

# BLUE MAN GROUP

Making a different wave on Long Island

How Co-Founder Phil Stanton and the Blue Man Group keep creativity alive  
by Jason Feinberg



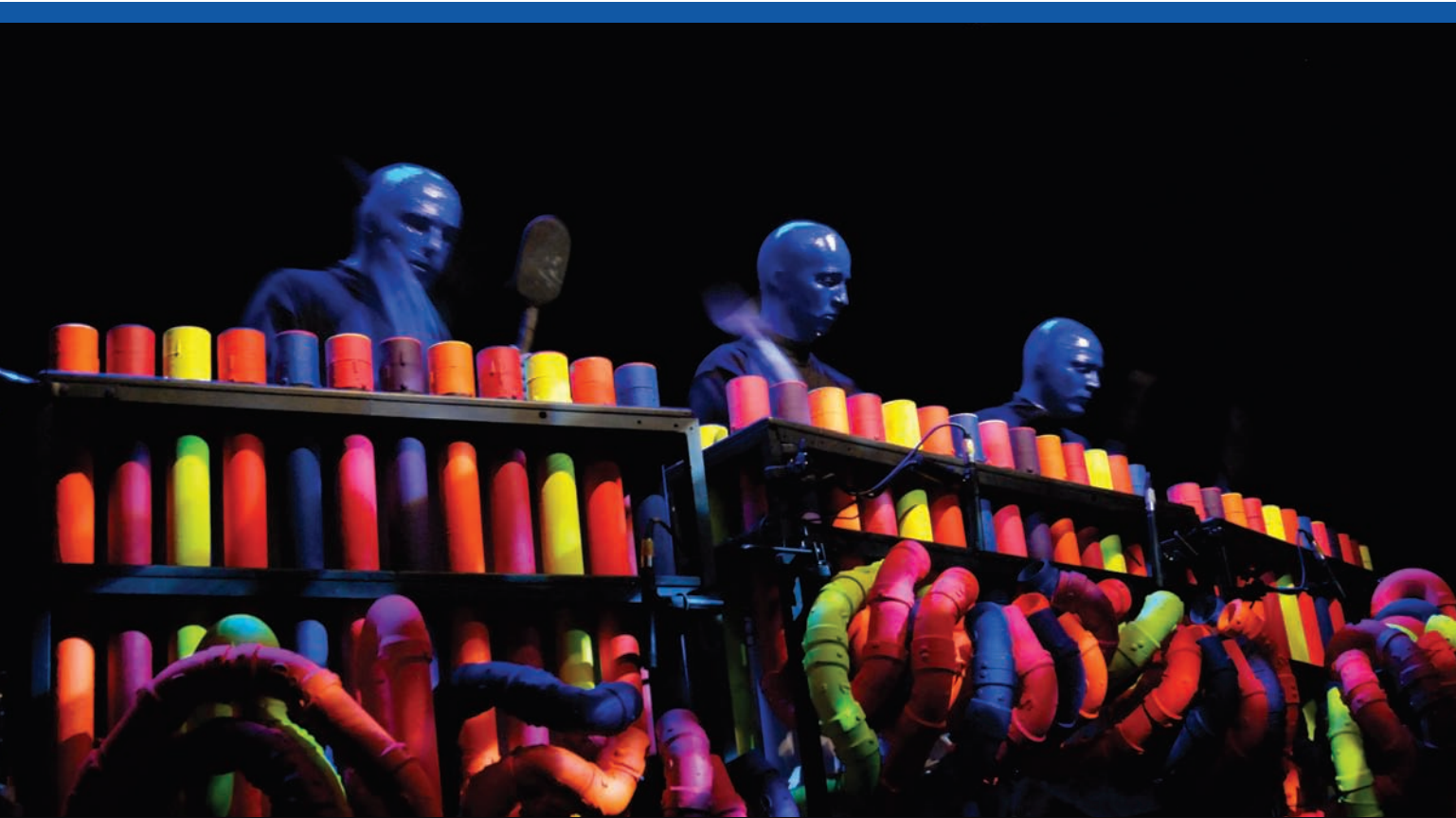
When Maureen Mangan from the Long Island Children's Museum sent me her upcoming events for The Boulevard, something caught my eye. It was the words "Blue Man Group," one of my favorite stage performances of all time. LICM was opening Blue Man Group - Making Waves, a new traveling exhibit running through May 4 in Garden City. I thought it was a great thing for the museum, although at that point I didn't grasp the actual concept of what was going to be created. An invitation to opening day of the Blue Man Group exhibit was decidedly an opportunity not to be missed. This was my first visit to LICM but my fourth time seeing the Blue Man Group (twice in Las Vegas, once in NYC). I was expecting almost an improvisation of their script. What I found was nothing less than awesome.

The Blue Man Group is a theatrical performance started in New York in the late 1980s. It blends music, comedy and yes, education. While the performance includes some incredible background music, the highlights of the show are the uniquely-designed percussion instruments made from PVC piping. At the center of the show are three blue human-like men, dressed in black, that have a childlike curiosity about them. They explore things on stage while creating art and music in a very different way than most of us are used to. The theater was dark, lit only by black lighting that caused the PVC instruments to glow. Then the powerful sound of drums, guitars and keyboards with a thick, deep bass just punched its way into you and moved the room. The theater was filled with wide-eyed children, dancing in their seats with smiles as big as life, not knowing what to expect. Then ... there they were: three very blue, human-like yet alienistic beings strolling about curiously, mimicking and expressing themselves with the dual-arm salute to their young audience.

Following the performance, the Blue Man Group greeted the children outside the theater and no one failed to take advantage of the photo op. The Blue Men, who always adapt to their environment, squatted down so they were the same size as the kids. We were then led to the Blue Man Group exhibit. As you entered the room, you entered a different world, the world of the Blue Men.

In most museums, you are not allowed to touch. At LICM, it's essential to touch and interact with the exhibits. BMG's instruments and lights were set up in a design similar to the show, but this time, it was a science exhibit of sound and lights. There were instructions on how to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" on the Thongophone, or you could play the Tubulum. Soon the Blue Men joined the audience in this incredible playground for children and the child inside all of us.

I had the opportunity to speak with Phil Stanton, co-creator of the Blue Man Group, about a trend that has been affecting school districts around the country. Every time a budget cut is inevitable, what gets cut are creative programs such as art and music. Stanton said, "One thing that brought the three of us together, the one thing we shared in common, is that we all felt a little betrayed by the school system that forces you into a vocational education - not that arts education can't be vocational - but one of the essential qualities of being human is creativity and curiosity and when our educational system doesn't strive to keep that alive for no good reason almost, it's just sad when that disappears, because that cuts into the core of who we are as human beings." He continued with passion, "I do think that keeping creativity alive can be an effective part of being a vocation or lifestyle. So why would we want to cut that short? It's really about being an investment into our future. I think we would like to infuse education ...





Phil Stanton Co-Founder of Blue Man Group

keeping that alive no matter what age you find yourself or what form of education you have.”

Phil met co-founders Chris Wink in 1986 and Matt Goldberg shortly thereafter, and the three of them have enjoyed a very creative and close friendship since. What started out as simply entertaining friends by talking about magazine articles and excerpts from books turned into an educational experience from which the Blue Men emerged. Walking around Canal Street in NYC hearing sounds from PVC piping and noting its similarity to 1,000-year-old bamboo percussion instruments fascinated them and seemed the perfect blend to create a tonal melody versus straight percussion. Soon they were constructing instruments in Chris’ apartment.

Once they knew what they had, they wanted to inspire creativity and keep alive a childlike curiosity. To make the performance educational, BMG added subliminal undertones that touch on science, technology, information, self-consciousness and of course, music, all in a comedic and childlike fashion. The addition of fluorescent paints, creative lighting and themes has led BMG to a high point of success and growth spawning two albums (the Grammy-nominated audio and the latest CD/DVD

complex) as well as the Complex Rock Tour Live (coming to the Nassau Coliseum in May). As popularity continued to grow, so did BMG’s career, resulting in their being made the faces of Swatch watches and appearing in commercials as the non-speaking spokespeople for Intel’s Pentium 3 and 4 Processors. They are currently appearing in TV ads for the LA Dodgers.

The Blue Man Group performs in New York, Boston, Chicago, Las Vegas and Orlando. Outside the US, they have performed in Germany (Berlin, Oberhausen and Stuttgart) and Japan (Tokyo). Each theater is different, which allows the BMG to explore new creative ideas. Essentially the second two-thirds of the show varies per location. At LICM, the stage was much smaller in depth but close to the width of the Astor Place Theater in NYC. No problem for the Blue Men; they adapted with ease.

The next stop for the Blue Man Group exhibit is Seattle; however, the theatrical show performs at the Astor Place Theater Tuesday through Sunday with three shows on weekends and one or two shows on weekdays. The Blue Man Group has been making waves for 20 years. Maybe it’s time you became a part of the experience.

