

Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

Daniel Schmidt and the creation of Fairy Music Farm

By C. J. Hirschfield

Daniel Schmidt has spent quite a lot of time lately hanging out in grocery stores and playgrounds, carefully observing small children. Luckily for him, the authorities have not picked him up, because the work he's doing is for Children's Fairyland's newest exhibit, and Daniel's research is critical to its success.

Once it's finished, The Fairy Music Farm will be a highly interactive environment, mostly located inside of the long-abandoned "Thumbelina Tunnel" at the park. It will feature magical lighting and remarkable murals, but the main focus will be the six custom crafted musical instruments designed by master instrument builder Daniel Schmidt.

Daniel was drawn to work on this public art project with a distinguished team of artists from different disciplines for one main reason. "I hadn't worked with very young children," he explains, "and it very much intrigued me."

His recent forays into the community to observe young children have taught him much about 2-5 year-olds. How do they interact with their environment? How do you design a musical instrument for a 3 year old with limited neck mobility, as well as for a 4 year-old, who is much more active?

A bit of background on Daniel would be helpful.

While other kids were taking apart electronics to see how they worked, Daniel, as a youngster, was most fascinated by how musical instruments were built to create wondrous sounds. In his early teens



Photo by Maria Rodriguez

Master instrument builder Daniel Schmidt reviews plans for Fairyland's new Fairy Music Farm interactive play structure, due to open next year.

he fell in with a crowd of influential artists in New York, including Claes Oldenburg, a group that ended up creating "happenings," which extended environments and assemblages into live art. Daniel created a calliope which used tin cans incorporated into the instrument's controller.

Subsequent years found him creating wearable instruments for the dancers at NYU's Dance Department, formally studying instrument building at the prestigious Cal Arts in Los Angeles, collaborating with music icons John Cage, Lou Harrison and Paul Dresher, as well as with the Boston and San Francisco Symphonies.

He also served as Artist-in-Residence and instrument builder at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, and teaching at Mills College and Aurora School in Oakland.

We're very happy that Daniel is inspired by an old tunnel at Fairyland that has been closed to the pub-

lic for years.

"The tunnel is acoustically a marvelous environment," he observed.

Here are brief descriptions of the six instruments Daniel is creating for the kids of our community to explore:

Harmony Chimes: Wave your hand across them, and listen to different chords as they hit each other.

Musical Leaves: Hear the low sounds as you push or pull the big metal leaves. Any type of touching will make a sound

Long Wall Harp: Vertical strings create a dramatic resonance when kids run their hands over it (think of what kids do to picket fences).

Wall Chimes: The tuning is chromatic (both white and black), when the chimes are stroked or hit each other.

Rain Wheel: A rotating wheel with a plastic front has marbles falling through rain clouds like individual raindrops, alighting onto a scene featuring fairies growing plants. (Daniel said this particular instrument is his most inspired.)

Tinkle Bell Plants: Plant-like stalks rise from the floor, curving up the walls, with bells on top. Irresistible.

In the courtyard outside of the tunnel will be a marimba bench and bridge, which will allow kids to use any part of their bodies to make sound.

Daniel Schmidt is indeed a renowned artistic figure, but we were just as impressed by his understanding of our needs at Fairyland – that each instrument must be durable, and easily maintained over the years. He gets it.

"Eighty percent of my work is making it last," he assured us.

Needless to say, we can't wait for the Fairy Music Farm to formally open next summer, and to see how the kids actually interact with the whimsical instruments. But frankly, no one is more excited than Daniel.

"I love kids," he smiles. We know, Daniel. It's kinda obvious.

C.J. Hirschfield is Executive Director of Children's Fairyland, which is located next to Lake Merritt at 699 Bellevue Avenue, Oakland. For more information call 452-2259 or e-mail cj@fairyland.org.