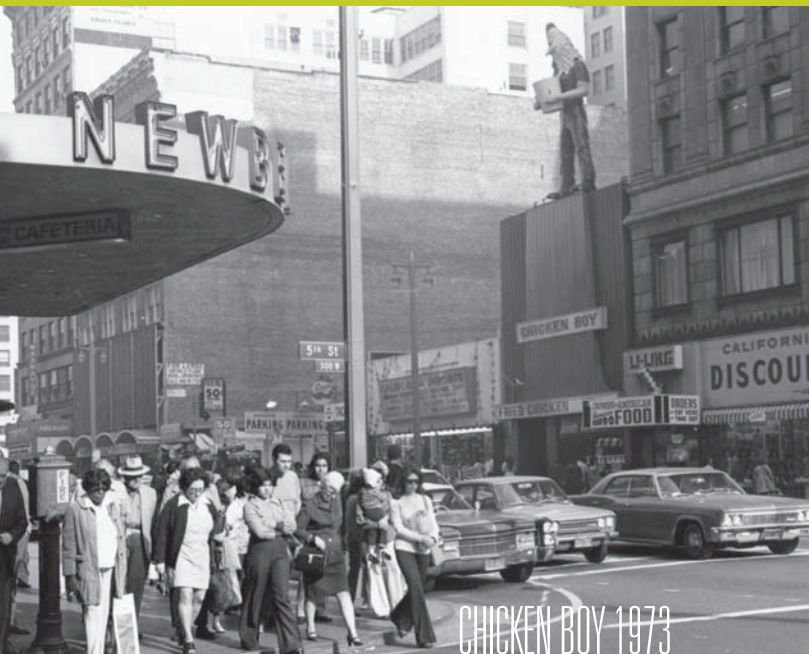


THE TRUE STORY OF CHICKEN BOY



GOOGIE WONDERLAND

When I moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s, I spent a week getting the lay o' the land by driving aimlessly about. One fateful day, the plan was to buy groceries downtown at Grand Central Market. Heading north on Broadway, I spotted Chicken Boy. Time stood still as our eyes met—it was kind of like Maria meeting Tony at the dance, only the object of my affection had the head of a chicken and was welded to the top of a three-story building on Broadway between 4th and 5th Streets (he was the mascot for the Chicken Boy fried chicken restaurant below). Little did I know it was not a mere flirtation; our destinies were sealed that day.

As years passed, Chicken Boy became my symbol of Los Angeles. He and I were both outsiders who just wanted to blend. We had dreamy dreams for ourselves and our town—like that we could all get along, cause, you know, we're all in this together. LA was a wonderland—cheap and delicious dining from all over the globe, dazzlingly hilarious roadside icons, a variety of structures that made every drive seem like a trip through a movie set, and enough other stuff going on to constantly entertain, provoke, and stupefy—who could ask for anything more?

Then they started disappearing—Googies, Ships Westwood, Ships Culver City, Ships La Cienega, the derby-shaped

Brown Derby, Vickman's, Nickodell, the Firefly—the list is long, and I'm really not that old. On a trip downtown one day, the shocking sight of a "for lease" sign on the restaurant made me worry for the fate of Chicken Boy. I called the leasing agent to inquire. I kept calling until one day, they called me and said, more or less, "If you're so concerned about him, come and get him." Okay said I. "Like now," said they.

It was during the whirlwind next few days that I discovered he was 22-feet tall (my guess was 10-feet, which is why I am an artist and not a day trader). So I went into the first of many conversations that started, "Can I get an estimate to dismantle and move a 22-foot-tall fiberglass statue of a man with a chicken's head, also known as Chicken Boy. . .?"

In the early hours of a morning in May 1984, Chicken Boy was removed to the first in a series of storage facilities and my Plan A fell upon deaf ears—I believed that surely my stewardship of such an important LA icon would be temporary. I was positive an art institution would gladly accept him into their sculpture garden so others too could admire Chicken Boy.



Top right: A few minutes after installation was completed, October 28 2007, around 3 pm. From the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection: (top left): Chicken Boy on Broadway, 1973; (center top) California Piano Supply on Venice Blvd., circa late 1920s; (center middle) Coffee Cup Café, 1920; (center bottom) The Tamale, East Los, date unknown (building still stands!).

BIRTH OF AN EMPIRE

So I wrote letters to various museums and mostly heard the sounds of silence. One or two wrote back and gently suggested that Chicken Boy was *not art!* Time for Plan B.



One year, as holiday gifts to clients, I re-created t-shirts that had been sold at the restaurant. The next year, it was lapel pins. Then watches. I made a small souvenir catalog. People not from Los Angeles started requesting catalogs, even ordering stuff, and for several years, I produced mail order gift catalogs (featuring Chicken Boy souvenir items and cool gifty items that Chicken Boy would have in his home or give his friends). Proceeds helped pay for storage. At its zenith, there were 14,000 people on the mailing list. The legend of Chicken Boy grew far beyond downtown LA—it became obvious that his appeal was universal. In every person, it seems, there is a little or a lot of self-conscious awkwardness trying to accept those cards they were dealt—we are, in fact, all Chicken Boy.

September 1 is Chicken Boy's birthday (determined astrologically) and it's listed in *Chase's Annual Events*,

referred to by many morning DJs so they can call and fill a few minutes with why one might think that Chicken Boy should be considered art. I choose to think they were laughing with me and not at me. Most of the time, calls wishing CB a happy birthday were from out of state. Then, a local country music station called and listeners went nuts. So many called in and told their Chicken Boy stories that they wanted to arrange a public viewing. It became the DJs' *cause célèbre*, complete with



listener volunteers to help clean and paint Mr Boy, donated display space (Arco Plaza subterranean time warp mall), and a live radio broadcast from the unveiling. A few weeks later, the mall made me remove CB because he didn't match their scary Currier and Ives themed holiday décor. Even after I offered to make CB a Santa hat and replace his bucket with a gift-wrapped box.

With the exception of a cameo appearance in the Gregg Araki film, *Nowhere*; serving as the stage set for a local taping of Michael Feldman's *Whad'Ya Know?* (ahem, a radio show); and being the subject of a profile on British television, CB was relegated back to storage in a friend's backyard.

Time for Plan C.

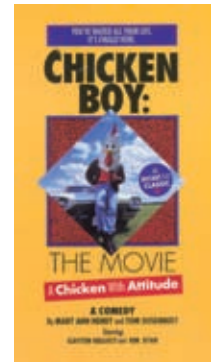
Above: (top) CB t-shirt based on the original sold at the restaurant; (middle) spiffed-up CB at Arco.

MEET THE PRESS

When asked to define funny, Mel Brooks said, "Well, the whole word chicken is funny. Every bit of it, funny. The *ch*, the *i*, the *k*. Put it together, you've got the funniest word in the English language. Chicken." Maybe that's why we've only had wonderful responses to Chicken Boy.

Chicken Boy's scrapbook takes up seven binders—dozens of glowing articles, mini-mentions, and much fan mail. The *Chicken Boy Catalog for a Perfect World* made the "Barometer of Cool" in *Esquire* and was pictured in *Newsweek*. Cyra McFadden devoted an entire Sunday *San Francisco Chronicle* column to him. We made the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, even if it was below the fold and one-sentence long. The *Los Angeles Times*' Steve Harvey ("Only in LA") mentioned CB so many times that we refer to him as Chicken Boy's godfather. Several people wanted to make a movie about CB. I had many meetings that didn't pan out, then one that did. One of my non-pan-meetings was with a three-named actor who hit the *Really Big Time* shortly after our conversation over a craft service table.

Chicken Boy: The Movie took three filmmakers from Columbus, Ohio, to bring the saga to the screen. The 25-minute extravaganza recounts how the fiberglass big guy is brought to life by the Harmonic Convergence of 1987* and has a series of adventures all around Los Angeles, culminating in his becoming a blues accordion playing singing sensation. Naturally, we thought this would lead to a studio development deal. It did lead to some fantastic friendships, several jam-packed and fun-filled screenings (in SF, it took five showings to accommodate the overflow crowd**), a couple of late-night showings on the Learning



*The period known as Harmonic Convergence is defined by Jose Arguelles as: "The point at which the counter-spin of history finally comes to a momentary halt, and the still imperceptible spin of post-history commences." It was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Quetzalcoatl, known as the Thirteen Heavens and Nine Hells. The prophecy stated that following the ninth hell, humanity would experience an unprecedented New Age of Peace. The Hell cycle ended on August 16, 1987; the Harmonic Convergence began on August 17. Thus began the projected twenty-five year culmination of the 5,125 year Great Cycle of History, as well as the 26,000-year cycle of evolution, both slated to end in 2012. Sadly, it hasn't worked out as prophesied, but there's still time everyone!

**It also included a real-life reenactment of a scene from *Fawlty Towers* where the lovesick chef gets drunk after Manuel spurns his advances. At our venue, the chef's boyfriend had that day broken up with her and she showed up at the event toasted. Then she passed out, but the dearth of deep-fried bar food did not stop the merriment.

Above: Sleeve from video of *Chicken Boy: The Movie*, written by Mary Ann Henry, directed by Tom Dusenbery, filmed by Dan Sakas. Opposite: (top to bottom) Two American icons of protein take a breather at Festival of Books; CB visits Dora at Yuca's Hut (photo by Gary Leonard, courtesy LAPL Photo Collection); still from CB's cameo in the opening sequence of the 1982 feature *Q The Winged Serpent*.

Channel and a few PBS affiliates. During this same time, San Francisco-based Those Darn Accordions recorded the “Chicken Boy Polka” (featured on their awesome 1991 album, *Vongole Fisarmonica*, available on iTunes).

ROOF 66

There cannot be many transplanted Angelenos more loyal than I, but while that ham sandwich was being indicted, Chicken Boy could not get arrested here. He’d get two lines buried in the *New York Times* and get a thousand requests for information, then get half a page in the *Los Angeles Times* magazine, and get five calls, all from people who wanted to sell us stuff. But we are nothing if not patient. We hear from Friends of Chicken Boy all the time. CB’s supporters range from little kids to LA boosters to roadside aficionados to cultural historians. We continue to be happily surprised at his renown in many tasteful and highly intelligent circles. Don’t think it goes unappreciated.

Onward to Plan D.

Okay, so by now I had been shepherding Chicken Boy around for many years (double digits). We became quite known by each other; the salutation I heard most was “How’s Chicken Boy?” (it still is). I dream of his installation beneath the Triforium (kitty-korner to City Hall), with the music box playing a loop of myriad renditions of “The Chicken Dance” as well as our disco favorites.

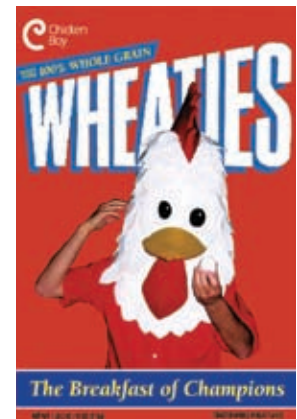
I entertained an invitation to move CB to the San Bernardino headquarters of the Juan Pollo restaurant empire (housed, btw, in the McDonald brothers’ original office building on Historic Route 66). I got a call from a dealer on behalf of an art patron who wanted to acquire CB for his gated art garden. I got a somewhat hostile call from a chicken restaurant that wanted me to sell CB to them because “what the hell good is he doing you in storage?” (resulting in the CB-channeling-Louis Prima catchphrase, “It’s nice to be important but it’s important to be nice.”). I tried to put together a proposal for a Metro station—an homage to roadside Los Angeles which would include Mr Boy (playing off an earlier proposal for Pershing Square—“The Pedestrian Freeway” of which we were a part and which obviously got passed over). I made friends dress up like him and attend events where he waved at passers-by. A lot happened, and nothing happened. CB remained in storage, patiently awaiting his close-up.

I sought a new headquarters. The picture comes into focus—find a place where CB can roost for always. After an intense search, taking us from Pomona to Santa Ana to Fillmore, the perfect spot finds us—Highland Park! A small office building that can accommodate my day job, a small gallery, and CB on the roof. A low-key neighborhood full of artists, musicians, many nail salons, muchos taco stands, and a Metro Gold Line stop. I visualize Chicken Boy on the roof and quietly send out feelers.

I put together a charrette and gathered plans for

Chicken Boy’s installation. I hire Melvyn Green & Associates (Mr Green is the rock star of structural engineers). On a whim (and to practice my proposal writing skills), I submit a proposal—“Chicken Boy on Figueroa Street”—for a Community Beautification Grant. You could have knocked me over with a feather when we won a grant. As much as the money (installing a roadside attraction in the 21st century ain’t cheap), the fact that a city agency endorsed Chicken Boy was a very extremely major big deal.

We found a fantastic crew to install Mr Boy, and they waited patiently while we made multiple trips over the course of eight months to Building & Safety for the permit process, the experience of which was a



***This is sure to be no news for anyone who has had to apply for a building permit in LA, but . . . the process seems kind of random and dependent on a lot of things that seemingly have a lot more to do with some sort of wheel of chance than with your plans. Our application was for Chicken Boy as an art installation. The thinking was that the installation had more to do with historic preservation and folk art than with commerce. We knew it was not typical and that probably no one would want to be responsible for being the one who said okay but we always like to look for the pony. Our application was denied like five times, for various reasons, mostly having to do with a philosophical difference of opinion (they deemed him still a sign and there’s a citywide sign restriction on “new” outdoor signs of a certain size; it didn’t seem to matter that we weren’t going to serve food, not to even mention the office is not generally open to the public). When we altered the plans according to their instructions (i.e., “we need a drawing of your bathroom,” and went back, there was never a record of the requested change, so a different person would make different comments, require different changes, and send us home. We found out that until a fee is paid, there is no record of the application. So the next time we were denied, we begged them to let us pay a fee anyhow so at least there was a paper trail. No dice. We were subsequently informed, with another denial, that we would have to file an appeal to the board (submit a written argument, wait for a hearing date, get all dressed up, go to a hearing, present arguments, wait for a decision, etc.). So we were all ready to do that because it was clearly becoming a Northeast LA low-rent Christo project and a board hearing made it more complex and arty and kind of fun. But they wouldn’t even let us do that because they would never formalize the denial of our carefully prepared plan. Then, by chance, we got an inspector person who accepted our application. Just like that, more or less. We paid a fee that was never broken down for us, but we were happy to get on the books at last. We made it through plan-check with a very serious but nice, professional inspector, and paid another fee that was numerically strange, and that was a very large hurdle jumped. Not that it wasn’t kind of interesting in its own *Rashomon* kind of way, but if this was our livelihood or the financial clock was ticking louder, it would be crying time. It’s a system that is very not encouraging for new businesses or smart growth and urban planning, so we hope this will someday change for the better.

Top: From “Chicken Boy Is Back” panel cartoon, which appears in the *Los Angeles Garment & Citizen* newsweekly. Illustrated by Stuart Rapeport, written mostly by Stuart, with occasional punchlines by TK Nagano and Amy Inouye; Middle: What a dilemma!

cross between *Groundhog Day*, *Brazil*, and *The Exterminating Angel*, and not nearly as amusing or deep.***

By luck, pluck, and cluck—we finally cleared multiple hurdles, paid some fees spit out by a random number-generating program, and gave the greenlight to our crew. Within two weeks, Chicken Boy was installed atop Future Studio and all was well in our little corner of the world.

Chicken Boy now welcomes travelers once again (we are on a patch of Historic Route 66) and he is a landmark anew. What a long (time between roofs: 23 years 5 months 14 days), strange (so I've been told), and funny (hopefully you are smiling) trip this has been (not to mention weird, not scary weird, more like hilarious weird). In fact, one of his many catchphrases is "Too Tall to Live Too Weird to Die."

Chicken Boy has been my muse, and my contribution to LA historic preservation. This is what I will be known for, even if I were to cure the common cold. I believe this small but mighty gesture is a wonderful and a fitting tribute to my buddy Chicken Boy. He deserves it.

Amy Inouye



Photos clockwise from top right: Contemplating the meaning of life with Mr Margot, or waiting for pizza (photo by Ethan Russell); For oh so many years, CB shared a storage parking lot with a trailer and a school bus; The installation of Chicken Boy on Figueroa Street, October 16–18 2007. A big crane, a crew of five, steel I-beams and tubes, a lot of welding, some scary and exciting moments, and Chicken Boy is home on the roost. Whew! Photos by Gary McCarthy, Stuart Rapeport, Tom Davies. Thank you Tako Tyko!

Right: Matchbox from the original restaurant (thank you Bruce Houston).

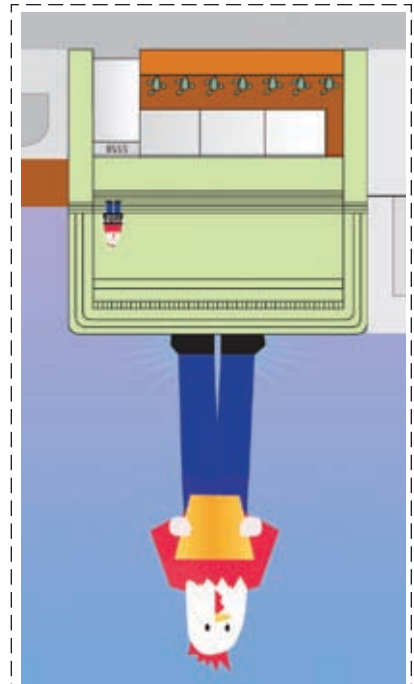
There are so many supercool people who have been fabulously supportive of Chicken Boy—here are a few special thank yous: Fred & Yo, Carolyn Kozo Cole, Frank Parrello, Christy & Stephen McAvoy, Ester & Perry Petschar, Nicole Possert, Michael Espinosa and the Office of Community Beautification, Ellen Bloom & Larry Underhill, and you.

PS: Future Studio Gallery (home of Chicken Boy) is open for NELA Art's Second Saturday Art Walk-Ride-Drive (check schedule at nelaart.com), with changing groovy art shows and other stuff. The tiny Chicken Boy Souvenir Shop is open then, with all proceeds going towards CB maintenance. Also open by appointment (323-254-4565, futurerstudio@sbcglobal.net).

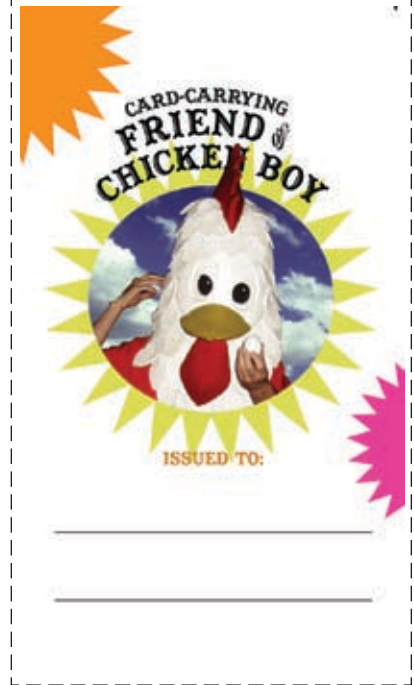


CHICKEN BOY STATS

Hatched	September 1 1969 (Virgo)
Former roost	Broadway between 4th & 5th Streets, Downtown LA
Sex	Yes, please
Hunka Hunka	Burnin' Fiberglass™
Height	Approx 22 feet tall
Weight	Pretty darn heavy
Tragedy strikes	Chicken Boy restaurant closes, fall 1983
Saved	From certain destruction, May 4 1984
How?	With the help of a cherry picker, a flat-bed truck, a welder, and some big dudes
Why?	We thought Chicken Boy was the Statue of Liberty of Los Angeles (so nicknamed by Art Fein)
New roost	Installed October 18 2007 atop Future Studio, 5558 N. Figueroa Street, Los Angeles CA 90042 (aka Highland Park, aka "Old LA," on Historic Route 66)
Now what?	Product endorsements, guest appearances, development deals, souvenir empire, and the like



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CLIP, FOLD, SIGN & CARRY
Friend of Chicken Boy ID Card

You are hereby deputized to do good for mankind as well as the animal kingdom and the earth.

CHICKENBOY.COM