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Business

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CENTERPIECE

The wiz kid

His zany ideas are wired into big business venture

By LAUREN RITCHIE
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Aaron Fechter, modern-day Thomas Edison, snatches up a colander, tosses it upside down over his head and snaps on a pair of dark glasses.

He looks pretty weird. He says strange things:

"You can go home tonight and put a colander on your head and look at yourself in the mirror, but I warn you: You will be a colander-head forever," he said.

Those kind of ideas brought Fechter's company, Creative Engineering Inc., \$20 million in sales last year.

Fechter owns a factory employing 170 Orlandoans. His business: audioanimatronics — the design and manufacture of characters that move in response to electronic impulses programmed through a computer.

Last year Creative Engineering Inc. sold \$20 million worth of fire-breathing dragons, talking trees, cheerleading pigs, and hairy drum-playing



Head club.

Nine years ago, Fechter started Creative Engineering Inc. He banged on the doors of those who would listen and of those busy with other things. He wanted them to buy his leaf-eater cleaning mechanism for swimming pools. He always introduced himself as an inventor.



Red Huber/Sentinel Star

Inventor-page '3-D' The guitar-playing bear gets support from a feathered friend



Here's a novelty group Central Florida music- and animal-lovers may go doubly ape over, inventor Fechter's gorilla band.

They thought I was a harmless kid with a good idea," Fechter said. "I wanted to make sure they knew I wasn't a salesman right off the bat. I wanted them to know that I invented the thing. Even if they didn't buy it, I got a kick out of showing them how it works." The \$50 device flopped. Today, Fechter said, another company is raking in loot selling mass-produced leaf-eaters that fetch .95 on the market. No matter, Aaron Fechter, a boyish executive in slacks and Western shirts, is too busy turning out long gorillas and trying to bring about utopia. His real love is putting those characters together to make a show "with a message" — a message about Fechter's philosophy on energy and utopia. Everybody told me you can't be an inventor. Now-a-days things are invented by corporations and not people. So I started a corporation to invent things," Fechter said.

His first brainstorm was to be a car. Gas had just gone up from 35 cents to 50 cents a gallon and the car was supposed to be smaller than an old one and get 90 miles to the gallon," Fechter said. It was 1975 when Orlandoans on the East-West Expressway first blew by Fechter, who toiled along in a car of deformed golf cart with a 12-horsepower lawnmower engine. Fechter got national publicity when he built the prototype, but he couldn't find anybody to put up the front money to manufacture the car. But I wanted to keep Creative Engineering alive, I built leaf-eaters and going door-to-door selling them the next day. I was still dead broke," Fechter said.

When Fechter knocked on the door of opportunity, it was Paul Czar. He said, 'Oh, so you're an inventor? Don't tell me about inventing. I'm an inventor.'" Fechter said. "He never bought a leaf-eater from me. But he wanted to know if I could make an electric control system for a shooting gallery. I said, 'Sure, anything.'"

While building the shooting gallery, Fechter saw a fine horse that Czar's company had. Soon afterward, Fechter persuaded his father to lend him \$5,000 to build his first character.

This was April 1, appropriately enough, in 1976. He built our first character on speculation and Sky-TV's Surplus parts, plus some wires from Radio Shack," Fechter said.

The character, Willie Wabbit, sat around for several months before the Miami Fun House on International purchased and put it in the Orlando Jetport advertisement for the tourist attraction. The fun house use paid \$5,000 for Willie — just what it cost to build him.

"I was really about ready to quit the business because it was so tough. I thought people would be beating a path to my door and no one did. I made another character, a talking head, and I took it to Six Gun Territory. They referred to it as 'Hot Lips.'"

Then Fechter, his parents and a talking head set out in a '69 Buick Skylark for New Orleans where the members of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions were meeting.

"Driving out there, we were making plans for closing down the business. When we got there, we were amazed at the response. All the haunted houses wanted him. People with imagination kept coming up to my booth saying, 'Can you build this and can you build that?'" Fechter said.

They left with \$15,000 worth of orders for audio-animated characters.

One of those customers had asked Fechter to build a talking deer head. After he saw the talking deer head, the customer ordered \$100,000 worth of elves and reindeer for Santa's Village, a Jefferson, N.H., attraction.

Today Fechter's primary customer is Showbiz Pizza Place.

The Christmas show for the pizza parlor features a gorilla, a pig, a bear, and several other characters that sing and play instruments in the Rock-a-fire Explosion band.

The character in the band that plays drums, Dook a Rue, pounds on a real set of them — "Expensive ones, too," Fechter said. Even a crescent moon in the background sings. One small furry critter pops out of a barrel to join in and a spider wearing tennis shoes in each foot dangles from the sky into the scene.

Fechter also owns an Orlando recording studio where members of a local band — Clutch — tape the songs and dialogue that go with the shows. Bert Wilson, better known as Salvadore Alvarez, the leader of Clutch, is the voice of the gorilla, Fatz.

"Our animation is extremely accurate. The lights, the mouths, the arms. When the faddism of characters moving around wears off, we will be the survivors because we're presenting entertainment," Fechter said.

The characters are pieces of metal connected by hydraulic devices that are controlled by electrical impulses. The impulses are produced by a computer that has been programmed to go with a tape.

Fechter strolls through the factory at 333 Michigan St. where the characters are assembled, watching the guitar-playing characters strum in harmony. He calls nearly every employee by first name.

Fechter can afford to mosey through the plant: The day to day operations are completely run by computer. Each worker is assigned a different job in the morning by the computer.

"If you notice, we don't have offices here. Executives can hide in offices. The plant is run by computer and we have a few people operating the computer. Paperwork is forbidden," Fechter said. "If I see someone doing paperwork, I ask what he's doing because that's the first indication that something is wrong."

Greg Kling and Larry Harmon, minor stockholders in the company, handle the glitches that the computer can't, leaving Fechter time to write music and improve on the electrical systems.

Fechter, who graduated from the University of South Florida with a degree in finance when he was 19, said he learned about electricity by experimenting. Now, he spends time designing more complicated systems to fit inside the characters.

The characters are relatively simple pieces of machinery that Fechter doesn't want described too carefully nor photographed too closely.

"We have a few patents and trademarks. But patents mean disclosing. We feel it's easier to keep a trade secret," he said.

Fechter sells the characters only to "good homes." If he thinks that someone is purchasing a character to dissect it — no sale. Most of the characters cost \$35,000 each. "But you could pick up a tree for about \$20,000," Fechter said.

Inside a converted warehouse at 47 W. Jefferson St., work the artists and researchers who fashion the creatures at their nuts and bolts births. In one room, an elaborate stage sits on the scratched wooden floors. One tangle of wire and metal waiting to make his debut is Uncle Klunk.

"He'll be a hunch after a fashion. He has a huge, almost obscene nose, and ears that wiggle. He's a TV



Fechter checks out the talking tree which is part of an elaborate \$1 million project

star after the fashion of Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin," he said.

Uncle Klunk is a character with a talk show. Everytime the phone rings, he snatches a banana to use as a receiver.

He'll be part of the Showbiz Pizza Place characters. "Showbiz gives us a budget and we get to go nuts," he said.

Another of the Showbiz characters, Beach Bear, is about to start a club.

"One night Bert and I were having a brainstorm session. He was fiddling with the colander and he just stuck the colander on his head. It distorted the way he looks so drastically that we passed it back and forth and looked at each other and looked in the mirror.

"We realized we had started a club. It's just for fun. There's no way to do it and be mean. People aren't wearing them for social occasions yet. It's for normal people like judges and lawyers who want to vent their anxiety and join in a little fun — the Colander Head Club," he said.

"Lately, we've been wearing our colanders around. Some people are hanging dried broccoli from them. We were wearing our colanders in Townsends (Fish House, Tavern & Shellfish Bar) the other night when a guy who is a Florida linebacker came up to us. He was indoctrinated right then and there," Fechter said.

Upstairs, in a spacious storeroom, stands a green fire-breathing dragon and a talking tree with leaves on the tips of its fingers. They are the beginning of a \$1 million project called the Extravaganza of Electronimation Excellence.

Fechter wants to turn the warehouse into a nightclub-museum to house the Extravaganza and showcase the talents of other artists who work for Creative Engineering.

"I consider it an important thing to do, although it may not be profitable. I want this to be a home for people who want to learn about animation," Fechter said.

In the basement stands a model of the nine-stage revolving Extravaganza that shows the good guy — dragon Reginald A. Flutesnoot. In the end, he pounds the bad guys — the ones who are splitting atoms to get energy.

Reginald is in favor of converting laughter giggled into a giant ear into electricity. The idea is tell a joke, light a city.

"We're going to be putting down nuclear energy because we're very against it. It's a terrible time bomb to

be planning for our children's children to cope with

"The greatest source of energy is still waiting for us to tap it — the sun. Creative Engineering started off to be an energy-related company interested in putting the Arabs out of business. We could tap the sun and all countries could be energy-independent."

When the show is paid for, Fechter said he'll look to the future — the home computer market.

"We would like to pioneer and invest large amounts of money in pioneering a central organized network in tying home computers together. What that means is a lot of people are buying computers but not knowing what to do with them.

"What we want you to do is type in 'waterheater' and get up a list of who can sell you one or repair one along with a better business report or a consumer report.

"That's the beginning of utopia — perfect communication. That means everybody has access to a massive data base of information. If you're looking to buy a home, why should you call a Realtor? Describe your home in the computer and it will come up," Fechter said.

Then, Fechter predicts, the labor force will switch to four-day work weeks, then to three-day weeks with six-hour days.

"People need more time to spend studying the arts and doing volunteer work. We should eliminate the hassle of routine jobs. Very carefully, we should introduce robots to help man do his work. That has to be done by the right people, who really want to help labor," Fechter said.

"The development of the industrial robot, when used the right way, will give man the freedom that he needs. The wonderful part about it is when robots become the moral slave of man, there is no more reason for man to enslave men. There is no necessity in holding human beings in a country that don't want to be there.

"The Great Wall of China will come down," Fechter said.

He pauses, waiting for a reaction, searching a listener's eyes for belief.

"Really, the Extravaganza is a prediction of that utopia. I don't mean everybody is going to be happy all the time. But it's a very, very optimistic, idealist feeling. I am practically living for the day when utopia will come."

THE WIZ KID

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