

Ziggy: A Favorite Pop Icon Comes Home to Cincinnati

Jan O'Daniel

Is that really Ziggy, America's favorite pop culture icon, the butterball that launched a thousand greeting cards and smile buttons on our cover this month? Sure is, and we didn't have to travel to either coast to pick up the artwork.

Ziggy's creators Tom Wilson Sr. and Tom Wilson Jr. are native Ohioans, and the junior half of the father-son team lives here in Cincinnati.

Known in family circles as Big Tom and Little Tom -- "Little" Tom is a lumbering six foot four -- they collaborate by fax and phone, cranking out the hundreds of Ziggy comic strips that appear on books, souvenir mugs and lunch boxes each year.

The artists say they're interchangeable. Big Tom may sketch a strip in Cleveland, while Little Tom inks it in here. Or Little Tom may come up with the idea, and Big Tom draws it.

As for this month's Best & Worst cover? In the past, we've commissioned nationally known cartoonists with a local connection, such as Garfield creator Jim Davis and Pulitzer winner Jim Borgman, to draw the October cover. This year, we decided to ask Tom Jr. and Sr. A third, brand-new member of the Wilson team -- a computer -- helped in the final design. (You hold in your hands, in fact, one of the first computergenerated Ziggys on the planet. Use this power wisely.)

We asked the Toms about working together, and what they think of this thing called Ziggy:

Tom Wilson Sr.

"When I decided to do a comic strip, I didn't want to do just a normal strip where you were watching two people and you were a third party. I intentionally created Ziggy to be able to address the reader. I wanted the eye contact and that's why he lives only with animals. He doesn't have a wife or girlfriend. I wanted the character to relate to the people. That's why he speaks to us and for us. I wanted it to be different. Evidently, it worked.

"Ziggy was like a third child. Tom grew up with me sitting at the kitchen table drawing. I never wanted to impose it on him ...[but] it is kind of like the family business. I don't think we should apologize for it, but you do have to produce.

"We think alike. I scribble things out, very roughly ...then I run them through the fax and he does the same thing back to me.



"When people try to impose the family business on their children, it hinders their ability to go out and find what they want to do and be themselves. [But] the truth is, what Tom and I were doing in parallel careers was product development. We created things. We made things happen. ..Ziggy is only one, but he's become the lasting one."

Tom Wilson Jr.

"Out of a sense of denial, I guess, in college I looked into journalism, went into fine arts and drifted into painting, illustration and graphics. I loved the design aspect, but kept finding out that while I did it pretty well, it was the idea of the creation that I liked better than the actual completion.

"What I like to do is create in concept. Here's Ziggy, a trendsetter in his own right, that I'm familiar with it was a natural transition to work with dad.

"I can tell a difference [when drawing Ziggy], but I'm probably my worst critic. I would hope other people couldn't tell the difference.

"There are a lot of things about Ziggy that I identify with. When things go wrong and life throws you a curve, and some curves are a little larger than others, Ziggy handles it. He takes it on the chin and he keeps on going and it hasn't turned him into a bitter, upset person. He keeps his idealism and youthfulness. He's not a loser, he's a winner and he keeps going."