

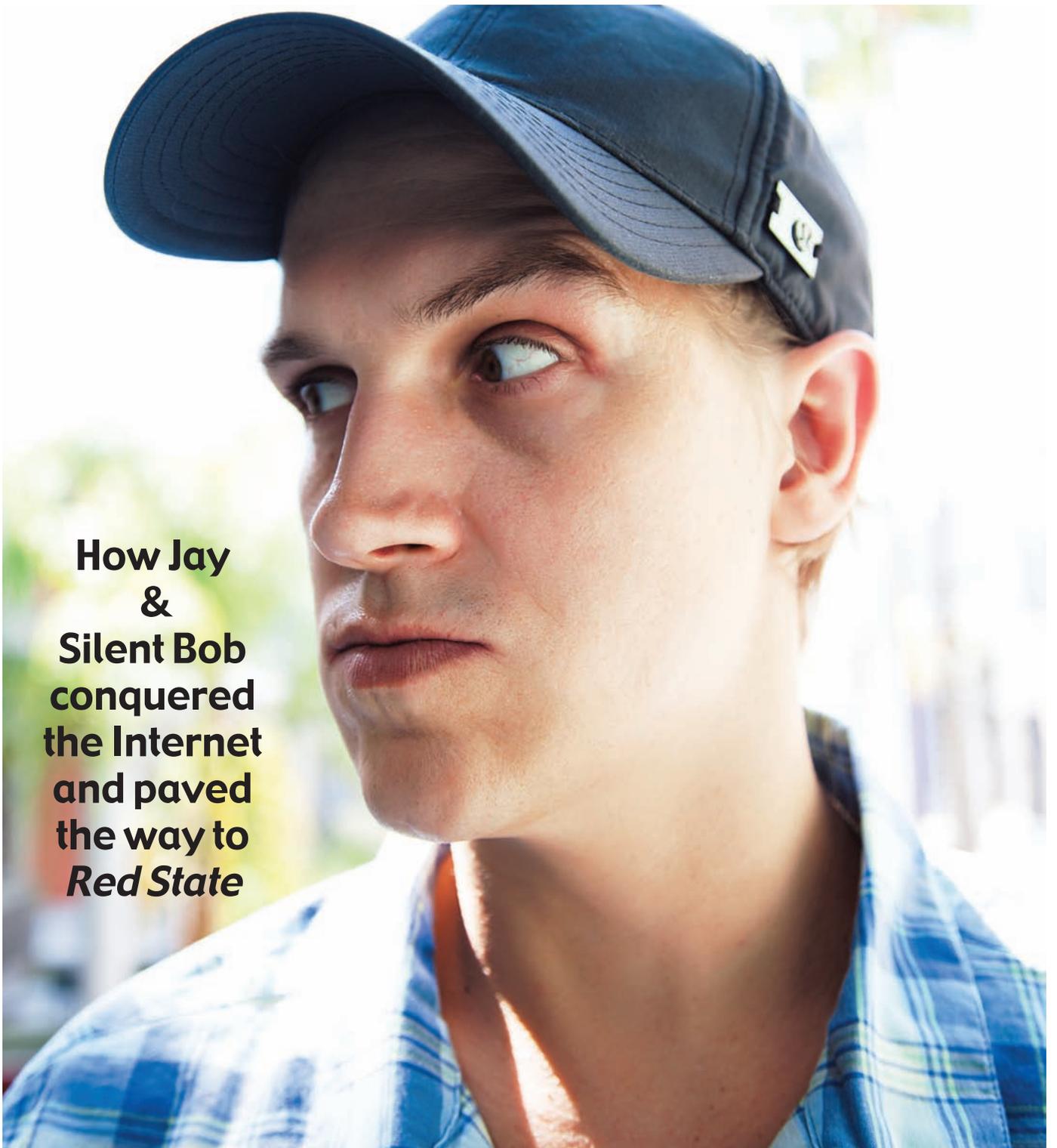
KEVIN SMITH & JASON MEWES

BY **ANDREW FISH**

First sighted loitering outside the Quick Stop in Leonardo, New Jersey, Jay and Silent Bob have been getting into mischief for 17 years and counting. They started off as lovable public nuisances in *Clerks* (1994), game-show saboteurs in *Mallrats* (1995), relationship gurus in *Chasing Amy* (1997), unlikely prophets in *Dogma* (1999), fugitive comic-book stars in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001), and full circle to neighborhood delinquents in *Clerks II* (2006). At the helm of the View Askew productions was Kevin Smith, a.k.a. Silent Bob, who created the characters as a tribute to the singular personality of his buddy, Jason Mewes, the ever-chattering, expletive-loving Jay. The two went on to appear as cartoon characters in “*Clerks: The Animated Series*” (2000). Allegedly finished appearing in live-action adventures, Jay and Silent Bob live on in cyberspace, as Smith and Mewes broadcast the raw, racy, and unpredictable

“Jay and Silent Bob Get Old” podcasts from the Jon Lovitz Theater in Universal City and from locations across the country.

Along with a number of other titles, these “SModcast” shows have gathered listeners by the thousands, who attend screenings, broadcasts, and Q&As with Smith, Mewes, and assorted guests. And it’s this groundswell of support that Smith has wielded to independently produce his latest effort, *Red State*. Amid some industry outcry, he opted to distribute the movie independently as well, purchasing the rights from himself for \$20. *Red State* is an utter departure from his previous films, and it’s arguably his best. The dark, creepy, blood-spattered look at a Christian extremist group that kidnaps three teenage boys with the intent to send them to hell stars Melissa Leo, John Goodman, and Michael Parks. We meet up with Smith and Mewes in the Hollywood Hills to talk history, Internet, *Red State*, and the future of their empire.



How Jay & Silent Bob conquered the Internet and paved the way to *Red State*

PHOTOGRAPHY **JEFFREY FITERMAN**

Venice: As two very different people, you must have had a lot to teach each other over the years.

Kevin Smith: Even to this day we have a nice yin-yang to our relationship. I was always the responsible one and he was always the dude with the million-dollar heart and the nickel head. But in recent years he's upped that ante. He's no longer a nickel head; he's worth 50 cents upstairs, now. He's doing a lot more thinking than he was back in the day, and I credit the podcasts. He's realized his own value, his own self worth. People will line up, like 200 people a weekend here, or 1,600 people in Orlando will sell out, to just sit there and listen to him literally talk about his life. That is what I've noticed over the course of the last year — he's grown as a storyteller and realizes his value as a storyteller. You go from laughing really hard at some of his previous antics to some horrifying shit from his youth that put him into compromised positions

as a child, and you can hear a pin drop in the audience. You are in a comedy club and everyone's drinking and having a good time and all of a sudden you get real with him. But then, boom, he brings it right back into the comedic without losing any of the sincerity of that real moment that popped in. I think those are the thrill moments of the show. People go and they expect to laugh, because he is a funny dude, but what they don't expect is how raw, emotional and real he can get and still deftly bring you back into, "Hey, we're all out here having a good time." And you walk away feeling better about your own life. I can't tell you how many people you meet who are like, "I am clean this long and I use your podcast because Jason's story is like mine."

Jason, do fans still come up to you expecting to meet Jay from the movies?



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Jason Mewes: Yeah, people will still expect that at times, but not as much anymore. I feel like they have grown, too. Even last night, I was at a *Red State* screening and afterwards, one of the kids came up and was like, “I hate to interrupt, but I want to let you know I’ve been three-months sober, and a big part is from listening to your podcasts and hearing what you’ve gone through, and when I’m feeling down, I’ll listen.”

When you guys were hanging out as kids, did it ever occur to you that you would like to be in movies together?

KS: No, but when I saw *Slacker* on my 21st birthday, I was like, I want to be a filmmaker! I’d never really thought about it prior to then, but one of the first thoughts I had was, I’ll put him in a movie, just to see if anyone else thinks he’s funny. And it translated incredibly well.

And behind the comedy was Jason’s struggle with addiction and everything that went with it.

JM: It just keeps going on and on and it’s a big circle. You get addicted and want to feel better, and you do the stupidest, craziest things you would never do sober. A couple of situations happened and it was like, you know what? This is never going to get better if I don’t go home. That’s when I started heading back to Jersey.

KS: Between *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma* is when I spent all that time babysitting Mewes and getting him clean and taking him to a methadone clinic in Asbury Park every morning — and people looking at us pull up and doing a double-take, going, “Oh my God, Jay and Silent Bob have a problem.” It was so weird. Then we’d leave there and go get the Manager’s Special at Dunkin Donuts and look for 12-inch [*Star Wars*] Greedo dolls that we can buy and re-sell at our store [Jay and Silent Bob’s Secret Stash in Red Bank, New Jersey]. And that was the program to keep him clean. Every waking hour. And then he got clean! We went into *Dogma* with him clean, but then he met a girl...

What was it like as you guys developed these alter-egos with your own action figures and comic books?

KS: It was neat. It wasn’t intended; it was kind of organic. We were in *Clerks*, but nobody ever talked about us in the reviews of the movie. Every once in awhile they would say, “The director plays a small part as a character called Silent Bob.” [Turns to Jason] Interview Magazine gave you a “10-minute Oscar,” or something like that. They thought you were really funny in *Clerks*. Then we screened *Mallrats* at San Diego Comic Con, 1995. It was maybe a 300-seat theater. Jay and Silent Bob come on screen for the first time, and you would have thought we’d been in five movies prior. You would have thought we were Cheech and Chong or Bill and Ted. There was instant recognition and familiarity in a way that was never reflected while *Clerks* played at the art houses.

It was when *Clerks* went to video, that’s where it found it’s audience. And that audience loved Jay and Silent Bob. We show up and the whole audience starts erupting in applause. That was fuckin’ special. For 20 years we’ve been doing this Jay and silly Bob nonsense, and it’s still panning out for us. It’s not even like a life raft; it’s an ark that he and I have been sailing on for two decades. We couldn’t play those roles anymore — we’re middle-aged men — but it’s nice to be able to still be associated with the roles by virtue of the podcasts. I don’t think they’ll go away. The new generation is finding it all the time. The day I realized that people were passing around our stuff the way I passed around Monty Python tapes, I was like, wow, it can’t get better than that. You can keep an Oscar. That means more to me, because I’m now part of that thing that I was on the other side of. And that’s what every artist wants to feel.

All the work you guys do is fueled by the Internet. What was your first online experience?

KS: Hands down, 1995, post-*Mallrats*, licking wounds from the movie not doing well. Somebody said, “Hey man, did you ever see all the *Clerks* websites on the Internet? Go to an Internet cafe. There’s one they just opened in Red Bank.” And that was the moment it began. I saw this website that looked like what I could only describe as a magazine on the computer about *Clerks*. I had seen nothing like it.

And from there it was all about direct-to-fan interaction?

KS: I figured out early on, if you work for the audience, then you have no boss. It won’t ever be work; it’s a sheer pleasure. To get to a point in your career where you don’t have to work for anybody but the audience, that’s what every artist should be pushing for. And we’ve kind of gotten there! We’re not doing the movies anymore, and this is cheaper and quicker. With a podcast, you can live in people’s nooks and crannies of their life. You pull out your smartphone and suddenly you’re listening to “Jay and Silent Bob Get Old,” and you’re transported, theater-of-the-mind style, with some funny and gripping shit, and that time has gone by. And suddenly you’re invaluable to somebody.

You’ve used “Jay and Silent Bob Get Old” and your other SModcasts, which can be really raw and goofy, to gather and maintain a fan base that allowed you to independently produce and distribute *Red State*, a major feature film.

KS: One begat the other. We went from 200-300 seaters on a SModcast tour, to [Jason] and I touring last year at 1500-1600 seaters. So with all these tours on the road, I know how to collect an audience. I’ve been talking to them about *Red State* for years, so it was a no-brainer. Once the touring business was born, once we started taking the tour out on the bus,

that led to my going, “I bet you we could do Red State like this.” Some people were like, “You’re taking on the industry!” It was never taking on the industry. It’s just looking for an alternate means to do something, to express oneself. It’s expensive, releasing movies, but the way I was going out and doing podcasts was *inexpensive*. And I was like, well, why don’t I just take that medium and cross it with this medium? I always believe in “second bite at the apple.” If I don’t get you with the movie, I try to get you with the Q&A afterwards. If I don’t get you with the movie or the Q&A, maybe I’ll get you with the podcast that we’re also bringing along on the same night. And that’s kind of the model that we’re going to follow for the next few years. Even when *Red State* is out on DVD, the idea will be to set up a *Red State* screening and Q&A, and right after or before that, a “Jay and Bob Get Old” or a “Hollywood Babble-On,” or something. The live thing on the road is really viable. It’s nice to have the movie to take under your arm as well, and even though the movie will be on VOD September 1st and DVD October 18th, we intend to just keep taking it out again and again and again. It’s a fun movie to watch with a crowd, and when you put it hand-in-hand with a live podcast, it’s a fun night, man. It’s like four or five hours in a movie theater, or a bar or something like that, where you’re having a blast. And a very singular experience, where the people behind your entertainment are also right there with you. And that’s what I believe in.

With *Red State* focusing on religious extremism, how do you reconcile your own religious beliefs with those of the far right?

KS: I haven’t gone [to church] in a while. I still identify as a Catholic, but I identify more Christian than Catholic. But I’m not one of those guys who tries to cram Christ down your throat. I like to talk about or study faith and spirituality in the flicks, *Dogma* being one of them. And then, of course, *Red State*. *Red State* is definitely more about religion than spirituality. God is very evident in *Red State* in only one throwaway moment. The rest of it is about God’s wacky followers. I have a huge respect for what might be out there. Some omnipotent being, call it God — whatever. I like to consider myself a Christian in the way that it should be. You try to go out of your way to help other people. Thinking of somebody else before yourself. That, to me, [is more important] than following the tenets of any strict organized faith. It took me years to say this, but you can pray anywhere.

That would seem to be the fundamental idea, to love your neighbor.

KS: But unfortunately, the people that believe in those fundamentals, believe in a lot of other stuff on top of it, and the fundamentals are lost. They absolutely forget about the things that are supposed to bind us, and instead they concentrate on the things that separate them as Christians, or you as a non-Christian. And that divide-and-conquer bullshit

is just not interesting to me. That’s not what that faith is about. [Jesus] was, based on what [italics][italics] read, a pretty easygoing, forgiving cat. So right then and there, if you take a figure like that, build a religion on it — and include in the matrix, “And this man and his father will send you to hell if you’re bad!” — it just doesn’t really make sense. But it’s been around since I was a kid, so I still fear the idea of hell. So, just to cover my ass, prayers now and then.

And you don’t believe that religion makes anyone more or less moral?

KS: Your faith or religion is not the thing that keeps you straight. Just because something’s pious on the outside, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s pious through and through. I’d rather present not pious, and be pious inside. Put up a cool exterior, and maybe, inside, a little more reverent. Be human first. Be a humanist. Secular humanist. Maybe that’s what I’m kind of into now.

What’s it like to be living lives, at least on the air, where you can say whatever you like and not worry about offending people?

JM: Since I was younger, I just spoke my mind. But then I definitely learned, as I got older, that I have to watch what I say sometimes. I used to not have a filter at all. I would speak exactly what I thought. People back then would say, “Why do you say that stuff?” To me it was, “This is what I’m thinking and this is what I’m like, so either you like it or you don’t.” But then I realized you don’t want to hurt people’s feelings, so I learned to put some boundaries on it. But I still feel somewhat that way, and if they don’t like me because of it, then too bad. That’s how I’ve always felt.

KS: I go to that point of utter candor by being around people like Jason. Mewes is actually the guy that made me that “Kevin Smith” way — open, and, “I’ll say this!” Because I’ve been around a guy who said even worse for years and didn’t get in trouble for it. Mewes really did give me a lot more freedom than I ever had. There was something that he was doing that I could admire. Even though I’m not supposed to look at who he was and how he lived and find anything remotely enviable, I did. It was his utter freedom. It was a guy who was just total heart, total sweetness, but he just said whatever he thought, and never maliciously. So I was like, “That’s what I want. I want to be more like him.” And as years went on, I became more and more like him. And now he’s all square! He’s the square loser who can’t get laid, and *I’m the king!* [both laugh] ▼

Red State is available on demand with most pay-TV distributors, and from amazon.com, iTunes, and other online outlets. The Blu-ray drops October 18. Visit www.viewaskew.com for more information on Red State availability and screenings, and for “Jay and Silent Bob Get Old” podcasts and upcoming shows.

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