

Playing it cool

Toy Fair's fab five

By MAXINE SHEN

JUST when you've managed to recover from the holiday hangover, the American International Toy Fair will start filling children's wish lists.

Toy manufacturers from around the globe are descending on New York from Sunday through Wednesday, introducing everything from action figures and board games to sporting equipment and preschool toys.

Toy Fair isn't open to the public — it's for buyers and other industry types only — so we're previewing five of the most drool-worthy and buzzed-about toys that will be highlighted at the fair.

Fortunately for the wallets of parents, these toys won't be out for months:

■ TMX
Price: \$39.99

Available: September

Details about this next generation Tickle Me Elmo — the red furry "Sesame Street" creation that spawned a million parental headaches in 1996 — are being so closely guarded, you'd think they were the president's nuclear codes.

The only details Fisher-Price will release is that the TMX requires six AA batteries (included), its name can be read as "Tickle Me Elmo Extreme," and that it will hit stores in September. They won't even reveal what the goggle-eyed toy will look like, beyond a shadowy and mysterious photo.

But, the 10th anniversary toy has been shown to a select few in the industry. Toy Wishes magazine editor-in-chief Jim Silver was one of them, and he thinks it's "surprising." But the only actual details he will reveal about the TMX is that "it's red, looks like Elmo, and its move-

ments are so realistic I thought he was being moved by wire."

■ Pleo
Price: \$199
Available: fall

The makers of the "Emo-tronic" Furby have created the next wave of kid-friendly "organic robotics" with the Pleo, further blurring the line between life and technology.

Modeled after a week-old camarasaurus from the Jurassic period (native to North America), the approximately 20-inch dinosaur shows actual emotions — including joy, aggression and boredom — in addition to crying when it's scared, growling when hungry or stretching when it wakes up.

To stop the Pleo from doing something like walking off the edge of a table, it has seven computer brains (the Furby only had two) controlling 38 sensors and 14 motors. Makers say this gives the Pleo fluid motion, intelligence and a personality.

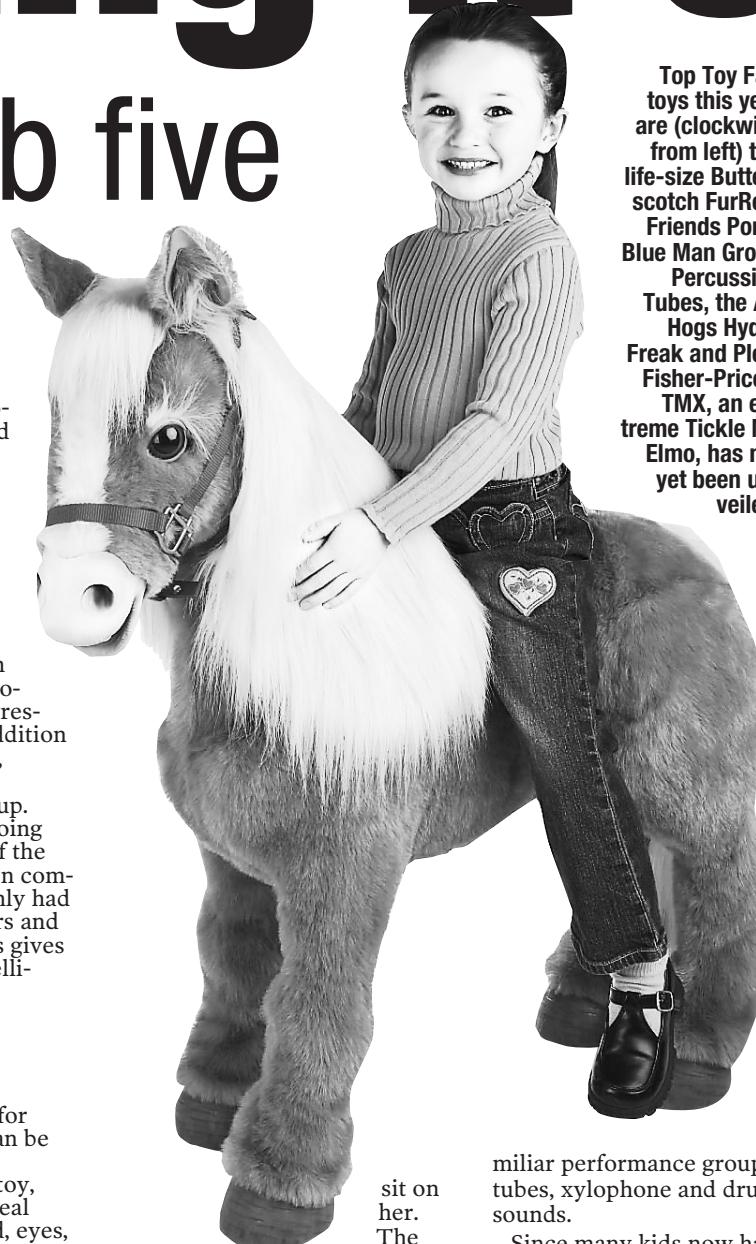
■ Butterscotch FurReal Friends Pony
Price: \$299.99
Available: fall

It's a fantasy come true for young girls: a pony that can be kept at home!

Butterscotch, the plush toy, can be treated just like a real pony. With a moving head, eyes, ears and swishing tail, she can feel when she's being groomed (thanks to sensors) and will whinny or snort with happiness and move in her head for more.

She can also be fed with pretend carrots — if she's hungry, she'll open her mouth, but when she's had enough, she'll shake her head "no." (Bonus for parents: no need to muck out a stall.)

And, because Butterscotch is life-sized, little kids can actually

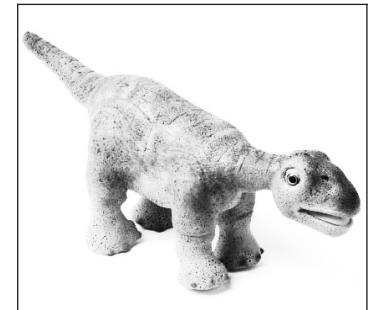
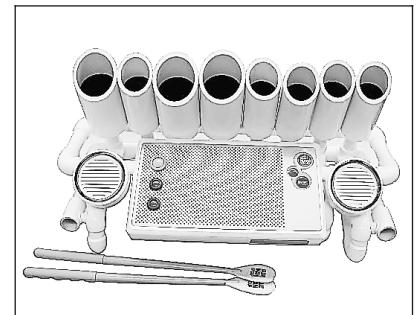


sit on her. The only thing she won't do is walk around.

■ Blue Man Group Percussion Tubes
Price: \$69.99
Available: July

The Blue Man Group Percussion Tubes have "proximity sensor technology" that registers movement, so waving a hand over a tube produces a cacophony of sound — including the fa-

Top Toy Fair toys this year are (clockwise from left) the life-size Butter-scotch FurReal Friends Pony, Blue Man Group Percussion Tubes, the Air Hogs Hydro Freak and Pleo. Fisher-Price's TMX, an extreme Tickle Me Elmo, has not yet been unveiled.



but this is the first time one will be able to work on any terrain.

The flying Air Hogs Hydro Freak can take off and land on the ground or in the water, all on its own power. There's no need to toss it in the air or carefully place it in a pond.

Technically, you can take off from the sidewalk, fly around for a bit and then land the plane in a lake, or vice versa. Because of this, it's actually more like a car that flies and floats.

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Get your Phil on your iPod

CAN'T make it to Avery Fisher Hall in time for Mozart? Come spring, the New York Philharmonic will be as close as your iPod.

Downloadable Debussy, Bach and more will be available as early as this spring, Zarin Mehta, the Philharmonic's president and executive director, announced yesterday.

First up: Mozart's final three symphonies, which the orchestra is performing (and recording) this week under conductor Lorin Maazel.

The Phil also inked a deal with New World Records to produce two CDs per year of world-premiere performances of New York Philharmonic-commissioned music.

— Barbara Hoffman

Pond whets appetite for fresh rock

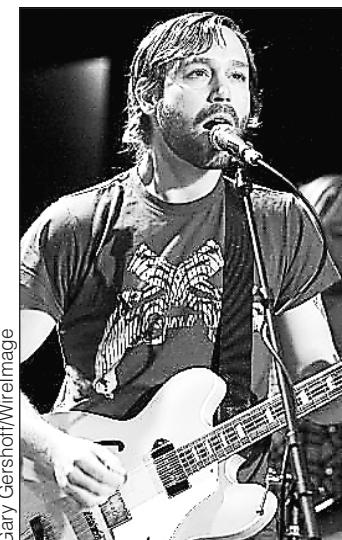
By DAN AQUILANTE

In a music cycle when everything sounds either derivative or processed, Matt Pond's gig at the Bowery Ballroom Tuesday was refreshing.

As an indie pop rocker, Pond, and his four-piece backup band, played a set that featured story songs where losers win, love conquers and humor is the key to understanding chaos.

Oh yeah, the man and band have a sitting-around-the-kitchen-table rock attack that sounds like it was fueled on wine and friendship.

Despite gigging around for at least four years, Pond and company retain a skilled amateur quality. They play like a band that digs music, not gold.



Matt Pond tell stories in song.

ROCK REVIEW

MATT POND

And this Bowery show was one of the most important that this group has ever played. While Pond tried to ignore the fact that he's on the cusp of fame, he couldn't help but marvel that his group had packed the club on a Tuesday night — and that he didn't know everyone there. These were strangers in the house, people who liked what they'd heard from his new record, "Several Arrows Later," and paid money to hear the tunes live.

At this first show of a 40-date tour, Pond's drawling tenor weaved in and out of a rasp that was reminiscent of baby Bruce. His biggest mistake vocally was not taking a chance on his upper register very often. When he did reach for the highs, he got them, giving his lyrics extra emotional punch.

That ability to conjure characters out of songs is Pond's strength; it cut the whole band slack when a guitar was a little out of tune or the cello produced notes better suited for the "Jaws" soundtrack than a rock show.

Now that the Grammy hoopla is done — at least for a year — it's time to get back to real music, like this.

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