

Mr. Rogers Introduces Kids to Experimental Electronic Music by Bruce Haack & Esther Nelson (1968)

in [Education](#), [K-12](#), [Music](#), [Television](#) | May 2nd, 2014



Experimental electronic musician and inventor [Bruce Haack](#)'s compositions expanded many a young consciousness, and taught kids to dance, move, meditate, and to be endlessly curious about the technology of sound. All of this makes him the perfect guest for Fred Rogers, who despite his totally square demeanor loved bringing his audience unusual artists of all kinds. In the clips above and below from the first, 1968 season of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, Haack introduces Rogers and a group of youngsters to the "musical computer," a homemade analog synthesizer of his own invention—one of many he created from household items, most of which integrated human touch and movement into their controls, as you'll see above. In both clips, Haack and longtime collaborator Esther Nelson sing and play charming songs as Nelson leads them in various movement exercises. (The remainder of the second video mostly features Mr. Roger's cat.)

Although he's seen a revival among electronic musicians and DJs, Haack became best known in his

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career as a composer of children's music, and for good reason. His 1962 debut kid's record [*Dance, Sing & Listen*](#) is an absolute classic of the genre, combining a dizzying range of musical styles—country, classical, pop, medieval, and experimental electronic—with far-out spoken word from Haack and Nelson. They followed this up with two more iterations of *Dance, Sing & Listen*, then [*The Way Out Record for Children*](#), [*The Electronic Record for Children*](#), the amazing [*Dance to the Music*](#), and several more, all them weirder and more wonderful than maybe anything you've ever heard. (Don't believe me? Take a listen to "[Soul Transportation](#)," "[EIO \(New MacDonald\)](#)," or the absolutely enchanting "[Saint Basil](#)," with its Doors-y organ outro.) A psychedelic genius, Haack also made grown-up acid rock in the form of 1970's [*The Electric Lucifer*](#), which is a bit like if Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice had written *Jesus Christ Superstar* on heavy doses of LSD and banks of analog synthesizers.

While Haack's *Mr. Rogers* appearance may not have seemed like much at the time, in hindsight this is a fascinating document of an artist who's been called "[The King of Techno](#)" for his forward-looking sounds meeting the cutting edge in children's programming. It's a testament to how much the counterculture influenced early childhood education. Many of the progressive educational experiments of the sixties have since become historical curiosities, replaced by insipid corporate merchandising. What Haack and Nelson's musical approach tells me is that we'd do well to revisit the educational climate of that day and take a few lessons from its freeform experimentation and openness. I'll certainly be playing these records for my daughter.

Bruce Haack (Wikipedia)

Bruce Haack

Birth name	Bruce Clinton Haack
Also known as	Jackpine Savage, Jacques Trapp
Born	May 4, 1931 Nordegg, Alberta, Canada
Died	September 26, 1988 (aged 57) West Chester, Pennsylvania, United States
Genres	Children's , electronic , space age pop
Occupation(s)	Musician, producer
Instruments	Synthesizer, voice, vocoder
Years active	1955-1988
Labels	Dimension 5, Columbia
Associated acts	Ted Pandel, Russell Simmons
Website	www.brucehaack.com

Bruce Clinton Haack [listen](#) ([help](#)·[info](#)) (May 4, 1931 – September 26, 1988) was a musician and composer, and a pioneer within the realm of [electronic music](#). He was born in [Alberta, Canada](#).

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Biography

From Alberta to New York (1931-1963)

Demonstrating an early ability for music, Bruce Haack is said to have started picking out melodies on his family's piano at age four, and progressing to providing piano lessons for others by age 12.

While attending college in [Edmonton](#), Canada, at the [University of Alberta](#), Haack began performing in local venues with a then-popular local band called The Swing Tones. While the band played primarily modern and old-time music, they also performed Ukrainian Folk music, which introduced Haack to Eastern musical motifs and themes. This exposure would prove to be a significant influence Haack's work later in life. Prior to leaving Alberta to move to New York City, Haack would assemble a large record collection of music from many parts of the world. In later years, Haack's painting of St. Basil is said to be reminiscent of his earlier years with The Swing Tones in Edmonton.

Bruce Haack is remembered at this time in his development as having a surprising ability to hear music and play it back immediately from memory, and would often composing innovative riffs through improvisation.

Haack was also invited by [Aboriginal peoples in Canada](#) to participate in their [pow-wows](#), experimenting with [peyote](#), which influenced his music for years to come. His upbringing in the isolated town of Rocky Mountain House in Alberta, Canada, gave him plenty of time to develop his musical talents.

Seeking formal training to hone his ability, Haack applied to the University of Alberta's music program. Though that school rejected him because of his poor notation skills, at Edmonton University he wrote and recorded music for campus theater productions, hosted a radio show, and played in a band. He received a degree in psychology from the university; this influence was felt later in songs that dealt with body language and the computer-like ways children absorb information.

New York City's [Juilliard School](#) offered Haack the opportunity to study with composer [Vincent Persichetti](#); thanks to a scholarship from the Canadian government, he headed to New York upon graduating from Edmonton in 1954. At Juilliard, Haack met a like-minded student, Ted "Praxiteles" Pandel, with whom he developed a lifelong friendship. However, his studies proved less sympathetic, and he dropped out of Juilliard just eight months later, rejecting the school's restrictive approach.

Throughout the rest of his career, Haack rejected restrictions of any kind, often writing several different kinds of music at one time. He spent the rest of the 1950s scoring dance and theater productions, as well as writing pop songs for record labels like Dot Records and [Coral Records](#). Haack's early scores,

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like 1955's *Les Etapes*, suggested the futuristic themes and experimental techniques Haack developed in his later works.^{[[citation needed](#)]} Originally commissioned for a Belgian ballet, *Les Etapes* mixed tape samples, electronics, soprano, and violin; the following year, he finished a *musique concrète* piece called "Lullaby for a Cat".

As the 1960s began, the public's interest in electronic music and synthesizers increased, and so did Haack's notoriety.^{[[citation needed](#)]} Along with songwriting and scoring, Haack appeared on TV shows like [I've Got a Secret](#) and [The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson](#), usually with Pandel in tow. The duo often played the *Dermatron*, a touch- and heat-sensitive synthesizer, on the foreheads of guests; 1966's appearance on *I've Got a Secret* featured them playing 12 "chromatically pitched" young women.

Meanwhile, Haack wrote serious compositions as well, such as 1962's "Mass for Solo Piano", which Pandel performed at [Carnegie Hall](#), and a song for Rocky Mountain House's 50th anniversary. One of his most futuristic pieces, 1963's "Garden of Delights", mixed Gregorian chants and electronic music. This work was never broadcast or released in its complete form.

From Children's Music to Electric Lucifer (1963-1976)

Haack found another outlet for his creativity as an accompanist for children's dance teacher Esther Nelson. Perhaps inspired by his own lonely childhood, he and Nelson collaborated on educational, open-minded children's music. With Pandel, they started their own record label, Dimension 5 Records, on which they released 1962's *Dance, Sing, & Listen*.^{[[citation needed](#)]} Two other records followed in the series, 1963's *Dance, Sing, & Listen Again* and 1965's *Dance, Sing, & Listen Again & Again*. Though the series included activity and story songs similar to other children's records at the time, the music moves freely between country, medieval, classical, and pop, and mixes instruments like piano, synthesizers, and [banjo](#). The lyrics deal with music history or provide instructions like, "When the music stops, be the sound you hear", resulting in an often surreal collage of sounds and ideas.

The otherworldly quality of Haack's music was emphasized by the instruments and recording techniques he developed with the *Dance, Sing, & Listen* series. Though he had little formal training in electronics, he made synthesizers and modulators out of any gadgets and surplus parts he could find, including guitar effects pedals and battery-operated transistor radios. Eschewing diagrams and plans, Haack improvised, creating instruments capable of 12-voice polyphony and random composition. Using these modular synthesizer systems, he then recorded with two two-track reel-to-reel decks, adding a moody tape echo to his already distinctive pieces.

As the 1960s progressed and the musical climate became more receptive to his kind of whimsical innovation, Haack's friend, collaborator, and business manager Chris Kachulis found mainstream applications for his music. This included scoring commercials for clients like [Parker Brothers Games](#), [Goodyear Tires](#), [Kraft Cheese](#), and [Lincoln Life Insurance](#); in the process, Haack won two awards for

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his work. He also continued to promote electronic music on television, demonstrating his homemade device encased in a suitcase on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in 1968, where he sampled a song by the [Rolling Stones](#) entitled "Citadel". He released *The Way-Out Record for Children* later that year.

Kachulis did another important favor for his friend by introducing Haack to [psychedelic rock](#). Acid rock's expansive nature was a perfect match for Haack's style, and in 1969 he released his first rock-influenced work, *The Electric Lucifer*. A concept album about the earth being caught in the middle of a war between heaven and hell, *The Electric Lucifer* featured a heavy, driving sound complete with [Moog synthesiser](#), Kachulis' singing, and Haack's homegrown electronics including a prototype [vocoder](#) and unique lyrics, which deal with "powerlove" — a force so strong and good that it will not only save mankind but Lucifer himself. Kachulis helped out once more by bringing Haack and Lucifer to the attention of [Columbia Records](#), who released it as Haack's major-label debut.

As the 1970s started, Haack's musical horizons continued to expand. After the release of *The Electric Lucifer*, he continued on Lucifer's rock-influenced musical approach with 1971's *Together*, an electronic pop album that marked his return to Dimension 5. Perhaps in an attempt to differentiate this work from his children's music, he released it under the name Jackpine Savage, the only time he used this pseudonym.

Haack continued making children's albums as well, including 1972's *Dance to the Music*, 1973's *Captain Entropy*, and 1974's *This Old Man*, which featured science fiction versions of nursery rhymes and traditional songs. After relocating to [West Chester, Pennsylvania](#), to spend more time with Pandel, Haack focused on children's music almost exclusively, writing music for [Scholastic Corporation](#) like "The Witches' Vacation" and "Clifford the Small Red Puppy." He also released *Funky Doodle* and *Ebenezer Electric* (an electronic version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*) in 1976, but by the late 1970s, his prolific output slowed. Two works, 1978's *Haackula* and the following year's *Electric Lucifer Book II*, were never released.

From Party Machine to Death (1977-1988)

His darkest album to date, *Haackula*, strikes out on into dark, yet playful territory. *Haackula* seems to have inspired Haack's final landmark work, 1981's *Bite*. The albums share several song titles and a dark lyrical tone different from Haack's usually idealistic style. Though *Bite* is harsher than his other works, it features his innovative, educational touch: A thorough primer on electronics and synthesizers makes up a large portion of the liner notes, and Haack adds a new collaborator for this album, 13-year-old vocalist Ed Harvey.

Haack's failing health slowed Dimension 5's musical output in the early 1980s, but Nelson and Pandel kept the label alive by publishing songbooks, like *Fun to Sing* and *The World's Best Funny Songs*, and re-released selected older albums as cassettes which are still available today. In 1982, Haack recorded his swan song, a proto hip-hop collaboration with [Def Jam's Russell Simmons](#), entitled "Party

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Machine". Haack died in 1988 from heart failure, but his label and commitment to making creative children's music survives. While Dimension 5's later musical releases — mostly singalong albums featuring Nelson — may lack the iconoclastic spark of the early records, Nelson and Pandel's continued work reveals the depth of their friendship with Haack, a distinctive and pioneering electronic musician.

Musical Inventions

- Mid 1950s: Peopleodian - an analog [synthesizer](#) ran on a 9 volt battery and used to play tones and pitches on people. Different versions of the device included 'M' and the Dermatron
- Mid 1960s: Mr C - an analog [synthesizer](#) in the form of a robot and programmed to play music for live audiences
- 1967: The Musical Computer - a home-built digital/analog [synthesizer](#) and digital [sampler \(musical instrument\)](#) encased in a suitcase which used sensors and skin touch to trigger lights and sounds, named by [Fred Rogers](#)
- 1968: Farad - a motion-controlled [vocoder](#), named after [Michael Faraday](#)

Documentaries

Haack: The King of Techno is a documentary film about Bruce Haack by Philip Anagnos. It was released in 2004 at the [Slamdance Film Festival](#), distributed by [Koch Vision](#) and televised on [DOC: The Documentary Channel](#), [Sky Italia](#), and [Sveriges Television](#). It features interviews with some of Haack's associates and collaborators such as [Esther Nelson](#) and [Chris Kachulis](#) as well as contemporary artists including [Eels \(band\)](#), [Mouse On Mars](#), [Money Mark](#), and [Peanut Butter Wolf](#). Additionally, the film includes archival footage of Haack's appearances on various talk shows and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. In 2013, the documentary was re-released by [Bleep.com](#), a division of [Warp Records](#).

Tribute albums

In 2005, a [tribute album](#) was released entitled *Dimension Mix*. A tribute to Dimension 5 Records featuring covers of Bruce Haack songs by [Beck](#), [Stereolab](#), and others, the project was produced by long time friend and Beck collaborator, Ross Harris, whose autistic child, and godson to Beck, inspired the album.

Discography

Albums

Year	Album	UK	US	Additional information
1963	<i>Dance Sing and Listen</i>	-	-	

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1964	<i>Dance Sing and Listen Again</i>	-	-	
1965	<i>Dance Sing and Listen Again and Again</i>	-	-	
1968	<i>The Way Out Record for Children</i>	-	-	Identified by Nick DiFonzo as having one of the worst album covers of all time. ^[1]
1969	<i>Electronic Record for Children</i>	-	-	
1970	<i>The Electric Lucifer</i>	-	-	
1971	<i>Together</i>	-	-	as Jackpine Savage
1972	<i>Dance to the Music</i>	-	-	
1973	<i>Captain Entropy</i>	-	-	
1974	<i>This Old Man</i>	-	-	
1975	<i>Funky Doodle</i>	-	-	
1976	<i>Ebenezer Electric</i>	-	-	
1978	<i>Haackula</i>	-	-	Unreleased because of content
1979	<i>Electric Lucifer Book II</i>	-	-	Released in 2001
1981	<i>Bite</i>	-	-	Reversioning of <i>Haackula</i>
1981	<i>Zoot Zoot Zoot Here Comes Santa In His New Space Suit</i>	-	-	Commissioned work w/ Tiny Tim

Singles

- 1955: "Les Etapes"
- 1956: "Lullaby for a Cat"
- 1979: "Icarus"
- 1983: "Party Machine" - collaboration w/ [Russell Simmons](#)

Compilations

- 1998: *Hush Little Robot* - QDK Media
- 1999: *Listen Compute Rock Home* - [Emperor Norton Records](#)
- 2002: *Electronic 01 - Mean Old Devil* - [Mute Records](#)
- 2007: *Badd Santa - I Like Christmas* - [Stones Throw Records](#)
- 2010: *Farad: The Electric Voice* - [Stones Throw Records](#)
- 2011: *Bruce Haack Remixed* - [Stones Throw Records](#)

Covers

- 2005: [Dimension Mix: A Tribute to Dimension 5 Records](#) - [Eenie Meenie Records](#)

Samples

- 1968: Bruce samples and loops the [Rolling Stones](#)' "Citadel" on a homemade instrument on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*
- 2006: [Cut Chemist](#) samples Bruce Haack's "School For Robots" on *(My 1st) Big Break*

Film and television

- 1958: *I've Got a Secret*
- 1965: *The Mike Douglas Show*
- 1965: *The Tonight Show*
- 1968: *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*[2]

Music videos

- 2005: "Funky Lil Song" - Beck, Dir. Joel Fox/Ross Harris, [Eenie Meenie Records](#)
- 2005: "Rain of Earth" - Stones Throw Singers, Dir. Joel Fox/Ross Harris, [Eenie Meenie Records](#)
- 2011: "Party Machine" - Prince Language Afterparty Edit, Dir. Philip Anagnos, [Stones Throw Records](#)

See also

- [Leon Theremin](#)
- [Raymond Scott](#)
- [Robert Moog](#)
- [Jim Copp](#)

References

1. [^] Nick DiFonzo, *The WORST album covers in the world...EVER!* London, UK; [New Holland Publishers](#), 2004 at p. 38. The album cover may be viewed [here](#); www.brucehaack.com.
2. [^] ["Mr Rogers Neighborhood with Bruce Haack & Miss Nelson"](#). *YouTube*. Retrieved 2014-09-27.

External links

- [Bruce Haack Web](#)

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