newton-John, opened the envelope, the Oscar went to ... “It Goes Like It Goes” from “Norma Rae,” music by David Shire, lyrics by Norman Gimbel. Nothing against that song, but I dare anyone reading this essay to sing even a few bars of it. Even critics back in 1980, without the benefit of years of artistic perspective, saw the Academy’s move as a colossal misstep. The very next morning, Tom Shales of “The Washington Post” called the Oscar-winning song an “already forgotten ballad.”

While “Muppet Movie” songwriters Paul Williams and Kenny Ascher did not win the Academy Award, nor the Golden Globe (“The Rose” won that one), the team received a more enduring

honor. “The Rainbow Connection” has become an American classic, ranking in the American Film Institute’s top 100 songs from movie musicals. (It was 74<sup>th</sup> on the list, ahead of Amanda McBroom’s “The Rose” at 83. The song from “Norma Rae” didn’t make the list at all.) Paul Williams’s path to “The Rainbow Connection” began when he was invited to appear on “The Muppet Show” during its first season in 1976. Already well known as an actor (“Battle for the Planet of the Apes”), a singer-songwriter (“An Old Fashioned Love Song,” “You and Me Against the World”) and a film composer (“Phantom of the Paradise,” “Bugsy Malone”), Williams arrived in London for the taping and meshed well with the entire Muppet team. At the time, Henson was planning to produce a one-hour holiday TV special based on a children’s book called “Emmet Otter’s Jug-Band Christmas” and invited Williams to compose the songs. Paul began with “The Bathing Suit That Grandma Otter Wore” and eventually created the entire score, including the beautiful modern spiritual “When the River Meets the Sea.”

Henson, Williams, and scriptwriter Jerry Juhl worked well together, so it was not a surprise when Jim asked Paul to create the songs for the Muppets’ first feature film, “The Muppet Movie.” But Williams did not want to embark on the project alone. “I wanted to include a really fine composer,” Williams said in 2002. “So I went to Kenny Ascher who worked with me on ‘A Star is Born.’” Williams later elaborated on the reasoning behind bringing Ascher on board: “His music sounds like a grown-up wrote it.”

Williams, Ascher, Henson, Juhl, and longtime Henson associate Frank Oz began the collaboration in Paul’s den in his Hollywood home. In 2013, Kenny Ascher recalled that the original draft of the script included indications for mostly peppy two-step tunes. During the meeting at Williams’s house, Ascher suggested the scope of the music be expanded to include a wider variety--including more thoughtful ballads. Thankfully, everyone was receptive to this; can you imagine if they hadn’t been? The film would have been much different, and there may not have been a “Rainbow Connection.”

“Kenny and I and Jim and Jerry Juhl all agreed that we had to establish Kermit’s soul from the very beginning,” Williams said in 2002. “And to do that, he has to ponder some big questions.” Once the placement for this initial song and the rest of the score was set, Williams expected Henson to want regular status reports and updates as the songwriting team worked. As Paul walked Jim to his car after that first meeting, he told his boss, “We won’t surprise you. We’ll let you hear the songs as we’re working on them along the way so you can have a sense of what we’re doing if you want to make any adjustments.” Williams was taken aback by Henson’s response: “No. That’s all right. I’ll hear them in the recording studio.”

With Henson’s faith in the songwriters established, Williams and Ascher went to work immediately, diving into the film’s first song. “Kenny and I began to write this song--the song addresses that inner voice that tells Kermit he can try to do these big things,” Williams said in 2002.

The song is a wistful yet hopeful ballad that beautifully sets the tone for the movie as it follows and establishes Kermit’s reality and his humanity (apologies to the amphibian) within this cinematic world.

While Kermit faced numerous challenges as he sought his “rainbow connection” in the film, in real life, the composing team did not truly struggle until they tried to come up with the song’s title. Williams and Ascher had woven the verses, including the inquisitive opening line about rainbows, and musically shaped the refrain, but they had not yet combined the words that would form the song’s title and key phrase within the refrain--two very special words that have become so well known to several generations. The team was searching for the best phrase to bridge the gap from dream to dream-come-true. For the time being, they were left with, “someday we’ll find it, *da-dee-dum-da-dee-dah*, the lovers, the dreamers, and me.”

Stumped, Williams and Ascher sat down to dinner with Paul’s then-wife, Kate Clinton. Having heard the “da-dee-dum” placeholder over and over, she inquired about the block they had encountered. “We’re looking for the connection to the rainbow, and we can’t figure it out,” Paul told her, as he recalled for a National Association of Music Merchants oral history in 2018.

“You’re looking for a rainbow connection,” she said.

Paul and Kenny looked at each other.

“Rainbow connection?” Paul asked.

“That’s what you just called it,” she said. With that, the song was finished.

“Then, Jerry Juhl did this great thing in the script at the end, when the stage explodes and the end of the rainbow appears--the actual ‘rainbow connection,’” Williams said in 2002. “That’s the proof of the whole Muppet philosophy,”

In the summer of 1978, Jim Henson put on his headphones and stepped in front of a microphone in the Music Recorders Inc. studio in Los Angeles to record “The Rainbow Connection.”

Since Kermit’s recording, the song has been covered by The Carpenters, Willie Nelson, Barbra Streisand, Johnny Mathis, and so many more. Beyond the Grammy that Williams and Ascher received for Best Children’s record and the platinum record (Kermit’s single of “The Rainbow Connection” reached 25 on the “Billboard” pop chart--the highest chart placement for an amphibian), perhaps the greatest reward the team received is the enduring popularity of the song as it transcended from movie hit to musical standard. Williams is constantly reminded of his own rainbow connection--the path that took him from Omaha, Nebraska, to his stardom as a composer, actor, producer, and president of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP)--as fans thank him for creating songs that have become the soundtrack for their lives. He calls these interactions “heart payments”: rewards that don’t appear on ASCAP royalty statements yet are every bit as enriching.

Inspired by such film classics as “The Wizard of Oz” and “Pinocchio,” Paul Williams and Kenny Ascher created their generation’s unforgettable fantasy film ballad--a direct offspring of “Over the Rainbow” and “When You Wish Upon a Star” and, in turn, inspired the next generation’s lovers and dreamers.

And you.

*Craig Shemin is a former staff writer for The Jim Henson Company, where he wrote television scripts, song lyrics, computer games, trading cards, and most anything else that words were associated with. He is the author of "Sam and Friends: The Story of Jim Henson's First Television Show" and "The Muppets Character Encyclopedia."*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.