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## PERFORMANCE

Does art imitate Maine or Maine imitate art? Cape Elizabeth's Jeff Kline, executive producer of *Transformers: Prime* and *Rescue Bots*, thrives on both sides of the line.

INTERVIEW BY DAVID SVENSON



Griffin Rock (top), the home of *Transformers: Rescue Bots*, bears an uncanny resemblance to Mount Desert Island, barring flying lobsters.

# Picnic @ Griffin Rock

In 2008, Jeff Kline left California to raise his family in a home just a brisk walk from the winding Spurwink River in Cape Elizabeth. There's just one thing: He's the executive producer of two television series back in Los Angeles. He's obviously drawn to the area and intends to stay, come Decepticons or flying lobsters.

### What difficulties arise with Maine as an animation set?

My favorite part of working on *Transformers: Rescue Bots* is—quite honestly—the challenge of working in as many Maine-based icons as possible. We've featured lobster (with the power of flight), fishing boats, lighthouses, and, in season two, even maple syrup has a featured role.

### What do you call a flying lobster?

I don't remember precisely how flobsters originated, but it was obviously our Maine-specific salute to Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

Flobsters can be pretty hard to catch, and I've heard their ability to fly actually results in less-tender tail meat.

### Where in Maine do the *Rescue Bots* live?

Griffin Rock is a small island just off the coast. Its dimensions and terrain tend to change based upon our story needs.

It's a little bit of everything iconic about Maine—assuming Maine is also the home of DARPA (The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—the U.S. government's true-life mad-scientist enclave).

### Are they exclusively islanders?

We mention "the mainland" quite often and regularly put Griffin Rock's lone ferry in grave jeopardy. But, as of yet, the Autobots haven't been to The Goldenrod in York Beach.



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## PERFORMANCE



### Why not place your characters in Fiji or Hawaii?

Well, I chose Maine. I can do stuff like that. And I really wanted to give a shout-out to my new home state.

The more variables in any given location, the more fodder for crafting a range of stories. And as anyone who lives in Maine can attest to, our weather alone allows for a snowy day episode one week and a heat-wave/blackout adventure the next.

### Were you always so animated?

I was one of those very fortunate kids who had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to do from a very early age. I was shooting Super 8 horror movies—and spilling fake blood on every white shag carpet in the house—throughout my teens. I was also fortunate that my middle and high school had student-operated TV stations.

I went to Boston University to study broadcasting and film and held a series of executive jobs in movies and television before transitioning into writing and producing. Most importantly, I had a small handful of amazing mentors—people who taught me directly and allowed me to make (sometimes embarrassing) mistakes.

### So you had to transform to work on Transformers?

I'm actually one generation older than most

COURTESY JEFF KLINE/TRANSFORMERS RESCUE BOTS/HUB TV NETWORK (2)



G1 (the original *Transformers* cartoon series) fans. So, I grew up on Sid and Marty Krofft, *Monkees* reruns, and Channel 56's *Creature Double Feature*.

It's been both exciting and a little scary to be entrusted with a mythology as deep and beloved as *Transformers*, but I feel like my coming to it as an outsider has allowed me to ask the very questions any new viewer might ask of these characters and this world.

**Have you always been a Mainer at heart?**

When I was a child growing up in Boston, we spent entire summers in Ogunquit and Wells. After my family moved to New York, we still visited Maine regularly.

During the two decades I lived in Los Angeles, I continued to make a yearly pilgrimage simply because so much of what I remembered still existed. To be honest, when I tell colleagues that I'm flying from California to Maine, most of them get a far-away look in their eyes...and ask if they can join me.

My wife Cathy, daughter Darby, and I drove cross-country for 33 days in a Prius and arrived in Cape Elizabeth the day before the school year began in fall 2008.

**How do you relax in Vacationland?**

We love jumping into the car and hitting the back roads. Finding an old drive-in restaurant, walking a still-active Main Street—simple family activities are our favorites.

Despite the fact we've toured everything from Fawcett's Antique Toy Museum in Waldoboro to Jake Day's Christmas Dioramas in Damariscotta, I still feel like we've only barely scratched the surface.



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## PERFORMANCE

**California has Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood.**

**What are your Maine attractions?**

The Lobster Shack at Two Lights in Cape Elizabeth, the Old Port, and Marden's (I'm, not kidding).

One of the reasons we moved here was to service my wife's passion for restaurants.

For reasons both nostalgic and current, Warren's in Kittery [is a favorite], but Cathy will be submitting her own "Top 25" momentarily.

**What Mainers would you give the Transformers treatment to?**

I imagine Stephen King would transform into a Plymouth Fury, the car in the movie *Christine*.

Dick Curless would choose a pirate ship.



**Is there a California clique you hang out with in Maine?**

I didn't really move here knowing anyone with a Maine connection, and I'm just beginning to plug into the movie and TV community here. Quite honestly, I would love to learn more.

Since arriving, however, Lisa Wolfinger and the gang at Lone Wolf Documentary Group have been very nice to me. And I'm a big fan of the work James Laplante and Sputnik Animation is doing.

**What keeps you grounded here?**

We came to Maine for the lifestyle, for the schools, and to keep Darby just a little younger a little longer.

For my daughter's sake, we planted ourselves in a more year-round neighborhood with lots of kids, versus right on the water where there seems to be fewer families. But it's less than five minutes to any number of great beaches, so when I'm craving the smells and sounds of the

ocean, I simply tell Los Angeles I have a doctor's appointment.

**What's the best part of winning an Emmy for Outstanding Special Class Animated Program for *Transformers: Prime*?**

The fact I hadn't lugged my tuxedo cross-country for nothing.

## Stephen King? He'd transform into a 1958 Plymouth Fury.

**Is there a sense of Maine out west?**

I will admit to buying a Moxie whenever I stumble upon one in California. And, occasionally, ordering a lobster even though I know it's from Mexico and it's going to disappoint.

I know I'm in Maine when I can breathe the air without actually seeing it.

**How does living in the Portland area fuel your creativity?**

Los Angeles was—and is—very good to my family and me. And I have great friends and favorite haunts I look forward to visiting those two weeks each month [I return for work]. But it's very much a "company town," and it can often feel like the only topics worthy of discussion are the past weekend's box-office grosses and network television's ever-shrinking audience. I'd much rather obsess about the Red Sox, local bands, and the weather—and let my mind wander away from the business every once in a while.

A few years ago, I was traveling through New England and found myself watching a baseball game at a local pub. The gentleman next to me started up a conversation which inevitably led to the question, "What do you do for a living?" I answered that I worked in television. He considered my reply for a beat, then asked, "You fix 'em?"

That's the moment when I knew I'd eventually return to the East Coast. ■

➤ For more, visit [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/07/kline-extras](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/07/kline-extras)



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