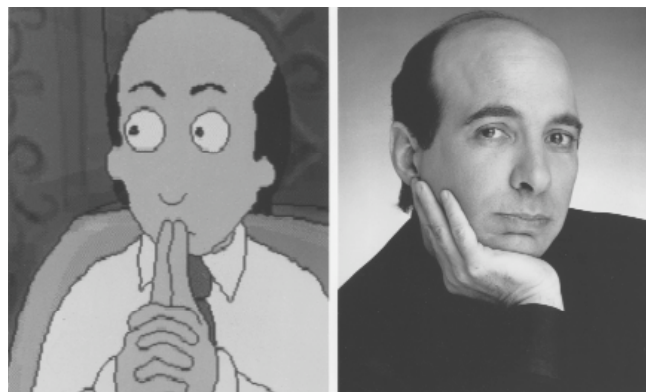


PAGING DR. KATZ:

An Interview with the Comedian

by Bonnie Blader (MFAW '97)

Jonathan Katz, actor, writer and comedian, has a wit so quick that the jokes that come in a conversation with him come as a surprise even when you expect them. He quips as easily as most people breathe and can't stop, he has half-lamented to his wife, Suzi, probably in a joke.



Photos: courtesy of Comedy Central and Linda Holt

Suzi Kaitz and Jonathan Katz go back a ways. They met on Christmas day in 1979. "Suzi didn't know it was Christmas. I didn't know it was 1979," Jonathan recalls. Suzi's sister, Sharon, had attended Goddard, as had Jonathan's sister, Phyllis, before him. When Suzi and Jonathan met, she was a neuro-anatomist and he was directing a six-piece band. They married and "have kids every nine years like clockwork." So far they have two daughters, 23 and 14, and live in Newton, Mass.

In the spring, Comedy Central released the first season of *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist* on DVD. The cartoon features Jonathan as Dr. Katz. All of his patients are comedians. "Dr. Katz really was a show about a father and a son," Jonathan reports, "and they had a kind of very sweet, loving relationship." The series ran for six seasons, garnered an Emmy, a Peabody Award, and two Cable Ace Awards, and was distributed internationally. Jonathan spoke with me by phone about his work and life.

BONNIE BLADER: Tell me about Goddard.

JONATHAN KATZ: I arrived at Goddard when it was still hip to be a lost loser. I was so thrilled to meet other people who were also slightly displaced in the world. I came in 1965, only they had no place to put us, so we waited in our cars for more than three years until they built Northwood.

BB: Who were your mentors there?

JK: Paul Vela meant a lot to me. He was very wonderful, and he actually gave me the sense that there are things about theater that might be fun. Then [David] Mamet showed me how it could be fun for the audience, too.

BB: He was your classmate?

JK: Yes, David wrote a revue at Goddard and cast me and three other people in it, and Paul Vela, and he did something very unconventional and brave for Goddard College.

He charged everyone 50 cents to come in and see the play. Do you know why?

BB: No.

JK: He wanted to pay the actors. It was my first experience in the professional theater.

BB: And experiences beyond Goddard?

JK: One of the first jobs I had after Goddard was for the New York City Department of Parks. I had a job title, Mr. Games, and I'd travel around with the puppet show from playground to playground. New York Parks had a puppet theater. We'd go into really scary—for me—neighborhoods, and I would have to keep the kids entertained until the puppet show started, and many times I would have to say things like, "Simon says, 'Put down your weapons.'" That was my first job in the real world.

BB: Who were your mentors after Goddard?

JK: Oh, so many. A comedian who has since passed away named Ronnie Shakes. He died as a very young man of a heart attack. Woody Allen as a comedian, not as a parent so much. My wife.

BB: Were you trying to learn something specific from each?

JK: Well, Ronnie Shakes was somebody who knew how to write a joke in a way that was so beautifully elegant. I'll give you an example of one of my favorite jokes of his. It's about therapy: "I've been seeing the same therapist for about 12 years, and yesterday he said something that brought tears to my eyes—'No hablo Inglés.'" I love telling that to people who haven't heard it before because it's a very efficient and elegant way of making people laugh.

BB: So making a joke is an art and a skill?

JK: Yes.

BB: How do you work?

JK: My days begin with me going into my recording studio in my home and recording this make-believe radio show called "Hey, We're Back." I get very lost in it because I can imagine that it's on the air and people are listening, people are calling in. So I have a very active, maybe hyperactive, imagination. I think—and this is going to sound a little pretentious—part of being able to create stuff is a certain kind of ability to confuse reality with make-believe, which also could be called psychotic. There's a certain amount of craziness involved.

BB: And about how long might you work on your imaginary program?

JK: Until I get hungry or thirsty or want another cup of coffee.

BB: Is there some point where you say, "This is a good idea."

JK: Or I say this is a good idea but I have a funnier idea, because my ideas and my jokes are always competing against each other. I have about six episodes of the make-believe show.

BB: And what will you do with it?

JK: I have a manager in New York and an agent in Los Angeles, so I get to play make-believe all day and then they get to try to turn it into income. And, occasionally, it doesn't turn into income; it just turns into something I find amusing, and you might hear it on public radio, which is possibly the least lucrative form of entertainment.

BB: Do you have a favorite type of comedy?

JK: I'm drawn to death and morbidity as a comedian, but I also like silly. I like physical comedy. Danny Kaye is somebody who used to make me laugh. Steve Martin ... that's a whole different kind of comedy I've never mastered.

BB: Do you ever think about who your audience is? For example, you say death and morbidity is your favorite subject matter ...

JK: Well, I'll give you an example. This is one of my favorite jokes: "My aunt died this week. She was cremated, and we think that's what did it." If an audience goes to a comedy club and the comedian says something of a sexual nature, or something intimate, there's a certain kind of discomfort and tension that allows for comedic release. I like to make people slightly uncomfortable with comedy, and in life, I think.

BB: How would your youngest daughter describe your work to someone else?

JK: They're my toughest crowd, my family. My 23-year-old has been giving me a courtesy laugh for about 15 years, and

my 14-year-old is much funnier than me, so they know that I'm in the comedy business, but they are not particularly amused.

BB: As a comedian, have you always been able to make ends meet?

JK: I haven't always been able to make them meet, but I've been able to make them acknowledge the existence of the other one. That is such a cryptic joke. Boy, that's probably a joke you could deconstruct at Goddard.

BB: I'll probably laugh when I rehear it on the tape.

JK: It wasn't so good.

BB: Can we get back to ... ?

JK: Oh, yes. My wife was often the breadwinner in our family. When I asked her recently about how she felt living with somebody who wasn't earning enough money on a regular basis, she said, "It was different because you had a dream." So I wasn't just your typical slug. I started out writing songs, you know. I was a songwriter long before I was a comedian.

BB: Have I heard your songs?

JK: I have a song that was recorded and released as a single called "No Place for a Lady." It was recorded by a guy named Buzz Kason and was released in Denmark.

[BONNIE BLADER TRIES NOT TO LAUGH]

JK: So it was released in Holland.

BB: Interesting place to be released.



Jonathan Katz during one of his nine appearances with David Letterman.

JK: Every once in a while, I get a check—every three years—for less than \$5, and that money continues to flow. I wrote a song with David Mamet called “This Heart is Closed for Alterations,” and that was recorded on *Mork and Mindy*, a TV show, and aired, so for that song, every once in a while, I get a check for \$11.

BB: You’re pretty creative.

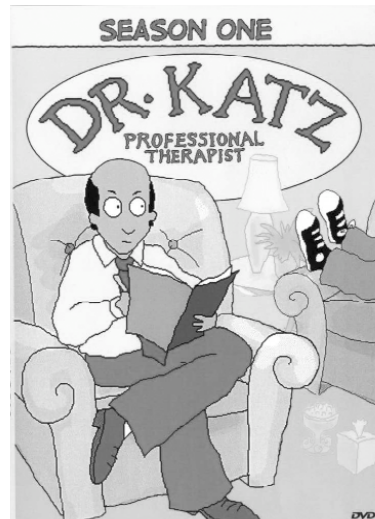
JK: Actually, right now, it’s almost a born-again creative thing. Born again is a poor choice of words, but it’s kind of a surge, a creative surge.

BB: I know that you have multiple sclerosis. Has it found its way into your creative life or had an impact on it?

JK: Well, certainly, the physicality of my work has changed. The last movie I did was with Eddie Murphy, *Daddy Daycare*, and the director of that movie was very accommodating because he wanted me in that particular role. One of the things I’m very good at and I’ve always been good at is asking for help. When you have a disability, you can either get angry about people not accommodating you or you can ask them to help you. But the thing I’ve discovered is that it’s easier to live with MS than to pretend not to have it. And that’s almost like my mantra.

BB: Do you restrict yourself in any way with regard to your comedy?

JK: My guideline is that if it makes me uncomfortable, it’s probably not a good idea. I have an enormous capacity for being inappropriate. And I live in a very politically correct town. Just to be safe, I refer to everybody—whether



they’re gay, straight, black or white—as an Asian.

BB: What degree did you graduate with?

JK: A B.A. It’s better than the MS.

BB: In what?

JK: You know, no one ever asked. I just said I went to Goddard and I winked. But everything I learned helped me in some odd way. I’m a day-dreamer, and there was never a better place to do

that. At Goddard, I learned about music, acting, writing and, yes, making fancy boxes out of clay and fine glass. I learned to sulk while other people danced in time to the music.

BB: Do you have any advice for aspiring performers?

JK: My advice to aspiring performers is get a notebook and a tape recorder, or if it makes sense a video camera ... and don’t be afraid to borrow liberally from yourself. ■

Above: the cover of the *Dr. Katz* DVD. Below: Jonathan performs with his band, Katz and Jammers, circa 1980. Another Goddard graduate, Andy Pitt, plays the guitar at left.

