

How The Gong Show Provided Early Career Breaks for RuPaul, Pee-Wee Herman

"Gong This Book," from author Adam Nedeff and publisher BearManor Media, chronicles the history of the classic '70s talent show and quirky host Chuck Barris

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Comic actor Paul "Pee-Wee Herman" Reubens and drag queen RuPaul were among the up-and-coming talents who got an early break on "The Gong Show." Author Adam Nedeff recounts this in publisher BearManor Media's newest title, "Gong This Book," an in-depth behind-the-scenes history of the classic 1970s television series.

Debuting in 1976, "The Gong Show" was the brainchild of game show producer Chuck Barris ("The Dating Game," "The Newlywed Game," "The New Treasure Hunt"). Barris initially envisioned "a stairway to the stars" a la modern reality shows like "American Idol," launching careers of talented new performers. Initial auditions for the new show were so dismal that Barris' business partner, Chris Bearde, suggested flipping the premise to make it a showcase for bad performances from untalented amateurs. Barris himself became master of ceremonies after five episodes with another host went so poorly that Barris deemed them unairable. "The Gong Show" starring Chuck Barris became an overnight sensation, something of a fad among television viewers.

Mike Metzger, a producer for Chuck Barris Productions, remembered, "Once 'The Gong Show' became popular, Chuck was doing auditions and interviews constantly... I got on an elevator once with two men in diapers. Between them was a coat rack with an assortment of animal carcasses hanging from it. I asked them what their act was. They said, 'We play the meat.'"

Despite the show's choice to pivot the spotlight toward the ridiculous, a number of hungry young performers benefitted from early exposure on "The Gong Show." Rock bands Oingo



"Gong This Book," now on sale from BearManor Media, is the latest title in Adam Nedeff's series of books about game show history.

Boingo and Green Jelly were contestants, with Oingo Boingo winning the coveted Golden Gong trophy. Future "NewsRadio" star Phil Hartman, made up as an elderly man, recited a poem about lusting after a younger woman. Stand-up comic Robert Schimmel played the piano with his nose. Emmy-winning actress Mare Winningham sang, going by the name Sharon Shamus. Drag queen Rupaul sang, but lost to an Elvis impersonator. Joey D'Auria, prior to his 17-year tenure as Chicago's Bozo the Clown, was a contestant, calling himself Dr. Flame-o. His act: holding his hands over lit candles and yelling the song "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" in pain.

D'Auria's memory of the experience is that the "Gong Show" audience was already heckling him as he walked onstage. When he held his hands over the fire, one audience member yelled, "He's hurting himself!" The rest of the audience responded, "YAAAAAAYYYYYY!"



Drag queen Tootie Finnell takes a flying leap during her performance of Aretha Franklin's "Respect" on "The Gong Show" while host Chuck Barris jumps along with her. In the 1970s, openly gay and openly transgender contestants were seen on multiple episodes

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*Mike Metzger,
writer/producer, Chuck Barris
Productions*

Surprisingly, the most prolific contestant on "The Gong Show" was likely Paul Reubens, then a member of the Los Angeles comedy troupe The Groundlings. Reubens and a partner won the grand prize for an act in which they provided sound effects for an old-time-radio-style sketch. But there was more to come—Chuck Barris encouraged particularly talented performers to come back again and again, giving them only the restriction that they had to come up with a unique act for each time that they auditioned for the show. With a fertile mind bubbling with ideas for acts, Reubens appeared on a total of 14 episodes of "The Gong Show." Because Barris arranged for royalties to be paid to the contestants when he sold "The Gong Show" reruns for syndication, Reubens got a financial

windfall a few years after his appearances, and he used the money to support himself while he developed material for his theatre shows.

For his research, Nedeff conducted interviews with numerous members of "The Gong Show" on-air family, who contributed their memories for the book. Among them: judges Jamie Farr and Jo Anne Worley; The Unknown Comic; Confusion the Philosopher; Count Banjola; Rhetch Butler; Scarlett O'Hara; Larry and His Magic Trumpet; Mike the Vike; musician Danny Lies who played the ham; and Paul Zeglar, whose performance of "Yankee Doodle" on a tea kettle led TV Guide to dub him one of the worst acts ever featured on the show.

[The author, Adam Nedeff](#), a West Virginia native who specializes in game shows. His other titles include "Game Shows FAQ; It's More Than Password—The Life (and Wife) of Allen Ludden"; "This Day in Game Show History"; "Monty Hall—TV's Big Dealer"; "The Matchless Gene Rayburn"; "Okay? Okay!—Dennis James' Lifetime of Firsts"; and "Quizmaster—The Life and Times and Fun and Games of Bill Cullen." Nedeff also lends his expertise as an archivist and researcher for the National Archives of Game Show History, a wing of the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. He's also been a trivia question researcher for more than a dozen TV game shows.

"Gong This Book" is now available in hardcover and paperback at [Amazon](#) and at [BarnesandNoble.com](#). An ebook version will be available at a later date.

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Paul Reubens, calling himself "Jay Longtoe," appears as a contestant, performing a stereotypical faux-Native American dance before abruptly switching to a lounge singer voice and singing "Soon It's Gonna Rain"

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