

Absolutely No Ceiling

The Jay Mohr Interview

Nassau Weekly
April 22nd, 2002

This past Thursday, Jay Mohr took the stage at Dillon Gym as the headlining act in the USG's annual spring concert. After the show, the *Nassau Weekly*, its staff and its hanger-ons, descended into the bowels of Dillon Gym to interview the man famed for his roles as comedian in shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, actor in films such as *Jerry Maguire*, and host on programs such as MTV's *Lipservice* and the recently debuted *Mohr Sports*. Tracy Morgan, at that point, was unavailable, having earlier headed back to a crack den on 167th Street in the Bronx. The assemblage, which included Ari Samsky, West Owens, Jay Katsir, Jeremy Weissman, Clay Bavor, Adam Nemett, Scott Lescher, Nate Sellyn, and myself, discovered a man who, first and foremost a stand-up performer, has a tremendous amount of respect for the people with whom he shares his profession, as well as a subtle understanding and appreciation for comedy itself. At his heart, Jay Mohr is just a "ruggedly handsome" and down-to-earth New Jersey guy living out a lifelong dream.

Nassau Weekly: So, Tracy Morgan, what was his deal tonight?

Jay Mohr: I couldn't even tell you. You'll have to call and ask Tracy.

NW: A lot of people consider the era of *Saturday Night Live* you were on to be the greatest era ever.

JM: Oh, when we were there, it was like we were the worst thing that ever happened.

NW: In terms of critical reaction?

JM: I was new, Dave Attell was a new writer, Sarah Silverman and Norm MacDonald were new, Chris Rock had just left. All the writing staff was new, they were all like 21. At the time, it was being reviewed as, like, take it off the air it's so bad. "Live From New York, It's Dead" was the headline in the *New York Post*.

NW: What was it like to work on a cast like that?

JM: It was fun. They all got hired at the same time. Chris [Farley] and [David] Spade and [Adam] Sandler and [Rob] Schneider and Timmy [Meadows]. When I got hired it was kind of like being a freshman and walking home with seniors you're friends with, even though you're really not walking home with them, you're just sort of a satellite on the outside. And it wasn't like they were being mean or pompous or anything, it was just they'd just been through it already. And they all came up together and went through the same things together, and they're well on their way and all of a sudden there's just a new guy.

NW: But now when you see these guys and look back on the three years you were on the show, how do you reflect on the whole experience?

JM: I'll never underestimate the importance of it. Julia Sweeney said going through *SNL* is like an uncle you hate paying for four years of college, but I think it's more like an uncle who touched you, the upside being it's a much more precious pedigree. Because a lot of people go to Harvard, but how many turn the turnstiles at *SNL*, like 13? And how many of those 13 are new? One? And you're part of a timeline, something that's historic. That was never lost on me. I was there for the twentieth anniversary and stuff like that. I'm writing a book now, *Gasp! for Airtime*, about trying to get on the air and having panic attacks and freaking out.

NW: You personally?

JM: Oh, yeah.

NW: Was it that much pressure?

JM: For me it was lack of structure. Not knowing when really to come, no one really telling you anything. I do well with, you come in at 8:00, you write 'til 10:00, then we're going to have a meeting at 11:00 – that's just how my brain works. Literally, I had never written a sketch before in my life and now I'm on an Emmy nominating writing staff.

NW: Had you been doing sketch comedy before that?

JM: I was just a stand-up and I auditioned by doing stand-up and got the job by doing stand-up, and part of my deal, I had to write six sketches to get on the show. Just to ice the cake. It was like, you got it, you just have to write sketches. And I complained: I don't know how to write sketches. And John DiMaggio – who's the voice of Bender the robot on *Futurama* and used to be on a comedy team Red Johnny and the Round Guy – we were just pounding beers one night and he goes, "Dude, go smoke a joint and make pretend you're a sketch writer, and stop complaining." And that's what I did and I just wrote some freaky shit I guess.

NW: How much of your material would you say actually made it on the show?

JM: Less than a percent. It was horrible. You're going from being the center of attention, being on stage, and every word out of your mouth is something you created, to submitting sketches that are funny, get read at read through, get huge laughs, and when you go to see what sketches make the show they're not there. With no explanation. Too bad. And now you're rewriting other people's sketches that aren't as funny as yours. So you're approaching the rewriting of a sketch, the mechanics of how to help a sketch, with the point of view that this is garbage, and you're angry, and you can't possibly contribute in a positive way when you feel that way. It's just very strange. And I don't know why it is run that way. Very cloak and dagger.

NW: Is this Lorne Michaels' system?

JM: You know, I still really don't know how it works. They just go behind closed doors and pick what's going to be on the air, that's it. You open the door to Lorne's office and look up on his board. If your sketch isn't up there, it's like, okay, it's time to go home. And then you're like, why did I stay up all night writing?

NW: In your years on *Saturday Night Live*, and even since then, who are your favorite comedians on the program?

JM: Will Ferrell. Farley's the best ever.

NW: Have you done any work with Ferrell?

JM: I'd love to work with him. But I don't know if we'd get any work done because I'd just giggle at everything he'd say. He makes me fucking piss my pants. I would say Bill Murray is the greatest ever to come out. Actually, I'd say Eddie Murphy is. People front on Eddie. But the timeline of what he's done...

NW: I mean, people give him shit for *Dr. Doolittle*.

JM: Why? I laughed my ass off. There's a French monkey, what's there not to laugh at? I went and saw it with my wife on a Saturday morning with all kids, and like, if they were screaming, we didn't care, I wanted to hear kids laughing. I think he's the biggest movie star in the world, bigger than even Tom Cruise, because he makes you laugh. You make someone laugh, you're a lot more accessible. It's like, if you see Pacino walking down the street, it's like, "Oh my god, there's Pacino." But if it's like Eddie Murphy or a comic, it's like, "Hey, what's up man?"

NW: And you're doing a film with Pacino now, right? Any Christopher Walken type experiences?

JM: No, he's super cool. When you get over the awe of who you're with – and that's one of the great things *SNL* provides you with – is, you know, you're not really star struck any more, because every week on *SNL* there was a star who didn't know where the bathroom is, literally. So you make small talk and I was never a big ass-kisser, for lack of a better expression, so when you just talk to these guys like a human being and bust balls with him, he really seems to open up. And then he would actually come onto the set and say [imitating Pacino's voice], "Where's that idiot Jay Mohr?"

NW: Did you get him to crack a laugh once in awhile?

JM: Did I make Al laugh? Aw yeah. And then he started telling me weird stories. Like, he was in these minstrel shows with his brother [Nass staff laughs]. I swear to God. He was telling me sketches they did, and I was like, who knows that about Al Pacino? There was one where he went to a shooting gallery and you shoot the guy at the piano when he plays, and you shoot the jug and something pops up, and you shoot the guy, and the bear goes "Arrr!!!" and the guy just keeps shooting the bear and then when they leave the bear just follows them home. But it's Pacino telling the story so it's the most riveting story you've ever heard, and it's like actually Al Pacino telling it.

NW: And then he leaves and you're like, what the fuck did he just say?

JM: No, you get on the phone with all your friends and you're like, guess what Pacino just said [Nass staff laughs].

NW: Speaking of childhood stuff, you went into stand-up right after your graduated high school –

JM: No, while I was in high school.

NW: While you were in high school, wow. Well, I guess, let's start off earlier on. At what point did you know that you wanted to do comedy. Like, when you were in third grade, did you already know this was what you wanted to do with your life?

JM: Up until I tried stand-up I wanted to be a pro-wrestler or a marine.

NW: You wrestled in high school...

JM: Yeah, I was captain because I was the only senior. But the moment I tried stand-up I went, "Ah, okay."

NW: When was the first time?

JM: I was fifteen, it was in West Orange, New Jersey, it was at noon on a Sunday at Rascal's Comedy Club.

NW: What was better, your first doing stand-up or your first time having sex?

JM: Oh, sex [Nass staff laughs]. Both went by just as quickly. They're actually a little similar, because you just can't wait to go back and do it better. Keith Richards said the first time he heard a Chuck Berry record his life went from black and white to Technicolor, and that's how it was the moment I went on stage I went, "Oh, wow." And it's also a pretty incredible realization and pretty trippy for a 15 year old brain to realize there's absolutely no ceiling on the endeavor you're about to go out on.

NW: Do you still feel like that when you're up on stage?

JM: Yeah, it's whatever you want it to be. You can do an hour of impressions, you can do crowd work which I'm not good at – I don't think that's why people go to a show, to find out what the guy in a first row does for a living, I don't think anyone really cares. People work hard for their money, like when you play clubs and people drop \$30 to come and see you, they can go see a movie, they can stay home, they got to go find babysitters, I take that very seriously and I want them to feel like they made the right decision.

NW: What's it like now that you're 31 and you've basically had a lifetime as a comedian?

JM: Everything's I'm doing is a wildest dream fulfilled already, as far as stand-up, to be as successful and play for the amount of people I've played for, and places I've played, and people I've met, and to make the amount of money I've made. And also just to be on *SNL* would be a life-altering event, just to do films with Tom Cruise and Al Pacino would be mind-blowing – I could die now – to write a novel, to have your own show on ESPN.

NW: How's that coming along?

JM: It's great, it's literally me and four guys, what we think is funny.

NW: Is it going to be better than – what is it – *The Best Damn Sports Show?*

JM: I hope so. But that's harder, that's five days a week. We've got the whole week.

NW: I know one of the things I love about ESPN is that, even as a sports network, they put a lot of emphasis on comedy. I mean, like, *SportsCenter* probably has more comedic brilliance than most sitcoms on television. Was this one of the things that attracted you to the network?

JM: Well, it was a sports variety show, so there's really one home for it, and that's the Worldwide Leader in Sports. Once ESPN came into the equation, we really nestle-locked in on that and realized that was the place to do it. It wasn't because Craig Kilbourne said, "Do that dance, make the glove get down," it was because everyone I know watches ESPN.

NW: How about, if I can bring up another television memory, *Lipservice* on MTV?

JM: Great. My first job ever. My first experience getting a check from The Man. Every girl on that show, though, was like 15, my hands were tied. Like, everyone's lip singing and shaking their asses and it's like, "Keep it going from Vermouth High School in the Bronx," and I was like, why can't their be like 22 year old chicks?

NW: Were you a big *Remote Control* fan?

JM: No, I was never *Remote Control* fan. I love Colin Quinn, that was my favorite part. I watched more like *Yo! MTV Raps*. The *Ben Stiller Show* was absolutely my favorite. And that's sort of the mentality we take with *Mohr Sports*, just like, what makes us laugh? The great thing about ESPN is that they let us stay completely autonomous, we literally shoot the show and send it to them.

NW: Have you been able to meet Chris Berman yet?

JM: Yeah, I met Berman a couple of times.

NW: He's one of the founders of ESPN, right?

JM: He's one of the founding forefathers of our country, I believe [Nass staff laughs]. Peter Gammons is Old Hickory.

NW: Could you talk a little about your influences.

JM: Dennis Miller's *Off White* album was really instrumental for me. It was an hour, it was just blazingly funny. It wasn't references for references sake at that point. They were really smart, sharp, clever references going from *Dance Fever* to the Kennedy assassination in one sentence, just how effortless that was. That album was probably the most influential. And pretty much everyone. I pretty much soaked up quantity, I was always at clubs, always watching everyone, why does that go there, why does that not. And then after I was already a headliner I met Buddy Hackett who gave me advice that was the greatest advice I ever had in my life: people can't laugh when they're breathing in. You say something, like, you go on stage and say "9-11," no matter how funny it is after that, you can't, it's impossible. Or, like, when you go on stage, don't walk right to the mic, walk to the front of the stage, walk around a little, look at people before you begin, and when you start talking they're going to go with you because you were just looking at them.

NW: So in those years it was like you were almost going to school.

JM: But the good part was that when I ran into Buddy Hackett I already knew pretty much what I was doing, and then he just came in and turned it upside down. Like when we did the MTV awards together, he wanted to know why I walked to the podium, and I said, "because that's where everyone walks," and he goes, "that's why you should never go to the podium, walk in front of the podium, they don't expect you to be in front of the podium." If you're sincere – and I really love watching and seeing everyone – and so if you actually look at someone and they're smiling back, it just makes you feel like everything is going to go really well.

NW: Do you still spend a lot of time enjoying other comedians? Especially now that you're on the other side, and have been through it?

JM: It's not fair for other comedians – like, I've seen pretty much every joke there ever could be. Comics don't really laugh, they sit at the back of the room and go, "Ha!" and they'll look at each other and go, "that was funny." But there's a lot of young comics I watch that I love, and I usually take them on the road with me, they inspire me, and I like giving advice to them. I had a lot of people give me great advice, so I think it's almost my duty to pass it along. And when you watch your guy grow from, you know, feature act to the point where my opening acts literally get standing ovations – when I'm on the opening road my opening act, there's four different guys I take out with me they get standing ovations – and that makes me so happy.

NW: I'd like to ask about the Walken impression. Everyone loves it, your impressions launched a thousand bad impressions in every club in this country. What is it about Christopher that succeeds so well? And can you break your impression down into a sort of do-it-yourself Walken kit?

JM: Well, with the second part, punctuation you just throw out the window. He's gone on record saying that when he reads a script he crosses out periods and question marks and commas. All the stage directions he crosses out as he reads it. One syllable words become two syllable words. "No" is "No-o." It's an east coast accent, thank goodness, so it's a little

easier. I did Chris Penn last week from *Reservoir Dogs* on *Mob Sports*. I don't want to rest on Walken, it's like having a hit. You don't want to be the guy who just goes out and plays "Freebird" and goes back to the tour bus. You always have to have that new album, something provocative. So I figured if I'm going to do Walken why go to De Niro, when everyone already does De Niro, so I'll do Chris Penn and Ricki Lake instead. What was the first part of the question?

NW: Why is Christopher Walken's personality such a hit?

JM: He's just an original. He's an absolute original. I see no one else in him when he speaks.

NW: I was at a Broadway show he did a few years ago, and this was a pretty sophisticated crowd, I didn't think they'd really dig him that much, the novelty of him. But at the end they had one of these AIDS drives, these donation drives, and the grand prize that they were raffling off was that Christopher Walken would record your home answering machine.

JM: That's great. [Imitating Walken] "Hello, I'm not home, uh, rather, the person you're calling. Maybe I'm home, but you didn't call me, you called that guy. Yadda, yadda, yadda. At the beep."

NW: What's your favorite porn?

JM: *Pool Party at Seymour's*.

NW: Seymour Butts?

JM: Yeah, *Pool Party at Seymour's*. I actually held it until the end, then rewound it and picked my spots. I've never done that before or since. Usually it's like first scene you crack one out, then there's like two scenes later, you get back up again. This one was like, people kept showing up and putting cocks in each other. You know what is infuriating? When you're watching porno and a girl's going down on a guy and he's soft for like five minutes. It's like, who is this guy? Fire this guy, I'll come down! You need a close-up of just a dick? I'll do it!

NW: If the comedy thing hadn't worked out, could you see yourself taking that route?

JM: Oh, yeah! Why not? [Pauses]. How did we get here? Not cosmically, like how did we get –

NW: That's actually a good question.

JM: You guys really want to talk porn.

NW: You do bits on the *Opie and Anthony* radio show –

JM: I was on today with Kid Rock.

NW: Where do you stand on the whole *Howard Stern* versus *Opie and Anthony* debate?

JM: I listened to Howard all the time in high school, like I'd be late to school just if he had a good gag going, I just wouldn't care and miss three classes. But I never get up that early anymore.

NW: You've done some stuff with Jim Rome?

JM: He's done as much for my stand-up as my entire career.

NW: Are you serious? Is he as much of a bad-ass as he is on the air?

JM: He's the coolest. Super cool.

NW: What's the name of his show, *The Last Word*?

JM: He's leaving that to stay in radio with *The Jungle*. I subbed for him once in awhile, and then when I signed my ESPN deal I can't anymore because they're rival companies, which is just some suit bullshit, but what am I going to do? I can still call, so I call him once in awhile. His fans are rabid. And when I go on stage out in the Pines, and I'm like, are there any Clones here (that's what they call his radio fans), it's like anywhere from 30% to 70% go bananas. Every show. And if I say, I'm going to be in Tempe this weekend, the shows are sold out before I get off the plane, just from saying it once, on that show. [Jay's manager says, "We got to go."]

NW: One last question. Carrot Top? Is anything going to be done about Carrot Top?

JM: He makes the audience laugh.

NW: You think so?

JM: I know so. He wouldn't have a job. You don't perform in arenas unless people go. And no one's going to allow you to perform in a theater unless everyone there is going to make money.

NW: So can we call him this generation's Gallagher?

JM: Call him whatever you want. But you know what, the guy does the job. The things he thinks of, I could never think of, my brain doesn't work that way.

NW: So you stick with dolphin cock?

JM: Yeah [laughs].

NW: Have you ever seen the website? There's actually a site that explains how to have sex with dolphins.

JM: I'll have to dig that up. Thanks for the tip man. [Nass staff laughs]

NW: It's consensual.

JM: Consensual [laughs]. Twice for yes? One for no? Anybody else got a groovy one?
That's it, huh?

NW: I think dolphin sex is a pretty good note to end on.

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