



I Thought I Was Interviewing Jonathan Katz. Instead, Dr. Katz Put Me on the Couch

'Dr. Katz Live' is livestreaming on November 15.

BY GREGORY LAWRENCE

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Typically, when I interview a famous person for the website Collider dot com, there's a touch of formality embedded within any attempt to be casual or vulnerable. Both parties know it's a one-sided conversation, both parties know the celebrity is there to provide information for the writer to write about, and both parties know it will be over once the interview is over.



This was not the case when I interviewed TV comedy legend [Jonathan Katz](#) over the phone. You likely know him as the central figure of [influential animated Comedy Central program *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist*](#), in which Katz plays a fictionalized, therapist version of himself and interviews tons of famous comedians in improvised conversations, while also dealing with his son **H. Jon Benjamin** and receptionist **Laura Silverman**. Katz is doing a live-streamed version of this show on [Sunday, November 15 at 5pm PST through RushTix](#), with special guests like **Jon Hamm**, **Paul F. Tompkins**, **Bob Saget**, and more.

How 'Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist' Paved the Way for All Your Favorite TV Comedies

The Comedy Central series, originally airing from 1995-2002, is a huge influence on TV today.

I thought I would ask him about the challenges and enjoyments producing live comedy through Zoom, the insights he's gained over so many years in professional comedy, the ratio between improv and scripted content, the joys of reuniting with Silverman, the pure genius of Benjamin, what it's like to work with **Ted Danson**, and more. All of these things did happen, technically. But more than that, from moment one, Katz took an unexpected interest in *me*, immediately destroying that "formal, practiced, one-sided familiarity" I had gotten used to. He asked me about me immediately and often, had me set-up jokes for him to knock down, and genuinely flustered me into admitting my relationship's commitment status.

In other words: I was on the couch with Dr. Katz, professional therapist. And I hope you enjoy the strange, unique results.

Image via Comedy Central pist-02

COLLIDER: Hey, Jonathan.

JONATHAN KATZ: Good, hi, look, Greg, I don't care what people say about you. I'm going to draw my own conclusions. How are you?

What are the rumors you are hearing? What's floating around?

KATZ: No, I'm just making that up. But I have to tell you, when you're the first one on a Google Meet phone call, and they tell you that you're in the call but you're the only one there, it kind of feels like my high school experience. In high school, I had no friends — I had *one* friend and I don't think he liked me. We would just wait for the bus together.

It sucks to be emotionally used like that.

KATZ: Oh my God, awful. His name was Alfonzo Grimes, which is a great name. And I think he was a track star.

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If you could see him now, what would you say?

KATZ: "Speak up!" Yeah, we just waited for the Q12 bus together to get to Bayside High. Where did you grow up?

I grew up just outside of Detroit, Michigan.

KATZ: Oh, I've got to tell you this only because it's true, it's not funny. When I was 18 years old, I took the bus to compete in the United States Table Tennis Championships at Cobo Hall.

I know exactly where that is.

KATZ: The bus ride was 87 hours, and I lost in the second round to the guy who eventually won. I forget his name, but he was really cool. He wore a glove on his right hand, which he played with. Ask me what style of table tennis I played.

What style of table tennis did you play?

KATZ: *[whiny, unsure, upturned voice]* Defensive? No, that's my only ping pong joke. But I was the New York State Champion in 1964, which is a while back.

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Wow. Do you feel like that gives you a sense of superiority when you're meeting people for the first time?

KATZ: Yes, I do. You know, the Emmy Award, the Peabody Award, they mean nothing compared to the New York State Table Tennis Championship.

It's so funny, we've technically started our interview and already I feel as though I'm being interviewed. Have you always kind of been a person who is more interested in other people than

yourself? Or a very empathetic person?

KATZ: Oh, I'm just nosy, and I'm curious, and I care about people. Dr. Katz, on the other hand, he really has got it going on. He is sensitive in a way that I'm not. Maybe I'm sensitive in a way that he's not, I get us mixed up. But I am excited about this show we're doing.

What have been some of the logistical, technical hurdles in putting together this show?

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KATZ: RushTix, the company that we're working for, theoretically, they sent me equipment that I would need. Lighting equipment, sound equipment. The lighting equipment is really intense. Audio I know a lot about, but I know nothing about lighting.

Do you have crew members that are going to safely help you with that, or is it just on you?

KATZ: No, my crew members are my wife [Suzan], and my wife can figure out anything. She's kind of a genius when it comes to the physical world, the mechanical things. I know more about audio than she does, but she really is talented. She's also the chairman of the board of [The Lenny Zakim Fund](#), a non-profit in Boston. My wife and my daughter are both in the non-profit business, and they are raking it in.

For this show, is it going to be kind of retro-scripted or semi-improvised, like the Comedy Central show, or do you have an outline? What can we expect from this show?

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KATZ: I have notes that I've made for each of my guests and the things I'm doing with my receptionist, Laura Silverman, who's wonderful even without notes. When I was just talking with her the other day I said, "Laura, we need to prepare for this thing," and she said, "Jonathan, we've been doing this for 27 years," which was very comforting. There are guys like Paul F. Tompkins, who is just a brilliant improvisational comedian. Jon Hamm, who is also very funny on his feet. Susie Essman, who's wonderful. And Bob Saget, who's brilliant and yet disgusting.

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Are you going to let Saget go blue, or is it supposed to be a family-friendly show?

KATZ: No, I don't think there's any way to really inhibit him, to limit what he says. He's very funny, but... A few years ago I had lunch with him and John Stamos in a restaurant in New York. I brought my assistant along because she just wanted to meet John Stamos. We weren't sitting at the same table, but from where we were sitting we could hear them just making jokes about poop for about a half-hour. He's so immature, it's unbelievable.

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Do you feel like your strategy is to play his straight man and to kind of try and reign him in and talk about more elevated things?

KATZ: No, I'm also quite immature. [laughter] I think I might meet him halfway, but I am going to try to create a construct in which it will feel like therapy. I did it once before with him in Los Angeles in a live theater. It's very different doing it in Zoom than doing anything live.

What are you finding the most different about it? Is there anything that you actually, maybe enjoy more about the Zoom version of the show?

KATZ: I *do*. I like the intimacy of it. I like seeing someone's face right next to me. It feels very intimate, more so than night clubs. But it's the technology that makes me tense, because, I don't know, do I want to hear people laughing? Is that what therapy would be like? And am I the only one [who should hear

laughter]? My theory is that the patients should just hear the laughter because it'll help them perform. I don't really need to hear it myself. But then you have the question, because I've done live television, I was in a sitcom a couple of times, and there's a question of holding for the laugh. If you say something funny, like on a four-camera show on TV, the actors are supposed to hold for the laugh. I don't know whether I can do that on Zoom.

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One of the sitcom series you were in was called *Ink*, with Ted Danson and Mary Steenburgen. What was it like working with a multi-cam sitcom legend like Ted Danson? Did you learn anything in particular from him? Or did you teach him anything?

KATZ: Oh my God, he is just a virtuoso. My problem was, I said to the director, "I can't really walk and talk at the same time." Ted Danson can really run around a gym and talk at the same time. So [the director] had a great solution. Every time Ted or Mary opened their door, I would just be there. He also was the guy who directed *West Wing*, and I noticed that was a trick he used on *West Wing* as well, very effectively.

Yeah, Thomas Schlamme.

KATZ: It's pronounced Tommy Schlommy, it's a really bad name.

Moving to your show, *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist*, you mentioned that you and Laura Silverman have been doing this for 27 years.

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KATZ: I think she's exaggerating. I think it's only 25 years, but that's a long time.

It *is* a long time, and I'm curious if when you revisit it, do you strive to reach for that level of

comfort of an old pair of shoes? Or do you always try to do something new to discover a new way to play it?

KATZ: Both of those are true. I mean, I'd like to revisit things that work on the cartoon, but also discover things that would only work in this format. We also did a few of the festivals. *Dr. Katz* live in Portland and Austin and San Francisco and Los Angeles. That was really fun. There have been so many iterations of the show, and I think Paul F. Tompkins is the only one, aside from Laura, who's shown up in all of them.

Who are some of your wishlist people you'd love to have on the show as guests?

KATZ: Katherine Heigl.

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What about her inspires you?

KATZ: She's beautiful.

Enough said.

KATZ: Ask me if I can think of someone else.

Can you think of anyone else?

KATZ: "I think I can think of someone else."

KATZ: [beat] Katherine Heigl. No, I was writing a sitcom where the lead was obsessed with Katherine Heigl, but it didn't go anywhere. It was a sitcom with Gary Gulman, and that was one of his characteristics.

Do you often hang on to the comedic ideas that don't get their day in the sun? Or do you just let them die when the project dies?

KATZ: I reuse everything. The only thing I recycle are jokes.

Which bin do you put them in?

KATZ: I'll show you the bin right now. You know, I don't like to beat a dead horse, Greg, but it's not the worst thing I've ever done. That's a joke I've been telling for about 10 years. I also tell jokes I was telling 30 years ago about the day my wife gave birth to my daughter, Julia. There's nothing like witnessing the birth of your own child, to see the stork penetrate the uterus.

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That is a very good joke.

KATZ: Thank you.

What was it like transitioning from the world of stand-up comedy to the world of fake therapy sessions for television? What prompted that inspiration and that jump?

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KATZ: I did stand up for 15 years and I hated it. It was like being stuck in a bad one man show. The audience loved it, but I didn't really enjoy it. And then it occurred to me one day that I too should enjoy the show, and then it became a little bit better. It wasn't until I met Jon Benjamin, working on *Dr. Katz*, that I realized how much fun improvisation could be, and that I actually had a talent for it. We would just laugh so hard. And I think that's one of the things that distinguishes *Dr. Katz* from other animated shows, that we left the laughter in for the audience to hear.

Do you remember any particular memories or moments that stuck out in your first recording session with Jon that made you go, "We've got something here"?

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KATZ: The first time we auditioned Jon Benjamin, he came in to read for the role of my father, as did my actual father. It was tough to tell my dad that he's not right for the part, you know? But then we discovered that Jon Benjamin would make much more sense as my son. I think the really diehard *Dr. Katz* fans are the ones that love that relationship, and the relationship that Jon Benjamin had with Laura. The patients, a lot of them were really wonderful, but they were more of a marketing tool than anything else.

When you do the live version of the show, do you strive to go for a similar emotional center? Like the moments with you and your son in the TV show?

KATZ: Yeah, especially if I'm talking to a patient and we're very close to some kind of breakthrough, that's when they're interrupted by the [closing] music. Then I say, "You know what the music means," so we never actually get there. We did 81 episodes of the TV show, and I made one woman cry just by taking my role too seriously. And I made one guy feel better. That's not such a bad thing, is it?

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Because of you doing this show, do you feel like your friends and family and even people who just meet you kind of treat you like a therapist? Or expect you to be a wealth of empathy and listening and healing?

KATZ: No, but there are people who thought I was actually a therapist, who I meet for the first time, and

had no idea that I was in the comedy business.

Did you have to prove to them that you were funny, or do you just kind of let them live that sort of made up mythology?

KATZ: No, I couldn't let anyone live with that lie. It would be cruel.

It would be, that's kind of you.

KATZ: So Greg, what's your life like when you're not working for Collider?

[flustered] Yeah, when I'm not working for Collider, um, I... live in a one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, California with my girlfriend Annabel. Um —

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KATZ: Did you say Annabel?

Annabel, yeah.

KATZ: Because we did [an episode of the audiobook, *Dr. Katz*](#), where I tried to convince Ben that he has a sister named Annabel that he never met. It's a very sad episode, but that's a beautiful name. I love that name. So Los Angeles is your home most of the time, you grew up in Detroit... And what does Annabel do for a living?

Annabel is a television comedy writer.

KATZ: That's too strange. I'm sorry. The business is so incestuous.

Yes, it is. That's how we met, doing improv comedy.

KATZ: Oh really, doing improv? That's great. That's romantic, in a way. And do you think someday you will marry Annabel?

[very flustered] Yes. I do think that someday I will.

KATZ: Will you keep me posted?

I will. I can send you an invitation to the wedding, if you want.

KATZ: No, I don't like to read anything that's unnecessary, but that's very sweet of you. [laughter] That's one of my big problems in life, I'm a really bad reader. I've been reading a book that I started in the sixties, and it's the kind of book you just can't put down. I'm trying to reread it. It's a book called *Boys and Girls Together* by William Goldman.

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I know William Goldman to be an excellent writer, but I don't know the book.

KATZ: Mostly he's known for writing movies now. *The Princess Bride*, also the *Marathon Man*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Magic*, really a prolific screenwriter. And he wrote two novels that I read as a young man. One was called *The Temple of Gold*, and the other was called *Boys and Girls Together*. And I just stopped reading novels. You might be too old to appreciate *Temple of Gold*. I read it when I was 18 and I knew nothing about women.

Was it a formative book for how to interact with women?

KATZ: Yeah, in a certain way. I was hitchhiking with my cousin, Paul, to California when I read it. I lived in New York City at the time, and I actually thought that women would like me more on the West Coast just because it was the West Coast. I was so wrong. Nothing changed. Just the weather.

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I know you've been doing a lot of live versions, a lot of audiobook versions, but will we ever see another animated series of *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist*?

KATZ: It's unlikely, and I think that it's more of a rights issue than my desire. Comedy Central owns the rights, as well as one of the partners who made the show who us very litigious. So I think it's unlikely. I am sorry to say that, I would love to see more. [Katz gets a text message] I'm getting texts reminding me... Anyway, I should deal with this. Greg, it's a pleasure talking to you.

You as well, Jon. Thanks so much for your time.

KATZ: Good luck to you and Annabel.

The *Dr. Katz Live* livestream takes place on Sunday, November 15 at 8 p.m. ET/5 p.m. PT. [Tickets are available here.](#)



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