

# A Long Time Ago ...?

## For 'Star Wars' Fans In Middle-Age, Force Is Still Strong

BY CHRISTOPHER BORRELLI

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Jimmy Mac recalled his age with a squint and a wince. Forty-six, he said after a pained calculation, the kind of hesitation that suggests lately he has to remember each time he is asked and would rather not remind himself. His hair is sort of brownish, with a bit of Irish red and, he pointed out, "a touch of gray." Jimmy Mac has been feeling old lately, though he doesn't seem old: He is a Chicago bro, a guy's guy, a longtime producer for radio personality Jonathon Brandmeier who speaks in the caffeinated, steamroller cadences of drive-time radio. Still, on a few things, Jimmy Mac (whose real name is James McInerney) can sound tender, his voice softening with unconditional love. He sounds like this talking about his two sons, he sounds like this talking about his wife, WGN radio host Wendy Snyder. And he sounds like this discussing his first love: a love that dates to 1977, a love that once seemed ephemeral, destined to fade with childhood.

And yet, in the past decade alone, Jimmy Mac's love for "Star Wars" has only intensified. Standing in the front room on the second floor of his Victorian in Chicago's southwest suburbs, he pulled a "Star Wars" trading card off a shelf: His first "Star Wars" collectible ever, he said, fished from a bag of Wonder Bread when he was 8. He grabbed a frayed paperback of "Return of the Jedi." Very same copy he bought in 1983, he said, then returned it to its perch and reached for his first "Star Wars" action figure, an R2-D2, its trash-can torso wrapped in a yellowing decal. He continued like this for a bit, the room so stuffed with "Star Wars" that it was surprising when a lovely summer twilight registered in the windows.

Night came.

Jimmy Mac put on his reading glasses.

He picked up a small package, read the return address and sliced it open. Inside were a pair of action figures, droids that he had mentioned recently on "RebelForce Radio," his weekly, 9-year-old "Star Wars" podcast. He didn't have them yet, so a fan of the show sent him a gift, bundling each figure in plastic bags.

Understand: None of this is all that remarkable. Not the love, not the collection, not the generosity. The elaborate devotion of "Star Wars" fans is as well-known as the going-on-40-year-old franchise itself.

Less apparent is that "Star Wars" fandom has become a community of three generations. Its first audiences, its foundational members, are now in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Which, again, sure, is not earth-shattering news. But unlike, say, most Beatles fans, or even "Star Trek" or "Lord of the Rings" loyalists, many of these early adopters remain as involved as they were in their childhoods, when George Lucas debuted his space epic. In fact, a vast number are far more invested now, energized by a universe that, like our actual universe, shows no sign of contracting.

Once, the obvious method for explaining longtime "Star Wars" fans was comparing them with the fandoms for other sci-fi classics or comic-book legacies. Now the better analogy is devotion to sports teams, those other franchises that, throughout highs and lows, stay relevant for multiple generations.

When "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," the latest film installment, opens in December, it won't merely mark the continuation of a decades-old melodrama, or the passing of creative stewardship from Lucas to director J.J. Abrams. It will herald the middle age of that first generation of "Star Wars" fan, and not unlike the movie itself, with its senior-citizen movie stars and freshman cast sharing screen time, promises to be a generational reckoning, a comfortable old shoe. Meet a Jimmy Mac, spend some time with this first generation, and you will know what it means to feel swaddled inside a cultural property without end.

His own winding trajectory with the franchise traces the contours of his life, a familiar path to many an old-school fan: When "Return of the Jedi" opened in 1983, capping the original trilogy, he felt his childhood end ("culture came with a shelf life back then"); in the 1980s he lost interest ("and got into high-school life and guitars and trouble"); in college he edged back into collecting, ever so slightly ("Star Wars" officially felt like a relic of the past"); then, in the 1990s, as the original movies were re-released and a new trilogy announced, he caught the fever again, and this time, the Internet was there to organize the rest of the fandom.

Toss in a millennial culture that never met an aesthetic it didn't like to keep around, and now you have "Star Wars" 2015, which, from the charming animated TV series "Star Wars Rebels" to the retro designs of "Force Awakens," is about returning to the breezy youth of the franchise's early days. Last spring, at Star Wars Celebration in Anaheim, Calif., the semi-regular Lucasfilm-sanctioned convention, Simon Kinberg, 41, producer of "Rebels," said his "first memory was the first 'Star Wars' film — not of 'Star Wars' but life itself" so the plan is to recapture a sense of joy.

With a few tweaks to the formula: Tricia Barr, a 45-year-old "Star Wars" podcaster/author and Florida transportation engineer, told me that when she returned to the fandom in her 20s, "women were being ignored, to the point where I couldn't buy a 'Star Wars' shirt in a woman's size." And now? "It's looser, more diverse. A family activity. I don't see myself losing interest again."

Which, as a sentiment, befits a 21st century that gives us no reason to leave behind childhood things anymore. As C.S. Lewis predicted — and Lucasfilm proves — eventually everyone is old enough to return to fairy tales.

At Celebration, a father in his 40s from Texas told me he feels old at every rock concert he attends these days but he never feels old around "Star Wars." Indeed, Jimmy Mac's "Star Wars" room is a kind of cultural womb, a safe space for the plastic Kenner spaceships he played with as a 9-year-old — even through his rough patches of wavering loyalty, he never abandoned a single toy. "There was a point 10 years ago where I was deep in my work and this room felt less maintained," he said. "I remember wondering if I was in a new 'Star Wars' menopause." But then his podcast grew popular. And "now, regardless of age, I'm more invested than ever."

He looked around. Dylan, his 12-year-old, was playing a video game in the corner. "Right, Dylan?" Jimmy Mac asked. Dylan did not look away from the computer. He said: "Right — I used to think everyone's dad had a 'Star Wars' room."

The garage door was open, the cul-de-sac quiet. It was a Saturday afternoon in Bolingbrook, Ill., a July day that had turned drizzly and gray. The barbecue was still happening, albeit a little slower now, a bit cautiously. Members of Chi2-D2, Chicago's largest "Star Wars" droid-building



Radio producer Jimmy "Jimmy Mac" McInerney is seen before the taping of his podcast in the basement of his home in LaGrange, Ill., recently.

group, were waiting out the rain before throwing on sausages that Alex Centeno brought. Having also brought full-size, fully-operational, radio-controlled R2s — which they built, with wood, steel, microchips — they weren't eager to roll them in the rain. So they did what guys do at a barbecue: Stood in the garage and drank beer, talking shop and ribbing each other. They made fun of Centeno's droid-driving skills. "Signal interference!" he said, and changed subjects:

"You know, I regret blowing up my 'Star Wars' toys," he said, a teddy bear of a guy in a Chewbacca shirt.

"Wait, you blew them up?" asked Jason Matlock, 38, incredulous.

"I did. As a kid, with M-80s," said Centeno, 43, matter-of-factly. "You didn't?"

"Uh, Alex, no," said Matlock.

Matlock's garage was full of droid chassis and severed R2 dome heads and metal doodads waiting to be soldered together and bleep-bleep-bleep. He found these guys online, he said. He had never soldered before joining Chi2-D2, which has about a dozen members. But he liked the bonding, the shared interests. With a tight smile, he added: "My kids like new 'Star Wars' films, and the ones I grew up on are 'boring.'"

Hanging out at the barbecue I realized that when I was a kid I probably pictured something like this — plus a Jimmy Mac-esque "Star Wars" shrine — as a vision of adulthood: "Star Wars" forever, albeit tucked in the spaces between family and other responsibilities. These guys were living the dream. They even had a cool gang name, so to speak. I was jealous, having long ago pushed my own "Star Wars" fetishes into the closet. Not that it was the first time I ran across guys who had seamlessly incorporated "Star Wars" into their middle-age everyday: In Providence, R.I., where I grew up, there's a neighborhood restaurant named Julians, and the owner, Julian Forgue, keeps an off-brand R2 lamp on the bar, a dining table shaped like a Death Star and, in the restroom, in a theft-proof case attached to a wall, his extensive collection of "Star Wars" action figures.

Forgue is 44 and talks about his fandom like it's a kind of sub-nationality: "You know when you got your first bike, your world tripled? 'Star Wars' made mine immense. I didn't have a father figure, I had a broken Italian family. I was like an outcast kid, and that movie woke up my imagination." Conversations like this with "Star Wars" fans who grew up in the 1970s, particularly children of Woodstock-era parents and dysfunction, are not uncommon. Jason Swank, 38, who co-hosts "Rebel Force Radio" with Jimmy Mac from his home in North Canton, Ohio, told me he "didn't have the most functional relationship" with his father and so "something about the journey of this Luke Skywalker guy, who had father issues, resonated. Same goes for the way the movie shows a surrogate family coming together in unexpected ways. That resonated hugely — it was like ... an option." At the droid-builders barbecue, Robert Redden, 43, of Orland Park, Ill., said: "I was never athletic or coordinated, but in school, at recess, everyone shared 'Star Wars.' Which was the only time I fit in."

Pair lingering hurt with the difficulty of making adult friends, and fandom can feel like a support network. Or another generation's version of the regular golf game — but more bottom-up, more middle class. Centeno is a tow-truck driver. He told me his first memory of "Star Wars" is forever linked with seeing, just as the movie started, a rat scurry across the stage of his Chicago theater. Years ago I spent an afternoon in Chicago with Anthony Daniels, the British actor who has played C-3PO in all seven "Star Wars" movies, and all day he was trailed by older guys asking him to autograph their cracked, 30-year-old vinyl "Star Wars" soundtracks and dog-eared "Empire Strikes Back" programs they could never toss.

Love, James Baldwin wrote, is a growing up. An acceptance of what moves you, for better or worse. You stop fighting your doubts and make it fit — even Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, 47, promoting his presidential run, quoted Yoda in his Twitter feed. He has made his fandom fit. Watching Jimmy Mac do his podcast — which draws more than 100,000 listeners a month and has a sponsor (Little Debbie snack cakes) — I was reminded of dads who jam on Hendrix covers in basements with other dads. Indeed, Jimmy Mac sat beneath a basement window, beside a hot water heater, alongside radio equipment. He dialed up Swank, who immediately launched into a tirade about a possibly sexist new Princess Leia action figure. "Jason, Jason — save it for the show," Jimmy Mac said, smiling, scrolling through the outline of their (two-hour) conversation. Enthusiasm was not an issue.

Fitting "Star Wars" into their adult lives was. They tape at 10 p.m. on Tuesdays, after the kids are asleep, after everyone's had dinner with their families.

Jeffrey Brown lives in a cute, squat house with flower boxes on its windowsills. It's on a

leafy working-class block in Chicago. Upstairs, in the back of his home, he keeps a bookcase of "Star Wars" titles — vehicles of "Star Wars," wild-life of "Star Wars" — alongside trading cards and old Burger King tie-ins, references for his own mini-empire. Brown, who has the shy, sideways glance of a longtime cartoonist, just turned 40, and for the past four years he has pounded out seven "Star Wars" books for children. Or rather, as he says, illustrated books initially intended for adults like himself — parents who want to introduce "Star Wars" to their children.

"Darth Vader and Son," his first "Star Wars" best-seller, imagined a single-parent Dark Lord of the Sith raising a young, rambunctious Luke Skywalker, each cartoon full of inside jokes and childhood parodies ("Luke, I am your father. Do you want a time out?"). "Vader's Little Princess" came next, followed by the "Jedi Academy" middle-schooler series. By the time Brown got to "Goodnight Darth Vader," a play on the classic "Goodnight Moon," he was getting letters from parents whose kids insist Brown's books are read at bedtime. "Which, seriously, I never saw coming," he said. "Now I'm hearing from older people who give my books to their parents, like a reconnecting thank-you for bringing them to these movies all those years ago."

Brown hit a sweet spot, a contemporary trism so ingrained we take it for granted:

"Star Wars" has become a lifestyle choice, offering, in marketing parlance, "multiple entry points" to keep any extended family involved. Brown's series, published by Scholastic and Chronicle, spawned diaries, calendars, activity journals. Kids too young for irony? Chronicle also has board books for preschoolers: "Star Wars: Epic Yarns," illustrated with felt characters. Older, more sophisticated kids? There's Lego's "Star Wars" line (partly credited with keeping the toy maker wildly flush). This fall, the first wave of "Force Awakens" tie-in books ranges from adult hardcovers to YA tales, Marvel adaptations to novelty bathroom reads. And that's just publishing. There's wallpaper that appropriates the silver racing stripes of old Kenner "Star Wars" action figure packaging; American Tourister R2 luggage; Vader toasters; and, on Etsy, clever Warhol-esque AT-AT rugs.

A "Star Wars" design for living. In the beginning, in a galaxy far, far away (named 1976), the prospective fan base was much narrower. Charles Lippincott, who grew up in the Chicago suburbs, was tasked by George Lucas with marketing and publicizing the first (unproven) "Star Wars" movie. He said they pictured a 13-year-old boy, but even in the early stages were already thinking broader. He took the film to the first San Diego Comic-Con International, to "Star Trek" fan groups; he licensed Marvel Comics to begin publishing "Star Wars" comics before the movie was in theaters. He played the coasts, then moved inward: "The people I grew up with in my small town of Oswego were important, because they represented an average middle-American viewer," said Lippincott, now in his 70s. "I was like them. ... In planning how to reach those folks in small-town America, we reached everyone on both coasts and people in between."

That initial audience multiplied, into the massive, stratified base. As Chris Taylor, author of the 2014 history "How Star Wars Conquered the Universe," explained, there are at minimum three types of fans: kids, geeks and bros. And, within these types, three generations: the original fans, the generation that grew up with the millennial-

era prequels and the children of the original fans. Which means, of course, if not a generational divide, an inevitable philosophical split: "Which is not a small thing to this fandom, and doesn't come until the prequels, the late '90s. When it does, it reveals layers: fans who like anything 'Star Wars' and are grateful for more, and fans who are suspicious of anything new, who don't like CGI, new characters — they see most new stuff as blasphemy."

"The splits are often, not always, on age lines. Which in a way feels like, I sometimes think, the slow-motion foundation of a religion, with its new and old versions of some core text."

This schism, like it or not, lends vitality.


"If we were still only dealing with work from 1977, 'Star Wars' would feel creaky, a lesson in nostalgia for an aging generation," Taylor said. If there's a key to the generational growth of the community and the revitalization of the original generation, he added, then it's contained in an anecdote, the short version of which goes: When Lucas was a kid in California he started and marketed a haunted house, and as soon as he noticed crowds dropping off he reorganized and tweaked and brought in bigger audiences. And so, in the early '90s, as interest in "Star Wars" waned, Lucasfilm hired Steve Sansweet, a former Wall Street Journal reporter who, he said, was told his job would not last long.

Sansweet was hired partly to work on Lucasfilm's fan relations, because, as he recalled, "there were no fan relations back then — Lucasfilm didn't even have a marketing department when I started. I remember talking to Howard Roffman, who was vice president of licensing, and he said, 'Steve, we're resting this, and when the fans are ready for 'Star Wars' again, it will be ready for them.' But in truth, they had no idea. I had always thought that merchandise would play a big part in keeping that first generation interested, though you had to wonder — I remember a big internal fight at Bantam Books about even publishing Timothy Zahn."


Zahn, an acclaimed science fiction writer by the early '90s — a Lombard, Ill., native who had been working on his doctorate in physics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign when he saw the first "Star Wars" — plays no small role in keeping that '70s generation of fans involved. He recognized a timelessness in the story and wrote a trilogy of novels ("Heir to the Empire," in 1991, now a genre classic, was the first) that hemmed close to the spirit of the original films, suggesting fresh, vital stories in this universe were possible. "Which was interesting," he said, "because then you started to see people whose entry point became the books, alongside people who loved only the films. And now, younger kids, their entry point is often the prequels."

Lucasfilm's strategy to get older fans reinvested, Sansweet recalled, came partly from building on new material, partly from Lippincott's play-book (work sci-fi conventions, develop relationships with fans) and partly from an embrace of amateur creativity: "Let fandom grow organically, don't deliver cease-and-desist orders to everyone playing in this universe." It's no coincidence that as the Internet started to flourish, so did droid-building groups and costuming clubs, populated by children of the late '70s. The 501st Legion, the largest "Star Wars" organization in the world, now has 7,500 active members (and nonprofit status). When the first prequel, "The Phantom

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