

# the unknown **BELUSHI**

Samurai. Frat prankster. Blues Brother. Legend. John Belushi's widow, Judith Belushi-Pisano, reveals how a klutzy high-school kid became one of the 20th century's most influential comics.

**O**n March 5, 1982, the comic genius of John Belushi was forever silenced. The then 33-year old actor—an original cast member of *Saturday Night Live* who went on to star in the hit movies *National Lampoon's Animal House* and *The Blues Brothers*—overdosed on a "speedball" (a combination of heroin and cocaine) at Hollywood's landmark Chateau Marmont hotel. Millions of fans around the world mourned him but none more than Judith Jacklin Belushi, his high-school sweetheart, soul mate, wife and biographer.

Thirty-one years after his untimely death, Judith (since remarried) sat down with entertainment reporter Keith Valcourt to discuss all things John Belushi, including the influence he had on today's comedians, his favorite movies and the raised-eyebrow thing.

**HUSTLER: When did you first meet John Belushi?**

**JUDITH BELUSHI-PISANO:** We both went to Wheaton Central High School [in Illinois]. I had seen him around. John was two years older than I. Freshman year I was setting up the freshman mixer dance, and he was the drummer for the band. We talked a little. We had mutual friends, and so we ended up being thrown together in a group on a trip to a forest reserve, where we rented boats.

I was in the boat with John, and we started having a water fight. He pulled the oar back and accidentally smacked me. It wasn't too bad, but it left a bruise on my arm. He used that as an excuse to phone me several nights after to ask how my arm was. On the fourth or fifth night he invited me to the prom. >>





The prom was our first real date. He was elected prom king and had to go dance with the prom queen, and I had to dance with her partner. John was very embarrassed after he won. We had to leave right away. The crown was too small. Guess they thought someone with a smaller head would win. (Laughs.)

**How did John get his start with the improv ensemble Second City in Chicago?**

John's high-school drama teacher gave him two tickets to Second City as a graduation present. John and I went to see Second City. As we walked out that night, he turned to me and said, "This is what I want to do." He started his own improv group. From there he got into Second City as the youngest guy to ever be put on the main stage. Everyone had to go through the touring company to get to the main stage. Not John.

**Do you remember any of John's Second City skits?**

One of the pieces he used to play was where he was a guy in an overcoat bracing against the Chicago cold as he's being picked on by a street thug. This bully is giving him a hard time. Suddenly, John throws open his coat, and he's got two swords. He throws one to the guy, and they start dueling while John is spewing Shakespeare. He did singer/songwriter parodies. He would throw in [Joe] Cocker randomly sometimes just to end a scene.

**Where did the raised eyebrow come from?**

As a kid, he did work on the eyebrows to get more expressions. He would practice one side and then the other.

**Was it hard to move to New York City?**

We had gotten very comfortable in Chicago. It's such a great place to work. People are working together and supportive. When John got hired by *National Lampoon* [magazine] for the *Lemmings* stage show at the Village Gate, it was different. There was a much more competitive air about it.

**How did John land *Saturday Night Live*?**

We were doing the *National Lampoon Radio Hour*, and *Lampoon* decided to do another live show. They cast Brian Doyle-Murray, Gilda [Radner], Joe [Flaherty], Harold Ramis and John. [SNL producer] Lorne Michaels came to the show to look at Gilda. John was very leery of television and didn't think it was his route. When Lorne came, John wasn't interested. He didn't think, *I've gotta impress this guy*. He wasn't interested in the show at that point, but along the way the people around us started getting hired to do it, like Michael O'Donoghue and Anne Beatts, who had been writers with us on *Lampoon*.

When John heard they were being hired and then Danny [Aykroyd], he wanted to do it. He still had these mixed feelings about television, and he took that attitude when he had his first meeting with Lorne. He said something along the lines of, "I hate television. There is spit all over my television." Of course, in reality our TV didn't have spit on it.



PHOTO BY LADY VON JANSKY

Lorne was left with the feeling that John was trouble, and he didn't need the hassle. Then Chevy [Chase] signed on as a writer. Everyone [O'Donoghue, Beatts, Aykroyd, Radner and Chase] knew John and were lobbying Lorne for him. Finally, Lorne said, "He'll have to audition." Which was kind of an insult to John.

**What did he do for the audition?**

He had been developing the Samurai character around the house. It was one of those things that maybe he hadn't even realized was a character yet. He hadn't consciously thought of it. He was watching Toshiro Mifune from Kurosawa's film on TV doing the expressions. I gave him a closet pole, which was a mistake because it was thick and heavy. He was swinging it all around. The cats were all scattering, and he had this green robe that looked a little Samurai. I suggested he do the Samurai for the audition. He said, "What do you mean do the Samurai?"

**Did John really hate playing the Bees as much as we've heard?**

Yeah, he did not like playing the Bees. He didn't like dressing up like women either. He knew he could be funny-looking as a woman, but it seemed so cheap to him. The Bee was like that. He thought it was nothing more than just a funny costume—a clown approach to humor, which he didn't like.

John defined himself as an actor who did improvisational comedy, but he was his own worse enemy. If you put him in

a Bee suit, he did something so funny with his head that made those antennas whirl in such a funny way, people wanted to see it again. And again. And again.

**What was the filming of *Animal House* like?**

*Animal House* was very smooth in most ways. They made good use of his time [as the frat rat Bluto]. It was while making *Animal House* that John got his education about the blues. We spent our down time watching this guy Curtis Salgado play. John and he started talking about music. Curtis became a friend, and he would come over with these blues albums. He and John would just sit there for hours listening. Curtis would talk about the history of the musicians and the writers of the songs. John really absorbed things like a sponge. Jake Blues was born as Bluto was finishing filming.

**Did John enjoy doing film more than TV?**

It was a tough decision for him to stop doing *Saturday Night Live*. He really enjoyed it. It was exciting, a rush doing live shows. Plus meeting everybody all the time. His early goal was to be a movie actor more than anything, and he realized he couldn't do both. It was just too much. He would have probably wanted to do

another year on *SNL*, but there was the choice to do *The Blues Brothers* film or *Saturday Night Live*. Danny and he chose the film.

**Where did the look and style of *The Blues Brothers* come from?**

John had done a character at Second City called Shelly Baylas, who was sort of like Lenny Bruce. The concept was that for certain members of society to blend in and not stand out, so no one will see them doing what they shouldn't do, they have to dress in a suit and tie.

The hat came because John was wearing the porkpie hat around town as well as the dark RayBan glasses. He started wearing that look before *The Blues Brothers* when he started to sing with musicians. Lorne [Michaels] came to see him at a club and suggested he should warm up the *SNL* audiences. John said, "Danny and I have always wanted to have a band." They started doing it as a warm-up on the show.

**How would you describe John's bond with Dan Aykroyd?**

Dan and John were really true best friends and had a great love for each other that was inclusive of me, which was really nice. There were guy times like when they drove across country, but I was always included in the big picture. Danny would actually stay with us. John and I lived in the West Village of New York City off Bleeker Street near Christopher Street. One time, Danny called us. "I've driven my motorcycle, and I'm wondering if I can stay with you."

We said, "Sure, where are you?" Danny said, "I'm in some bar on Christopher Street." Oh no! He was sitting in a gay bar on Christopher Street in his biker leathers. We rushed right over to save him!

**Did John have a favorite movie he did?**

I assume his favorite film would be *The Blues Brothers* because of the connection [with Aykroyd]. They created it. These were characters they came up with. He liked *Animal House* and was very proud of it. He liked *Continental Divide* but was not thrilled about his other films.

**What is the one thing about him that would surprise his fans.**

Probably that he could speak in full sentences. That he was well read and could carry a conversation about lots of subjects you would be surprised about.

**What was it about him that has inspired so many comedians?**

I think people got the sense that he was putting himself out there on the line—the

boldness and truth in that. What you saw was what you got. He was very willing to work hard, and he made it look effortless. People had this impression that he just fell out of the limo and rolled up to the set, said "Food fight!" and left. But it took years of practice to get that jello sucking down.

**What is John's legacy?**

The work he put on film. Unfortunately, there isn't much documentation of his stage legacy, which is where I think he did his strongest work. He was very powerful onstage, but that was just for the moment.

**What are you doing to preserve his memory?**

I look at it like I inherited the farm [the rights to *The Blues Brothers* brand], and I'm trying to do what I can with it. We've started to promote projects instead of simply licensing the characters.

I wrote a television sample script with Anne Beatts to try to bring *The Blues Brothers* to television. I'm working as a producer with Danny and [Animal House director] John Landis to bring *The Blues Brothers* film to life on Broadway. I've got a deal with Warner Bros. and [The Hangover director] Todd Phillips to do a film on John's life. And we have a band, and there are two fellows that lead it: Wayne Catania [who plays Jake] and Kieron Lafferty [as Elwood] called The Official Blues Brothers Revue. We finally got them a nice tour. They were out for 60 dates.

**Is John really buried on Martha's Vineyard?**

I always tell people exactly where he is, and yet it remains a mystery. He used to be in the center of the cemetery in a regular plot, and when people came to visit his grave, they tended to go over other graves. So the town commission thought the best spot would be coming down the drive. I first got a beach stone to mark the plot with the Belushi name, but that was not at his head. Now there's a full plot, and it's even got a fence around it. We added a headstone with a skull and crossbones that reads, "Here lies the body of John Belushi." And it's not a lie.

**What about John do you miss most?**

I miss his consul—his advice. Does it get any easier?

Definitely. Life does go on. It's changed forever, not necessarily for the worst. It was certainly very difficult and took some time to work through. There's always something that lingers, but I can now look back and know that John had a great life and that he was pretty successful. Those conclusions give me a certain peace. ☺

