



# JACKIE MASON

## *'Funnier Than Thou'*

By Aliza Davidovitz

**A**s a celebrity journalist, I have walked down many streets in Manhattan with famous faces, but the experience is never more hilarious and entertaining than doing it with comedian Jackie Mason. Sometimes it can take 45 minutes to travel down one short block. Every passing stranger, with uncommon familiarity, stops to say hello and get his autograph. "Aren't you Jackie Mason," one fan asks. Mason quickly replies, "I sure hope so because I've been cashing his check every week." They laugh, they fawn, and then four seconds into the conversation--whether it be a Pakistani cab driver, a Jew from Boro Park or a farmer from Arkansas--they start to imitate him. Some are dead on—and some make you wish you were dead. But Mason knows that his manner and gesticulations are infectious, and jokes that even the Queen of England started imitating him after his royal command performance.

But there is indeed only one Jackie Mason, something that remains decisively clear in his new show, *The Ultimate Jew*, his farewell performance at New World Stages, in New York City. And though Mason has reached the zenith in his career and has been honored by the likes of Nelson Mandela, Benjamin Netanyahu and Oxford University, he has nonetheless remained down-to-earth.

In fact, he has very little tolerance for pretensions. With an agile tongue and keen insight into human nature, he slices right through the upper-crust and crumbles the flakes and fakes with his 70-something years of whetted wit. For instance, in regard to Eliot Spitzer's sex scandal, he queries: "What do you get for \$5,000 from a hooker that you can't get for \$4,000?"

In regard to the other "fine" luxuries of life, money is no problem for the very generous comedian, but he nonetheless prefers simplicity to ostentation. His favorite hangouts are New York's delis and diners. It is there, and in the very streets of the city he loves so much, that Mason finds fodder for his humor,



studies human behavior and explores the gridlock of colorful characters with whom he intersects.

He analyzes people on-the-go and within 10 seconds he can guess what a complete stranger does for a living and whether he's a divorcé, a Nazi, a patsy or a homosexual. How he does it is anyone's guess. But when one looks into his big blue eyes, one can see a depth and purity of soul that is hardly plebeian.

Though many may think that Mason, who was once a rabbi, and whose father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather and three brothers were all rabbis, has gone way, way off that track, it may not be so. For at the end of the day his goal is the same.

He exposes faults and foibles in the pursuit of honesty; he forces people to examine their behavior; he holds all people accountable for their actions; through humor he breaks down barriers between people and unites them in joy; in the midst of every show he breaks into chazzanus, singing in tribute to his rabbinic family; and, indeed, wherever he goes he tries to make people happy and is nice to everyone. He jokingly says that he gave up the rabbinate because somebody in the family had to make a living.

But does the one time rabbi believe in God? "Not that much," Mason says. "Why should I believe in Him, just because people says He exists. Personally, I never heard from Him. And look at our world. If a manager would run a company the way God runs the world, he'd be fired in second."

But unlike many famous people, Mason doesn't mistake himself for a god. And though he admits to having an ego and jokingly says that his only fault is that he has no faults, he makes no effort to deify himself or make himself larger-than-life. He collects no memorabilia or press clippings, playbills or anything of that nature in which he is featured. "I have nothing to gain by living in the past," Mason says. "When you die no one cares except maybe one sister-in-law and two cousins because they care how much they can collect. So why waste your time filling up closets with papers and tsootchkes." Instead, he suggests, "hang up two shirts."

Yet, is this man who makes so many people laugh happy himself? He says yes. "I'm sure I'm happier than most people because most people look miserable." And when asked when was the last time he cried, he of course replies to this blonde journalist with a joke, "I cry every time we meet and you don't take your clothes off."



*Mason and Davidovitz*

Born in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, Jackie Mason was raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His career had a meteoric rise until the one fateful day it fell into Ed Sullivan's disfavor when the powerful host misinterpreted Mason's finger which begged for one more moment of airtime as a lewd hand gesture.

It took many years for Mason to rise again after that incident but he did in 1986, and with great success, with his one-man show, *The World According to Me*. Now by his eighth and final show he has earned a Tony Award, an Outer Critics Circle Award, an Ace Award, an Emmy Award and a Grammy nomination and numerous other accolades.

He has made movies, TV shows, co-authored books and articles with famed attorney Raoul Felder, performed on the finest stages of the world, and now, despite all the fun he pokes at e-mail users, he has brought his humor to the Internet and has his own blog. He also appears weekly on Youtube or perhaps in his case, it would be more appropriately named JewTube.

But this comedian who has often been regarded as too Jewish himself is an equal opportunist when it comes to making fun of people. And when it comes to the presidential candidates especially, he has no problems stepping on their feet. In Obama's case, he's not sure on which foot to dance on. At one point in

his new one-man-show Mason deliberates on the question of whether Barack Obama is entitled to be called a black man. Obama's mother, he reminds us, is white. "If I had on one white shoe and one black shoe, would you say to me, that's a nice pair of black shoes?"

When the final curtain will fall on Jackie Mason's last show, it is certain that the likes of him will never grace the stages of Broadway again. Regardless, he wants no tributes, no flowers, no monuments, he simply wants to be remembered he says, "As still living."