



Interview with Pete James, creator of Cheeky Pandas

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Congratulations on being a part of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. How has your involvement come about?

Yes, it's been really exciting to be able to be involved in producing materials for the Platinum Jubilee. It came about through two of our partnerships: HOPE, who do a remarkable work with the UK and were asking for resources, and also Thy Kingdom Come, which is the Archbishop of Canterbury's prayer movement. We've created a song for toddlers, a street party anthem that can be used and given away as well, and also we wrote a whole Cheeky Pandas cartoon animated story about faithfulness, and a book!

Up to 500,000 copies of the book - Queen CJ and the Bouncy Castle - will be given out. Did you specifically write the book with the project in mind? The theme of the book of 'faithfulness'. How was that chosen?

The book was written with the Jubilee in mind. We were writing for the TV episode, and thinking about faithfulness of her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth. Just as she has been faithful in following God and serving people, we wanted to reinforce the message of how God is faithful to us. One of our scriptwriters, **Paul Kerensa**, who's written for a number of BBC TV shows came up with a great idea around a bouncy castle. It's a story of Queen CJ being a little bit domineering at times, wanting the bouncy castle for herself. If she was monarch of bouncy castle she'd use her authority to tell people what to do, but she learns that it's about serving people and being faithful. The idea of a bouncy castle felt fun bright and enjoyable for kids, and with the castle it was a great analogy. Through the generosity of some remarkable people we've been able to fund the shorter version of the book to give away in schools.



Tell us a bit about your own faith story. When did you come to Christ?

I became a Christian when I was 5 years old and grew up attending church with my family. My parents are Christians and I remember wanting to pray a prayer with my mum one evening and asking God into my life. I remember being at various Christian festivals around that time and good input and encouragement from youth group leaders and children's group leaders. The whole thing of a village raising faith is really key. We had some good people around our family, and good input from parents and church.

How did you come to found Cheeky Pandas?

Cheeky Pandas began life as a song called 'God Suit' about the armour of God. I invited a friend down to write music for a few days, and our final idea was a children's song about the armour of God. He really liked it so we went to the beach to write it. It gained traction quite quickly, so we made a simple dance routine video which only cost £20, but people found it useful in teaching children in Sunday school. As I began to write a few more I wanted an identity to put them under, so originally the Pandas were just something to hide behind, then I realised the potential. What would happen if we brought them to life, animated them?

What do you see as its purpose?

When you see how a great children's character can influence children, the strength of that, it made me think about the potential for carrying a Christian message, and for teaching and discipling children and families in Christian faith. Take a Disney character, or characters that have come through TV in the UK like Peppa Pig and Hey Duggee: you can create this wealth of material and resources around them. We went from making music videos to thinking, well, if we could make a video could we make a TV show? If you've done that, what about a live show? Then you start thinking about theatre and gigs, about films, books, Sunday school resources, apps, games, something children could be something they could play with, something they teach on Sunday, something at home - purpose was really great resources that are educational and fun and allow God to speak through that into families' lives

Why do you think ministry to children is important?

There was a recent statistic that pointed to the fact that children spend more than 10 times online than they do engaging in real life conversation with family or kitchen table. The way we engage with visual media has changed dramatically in recent years. Everyone is making TV. It's at everyone's fingertips. That's true for children too. To be at the front edge of creating great Christian digital media that kids want to engage with, teaching them good and godly values and teaching them about the Bible: it is a massive opportunity that we should not be missing.



Why the name 'Cheeky Pandas'?

Well, I was intrigued by bands like Gorrillaz and Daft Punk who have another identity. I thought the pandas idea was funny and liked the idea of it being cheeky... I was hiding behind it, putting songs out with my friends, and the initial press releases said 'no one knows who they are', so the whole thing was just quite fun. Then when Cheeky Pandas became something more, and it was possible to bring them to life, I worked with a really talented young artist called Noah Warnes who brought them to life as drawn character. That meant we could build on that for further work. You have five pandas who have an identity. Children can enter into their world. They live in a treehouse which is a recording studio. They love bamboo and skateboarding and making music. Who wouldn't want that?!

Where do your ideas for Cheeky Pandas come from?

Well, we're really strong on wanting to communicate the Bible, trying to interpret great Bible stories in a fun way that children can identify with and hold a mirror up to that. The Fruit of the Spirit is a whole series that we've done: lots of material that we want to intentionally teach and communicate. For the ideas that create the stories and songs, I take lots of inspiration from things I've enjoyed like skateboarding, building treehouses as a kid, the recording studio as a musician, and things I've watched that all lead to ideas. I'm always hungry for input. To create a lot of content as rapidly as we've done needs both the solitude time with God and also enjoying life and travel. It all feeds in, as well as having two children of my own who keep me on point!

What's the relationship between Swell Revolution and Cheeky Pandas?

This started as a little bit of fun, some songs and videos, then our first donors were a couple who gave incredibly generously to make music videos. As it grows you realise it needs a structure to hold it. As a creative head I'm not wired to be able to sustain or mobilise the material to get it out there. Swell Revolution is the charity home base for Cheeky Pandas. It meant we could have a Board who can steer, advise, guide and pray and raise support, and a structure to handle the finances. Swell has been an incredible opportunity and it also leads to it being a safe place to continue the journey of material we want to create, from toddlers to young adults. Why the name? I have a great passion for surfing. I love the image of a swell starting out further out to sea where you can't see it, then arrives on the shore and has this impact of the wave breaking. For me it's the analogy of God's spirit doing something, like a new wave of worship coming that was going to impact the youngest of the young and take them on a journey to adulthood. Revolution? Turn something on its head and invite people into the most incredible journey of following Jesus.



Last year, Cheeky Pandas became the primary family resource for the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby's, global prayer initiative, Thy Kingdom Come. What does that involve beyond the Platinum Jubilee initiative?

We've had a really unique relationship with Thy Kingdom Come. Early on they approached us and asked if we would create a set of video resources and songs for the 11 day period of Thy Kingdom Come. It meant we had to work at any incredible pace to write the material and film it, and as we did all the Covid restrictions hit which forced us to think differently. We'd originally decided not to do animation because we couldn't afford it, but it became the most obvious answer because we could work in isolation. They helped us promote it and they were really encouraged by the level of engagement, the reach and the impact it had for churches and Sunday schools in that time. It's been a great partnership and we've gone onto our second year of working together. We've been able to do good for each other, which is good to see. Where people collaborate it can be really good. It's been a God-blessed relationship.

And lastly, for all those Sunday school teachers out there, what are your tips for teaching Bible truths to children?

Firstly, a big yay to you for taking this on, for investing in young lives and I would encourage you to know that in no way is what you're doing in any way second rate to anything else in church life, but it's an absolute privilege and I really believe God will bless it enormously, that He is calling children back to God and to church. Tips? There are lots of resources out there. It's easy to burn the candle and reinvent the wheel but if you can access other stuff, great. That's where we get a lot of delight, seeing people use what we have created. And there is lots of other incredible stuff out there. Three tips: keep it simple: children can engage at lots of levels but make it as accessible as possible, and that's where our partnership with Raise Up Faith has been incredible to see as they work to make all the material as available as possible to as many around the world. Second, keep it as creative as possible. Third, laugh lots!

Who is your favourite cartoonist?

I love what Walt Disney achieved, from humble beginnings and some original sketches on paper to a world of animation, the world of Disney and all the characters that followed, having years and years of influence on children. It inspires me: what could God do even with the humble beginnings of Cheeky Pandas? Could it do far more for God's Kingdom with the Holy Spirit's power than we ever thought possible? I love when Walt Disney said he wanted a world "where all the horses jumped and there was no chipped paint": that desire for excellence inspires me. At Swell and Cheeky Pandas we want to bring the very very best we can bring for children. We don't want to make music or video content or stories that are in



any way compromised or second rate. If they are entertaining and educational, if those two go hand in hand, then we're going to see some young lives grow in faith in God.

Who is your favourite Bible character?

My favourite Bible character would have to be David. I love that he was a musician, but also I love that he took the little in his hand, a sling and some stones, and achieved incredible things in defeating Goliath and in his life. I love that the words he wrote and the life he lived carry on influencing hearts and lives thousands of years later.

What is your favourite Bible verse?

A verse that constantly speaks to me is at the start of Hebrews 12: 'Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles'. I particularly love the next part: "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.' I love that daily reminder to keep running. It's not a sprint, over in a day. When you embark on where God's leading you it is a journey. It does take persevering.

The highs are very high with Cheeky Pandas, there's lots of fun and laughter, but there's also been the hard work and diligence of meetings with a great team putting in lots of effort, hours and generosity. It's taken Holy Spirit inspiration to come up with ideas. It's taken gifted animators, a great marketing team, a great communications team behind the scenes, great producers bringing top draw music creativity, it's taken great vocalists, studio engineers, the list goes on.

It started with one song written on a beach and now there's this team around it making everything happen. I'm grateful for every single one of them. Here we go - let the running with perseverance continue!