

# Behind the Curtain



## Chapter One

# James Douglas Muir “Jay” Leno

In all my years at *The Tonight Show*, Jay Leno never raised his voice to me or anyone else. He was generous, fair and loyal. And, of course, he was always good for a joke—no matter what the circumstances. Did he have a big ego? Of course. So does every prominent person in show business, politics, sports, business, religion—you name it. But ego is not what drives Jay Leno.

What drives—and defines—Jay is an amazingly short attention span. It’s about ten seconds long. Thirty seconds, tops. He’s very intelligent and professionally successful but is simply incapable of paying attention for a long period of time; he gets fidgety and can’t sit still. One knee is constantly bouncing up and down to a staccato rhythm. I believe this is because he has some form of ADHD. I don’t claim to be an expert on the condition, but I’m very familiar with its symptoms. Many people in show business have it.

Jay’s condition—whatever it is—affects almost everything he does. It may have even been a blessing in disguise for the show. Whenever I had to brief Jay or pitch an idea to him, I had to keep it short or risk the danger of losing his attention and not getting it back. This was good because I often tell long, meandering stories. With Jay I had no choice but to stay on topic and keep it simple.

His restlessness was perfect for the monologue. Each joke was short enough to keep his attention but long enough to keep him challenged to the point of obsession. He and his writers turned out hundreds of jokes daily, up to as many as 1,500, but only the twenty-five or so funniest ones made it

into the twelve-minute monologue. The strategy was to keep throwing pasta on the wall until some of it stuck.

Consistently delivering relevant and funny jokes was a relentless, demanding, and tireless task, although Jay never looked at it that way. Whenever someone asked him how he was able to do it, he would say: "Write joke. Tell joke. Get paid." Of course, his answer was a joke in itself that always got a laugh because, obviously, there was more to it than that. But in a way, his glib answer was true. He did his job by making it into a routine.

Jay usually began crafting his monologue at his home in Beverly Hills the night before a show. While his approach appeared to be casual and relaxed, it was actually quite regimented. In fact, it was the same almost every night. He wanted it that way so nothing interfered with his job.

A typical day for Jay actually began in the evening. Driving himself, he would leave the NBC lot after the show, usually about 6 p.m., and head for his home in Beverly Hills, where he would heat up lasagna for dinner. Then he would begin the work of putting the next day's monologue together by reading through hundreds of jokes. When he had enough material for at least half the monologue, he would go to bed, usually about 2:00 a.m., and get up the next morning about 6:00.

After arriving at the studio around 8:15, often before anyone else, he would work out with a trainer—usually with little enthusiasm. Then he and his head writer would go over the jokes that came in from the writers overnight. Jay's search for material would continue off and on throughout the day until show time at 4 p.m. He would try out jokes on as many people as possible. Anyone caught near his office, where the door was usually open, was fair game.

Whenever he used me as a sounding board, Jay would often do a slightly off-color joke and see if I was offended; I was considered to be pretty straight-laced, at least by Hollywood standards. To Jay, I represented our conservative, middle-of-the-road viewers, which I appreciated. But sometimes I think he was just yanking my chain.

Jay used cue cards for his monologue, which I thought was odd at first. Teleprompters had already been around for years, even in the smallest stations. I had used one year earlier to give the farm news and commodity prices in Green Bay, Wisconsin; Sioux City, Iowa; and Omaha, Nebraska.

So why did Jay insist on using cue cards? I think it was because of another condition—dyslexia, a reading disability. He would often flub words and complicated phrases. It was hard enough for him to read static words, but moving words would have been even worse, resulting in a confusing jumble of letters.

Jay was open about his dyslexia and became very adept at making fun of himself when he made mistakes, which only reinforced his image as a likeable guy. I asked him one day if it was what prevented him from using a prompter. He quickly dismissed the idea, which didn't surprise me. He tended to instinctively reject any perceived attempt to pigeonhole him.

He struggled so much with dyslexia that I think he even memorized most of his monologue jokes, referring to the written words only for an occasional cue. That didn't mean he could get by on his memory alone, though. One night the cue card guy didn't show up on time for the monologue, and we had to stop the show until he arrived.

Many entertainers do not like the grind of a daily program, but Jay never saw it that way. Because of his short attention span, he was easily bored and liked moving on to a new show every day. Whether an episode was good, bad, or just okay, the next day he didn't think much about it other than the ratings.

He was already concentrating on that day's show, which was something new and different. Besides, he didn't like resting on his laurels. Just because the monologue “killed” today didn't mean it would tomorrow. Or as Jay put it, “You're only as good as your last joke.”

Jay's attitude about doing a daily show reflected his very essence, his philosophy of life. A reporter for *GQ* magazine once asked him a telling question: if he could be any of the

many engines he owned, which one would he be? On the surface this appeared to be a contrived question, which Jay would normally deflect with a joke. But he took it seriously, saying he would most likely be his 1866 steam engine: “Steam engines are probably my favorite, because they chug along at the same speed. They don’t get too up. They don’t get too down.” That short answer revealed more about his character and personality than anything else I ever heard him say. I think it could be his epitaph.

Jay appeared in a number of films early in his career, and not just cameos. He had some decent parts in such films as *Silver Bears* (1978), *Collision Course* (1989), and *American Hot Wax* (1978). But he disliked film acting because of the endless retakes, which could take days. He just didn’t have the patience for that kind of repetitive work, so he didn’t stay with it.

Instead, he put all of his effort into his stand-up comedy and, eventually, *The Tonight Show*. Ironically, he would do a number of films during his time as the show’s host. He mostly made cameo appearances, which he enjoyed, especially if they were shot in *The Tonight Show* studio, where he had to be every day anyway. (Such films include *Space Cowboys*, 2000; *Calendar Girls*, 2003; and *Mr. 3000*, 2004.)

Jay also liked doing voiceover parts in animated films and voiced characters in *The Flintstones* (1994), *Cars* (2006), and *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006). However, he didn’t like watching these films. He was a very literal guy, and he could never get over the fact that cartoon characters literally weren’t real people; they were just moving pictures. He even had a hard time with the idea of interviewing animated characters on the show and rarely did it.

Other than animated features, Jay loved watching films and talking about them—usually at the same time—during film screenings. Since many of the show’s guests were actors who were promoting projects they starred in, Jay felt he should watch their films. Attending a screening with Jay, usually at NBC, was an experience I will never forget. Not only did

you get to see a movie before it was released in theaters but you also often got Jay's thoughts about it while the film was playing. And there was always pizza, Jay's favorite food.

His running commentaries during the screenings could be annoying, but they were often more entertaining than the films themselves. He would say things like, "Would anyone do that in real life?" Or, "Who didn't see that coming a mile away?"

While Jay thought most films were flawed, he had no agenda. He was equally passionate about films he liked and those he didn't like. One time he was so upset by how badly a film was made that he just wouldn't stop ranting about it. So I told him, "Hey, it's free." He responded, "Yes, but I'll never get my two hours back."

After a screening, he would sometimes corner the first person he encountered and engage them in conversation about the film. If you were in a hurry to get home, it was best to avoid Jay. Sometimes he would go on for fifteen minutes. He even did this with my children, Melissa and David, who were teenagers at the time. They were thrilled that Jay was interested in talking with them, but at the same time they didn't quite know if they had permission to disagree with him.

They still remember Jay's thoughts about *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), the first in the series. He told them he loved it partly because the director didn't put in too many CGI "ghost pirates." There were only about eighteen, which made the flesh-and-blood soldiers' battle scene against the "ghost pirates" more realistic than if there had been an endless swarm of them. That was a critique they could relate to as teenagers.

Jay genuinely enjoyed having film critics as guests, including the late Gene Siskel, the late Roger Ebert, and Richard Roeper. They weren't always the biggest ratings draw, but Jay so enjoyed bantering with them about films, both on and off the air, that they were frequent guests. And in many ways, his views were similar to those of the professional critics.

Like them, he tended to favor smaller, independent films that featured actors rather than action.

In 2006, Richard Roeper invited Jay to fill in for Roger Ebert while he was in the hospital and serve as a guest co-host on his show, *At the Movies with Ebert and Roeper*. I thought Jay's performance on the show was one of the best things he had done, but it wasn't as entertaining as sitting through a screening with him.

While critics tended to dismiss Jay as the middle-of-the-road guy, he is actually more complicated than he appeared and is very quirky. I don't mean phony, Hollywood, "I-must-have-Coke-in-a-bottle-and-only-green-M&Ms-in-my-dressing-room" quirky. I mean he is genuinely idiosyncratic. Much of it is probably related in some way to his dyslexia and short attention span.

But as odd as he seemed, Jay's behavior worked for him and the show. His quirks generally reflected his desire to be in total control of his life. He wanted to spend as much time as possible writing jokes and working on cars and as little time as possible doing things that prevented him from that.

Jay had no interest in owning the rights to *The Tonight Show* while he was the host, as Johnny Carson had done before him and as David Letterman has done with *The Late Show*. Instead, Jay just wanted to be an employee so he could spend most of his time actually working on the show.

He is a workaholic and genuinely liked his job more than anything else. Jay once asked me if I was familiar with the math seventh graders were doing, which he described as impossibly difficult. I had to agree, as I had seen my own kids' math when they were in junior high school and remembered being unable to help them with some of it. "Imagine if we had a real job where we had to know how to do actual work," he told me. "We're lucky to be in show business."

Jay almost never took a day off and detested even the thought of going on vacation, which he considered a "nightmare." Were it up to him, *Tonight* would have original episodes fifty-two weeks a year. At his first contract renewal

he asked for less time off but was turned down for his staff's sake.

The show took six weeks of hiatus, while Letterman stops production for twelve weeks, which helped Jay's ratings since reruns drew fewer viewers. Letterman works four days a week, recording two shows in one day, while Jay insisted on doing a show every weekday so the monologue jokes and guest segments would be timely and topical.

Jay rarely seeks leisure time. While the show was in reruns, he usually made stand-up appearances. He told *Fortune* magazine that he once decided to spend a day on the beach in Hawaii while he was there on a gig. He said it felt like he was there for hours, so he checked his watch only to find he had been there just ten minutes!

His parents grew up during the Depression, and Jay said he had a fear of running out of money. As such, he never spent a penny of his *Tonight Show* income while he was host. Instead, he lived off his stand-up earnings. Jay didn't buy anything on credit; he purchased his house outright and to this day doesn't invest in stocks.

Surprisingly, he doesn't think of himself as a rich person. Once while in New York, he and I shared a limo to the airport. As we headed down 5th Avenue, we passed some very expensive department stores. We were both amazed at some of the fine clothes, furniture, and other items we were seeing in the store windows. Finally, Jay said, "Wow, if you had a lot of dough you could get some nice stuff here." "Jay," I responded, "you do have a lot of dough." "I guess I do," he said.

Despite his dough, he wore the same clothes—jeans and a denim shirt—all the time, except when he did the show or was making a scheduled stand-up appearance. Though he admits he's a little overweight, Jay hasn't actually weighed himself since 1973, saying he's already married and doesn't need to impress women. For such a hard-working guy, he doesn't sleep much: four to four-and-a-half hours a night is his maximum.

Jay's quirkiness is also reflected in his diet. He never drinks hot liquids, such as coffee or tea, and he doesn't eat soup. No alcohol or drugs, either. He hasn't had a raw vegetable since 1969 when his mom finally stopped trying to get him to eat them, and he proudly claims he has never had a salad.

He likes beef, chicken, potatoes, pasta, pizza, hamburgers, and hot dogs. He would eat the same thing for lunch every day for a year at a time. One year it was chicken legs and thighs. The next year it was turkey from the fast-food chain Koo Koo Roo. Jay did this so he could spend more time thinking about jokes and less time worrying about food.

He frequented the original Bob's Big Boy in Burbank, not far from the NBC lot. People occasionally see him with his wife, Mavis, at an Italian restaurant, but Jay generally avoids exotic or exclusive establishments. He once gave this impression of a European restaurant to *Fortune* magazine: "*Excuse me, I didn't order this! Excuse me! Will you be having the eel's head in some kind of butter cream sauce?*"

A creature of habit, Jay generally preferred to keep things the same, especially in his *Tonight Show* office or dressing room. This may have to do with superstitious tendencies, common to many celebrities. His first office, which he used from 1992 to 2009, had a pile of papers and other items approximately five feet tall and five feet wide, as did his dressing room.

He also had a corkboard in his office that was only anchored to the wall at the top left corner. The bottom right corner rested diagonally on the floor, where it had fallen on January 17, 1994, during the enormously destructive 6.7 magnitude Northridge Earthquake. After that, Jay continued to use the corkboard, but he never had it horizontally reattached to the wall.

When Jay began guest-hosting for Johnny Carson in 1987, Joe Drago, a props man, would stand backstage with a cup of ice water for him just before the show started. The first few times, Jay ignored Joe and the water. Finally, Joe asked if he should continue bringing the water, which surprised Jay.

"Was that for me?" he replied. Jay thought Joe was drinking the water himself. During the monologue that night Jay even mentioned Joe's kind gesture and how he had stupidly misunderstood Joe's intentions.

From then on, Jay drank from the cup prior to making his entrance for every single show. He did it methodically, waiting for the first note of the show's theme song before taking a sip and then bowing to Joe in appreciation. Jay continued the ritual when he took over as host on May 25, 1992, through the end of the first run on May 29, 2009, when he poured the water on Joe's head instead of drinking it. Jay and Joe continued the practice during *The Jay Leno Show* and the second run of *The Tonight Show*.

According to Joe, Jay also had a tendency to touch things while waiting to go on stage. He was particularly fond of little corners and certain pieces of the set, such as a railing that held camera cables back. He also liked to sweep his foot over electrical outlets.

Jay has an affinity for numbers, although I wouldn't say he's a numerologist. He married Mavis on November 30, 1980, the same day his parents were married. Jay once told Larry King: "They were married for fifty-seven years, and my wife and I got married on the same day because it seemed to work for them. They were the funniest people I ever knew."

Before he met Mavis, Jay lived at different times with five women. All six were born on September 5. Cathy Guisewite, creator of the comic strip *Cathy*, once appeared on the show as a guest. In her dressing room before the show Jay told her that he was happily married but was attracted to her in a non-sexual way. (He did this in front of me so she wouldn't think he was flirting.) Then he asked her if she was born September 5. Turns out, she was.

Jay rarely attends Hollywood parties or social events and has few show-business friends. He says he likes making showbiz money but doesn't like living the life, which he compares to marrying a hooker. He rolled his eyes whenever entertainers whined about how hard they worked and advised

them never to do it in public because so many people were struggling just to make ends meet.

He would tell young actors who were overwhelmed by the long hours they had to spend on shoots: “The last thing people want to see is rich people complaining.” And his definition of a rich person was “anyone making more money than you do.”

Jay has close ties with police and firefighters and often does benefits for them. He once told me that everybody—not just kids in the ghetto—had to be in a gang, like it or not. The gang he preferred was made up of cops. Of course, he was kidding. Although, for some odd reason, he rarely gets speeding tickets. And he owns some of the fastest cars on the planet.

Early in his career, Jay had a few run-ins with the law. He was arrested for vagrancy two nights in a row at the same place, right in front of the Ripley’s Believe It or Not! museum on Hollywood Boulevard. He was homeless at the time and had no place to sleep, so he walked all night.

In 2000, when he got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, he requested that it be placed on the spot where he was arrested in front of the iconic Hollywood museum. At the ceremony, the late Johnny Grant, Hollywood’s honorary mayor, granted Jay a pardon for his crimes. The police were also there—this time as Jay’s invited guests.

Jay had come a long way since he told his first joke in fourth grade. His teacher was talking about how cruel the Sheriff of Nottingham was to Friar Tuck. And Jay said: “Do you know why they boiled him in oil? Because he was a fryer.” He got laughs right from the get-go.

A number of show business greats influenced Jay, including Johnny Carson, Steve Allen, Jack Benny, and Rodney Dangerfield. But his favorite was Elvis Presley. He would often point out that every single one of Elvis’s thirty-one films made money, despite the fact that critics couldn’t stand them. When Jay was seven years old, he went to the movies and watched Elvis in *Loving You*. The girls swooned

when he sang “Teddy Bear.” That’s when Jay decided to get into entertainment. At first he took guitar lessons, but when that didn’t work he turned to jokes.

Jay impersonates Elvis all the time, saying, “Thank you, thank you very much.” He used to do an Elvis bit, sneering and singing Shakespearean soliloquies as the King would have done. In fact, Dick Clark told him that Elvis only liked two impersonations of himself, and Jay’s was one of them.

But no one shaped James Douglas Muir “Jay” Leno and his comedy more than his parents. You could see it in his stand-up routine, which was full of funny stories that illustrated the dichotomy of his father Angelo’s Italian background and his mother Catherine’s Scottish side.

Much of the humor was about food. On Sundays, dinner on the Italian side of the family consisted of more meatballs and spaghetti than anyone could eat. On the Scottish side, the family would go to his aunt’s house; she kept Coca Cola in the cupboard rather than paying to refrigerate it.

Jay described it to Oprah this way: “We’d go from meatballs and lasagna to warm Coke and a stale scone. My poor aunt would pour half a glass of Coke, and it would overflow because it was so hot! When we’d go to the Italian side for dinner, my [Scottish] aunt would say, ‘Look at the waste.’ She’d be counting how many meatballs were left.”

Jay’s parents have both passed on, but they lived long enough to see their son become a successful comedian and eventually take over *Tonight*. However, they never quite understood it, which was also a rich source of comedy for Jay.

When Jay got the gig, he made the cover of *TIME*, and he called his mom to tell her to pick up a copy. “Now, which one is that?” she asked. “It’s *TIME* magazine, Ma—one of the biggest. . . . Call Aunt Faye in New Jersey and everybody in New York, and tell them I’m on the cover.” There was a long pause, and his mom said, “I don’t think you’d be on the cover there, Jay. They just put you on the cover here in Andover [Massachusetts] because they know you’re from the area.”

Jay credited his mom as the inspiration for the title of his

show, which was originally called *The Tonight Show Starring Jay Leno*. But his mom, who despised pretentiousness, recoiled at the idea that her son would be the star of anything. So Jay changed the name to *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

He was a C-student, which probably stemmed from his dyslexia and his restlessness. His mom used to tell him he would have to work a little harder than the other kids. He took it to heart, and that's why he's a workaholic. No one—not even his harshest critics—would dispute the claim that he is the hardest-working man in show business.

Jay loves to tell the story about a meeting he and his mom had with his high-school guidance counselor, who told him, "Education isn't for everyone." He then suggested Jay might want to drop out of school and parlay a part-time job he had at McDonald's into a career.

The best part of this story is that after that meeting Jay continued to work at McDonald's, where he won a talent show and decided to go into comedy. He also went on to study at Emerson College in Boston, where he launched his career by writing and performing comedy sketches with his roommate.

But Jay doesn't resent his counselor for irreparably damaging his sense of self-worth. He thinks today's emphasis on self-esteem is overrated and often points out that Mafia hit men are more self-confident than anyone else. He really believes everyone else is better and smarter than he is. "Maybe there's nothing wrong with feeling like you're not the greatest," he once said. "Maybe you're not the best, so you should work a little harder."

In any competitive situation Jay portrays himself as—and is often perceived as—the underdog, even if he isn't. But how does he pull that off? He was the number-one guy in late night from 1995 to 2014. I think he subconsciously believed he was not as good as Letterman. But I also think he consciously portrayed himself that way because he knew everyone roots for the underdog. There's a reason he always insisted on being paid less than his *Late Show* counterpart.

One of my favorite *Tonight Show* features was “Jaywalking,” Jay’s version of “man-on-the-street” interviews. The concept was created by Steve Allen, the original host of *The Tonight Show*. But Jaywalking brought a unique twist to this well-known routine: The people being interviewed tended to be stupid—really stupid—about everything from world events to history to the identity of prominent political leaders. But it was funny simply because their blissful ignorance was so unbelievable:

Jay: Who was the first president?

Person: Benjamin Franklin.

Jay: In what country would you find the Panama Canal?

Person: I haven’t a clue.

Jay: What year was Independence Day?

Person: July 4, 1864.

Sometimes the answers were amazingly clever, even though they weren’t meant to be:

Jay: What was the Gettysburg Address?

Person: I don’t know the exact address.

Jay: How many stars in the [American] flag?

Person: It’s moving too fast to count them.

Jay: What president was named “Tricky Dick”?

Person: Bill Clinton.

Jay and the writers of Jaywalking were often asked how many people they had to talk to for each one that aired. The answer was: surprisingly few. At the same time, there was admittedly a little sleight of hand involved. A successful Jaywalking segment was all about location. The best spots were Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles and Universal CityWalk in Universal City. The key was to find the places where trendy people hung out. In the early days, Jaywalking was shot in Burbank, a typical family community where they found very few “stupid people.”

I believe Jaywalking was really about Jay Leno himself. It

was his clever way of getting even with the world for all those Cs he got in school. He was thumbing his nose while winking at his fifth grade teacher, who wrote on his report card, "If James spent as much time on his studies as he does trying to be funny, he'd be an A student." But he was never malicious about it. He was having fun.