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The bird is the word

Sculptor/engineer David DeMattia to debut robot sculpture

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Reporter

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With a background in sculpture, theatre and engineering, it seems logical to David DeMattia that he would come up with a creation such as Robobird II.

Robobird II is a 2-foot tall Erector Set-like mechanical bird-an "animatronic" character-DeMattia has programmed to sing and dance through a two-and-a-half or three minute recorded song.

DeMattia, a Lindstrom, Minn., area resident who was Festival Theatre's sound designer for four years, will debut Robobird II at Gallery 135 in downtown St. Croix Falls this Saturday. The featured bird, as well as other examples of DeMattia's "strange sculpture and other odd things," will be on display from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. DeMattia will be on hand for a wine and cheese reception from 4 to 5 p.m., then spend an hour talking about how the history of his work led to Robobird II, putting Robobird II through its performance routine a time or two and answering audience questions.

"I've been wanting to experiment a little bit more with shape and form and character," Demattia said, noting that animatronic technology is "just light years ahead" of where it was in the 1990s.

David DeMattia, with "Robobird II" and one of his "Peeps," will debut their animatronic song and dance number at Gallery 135 in St. Croix Falls on Saturday. Photo courtesy Jane F. Meinz

When DeMattia, who has a degree in industrial engineering from the University of North Texas, created Robobird I for an animatronic stage show in Texas in the mid-1990s he could program it to perform only very simple movements.

he used a computer to edit sound.

Even so, that creation marked a milestone for him because it was the first time

He received a grant from the East Central Arts Council-with funds appropriated by the McKnight Foundation-to create Robobird II.

He approached the arts council with a loose concept, was approved, decided that his animatronic character would be a bird, then "hit the hardware store" in search of building materials. After deciding he would use ping-pong balls for eyes, he scaled the rest of the body in proportion.

"The technique I used was just a lot like I sculpt," he said. "I get some things together, attach 'em, see how it looks and then move on from there. This is all free form."

The computer programming involved couldn't be quite as cavalier.

"It takes forever to program this because I can only program one movement at a time," he said. ". . . I'm thinking that for every 30 seconds of movement I have in excess of 10 hours of programming."

Robobird II has two much smaller backup singers, Peep 1 and Peep 2, who perform pretty much the same role as Gladys Knight's Pips did.

DeMattia is a "mixed media" artist who works in stoneware, earthenware, metal and other media in addition to his work in the realm of animatronics. He has created everything from a 9-foot tall talking Christmas tree for a Fort Worth, Texas mall, to "different kinds of creatures" for a Dallas science museum to four man-eating plants for Festival Theatre's 2004 production of "Little Shop of Horrors."

He has been fascinated with animatronic characters since his youth. He grew up in California's Simi Valley, about an hour's drive from Disneyland, where animatronics were taken to an entertainment zenith.

"I was probably one of the only kids that would bring a drawing pad," he said. ". . . I would go there and watch their shows. . . and I would plot out movements and sketch."

He finished high school in Wichita, Kan., studied theatre at Wichita State University, then moved to Texas and studied electronics there.

After 11 years as an engineering designer for a large company, which moved him to Minnesota, DeMattia left corporate America to start his own home-based business, Sleeping Dragon Studios. That business has both an arts side and an engineering side.

"I've never been happy doing (only) one thing or the other," he said. "I get bored. It's however I can make a living. It's tough. But I'd rather do this than work in corporate America now 'cause it's just soulless and horrible."

Gallery 135's featured artist for the month of March, Richard Simonsen, also will be on hand to visit with people between 4 and 6 p.m. this Saturday. Simonsen specializes in mixed media constructions.
