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DVD For Him, Laughter Was the Best Therapy

By ERIKA MILVY
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A MILD-MANNERED professional therapist by day and a mild-mannered, guitar-playing divorced father by night, Dr. Katz was not your average cartoon character. "Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist," which made its debut in 1995, was Comedy Central's first animated series, and it rejected the adult cartoon tradition of high-impact irreverence, snarkiness and raised voices.



Comedy Central
Cartoon versions of Jonathan Katz, as a therapist, and Steven Wright, as a patient, on "Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist."

It was understated comedy, low key and paced as slowly as drying paint. Nothing zany ever happened. Gravity was never defied. Its most kinetic aspect was the characters' propensity to vibrate. Rendered in what its creators called Squigglevision — a pseudo-amateurish cartooning style that uses software to replicate human error — the show looked as if it was hand-drawn by an artist on way too much coffee.

With its winning formula of neurotic comedians free-associating on Dr. Katz's couch, the show became a cult favorite among those who discovered it on the fledgling Comedy Central. A best-of compilation was released this month; a 13-disc set of all six seasons of

the series, which won both Emmy and Peabody awards, came out last year.

While Jonathan Katz, the man behind the cartoon, contends that the show ended because his patients got better, it was canceled as the network became a destination for young male viewers — the vulgarity-seeking "South Park" audience. This sleepy sitcom wasn't suitably high voltage.

"My comedy belongs in the '60s rather than the '80s or '90s; it was almost too gentle," Mr. Katz said in a phone interview. Like [Bob Newhart](#), the gold standard of TV shrinks, Mr. Katz is baldish and possesses a phlegmatic affect and a subtle wit.

Created by Mr. Katz and Tom Snyder, an animator and educator, "Dr. Katz" was based on Mr. Snyder's 20 years in therapy coping with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Two seasons into the series

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Mr. Katz found out he had multiple sclerosis. Together the two made a show of attenuated and comedic anxiety.

On Dr. Katz's couch were a stellar line-up of stand-ups lying down. [Rodney Dangerfield](#), [Ben Stiller](#), [Conan O'Brien](#), [Denis Leary](#), [Lisa Kudrow](#) — even [Winona Ryder](#) and [David Mamet](#) guest-starred.

MULTIMEDIA

Clip: 'Dr. Katz, Professional

1990s, Ben had boomeranged back to his dad's home, where he halfheartedly considered occupations (psychic, animal husbandrist) but mostly napped. Still, Ben and Dr. Katz were buds; they cracked each other up. It was an easygoing father-son rapport rarely depicted in TV or film — and probably never attempted in cartoons.

The other major recurring character was Dr. Katz's put-upon receptionist, Laura, the cast's only snide presence. Voiced by Laura Silverman (now on her sister Sarah's Comedy Central show), the character was unambiguously irritated by Ben and mildly irritated by Dr. Katz. (Ms. Silverman had been living in Cambridge, Mass., with Mr. Benjamin, and the role was based on her unamused responses to Mr. Katz's shticky phone etiquette.)

The show's head illustrator was a former cocktail waitress who would scribble on Mr. Snyder's napkins. The audio was recorded (in Season 1) in Mr. Snyder's kitchen pantry. At the advent of computer-generated photorealism, "Dr. Katz" cultivated a homemade imperfection. In 1995 Pixar released "Toy Story," the first C.G.I. feature film. At the same time Mr. Snyder was making high-tech animation on a shoestring with a few PCs. "I'm often asked, 'Does Squigglevision represent the characters' emotional turmoil?'" Mr. Katz said. "My answer is, 'Yes, and it's cheap.'"

Squigglevision's crudely rendered video was paired with retroscripting, an audio editing process in which ad-libs, mistakes and asides were repurposed and reordered. It produced the show's charmingly naturalistic dialogue, full of irregularities.

In the mouths of the guest patients, these audio quirks complemented the celebrities' couch ramblings, which ranged from [Ray Romano](#) talking about the lighter side of marriage and kids to Joy Behar kvetching about the cost of pantyhose to [Janeane Garofalo](#) grouching about the cost of lattes. [Julia Louis-Dreyfus](#) complained because her dry cleaner lost her maternity pants. [Sarah Silverman](#) talked about sex and toilets. [Jon Stewart](#) talked about pets and Jewish holidays.

Mr. Katz reflected that his soothing voice lent itself to Dr. Katz's vocation. "Soothing, bordering on boring," he said, recalling that one patient called him "Dr. Am-I-Keeping-You-Awake?" Yet he clearly helped his patients. Many went on to star in their own shows. **ERIKA MILVY**

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