

Jason Stuart: Bustin' "Out!"

He's "out," he's Jewish, he's funny and he's coming to Indy June 18th. He's Jason Stuart: the first openly gay comic to headline Crackers. You may recognize him from his recurring role as Damon Wayans' "Doctor Thomas" on ABC's hit sit-com, "My Wife and Kids;" or maybe you've seen him on "Will & Grace," "The Drew Carey Show," "Charmed," "Providence," "Murder She Wrote," "HBO's Gia," or any number of stage, film and TV appearances he's notched onto his belt over an impressive 20-year career. You'll be seeing a lot more of this multi-faceted comic gem in coming months; but let's let him tell you – it'll be better.

N: You've been to Indianapolis before, haven't you?

JS: Yes, but never in a club... only for events: once, for Kay Clinton; then most recently, for my film, "10 Attitudes." I was there for that film festival you have.

N: The gay and lesbian film festival?

JS: Yes. I did a little show before the film. I guess I've just done little sets -- guest appearances there. I've never really done my whole show.

N: You won an award recently for that film, didn't you? Best picture at the Barcelona International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival?

JS: Yes, that was wonderful.

N: That was. So, what's new?

JS: Now, I'm on the road with "My Big Fat Gay Jewish Comedy Tour."

N: How's it going, so far?

JS: I'm having a ball!

N: Anything new or different for you this time around?

JS: Well, a lot of new material, and I think I'm a lot happier now.

N: Great. When you think of Indianapolis, what impressions come to mind?

JS: I liked your leather bar. Let's see... I thought the audiences were so supportive and wonderful last time... I did a guest set at Crackers one night. That's how they met me.

N: Where are you from, Jason?

JS: I was born in New York and when I was 9 months old, I moved to Los Angeles. I've lived in Los Angeles my whole life. That's why I'm very affected by my own presence.

N: That's funny. Before you started acting and doing stand-up comedy, what other jobs did you have? What kind of things were you into?

JS: I never had a job. I never did anything else. I mean I did part time jobs: I was a waiter... I was a phone operator... I did office temp work... held out leaflets. I never really had any talent for anything else... except being fired. I always thought I was going to be a really big star. So I'd never have to learn anything else. Thank God, I'm able to make a living at what I do now.

N: Did you study acting?

JS: I'm always studying... I just finished a class with Jeffrey Tambour, from Larry Sanders' Show... I also did a drama class recently... Now, I'm starting an improv class at the Comedy Store.

(The phone rings. He takes the call and comes back.)

JS: I was up for the part on “Strong Medicine” and I just found out I’ve been moved up to “on avail” which means it’s between me and one other guy.

N: That’s good news.

JS: And they’re interested in me for a part on “ER.”

N: As a doctor or a patient?

JS: As a patient. This is very, very exciting.

N: What moved you over from acting to comedy?

JS: I’ve always done both. I had manager who talked me into doing it.

N: Would you do us a favor and describe what your first night doing stand up was like?

JS: My whole life flashed before me eyes... I was so nervous that I was funny. I followed Damon Wayans at the Comedy Store.

N: Now you’ve performed with him on TV a lot.

JS: Yes, that’s where I met him, the night I auditioned at the Comedy Store in 1983, twenty years ago. I was a baby boy. I was like a teenager I was so young.

N: How was that night different from your first night “out” as a gay comedian?

JS: I became an openly gay comedian 10 years later. I have always been nervous and scared. I am not a very public person, personally. You know what I mean?

N: U-huh. Do you have a best and worst night story?

JS: Oh, recently I had a best night. I’ll tell you about it. I was doing a college at Syracuse University, in front of 1500 students, between the ages of 18 and 20. I wasn’t nervous about being gay, I was nervous about being over 30 and doing comedy in front of these young kids. So I am doing my show, I’m doing great, everybody’s there, it’s orientation week, I’m killing, I’m doing very well... then somebody screams, up in the balcony, “You suck!”

N: Oh no.

JS: I took a beat, looked at the audience and said, “You’re right... I’m good at it.” From then, the audience loved me even more. I got written up in the papers. It was a great thing. What it really was; was very powerful, because, when I was a kid... if somebody would have said that to me I would have melted. I would have become part of the carpeting. Now, I just... you know, I don’t give away my power... and because I’m an openly gay person, I can respond... in a positive way.

N: Have you performed in front of all gay audiences?

JS: I’ve done all gay audiences, I’ve done all straight -- most of my audiences are mostly mixed.

N: Any particular difference or is that too much of a generality to go in to?

JS: It’s more social; because, you can go on in Los Angeles and it’s different... economically, gay, straight, than say, Indianapolis. It’s social.

N: How about for you, as a performer: Any difference between being pre and post “out?”

JS: Freedom. Being able to be everything you can be. I think it’s more important to be an openly gay person than it is to be in show business. When I made that choice, you know... my power...

N: Cool. Jason, what sources for material do you use?

JS: My life, you know... things that happen. I mean, the other day, I was in West Hollywood and I was driving... and you know how “looks-ist” West Hollywood is...

N: Yes...

JS: So, I was driving and I see all these cops and I hear all these sirens... streets blocked off... and I thought to myself: What could be happening? Somebody fat must be trying to get into West Hollywood.

N: (Laughs)

JS: I just thought of it. That's how I think of things; you know what I mean?

N: Yea. So, do you use a script? If so, how much of your show is improvised?

JS: I use a lot of improv, I think... Deal with the audience... If you go to my website, www.jasonstuart.com there's a clip where I do an interview with a couple of bi-sexual women from the audience. So there's a section in my show where I actually do that.

N: How do you rehearse your show Jason?

JS: On stage.

N: You don't stand in front of a mirror or practice on the beach?

JS: No, not at all. The other day a comedian was saying to me "Don't you write your act out?" The first year I wrote my act out and then I have never done it since. I say, "Oh, it's the bit about fat guys in West Hollywood, it's the one about high heels on the beach," and I write bullet points on a piece of paper and I keep it on stage for new jokes and I work it out on stage.

N: Do you have any pre-show ritual or superstitions?

JS: No, I try to be calm and quiet.

N: What's funny to you, what makes you laugh, what tickles you the most?

JS: Something that's unexpected.

N: And if you had to be Webster for a day, how would you define humor?

JS: I would put my picture there.

N: Okay, thank you. Is there any particular message you are trying to convey through your work?

JS: Yes, to tell the truth... my truth.

N: Great. Can we talk about your film "10 Attitudes"?

JS: Yes, I would love to.

N: It's coming out for national release around the holidays?

JS: That's what I hear.

N: We're looking forward to it. Is there anything personal in this film? You star in it and you produced it.

JS: It came from an idea... an idea that I had because it was so hard to fall in love, which... I am still looking.

N: So you don't have a partner right now.

JS: No, no boyfriend.

N: Okay, have you ever had one?

JS: (Laughs) Oh yes, many... I've had! If they were coming out of prison I liked 'em. No more. You can bad boy in the bedroom but not in real life.

N: So about the film?

JS: It won best picture at Barcelona Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and best audience award.

N: You were in another film as well, called "Letting Go."

JS: Yes.

N: The character you play was an HIV+ guy.

JS: Yes, that was a wonderful experience.

N: That was a more serious role.

JS: Very serious. And the people from “ER” saw it. That’s why they are going to call me in to read for the part of an HIV+ person on that show.

N: In that film you talk about dying with dignity. What does that mean: “dying with dignity?”

JS: It took place in 1989 before they had “the cocktail,” so he didn’t want to live and be on AZT, because AZT was so bad for people. I don’t know if you remember. They took such large doses of it that it ate up the insides of their bodies.

N: So would you define living with dignity any differently than gay pride?

JS: Well gay pride is dignity on a personal level.

N: Thank you. Speaking of personal, what else do you enjoy doing when you’re not working?

JS: I work out with weights a lot. I enjoy that. I’m becoming very buff these days. I like to read, I like to hike, and I love going to the movies... all kinds, really.

N: Have you ever considered what else you’d like to do later in life?

JS: Well, I’d like to help my community more. That’s something I’d really like to do. I’d like to do more. Right now, I do a lot with HRC, the Human Rights Campaign. I’ve hosted a number of dinners and been doing some speaking. Right now, I doing a speaking tour called, “To be Out, or, Not to be Out.” I’ve been doing that at a number of colleges.

N: What advise do you give about being out?

JS: Being out is a gift of God, really. It’s a gift of God to your family, because, what it does is, it gives them the opportunity to become a better person. I really believe that.

N: Is there anything you’d like to say that we haven’t covered?

JS: I’ve got a part in a film that begins in June. It’s called, “A Day Without a Mexican.” It’s a comedy. I play a restaurateur. I’m excited about that and I’m working on a concert film.

N: Of your show?

JS: Yes, one I did in Austin... That and the release of “10 Attitudes,” along with this tour and acting... that’s about enough for now, don’t you think?

N: Yes, thank you. We look forward to seeing you here on the 18th.

JS: Thank you so much. Please say hello for me and let me know if you need anything else.

All we need now are reservations for one or all of his shows June 18th-21st at Crackers Comedy Club, 217 S. Meridian, 317-631-3536. You can be sure each one will be unique and, undeniably, gut-bustin’ tons of fun!

David Brunoehler