

Sacramento, CA



An interview with comic Keith Lowell Jensen



Karma Waltonen, Davis Sci-Fi Examiner

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This week, I caught up with local stand-up [Keith Lowell Jensen](#) as he celebrates the release of his new CD and DVD, *Cats Made of Rabbits*. Keith is the resident atheist comedian in the multi-faith [Co-Exist Comedy Tour](#). He's also a sci-fi lover, so I thought we could talk about science, sci-fi, and comedy.

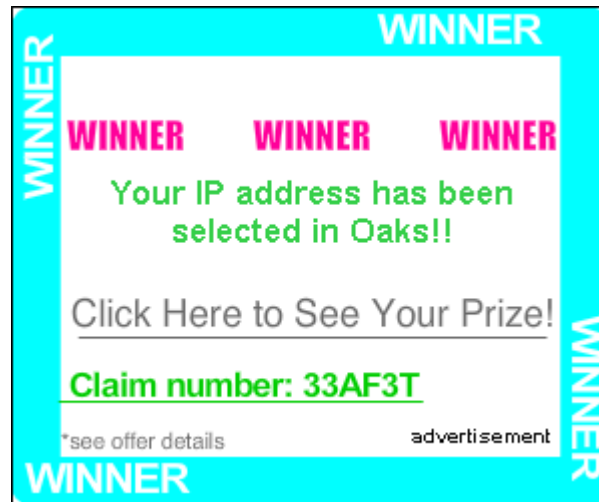
Keith, what sci-fi did you love reading and watching as a child?

The *Wizard of Oz* was both my favorite book and movie for a long time. Then, like most kids of my generation and every generation to follow it would seem, I got heavily into *Star Wars*.

My grandpa shared *Mad Magazine* with me and I enjoyed comic books, which I seemed to be the only person who even noticed were for sale at the local grocery store. They felt like little time machines, anachronistic in style and popularity.

In Junior High my friend Cole introduced me to *ElfQuest*, and I've been a full on comic book geek ever since, though always into the wimpier titles, never quite getting the appeal of the spandex heroes.

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You talk about science and geeky things (like comics) in your stand-up. Did your love of those things flourish together or did one notably come before the other in your youth?

I was tested for the "Gifted" program. I'd been expelled for fighting in 3rd grade, so it was either get into the gifted classes at a nearby school or my poor mother would be stuck either homeschooling or paying for private school. I tested high, and my parents told me I could be whatever I wanted to be. I wanted to be a rock star, but with all this smart talk I figured they'd want to hear something brainier, so I said I wanted to be scientist. That led to science kits and science books, etc. It was just good fortune that I turned out to really enjoy those things, and soon my feigned interest in science became genuine. I still want to be a rock star.

As for the other geek things, I didn't realize they were geeky. Not enough kids were into comics for it to be labelled geeky. The cool kids were actually really intrigued by our passion for *ElfQuest* and other comics and they ended up getting into it too.

Do you find that audiences can follow along both paths? Do you lose the non-geeks sometimes (those people who never read comic books)? Do some people just tune you out when you start talking about Darwin and sexual selection?

I try to keep everyone in so that I'm not preaching to the choir

all the time. I'd like people who haven't really thought about atheism vs creationism to listen in and not tune me out so, I make it about duck penis. Everyone loves duck penis. It is fun though when I do atheist conventions and such and I can just go full geek. The atheist crowd, the ones so into it they go to meetings, they're pretty reliably into other geeky stuff too.

As a related question, you regularly perform as an "atheist" comic. When you're actively labelled that way, the audience is prepared to go along with you. However, when that's not on the poster and you out yourself to the audience, as you often do, what are the types of responses you get?

Mostly positive. I start by making fun of the door knockers, and it says "See, we have more in common with you than even some who are also labelled Christians." And I try to make fun of myself too, but this is a challenge because non-atheist crowds don't tend to actually know enough about atheism as a sub-culture so we get a lot of the stereotypes.

I only once had a person really giving me a hard time about it. A drunk woman in Seattle, identifying herself as a conservative Christian. She fell out of her seat, I jumped to the edge of the stage and cast out some demons, and then security helped her up and out.

Poll after poll shows that Americans consider an atheist as the person they'd be least inclined to vote for--over someone who had an affair, over someone with "weird" religious beliefs, over someone who admitted using illegal drugs in the past. Why do you think that is, and do you see comedy such as yours as a vehicle for overcoming prejudices against us?

I think it's largely that they've never met an atheist. It's the same with homophobia or racism. Hard to keep it up when you meet someone and you connect with them on a human level. I think that my dad's generation had a hard time being racist because Little Richard and Chuck Berry were moving 'em, really touching 'em. Some think that's idealistic, but I believe that Rock and Roll and *The Cosby Show*, and Richard Pryor, etc. did wonders to help race relations and I believe that making people laugh and having a good time with them while being "out" as an atheist can have the same kind of positive effect.

I find that separating legislation from religion can be so liberating--on your album, you make the point that although you don't smoke marijuana, it should be legal. Your argument is that no one can give you a logical reason why it shouldn't be. What's gone so wrong with us that logic becomes the punchline?

Ha ha. I don't think it's GONE wrong. It's been wrong. I think the age of enlightenment was actually the enlightenment of a tiny minority of well to do intellectuals. Now we're working on spreading that to the masses, and in practice not just in theory.

On your album, you talk about how fatherhood has changed you, but now you get to mold your daughter. How are you going to make her an awesome geek girl?

Oh my goodness, it just happens. Sometimes when I'm carrying her she'll say "Sam, you're my best friend." This means she is now pretending that she's Frodo and Sam is carrying her the last stretch to throw the ring into the volcano.

Finally, for our readers, can you recommend five sci-fi books or movies that immediately jump to mind that everyone should read/see AND then give me another five that might be more obscure--things that not everyone has experienced, but should? I'm asking for your top five from the canon list and your top five things that should be on the canon list.

I made my list sci-fi and fantasy, I hope that's okay:

The Lord of The Rings films and books, an obvious choice, but SO good.

Blade Runner, the 90s director cut (tied with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* & *Being John Malkovich*)

Brave New World, Aldus Huxley

Star Wars

Star Trek the Next Generation

Fast Cheap and Out Of Control, great documentary

Liquid Sky

The Forbidden Zone

Sigue Sigue Sputnik, the best sci-fi band ever

ElfQuest, the original quest

Keith Lowell Jensen's website, with blog and performance schedule, can be found [here](#). If you'd like to see him perform exorcism on hecklers, he hosts comedy night at

Luna's in Sacramento every Wednesday. If you'd like to laugh really hard, *Cats Made of Rabbits* is available from Amazon in DVD and CD format.

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