

It's a magic carpet ride

Forty years on, 'Sesame Street' still takes the high road

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It has won over 100 Emmys, been shown in more than 125 countries and yesterday it celebrated a rare achievement in an age of ever-shifting tastes: *Sesame Street* turned 40 years old.

"*Sesame Street* is one of the five most influential television shows of all time," says Bob Thompson, professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. "It had an enormous social influence as well as artistic. In fact there's nothing like it on the air to this day."

The format of the show may have changed somewhat since that first historic broadcast on Nov. 10, 1969, which itself was the result of extensive research that aimed to find the way of blending entertainment with education.

The goal was to give children and their parents an alternative to the fun but mindless fare of children's television back then, shows that were often filled with violent episodes and were primarily designed not to teach kids, but to sell them things.

Funded by grants from the

Carnegie Institute and the federal government, the Children's Television Workshop used the latest knowledge of child development, psychology and preschool education to stimulate young viewers' minds, improve their letter recognition, math and problem-solving skills, and just as importantly teach them essential life skills needed to thrive in modern America.

That goal established the new program as one of the most progressive shows on US television.

It was determined to appeal to underprivileged urban children and to create a muppet-inhabited world that reflected the reality those kids saw each day. *Sesame Street* was thus set in a gritty cityscape with rubbish bins on the street and black actors featuring prominently in the cast.

The trick was that by using brilliant production techniques, the show taught children and their parents, without them even knowing.

Forty years on, it's not too

much of a stretch to argue that the liberal and tolerant approach the show inculcated in its viewers played an important role in bringing the US to the point where it could elect a black president. So there is a sense of poignant justice that the special guest for the 40th anniversary show was none other than first lady Michelle Obama.

Her message reflects the broadening scope of *Sesame Street's* agenda and its determination to move with the times. Not content with merely teaching kindergarten academics or social tolerance, the goal now is also to educate children about healthy lifestyles.

The Michelle Obama thus plants a vegetable garden on the show, to mirror the one she planted on the White House grounds. "Veggies taste so good when they come fresh from the garden, don't they?" she says.

"If you eat all these healthy foods, you are going to grow up to be big and strong." Then she flexes her famous arms and adds: "Just like me."

Even the show's world famous

Cookie Monster has taken the lesson to heart. He now confines his cookie munching to occasional treats, while using carrots and fruit as his snacking staples.

The show is remaining contemporary in other ways too. Being featured as the decoration on Google's logo may be the ultimate tech accolade, but *Sesame Street's* Web site is regarded by experts as one of the most innovative and effective children's Internet destinations.

The project is also a merchandising powerhouse with everything from T-shirts to lunch boxes. But it also has been a pioneer of smart dolls and high-tech toys such as Elmo Live, which use animatronics and computer chips to give children new experiences.

"*Sesame Street* grew out of the civil rights movement, but it never stopped learning," says professor Thompson. "It changed segments and style but always retained its integrity and key goals."

On the Net:
www.sesamestreet.org/home

Elmo by Mania

Elmo is a furry red monster with large white eyes and an orange nose. He is usually accompanied by his goldfish Dorothy. Street brand Mania turned Elmo's head into the heart in the brand's "I love MA" logo. MA stands for Mania.

White T-shirt with Elmo print
(ELMO 字母白T)
NT\$1,200



The Count by B-Side

Count von Count, aka "The Count," loves to ... count. He lives in a castle with lots of bats. Not surprisingly, he sometimes counts them.



The Count biker style
T-shirt (white)
(騎美式機車白T)
NT\$1,000



Oscar by Provider

Oscar "The Grouch" has no nose and lives in a garbage can. Provider's designers honor the world's most famous misanthrope in his capacity as the "King of Trash."



Oscar flying bucket T-shirt (black)
(Oscar 飛行單鬥機黑T)
NT\$1,200



Grover by Relevator

Grover sees himself as being a chap of the likeable kind who almost never uses contradictions. The New York-based Taiwanese designer team Relevator is very much inspired by alternative East Coast style. To them, Grover definitely deserves to be regarded as "Super Grover."



Super Grover T-shirt (blue)
(Super Grover 藍色T)
NT\$1,280



Ernie by Overkill

Ernie, the little troublemaker, keeps annoying Bert with games he wants to play. When Bert finally agrees to join in, Ernie usually is already bored and wants to do something else. Overkill has changed Ernie's appearance a bit, by depicted him sporting the company's morbid skull logo on his clothes.



Angry Bert T-shirt
(Angry Bert 黑色T)
NT\$1,280



Ernie skeleton T-shirts
(Ernie 骷髏裝T)
NT\$1,300



Big Bird by Anthony

Big Bird is a six-year-old who can roller skate, dance, sing, write poetry and ride a unicycle. He lives in a large nest and has a teddy bear named Radar.

Anthony is a Taiwanese-Japanese design company that uses the charming slogan: "Anyhow we makes world go round!"



Anyhow we makes world go round Big Bird T-shirt (red)
(Anyhow we makes world go round 大鳥紅T)
NT\$1,100

Cookie Monster by Remix

"Om nom nom nom," Cookie Monster eats anything and everything. Fashion label Remix jazzes up Cookie Monster with a dose of Taipei City-Ximending street style.



Cookie Monster jeans
(Cookie Monster 牛仔褲)
NT\$3,800

Bert by Phantaci

World-weary, anxious Bert shares a room with Ernie, *Sesame Street's* main character. Designer duo Phantaci has given this Bert series an "Asian" touch.



VENDORS:

- Mania: (02) 2375-7995
- Remix: (02) 2375-8092
- B-Side: (02) 2311-7328
- Provider: (02) 2375-3916
- Anyhow: (02) 2383-2385
- Overkill: (02) 2314-5671
- Phantaci: (02) 8773-1426
- Relevator: (02) 8771-9958