

COYOTE & OAK

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A PRINTED MAGAZINE, CREATED BY AND SHOWCASING CALIFORNIA ARTISTS AND ENTREPRENEURS.
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BEHIND THE SCENE:

*An Animator's Advice on Standing Out
in the Creative Crowd*

*By Kristen Charaiwa
Photography by Alex Thus*

BORN IN THE 80S AND RAISED ON THE EAST COAST, JUSTIN CONNOLLY GREW UP EXPRESSING HIMSELF THROUGH CREATIVE ENDEAVORS.

Drawing from the time he was able to hold a crayon, it wasn't until after his parents had given him a pack of grocery store molding clay, that he made his first attempts at sculpting an animated world, inspired by his obsession with the dancing California Raisins.

Now living in Los Angeles, Justin says it was a winding path through the Fine Arts world that delivered him to the University of Southern California. He graduated with an M.F.A. in Animation in 2012, and that winter, he landed his first paid gig on the set of 'It's a Spongebob Christmas!' The rest, as they say, is history.

In 2016, Justin is a stop-motion animator and set fabricator at Stoopid Buddy Stoodios, where he's contributing his talents to television and online productions, such as Adult Swim's Robot Chicken, and Netflix's kids' show, Buddy Thunderstruck. Here are his top tips for finding success where your passion lies.

BE WHERE THE ACTION IS

"Find that industry, wherever it is. Find an epicenter; go there. Get your foot in the door, and then show your work..."

If you're looking for the epicenter of the animation world, you'll find it in Los Angeles, but it's a small world; there are just a handful of stop-motion studios, so making the move cross-country was a no-brainer. "If you want to get a career going, if you want to be in any industry, you have to be where the industry is. Physically being there is [key]." Be where the action is.

PAY YOUR DUES

Everybody starts somewhere—and it's generally at the bottom. It's rare that even the most highly-talented among us finds herself an overnight success, and yet many creative types quickly become discouraged, when they realize competition is stiff, and opportunities have to be fought for, and won. Justin believes interning is among the best ways to both learn from others, and build a bridge to future work. "To be perfectly honest, it stinks to work for free, and no one wants to do that," he says, but you gotta pay your dues, and build a body of work.

SOMETIMES YOUR DREAM JOB ISN'T

"When you're a kid, and you're thinking about what your dream job would be, you always imagine that you'll be jumping out of bed every morning, so excited to go to work..."

To be successful in your career, Justin says there's more required of you than just passion. He knows this first-hand. Stop-motion animation takes stamina. He works a typical ten-hour day at the studio, with the goal of shooting just one to ten seconds of film per day. With an episode of Robot Chicken lasting about 11 minutes, it's obvious why he frequently hears the word 'tedious' associated with his line of work. Eventually, he says, "...reality sinks in. Even if it's a dream job—which [animation] is for me—it's still a lot of work, and sometimes a lot of long hours."

REMEMBER: SKILL TRUMPS TALENT

"It's important to know the difference between talent and skill: skill opens doors, keeps you employed and gives you career longevity."

Far too often, people fall into the trap of relying on talent alone; but talent can only take you so far. Justin is skilled as both an animator and a set builder. He doesn't know anyone else in the industry with the same skill set, and his advice is to pick up as many skills as you can. There are a million ways to stay current, from free online platforms like *Taught by a Pro.com* and *Skillsshare.com*, to paid local courses. "I would recommend taking an active role in self-education, and not just going to a college, and waiting for someone to stand in front of you in a classroom and show you things."

Whatever you do, stay educated. *[continued on page 61]*





TOUGHEN UP

"Learn to accept criticism. That's a really big one."

After five years in animation, Justin admits he still struggles with being critiqued, but says he's become more resilient over time, and has reached a place of healthy detachment from the objects he creates. He takes ownership of his art, but he gives up emotional possession once it's out in the world. "Most artists are very sensitive people, in general. Be able to separate yourself from the work; be able to differentiate between someone criticizing your work, versus someone criticizing *you*. It's tough, but being able to make that distinction has helped

FAIL OFTEN

Justin finds inspiration in stories of highly successful people, who repeatedly failed, but persevered despite it all. J.K. Rowling, author of the famed *Harry Potter* books, was turned down by twelve different publishing houses before getting her book deal. "She submitted the original *Harry Potter* books to so many people, and everyone closed doors in her face, and everyone said no," he says. "Then she finally got that yes and look what a huge thing *Harry Potter* is now— it's inescapable."

DREAM ON

With hopes of a lengthy career and retiring in the animation industry, Justin does have other aspirations, including writing kids' books, and using his love of industrial design to create "functional sculpture" as children's products and furniture. "I just hope that when I look back on my career, I've contributed to enough projects that I'm really proud to have been a part of, and contributed to what I believe to be great art." 🎬

You can find Justin online at www.jvconnolly.com and see his full filmography at [IMDB](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1023000/).