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Jack Black Biography

April 7, 1969 • Santa Monica, California

Actor, singer, musician



Black, Jack.

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Jack Black is a one-man dynamo—a manic, scruffy ball of energy who has quietly been shaking up the entertainment world for years. Acting steadily since the mid-1990s, Black usually took on smaller roles that were usually quirky, but always unforgettable. He also became one-half of a comedy rock duo called Tenacious D, which played regularly in small comedy clubs in California. As a result, Black developed a cult following of fans, who watched and waited for him to break out as a star. In 2003 fans got their wish, when Black skidded onto the screen as rocker-turned-teacher Dewey Finn in the blockbuster *School of Rock*. Almost overnight, Jack Black became a household name.

(Product of rocket science

Jack Black was born April 7, 1969, in Santa Monica, California, to Tom and Judy Black, both satellite engineers. In a 2003 *Newsweek* interview with Devin Gordon, Black admitted it was ironic that both his parents were rocket scientists. He also put a Jack Black spin on the situation: "They're rocket scientists. I'm a rock scientist."

While Black was growing up his parents fought constantly, which finally led them to divorce when he was ten years old. The separation had a profound effect on Black. In search of attention, he turned to acting. Black appeared in his first television commercial, for Atari, when he was thirteen. "I knew that if my friends saw me on TV, it would be the answer to all my prayers," he told Gordon, "because ... everyone would know I was awesome. And I was awesome—for three days. Then it wore off. But it gave me the hunger." Black followed his Atari commercial with a Smurfberry Crunch ad, which he admitted wasn't nearly as cool.

After divorcing Judy Black, Tom Black moved out of the country and started a new family. Feeling abandoned, Jack became moody and started to act out. He turned to drugs and began stealing money from his mother. A frustrated Judy sent the boy to an alternative school in Culver City, California, where therapy was part of the curriculum. While there, Black was encouraged by one of his teachers to channel his energy through acting. After getting back on track, Black transferred to a private school called Crossroads in Santa Monica. After graduating in 1987, he enrolled at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

"There's a little bit of acting in my music, and there's always a little music in my acting, so it's kind of like the peanut butter cups: 'You've got your chocolate in my peanut butter.'"

(More than a Belushi clone

In 1989 Black left UCLA to join The Actors' Gang, a Los Angeles-based acting troupe co-founded in 1981 by Tim Robbins (1959–). At the time, Robbins was best known for his performance as the rookie pitcher in *Bull Durham* (1989), but he was also about to break out as a director. In 1992 Robbins directed his first movie, *Bob Roberts*, and he cast Black in his first film role, as a crazed fan. Their collaboration would continue throughout the 1990s, with Black appearing in two more movies directed by Robbins: *Dead Man Walking* (1995) and *Cradle Will Rock* (1999).

(Will Ferrell: Partner in Comedy

It seems that everywhere Jack Black goes, Will Ferrell is not too far behind. In 2003, according to *Entertainment Weekly*'s annual list of top entertainers, Black had the dubious distinction of sharing the title of favorite Hollywood class clown with Ferrell. At the 2004 Academy Awards, the two cracked up viewers when they shared a microphone and sang the "get off the stage" song. And in April of 2004, it was announced that Black and Ferrell were slated to star in an upcoming comedy about two Los Angeles motorcycle cops. The two have been so closely linked that many people often wonder who is funnier—Black or Ferrell?

Best known for the many characters he created on the long-running television series *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), Will Ferrell was born on July 16, 1968, in Irvine, California. He began his impersonations in high school when he was in charge of broadcasting the daily announcements. Ferrell graduated from the University of Southern California with a degree in sports journalism, and worked briefly as a sports announcer. At the same time, he performed stand-up comedy at local clubs and coffee houses. When he realized he preferred comedy, Ferrell began taking workshops at a local community college. He soon joined The Groundlings, an Los Angeles-based comedy improv group. It was while working with The Groundlings that he was discovered for *Saturday Night Live*.

Ferrell appeared on *Saturday Night Live* from 1995 to 2002, and is known for creating such memorable characters as Craig the Spartan cheerleader, and for his uncanny impersonations of famous persons such as President George W. Bush (1946–). Ferrell's movie career began during his stint on *Saturday Night Live*. His movie titles include *A Night at the Roxbury* (1998), featuring his SNL club-hopping character Steve Butabi, *Zoolander* (2001), and *Old School* (2003).

In 2003 Ferrell had his first starring role playing a six-foot-three-inch, yellow-tight-wearing Christmas gnome in the movie *Elf*. Ferrell gave Black a run for his money at the box office when *Elf* proved to be a surprise hit, bringing in \$150 million dollars. As a result Ferrell, like Black, seemed to have his pick of roles. He followed *Elf* with the movie *Anchorman* (2004), and signed on to appear in a film by famous director Woody Allen (1935–). He was also chosen to star in the movie *A Confederacy of Dunces*, based on a novel by American author John Kennedy O'Toole (1937–1967). Jack Black had also been considered for the role.

In addition to appearing in Robbins-directed films, Black accumulated a number of other movie credits, usually playing the wacky best friend, as he did in *The Cable Guy* (1996) or *Bongwater* (1998). Black also took bit parts on such television shows as *Life Goes On*, *Northern Exposure*, and *The X-Files*. He was definitely starting to get noticed, especially by critics, who often compared him to the comedian John Belushi (1949–1982), who first gained fame on the late-night comedy series *Saturday Night Live*.

On the surface, the comparison was easy to see. At five-foot seven inches tall and weighing about two hundred pounds, Black, like Belushi, is short and stocky. He also shares the same wild-eyed look, devilish grin, and animated eyebrows. But it was also clear that Black was not a Belushi clone; he was an actor who brought a unique talent to his many roles. That talent became apparent when he appeared in *High Fidelity* (2000), a movie based on the novel by popular English author Nick Hornby (1957–) and starring John Cusack (1966–). Cusack, a friend of Black's since their Actors' Gang days, suggested Black for the movie.

Although *High Fidelity* starred John Cusack as record store owner Rob Gordon, the main draw of the movie was Jack Black, who played Barry, the obnoxious record store clerk with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of all things vinyl. Barry does little actual work. Instead, he and a fellow clerk spend most of their time making fun of customers and quizzing each other on music trivia. The record store scenes highlight Black's whip-smart acting abilities, but the real treat takes place at the end of the film. Barry, who has hinted about his singing aspirations throughout the movie, takes the stage and steals the show by belting out a classic tune by American R&B singer Marvin Gaye (1939–1984).

(Half of a tenacious duo

For those who have followed Black's career, it was not surprising that he took so easily to the microphone in *High Fidelity*. Since 1994, in addition to being an actor, Black has also been part of a rock band known as Tenacious D. Black formed the two-man group with Kyle Gass, whom he met while performing with The Actors' Gang. In a *People* interview with Jason Lynch, Black confided that at first he and Gass were "archenemies," but that eventually they worked out their differences and soon were spending a lot of time in Gass's apartment, writing songs, playing music, and dreaming about forming a band. They named their group Tenacious D, which stands for "tenacious defense," a term regularly used by sports announcer Marv Albert (1944–).

The D (as the group is referred to by its fans) started out as a regular band, but Black and Gass quickly realized that their strength was in parody. This means that they poke fun at anything that comes their way, including heavy metal rockers who take themselves too seriously and the music industry in general. Essentially they are heavy metal comedians: two middle-aged, overweight men who tear up the stage like veteran rock stars. According to Cusack, who spoke with reporter Michael Salkind of the *Colorado Springs Gazette* in 2000, Tenacious D is "one of the six or seven wonders of the world."

The band drew such a following at local Los Angeles area clubs that the rock duo was soon featured in short spots on the Home Box Office (HBO) show, *Mr. Show with Bob and David*. This led to an appearance in the 1995 movie *Bio-Dome* and a half-hour series in 1999 on HBO called *Tenacious D: The Greatest Band on Earth*.

(Black and White

Following his talented turn in *High Fidelity*, Black got his first taste as a leading man while playing opposite Oscar-winning actress Gwyneth Paltrow (1973–) in the comedy *Shallow Hal* (2001). The movie's premise is that Black's character, the superficial Hal Larson, pursues only gorgeous women. During a chance meeting with self-help guru Tony Robbins, Larson is hypnotized so that he is able to see a woman's inner beauty. As a result, he stuns his friends by falling for a 300-pound woman. Critics generally panned the weak comedy, and most felt that Black was miscast as the cynical Larson. On the other hand, it was a turning point in his career, since it was evident that Black felt comfortable as a leading man. Roger Ebert, film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, commented that "in his first big-time starring role, [Black] struts through with the blissful confidence of a man who knows he was born for stardom."

In 2002 Black briefly slipped back into co-star status when he appeared as Lance, the deadbeat brother, in the offbeat comedy *Orange County*. Again, the movie received lackluster reviews, but critics, including Ebert, were wowed by Black's performance. The film was also important for Black because he formed a partnership with the movie's writer that would change his career.

Orange County was written by Mike White (1970–), a pal of Black's who lived next door to him in Hollywood from 1997 to 2000. White, too, was on the verge of making it big. He had written for the popular television shows *Freaks and Geeks* and *Dawson's Creek*, and he had penned the movies *Chuck and Buck* (2000) and *The Good Girl* (2002). Black admitted to Steven Daly of *Entertainment Weekly* that he was "obsessed" with White's quirky style of writing, so he approached his friend about writing a movie specifically for him. He was tired of being offered frat boy Belushi-type roles and wanted something that would showcase his talents. White was up for the challenge, and spent five months designing a custom-made role for Black and crafting a script. The character he developed was Dewey Finn; the movie was *School of Rock* (2003).

(School Daze

In *School of Rock*, Black plays Dewey Finn, a down-on-his-luck guitarist and singer who scams his way into becoming a substitute teacher at a posh New York prep school. The scruffy musician has his own unique way of teaching. For homework, he hands out CDs so that his students can study the history of rock, and their daily lessons focus on creating what he calls "musical fusion." Ultimately Finn and his fifth graders form their own group, the School of Rock, and they compete in a citywide battle of the bands. But of course the point is not about winning the contest. As Freddy, the band's ten-year-old drummer explained, "We're on a mission. One great rock show can change the world."

The character of Dewey Finn is everything about Black all rolled into one: he has Black's abundant energy, his love of rock and roll, his musical talent, and his frantic personality. As Black explained to Edna Gundersen in *USA Today*, he "scientifically figured [Dewey Finn] is 92% me. There's 8% that's not

me." In the same article, however, film writer White was quick to point out that Finn is not a Xerox copy of Black. "Jack is a conscientious professional who takes his job seriously, and he isn't bouncing off the walls 24/7."



Jack Black poses with his young co-stars at the Hollywood premiere of *School of Rock*.

AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.

School of Rock brought in more than \$20 million at the box office when it opened in October of 2003. The movie drew praise for writer White, who also costarred as Finn's uptight roommate, Ned Schneebly. Director Richard Linklater (1961–) also earned kudos for the project. Linklater, who directed 1993's *Dazed and Confused*, is a dedicated rock buff; he painstakingly made sure that all music references in the movie were accurate. In addition, it was Linklater's idea to cast children who were musicians as Dewey Finn's students. All the kids in the movie sing and play their own instruments.

(Goblets of praise

Without a doubt, however, *School of Rock* was Jack Black's movie. It established him as a certified star, and critics, to quote Dan Snierson in *Entertainment Weekly*, raised "goblets of gush" in his honor. Black even received a Golden Globe nomination as best leading actor in a musical or comedy. Golden Globes are awarded each year by members of the Hollywood Foreign Press for outstanding achievement in film and television.

Following the movie's release, Black went on a nonstop whirl of interviews, appearing on every program from *Good Morning America* to the *Tonight Show*. In interviews he gave a glimpse into his personal life, making it clear that he is not the party animal that people perceive him to be. In fact, White explained to Gordon that in all the years he lived next door to his portly pal, they never had a single party. Instead, Black spends as much time as he can with his longtime girlfriend, actress and writer Laura Kightlinger. He is a self-proclaimed hermit, whose favorite pastimes include sleeping late, all-night movie marathons, and playing video games on his Xbox.

Given his white-hot status, however, there is not much time for Black to relax. In 2004 he appeared in *Envy* with Ben Stiller (1966–), and then lent his voice to the animated film *Shark Tale*. He was also tapped by English director Peter Jackson (1961–) to star in a remake of *King Kong*. Black especially hoped his newfound clout would spark interest in his own pet project, a script called *Tenacious D in the Pick of Destiny*. When asked by Daly what might be next on his plate, Black replied as only he can, "I'll probably have to do something stretchy. After the D-movie, of course. But then? Stretcha-letcha ding-dong."

(For More Information

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(User Contributions:

1 Austin Rogers

May 14, 2007 @ 9:09 am

Jack Black is the greatest rocker in the world! Don't get me wrong his movies are good too but i just really love Tenacious D!!

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