

# Tall Tales in Animation: How Troy Campbell and Dano Johnson Make Kinky Friedman Funnier

By Michael Corcoran  
American-Statesman Staff  
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Photo by Ralph Barrera/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

The partnership between musician Troy Campbell, left, and animation collaborator Dano Johnson began with a Ray Wylie Hubbard story.

When you're in the recording studio with the clock ticking, you usually don't want any distractions. But when Ray Wylie Hubbard stopped in at producer Gurf Morlix's studio in autumn 2004, singer-songwriter Troy Campbell put down his guitar, stepped away from the mike and pulled up a chair. "Ray Wylie's the funniest person I know," says Campbell, the former co-leader of Loose Diamonds. "When he starts telling stories, everything else stops."

But on this day, as Hubbard wove a hilarious yarn about an amorous dog and a fan incapacitated by alcohol, a new career path was forged. That path currently has Campbell working for Kinky Friedman, the man he believes will be the next governor of Texas.

"I just started thinking, 'Man, this story would make a great cartoon,'" Campbell says from the living room of his house in Hyde Park. "In the early days of MTV, a video could make a lousy song better. Well, I figured that animation could make a funny story even more hilarious."

Only problem was that, aside from working behind the scenes on Richard Linklater's "A Scanner Darkly," Campbell had no experience with animation. "I had to find someone to con into doing most of the work," says the self-effacing Campbell.

A couple weeks earlier, at the Austin Film Festival in October 2004, Campbell had met Dano Johnson, a soft-spoken and wide-eyed filmmaker and former co-host of "The Puppet Show" on access TV. Both had made splashes at the festival, with the Campbell-produced (and Alan Berg-directed) documentary "A Place To Dance" winning an audience award and Johnson's send-up of modern Hollywood, recasting "The Old Man and the Sea" as a summer blockbuster starring Will Smith and Nathan Lane, tapped in the best trailer competition.

"I told someone about my idea with the Ray Wylie cartoon and they said, 'we've got your partner,'" Campbell says. In the clean-cut 26-year-old Johnson, 14 years his junior, the self-described "exotic, white trash, hillbilly punk from Ohio" saw his opposite. But when Johnson let out a gut-rattling chuckle when Campbell told him Hubbard's story, Campbell knew the two could work together.

"He got it right away," says Campbell. "We may seem like the odd couple, but we're a lot more alike than you'd think."

Johnson says he's thankful that Campbell handles most of the communications and transactions of their fledgling Collection Agency Films partnership, keeping his schedule clear for creative concerns. The two write most scripts together, using a close-knit circle of comrades as sounding boards. "If everyone laughs, then it's unanimous," says Johnson.

But Johnson wasn't totally sold on the idea that the public was waiting for "Tall Tales and Other Lies," which they conceived as a series of songwriter war stories, until he retold Hubbard's dog story at Thanksgiving dinner in Sugarland last year. "We had an old family friend, a Lutheran minister over, and when he doubled over in laughter, I called Troy and said, 'We've got a hit; the minister loved it!'"

Invigorated, the pair went to work, enlisting the cartooning skills of R. Crumb-devotee Jose Luis Gonzales, Johnson's friend from University of Texas, now living in San Francisco. Johnson co-wrote the script, which includes several clever asides, and moved and manipulate the drawings like a puppeteer, giving the two-and-a-half minute cartoon a distinctive look. It's "Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers" meets "South Park." (The mildly risque cartoon can be found at [www.collectionagencyfilms.com](http://www.collectionagencyfilms.com)).

"Our whole goal in the beginning was to make a short film that would make all our friends laugh their (rear ends) off," Campbell says. Mission accomplished.

The venture attracted its first paying customer when Minneapolis-based advertising executive Bill Hillsman, who's a bit of a folk hero in the field after helping get Jesse Ventura elected governor in his home state, received Hubbard cartoon in a forwarded e-mail and then hired Collection Agency to produce a two-minute piece on his new client Kinky Friedman.

The Internet has become a cost-effective, grass roots way to build exposure for candidates and in Johnson and Campbell's edgy work, Hillsman found the right vehicle to establish Friedman as a fresh independent voice.

"I Looove Texas," the first Kinky toon, lampoons the entire spectrum of Texas politicians, finding hypocrisy in the far left as well as the religious right. In the first 48 hours it was posted online, more than 60,000 hits were registered. That number is now up to 500,000.

The second Friedman cartoon urged voters to "save yourselves for Kinky," outlining why voting in the March primary will make supporters ineligible to sign Friedman's petition to run.

On a recent Tuesday, Campbell and Johnson got together to work on a song for Toon No. 3, which they declined to discuss until it's released in about a month. "We're looking at it as our 'Roots,'" Campbell says. "This one's gonna be three whole minutes. We're going all out."

Meanwhile, Campbell is readying for the release of his next solo album "Long In the Sun" in early January. "The songs come from a specific place. They're focused and personal," he says, when asked the difference between music and his new pursuit in visual art. "With films, you share the creative process with other people because they're better at what they do than you are. There's a lot more trust, whereas in music I tend to be a little more controlling."

By his own admission, Campbell was a bit of an opinionated lout when he fronted the Highwaymen, the group he formed in Dayton at the urging of Alejandro Escovedo, whom he'd met after a True Believers gig. "My brother and I were hanging out with Al and he said, 'You guys are cool. What's holding you back?'"

Escovedo also convinced the Campbell brothers to move to Austin.

The band, whose flavor of country rock was sweetened by Troy's attractive, pristine vocals, was forced to change its name to Loose Diamonds (after a song by Jo Carol Pierce), to avoid confusion with the country supergroup of Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson. Although Campbell's band had the name first, they relented. In lieu of a lucrative payoff, Austin's Highwaymen gave up the moniker in return for opening for country music's Mount Rushmore.

"I was never too smart about the money side of things," Campbell says with a laugh. "But I'm really on top of that aspect with the film work."

Another difference, Campbell says, is the peace of mind he receives staying at home and concentrating on small details, rather than hitting the road with his guitar for up to three months at a time.

"With music, there's one hour a night, the time onstage, where everything runs smoothly and you find pure contentment," he says. "The rest of the time you're out of your mind. But it's the opposite with filmmaking. Everything's been pretty cool about 23 hours a day."