

Hey Parco! Ep. 5: Best of GenX - We Were Toys R Us Kids, Pt. 2

(Phone rings)

Ann: Hey Parco!

Samantha: Hey Parco!

(Lively Jazz opening music plays)

Samantha: Hello friends! Welcome to Hey Parco, the mostly true adventures of two Recovering GenX Valley Girls. I'm Samantha.

Ann: And I'm Ann, and we're the Parcos! We've been friends since 1977. Today's discussion in our continuing Best of GenX series is "We Were Toys R Us Kids".

Samantha: Part two.

Ann: Did you know that the Lite-Brite came out in 1967?

Samantha: Just in time for us.

Ann: Yes. I think these toy makers were listening to Sergeant Pepper and imbibing in things that were mind altering, and they came up with this great—it's like, it's like the precursor to the laser light show. The simple little Lite-Brite.

Samantha: Well, that's a very imaginative take on that, I think.

Ann: Yeah.

Samantha: Don't get me wrong. I love a Lite-Brite and I—

Ann: Yes, I do too.

Samantha: I think they're fabulous. I would love to own a Lite-Brite now, to be honest. I really want—

Ann: Me too!

Samantha: But, um, laser show, that's kind of...that's a stretch.

Ann: I know. Maybe, maybe not. Maybe it's the precursor to my love of Christmas lights, like little twinkly, Christmas lights, that I like to have everywhere.

Samantha: Or maybe they were really smart when they designed it , and knew that it plugged into that kind of delight that we all do take in little lights, little colorful lights.

Ann: That's true. Maybe cannabis had—wasn't a part of it at all.

(Lively jazz music plays)

Ann: Holly Hobbie was an illustrator and worked for a greeting card company, and she came up with this character: Girl in Blue Dress.

Samantha: (laughing) Okay. Which was not so catchy.

Ann: Not so catchy. So not so catchy, but I mean, it was illustrated by Holly Hobbie, so, you know, naturally—okay. But here's the thing, here's where the doll came in. There was never a plan for a doll. She was just painting cute pictures of a little girl, like, you know, doing wild flowers and catching butterflies.

Samantha: Okay. So I'm assuming that Holly Hobbie was, uh, a character that was used again and again, in the greeting cards?

Ann: Yes.

Samantha: Okay.

Ann: Yeah. The Blue Girl in Blue Dress, because Holly Hobbie, remember, is the illustrator.

Samantha: Right, I was just saying—exactly.

Ann: Exactly. The VP of creative services at this greeting card company said to his boss: "We really need to make a line of rag dolls," and the boss wasn't having it. The boss thought it was dumb. I know too many bosses that think great ideas are dumb. So anyway—

Samantha: Yes.

Ann: So anyway, check this out. The VP goes home for the weekend and actually hand stitches the Holly Hobbie doll.

Samantha: Wow.

Ann: And they take it, they take it to Knickerbocker Toys. Knickerbocker Toys buys the license and starts creating the Holly Hobbie frenzy that was in 1975, of which I have an original Holly Hobbie doll that has never been opened.

Samantha: That's never been opened? Why has that never been opened?

Ann: Never been opened. Because I had another one that I was allowed to play with. My mom bought it as a, you know: "In years to come, this might be worth something."

Samantha: Really? Wow. That was—

Ann: My mom was—my mom was a doll collector. So was my grandmother.

Samantha: Oh, I never knew that. That's interesting.

Ann: I've got a—I've got a boatload of creepy, creepy dolls.

Samantha: Remind me that I have a question to ask you about these dolls after you finished your, story about Holly Hobbie.

Ann: So anyway, so Holly Hobbie—so they decided to name the Girl in a Blue Dress "Holly Hobbie" cause it was cute. And so, and, and this woman writes children's books. I mean, she does all sorts of things.

Samantha: Does she write children's books about the character Holly Hobbie?

Ann: No. Oh no.

Samantha: Therefore then, Holly Hobbie doesn't have a backstory in—as a character. She doesn't come from a story or anything like that. She—she literally was just a product that was created.

Ann: Yes. But mind you, those greeting cards were really popular.

Samantha: I never knew where she came from. It just seemed like one day

there was no Holly Hobbie, and the next day, there was Holly Hobbie everywhere. Let me get back to you saying, that your mom and your grandmother collected dolls?

Ann: Mmm-hmm.

Samantha: Okay. Yeah, I think it was when I was in kindergarten. And because, you know, you have weird hours when you're in kindergarten: you don't go to school for the whole day, you go to school for part of the day. And so my mom had arranged for this woman who lived near the school—for me to go to her house after kindergarten. Then she would take care of me until my mom was available. This woman had two half-walls with shelves above them. And in every little cubby of the shelves, she had a Doll of the World.

Ann: Oh, yeah, I've got a couple of those!

Samantha: I absolutely—I would stare at them. That's probably what I spent most of my time doing when I was at her house was just looking at these dolls. She did not want me to touch them. Once in a blue moon, she'd let me hold one for like a few minutes. Because I was just—I really, I just wanted to have contact with these dolls, because they, of course, they had like the national dress of the nation, you know?

Ann: Right! Yes, yes!

Samantha: I don't know which set that woman had, but I can say that back in the 60s, like ARCO gas stations would sell them. So you, you would come and fill up your tank of gas and they would either give them—there are conflicting stories about this— they would give them to you for free with a tank of gas—

Ann: Yes! Right!

Samantha: —or for 99 cents. Either way, very affordable, very collectible.

Ann: Yes.

Samantha: The Dolls of the World. It was kind of like having 'It's a Small World After All' in your house.

Ann: Exactly!

(Lively Jazz music plays)

Ann: The Sunshine Family was Papa Steve, Mama Stephe and Sweets, the baby. Steve—Steve wore khakis and a red turtleneck and work boots.

Samantha: Oh my God. I'm looking them up right now. Oh my God!

Ann: Stephe wore sandals and like a Prairie—Prairie—

Samantha: A Prairie dress!

Ann: And little—and little Sweets was in like this little polka-dotted thing. I mean, you could get other clothes. And I didn't have all the accessories, but they were basically—they basically were the back-to-the-landers.

Samantha: Totally!

Ann: It was about, you know, traveling around in their RV, selling their crafts.

Samantha: (laughing) Right! I see the Sunshine Family Craft Store. There's a spinning wheel in it.

Ann: Yes, yes, yes. I loved those dolls. I took those dolls when I went camping, and I was so happy when they were able to walk on rocks. And like by the stream.

Samantha: Aw...

Ann: And take little Sweets—and sweets would go into the stream and go and swim in with me.

Samantha: Aw...

Ann: Oh, I loved those dolls. I never had the—

Samantha: Little Sweets looks very small—that looks like she'd be easy to lose.

Ann: I took very good care of Sweets.

Samantha: And in one, at least one picture of the Sunshine Family, the dad has like long hair—I mean, not super long hair—but like, you know, for a doll, pretty long—a male doll, quite long hair.

Ann: It was hippie hair!

Samantha: That's so funny. Of course, her dress today reads as sister-wife, but back then it would've just been back-to-the-land lady.

Ann: Right; back-to-the-landers. They made cheese and they grew their own food—

Samantha: Aw.

Ann: —did all those fun things. God, I loved my Sunshine Family. I really did!

Samantha: That's so you, that's so you.

(Both laugh)

Samantha: I'm so sad, I never met your Sunshine Family.

Ann: I'm so sad too, because you would've loved them!

(Lively Jazz music plays)

Samantha: So you had a lot of girly toys. Did you have any more butch toys?

Ann: I didn't have one, but I wanted one so bad and I still do—

Samantha: Okay.

Ann: —and that was the Evel Knievel shock-absorbing stunt cycle.

Samantha: Oh, did that go through a loop-de-loop?

Ann: You made your own loop-de-loop. You made your own ramp—

Samantha: It's like the first thing I'm seeing in my imagination, it must've been in the commercial or something.

Ann: It was in the commercial where he does the back flips and all this stuff. And you—you put the cycle with the little Evel Knievel—the Evel Knievel doll was sold separately—the bastards. Anyway—

Samantha: Of course.

Ann: Of course! Um, and you put this thing on this little, on this little stand and you start cranking it up really fast, and then you click a release and it, and it just drives off. And does all these things—

Samantha: Tricks.

Ann: Like if you make ramps, it'll jump the ramp. Yeah!

Samantha Right, right, right.

Ann: I wanted that so bad.

Samantha: I strongly suspect that we're talking about marketing magic again.

Ann: Yes, we are.

Samantha: I didn't know anybody who had one, but I suspect it couldn't do all those tricks when you actually had it in person. Because my brothers—I had two older brothers—and they had, um, like the racing tracks, car racing tracks in the house, which they would let me watch them play. I wasn't allowed to touch it, but I could watch it.

Ann: Were those—was that the slot cars or was it, um—

Samantha: I guess so.

Ann: —Hot Wheels, where you just, you know, pushed them around the thing?

Samantha: No, it was the slot cars, then. The kind that would actually go around the track themselves. You had a controller—

Ann: You had a controller. Yeah, I loved those!

Samantha: Like I said, they wouldn't let me play, but I would watch them play. It was interesting enough. I watched them play. But of course, like 50% of the time they're just flying off the track. They're just —

Ann: Of course!

Samantha: —flying off the curves. They can't make the curves, the tight curves and things like that. But, um, but still I did, I did find it interesting to watch, but I would've liked to have had my own, but that was not going to

happen.

Ann: No, no, I begged my—now my brother is almost 10 years older than me.

Samantha: Right.

Ann: And I begged my brother to ask for an Evel Knievel Stunt Cycle—

Samantha: Ooh, tricky! Very tricky!

Ann: —for Christmas. Yeah, yeah.

(Both laugh)

Ann: And he was like: (effecting brother's voice) "What? I don't want that stupid thing." I was like: "Come on! You know you want it!"

(Lively Jazz music plays)

Samantha: A Magic 8-Ball.

Ann: Yes!

Samantha: I mean, it goes back to 1950, so it's not exactly our generation and I think it still exists. So it's, it's on a continuum, the Magic8-Ball. But it was big in our day too. What I think is really cool is that the guy who invented the Magic 8-Ball, his mother was a clairvoyant and she would engage in spirit writing.

Ann: Oh, interesting.

Samantha: Interesting, isn't it? And the standard Magic 8-Ball Has 20 different possible answers: 10 that are affirmative for whatever you're asking, five that are non-committal and five that are negative. Personally, my life experience in my whole, once-upon-a-time delving into kind of New Age-y stuff, it just,—it's kind of like the I-Ching.

Ann: right!

Samantha: You know, I don't know if you ever did the I-Ching, I used to do the I-Ching with coins.

Ann: I don't remember you doing that.

Samantha: Oh yeah. For few years there, when I was at my woo-woolest.

Ann: Okay.

Samantha: Sometimes it would be kind of inspiring—the result would be kind of inspiring or kind of, you know, impart a bit of wisdom or something like that.

Ann: Right.

Samantha: Obviously the answers are a little more complicated than what the Magic 8-Ball offers., but it's kind of the same idea. You have a question—

Ann: Totally.

Samantha: —you're kind of casting something, and then you get a response and you can decide what you're going to do about that.

Ann: Well, I will tell you that on my wacky trip—and someday we'll go through that whole wacky thing where I had to leave my farm in 30 days and hit the road—but I had a Magic 8-Ball on the dashboard of the RV.

Samantha: Oh, did you? I didn't know that.

Ann: I did. So, you know, if we didn't know where to go, we'd look at a map, shake it up: "It is certain"—we're going to Georgia.

Samantha: Would you actually allow it to help you make a decision?

Ann: Yes.

Samantha: Wow.

Ann: Yeah. Well, what the hell? I had nothing else going on. I was like completely—

Samantha: Well, you could have tried a Ouija Board. That's another option.

Ann: Excuse me, but my Ouija Board is stuck in a cargo container. I still have my Ouija Board.

Samantha: I do too.

Ann: You know, what's, you know, what's interesting about Ouija Boards? Ouija Boards were developed in the 1800s.

Samantha: That sounds right; when Spiritualism was really huge.

Ann: Yeah, it was the Civil War was killing so many people, people were desperate to communicate with the dead.

Samantha: Oh, that's so sad.

Ann: Isn't that sad? It is.

Samantha: Yeah, I think that is—it's all hand-in-hand with the Spiritualism movement, where people were table knocking and—

Ann: Exactly. Right.

Samantha: —seances.

Ann: Right, exactly. And, um, it was actually manufactured in Baltimore, Maryland.

Samantha: Okay.

Ann: Which is interesting because that's where Edgar Allen Poe—I mean, Edgar Allen Poe, wasn't born in Maryland, but he got married and started writing in Baltimore. And died there.

Samantha: You feel there is a connection between Edgar Allen Poe and the Ouija Board?

Ann: I feel there is no connection, no direct connection, but it's interesting that Baltimore is the home of the Ouija Board and Edgar Allen Poe. It seems to kind of go hand-in-hand in a weird, obtuse kind of way.

Samantha: Ehhhh...I think we're back to lasers and the Lite-Brite.

Ann: Okay. Yeah.

Samantha: Well, it's just like if you drew a correlation or connection between the Ouija Board and say, Houdini—

Ann: Right.

Samantha: Then that would be relevant, because Houdini was involved in that world of Spiritualists.

Ann: Right. Who was the famous ghost guy? Edgar, Edwin, Edward Cayce?

Samantha: Edgar Cayce.

Ann: Edgar Cayce.

Samantha: He was a healer and, um, yeah, he'd had some sort of—or at least the story is he had some sort of illness that he cured himself and then he became someone who could diagnose people from a distance. They could like write him a letter. The Edgar Cayce Institute still exists.

Ann: Yeah. They're in Virginia Beach.

Samantha: Virginia Beach. Yeah.

Ann: Yeah. Anywho, so I had a friend who would play Ouija with me.

Samantha: Okay.

Ann: Okay? And I swear, I wasn't touching the Oracle—

Samantha: Well, you're supposed to have your fingertips lightly touching.

Ann: Lightly touching. I swear it wasn't moving it—wasn't moving it. And my girlfriend would go like: "Will Ann's mother ever get married? Is there a true love?" And it kept spelling out "Edgar". And so I'd go to my mom: "Mom, you're going to meet a guy named Edgar. He's going to have a lot of money. So says the Ouija Board."

Samantha: Well, then.

Ann: My mother was smart: she never got married again.

(Lively Jazz music plays)

Samantha: Okay. I wanted to bring up a category, which is: The Most Baffling Toys of Our Generation.

Ann: Okay.

Samantha: I know I'm pulling—pulling this on you. You didn't know about this. The first one was the toy that I credit with one of my greatest phobias in life. And that would be: the clown punching bag that I had when I was like four years old.

(Laughter)

Samantha: I mean, I think it was a Bobo. Like, if you look up 'Bobo punching clown', you'll see him. I'm pretty sure that was the guy. I can tell you as like, I don't think it was bought for me; I think it was bought for one of my siblings, one of my older siblings and I just inherited it. But I have such vivid memories of trying to punch that stupid clown's face as hard as I could, to make it go away. And it would always come back up, smiling, no matter how much power and how much frustration I felt. And I just wanted it to go away. It would just keep on coming back.

Ann: So according to the Association of Psychological Science—

Samantha: (laughing) Wait, wait! Association of Psychological what?

Ann: Science.

Samantha: Science. Okay, yeah.

Ann: In 1961, children and APS—Association for Psychological Science—fellow Albert Bandura's laboratory witnessed an adult beating up an inflatable clown. The doll called Bobo was the opposite of menacing, with its wide ecstatic grin—

Samantha: Oh no!

Ann: —and goofy clown outfit.

Samantha: Please, spare me!

Ann: But when it was their turn to play with Bobo, children who witnessed an adult pummeling, the doll were likely to show aggression to it.

(Both laugh)

Ann: Of course! It is meant to be punched!

Samantha: It is literally meant to be punched! It has like, this nose that you're supposed to punch!

Ann: Similar to their adult models, the children kicked the doll, hit it with a mallet, and threw it in the air. They even came up with new ways to hurt Bobo, such as throwing darts or aiming a toy gun at him.

Samantha: Okay.

Ann: Sorry.

Samantha: Yeah. Why, why this toy? Why?

Ann: Um, you know, it really makes no sense.

Samantha: Makes no sense!

Ann: It makes no sense.

Samantha: Now related—sort of, you'll understand in a second—toy. That was not this—didn't have violence involved, but also I have—don't understand the point: were Weebles.

Ann: Oh! (singing jingle) Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down.

Samantha: That's Right! Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down. Why?

Ann: Um, you know...

Samantha: Why?

Ann: (laughing) My neighbor...my neighbor—

Samantha: Damn her!

Ann: No, a different one.

Samantha: Oh. Damn him!

Ann: Yes, exactly. He was a Weebles maniac. He loved his Weebles.

Samantha: What? But why?

Ann: But he had—he had the Noah's Ark Weebles, he had the Pirate Weebles, he had the Farmhouse, he had all the Weebles.

Samantha: Okay, all right. So he was into them because he had all these different scenarios with them, where he could pretend.

Ann: Yeah. My favorite thing to do, no—my favorite thing to do with the Weeble. I wanted nothing to do with playing with the Weebles. I wanted nothing to do with it. What I wanted to do was hold it really high and watch it wobble once it hit the ground. That was the—that was my only thing—knock it off a table to see it come back up and wobble. I liked to wobble the Weebles.

Samantha: And that's what the Weebles were there for there. They were there to be wobbled. But the question just is: what do you after you've wobbled them? Then what?

Ann: Then you play with them like dolls.

Samantha: I just never got it.

Ann: It's nuts.

Samantha: Stretch Armstrong.

Ann: Oh my god!!! Yes!!!

Samantha: Wh-what???

Ann: Well, okay. So let's—let's let's take this—here comes one more of Ann's correlations.

Samantha: Oh god, oh god. All right, all right. I'm braced, I'm braced.

Ann: Okay. So if you take the Bobo, where you're learning how to punch things—

Samantha: What!?

Ann: Okay, just hear me out here!

Samantha: Okay. All right.

Ann: You take, you take the Bobo that you learned how to be aggressive and punched the damn thing.

Samantha: Yes...

Ann: You move to Weebles where you're just throwing them. You're just like throwing them to just like watch them wobble.

Samantha: Okay...alright..yeah...

Ann: So that was like, you know, teaches somebody how to throw somebody off a cliff.

Samantha: (giggling) Yeah, of course.

Ann: (laughing) And then the Stretch Armstrong is how to fork—

(Dissolves into laughter)

Samantha: How to what?

Ann: (laughing hard) How to quarter—

(Dissolves into laughter)

Samantha: How to what? Oh what, draw and quarter someone? Is that what you're saying?

Ann: (laughing) Yeah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha....yes! Not only were they teaching us all the psychedelic ways with the Magic Window, they were also turning us into trained killers! And torturers! What was the point?

Samantha: What was the point!?

Ann: Except for learning how to draw and quarter somebody.

(Laughing)

Samantha: Okay. I had one more in my list, but I think, I think Stretch Armstrong just took the biscuit. So we'll leave it with him.

Ann: No!

Samantha: You sure? Okay.

Ann: Absolutely not! You can not dangle that out in front of me and walk away.

Samantha: How dare I? Okay.

Ann: God!

Samantha: Okay! Not too much build-up. It's not that great. Okay.
Rock'em Sock'em Robots.

Ann: I always wanted to have those!

Samantha: But think about why did you want to have it?

Ann: Because I wanted to punch a robot, because I knew robots were going to take my job one day.

Samantha: Oh, my sweet Jiminy Joseph—

Ann: So yeah, that is so weird! I know that these are past our time, but the Sock'em Boppers.

Samantha: I don't even know what that is.

Ann: So this came out like when my kid was little and you—you put your fist through this giant inflatable... giant inflatable ball and you just hit each other. Why are we teaching our children to hit things? And draw and quarter them? And drop them off—over cliffs? Like lemmings or Genghis Khan? It's terrible!

Samantha: What!? Lemmings or Genghis Khan?!

(Hysterical snorting laughter)

Ann: I don't know, I'm just throwing words!

(Laughter continues)

Samantha: Oh! Oh my god.

(Laughter continues)

Ann: More research will have to be done on that!

(Laughter continues)

Ann: Oh god, I can't breathe! My stomach! I'm getting a work out!

(Laughter continues)

(Laughter winds down and both exhale)

Samantha: Well, that's it. I can, I can press stop.

Ann: Now that was a real Parco conversation!

Samantha: It was.

(Lively Jazz closing music plays)

Samantha: We'd love to hear your stories of being a GenX kid. You can contact us on our website heyparco.com, and there you'll find links to our Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, along with images and info related to this and other Hey Parco episodes. Thanks for joining us! See you next time!