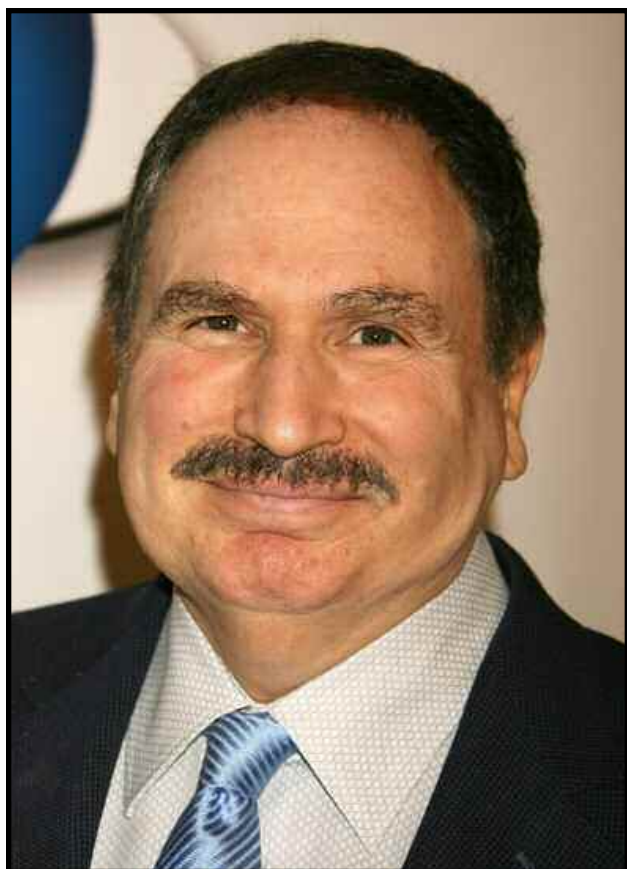


We all know Gabe Kaplan from his hit series “Welcome Back Kotter.” What you may not know is that he’s a world class poker player, a stand-up comic who worked his way up playing dives that Genghis Khan would be afraid to enter, and broke new ground with a classic comedy bit that almost got him beheaded. All of this toughness out of a quiet funny man with a gentle rebellious soul and an ego that you’d have to hire Phillip Marlowe to find.

GABE KAPLAN



INTERVIEW BY JOHN DEBELLIS

DeBELLIS: Your new book came out on June 26th.

GABE: Yes, It’s called, “Kotter’s Back.” Subtitled, “E-mails from a Faded Celebrity to a Bewildered World.”

DeBELLIS: Give us a brief description of it.

GABE: It’s me, under my own name, sending absurd, surrealistic e-mails to people, and includes their responses back.

DeBELLIS: What gave you the idea?

GABE: About four years ago, I got an e-mail from a celebrity boxing show. They actually wanted me, knowing I was approaching sixty years old, to get into the ring and box with another celebrity of the same age. So I thought screw this, I’m going to have fun with this ridiculous request.

DeBELLIS: And of course being a comedian at your core...

GABE: Right; I wrote ridiculous things, like I enjoyed boxing, but had become a Hasidic Jew and would have to fight wearing a skull cap and a prayer shawl. I also traveled with my own cut man and trainer, and wanted to stage a fake press conference where my opponent and I would insult each other and throw a few punches. I added that I would only fight someone who was at least ten years older

than me, like Adam West or Conrad Bain. I didn’t expect them to answer me. But they e-mailed me back and started real negotiations based on these ridiculous points. The e-mails went back and forth for a week and grew more and more bizarre. When it was over I said this was very funny stuff and I could do a book like this, because if people in show business, like a talent coordinator, could accept what I said at face value, other people might react in a similar manner.

DeBELLIS: When I read the book, I laughed out loud. The e-mails were so crazy, I was surprised people actually wrote back, like the famous pathologist.

GABE: Dr. Henry Lee. I wrote that my parrot “Steinmetz” had been brutally murdered and I suspected it wasn’t another parrot, but a human who was responsible. Could he come in and do a thorough forensic investigation of the crime scene. He wrote me back that he couldn’t but recommended other pathologists who might be available. He sympathized with me on my loss and tried to help. I told him the LAPD pet unit had botched the investigation.

DeBELLIS: One of my favorites is breaking Wilt Chamberlain’s record.

GABE: Wilt had written a book saying he had sex with 20,000 women. So I wrote to a book publisher that had done a lot of

salacious books over the years and said that I was going to break Wilt’s record. I have been with two women every day and was trying to break the record, but none of it was fun. The women were all paid and I had to complete the act to count it. I had a penis pump and was actually close to penetrating over 20,000 women. We corresponded four of five times. And he wanted to publish this book. He was raring to go.

DeBELLIS: In one of your e-mails you talked about forming a new act.

GABE: “Gabe Kaplan and the Pips.” Gladys Knight had retired. I had a picture of me dressed like Gladys Knight with the Pips. I had to send it to seven or eight places before someone answered, because everybody thought either I was out of my mind, or it was a joke. Finally someone answered and said, “Yeah, we’d be interested in booking it, but we’re an ice arena.” So I said we could put the act on ice.

DeBELLIS: You had mixed feelings about publishing the book when you finished.

GABE: Yes, when I was finished, people wanted to publish it, but I didn’t want to. I felt bad about putting these people on. But eventually I realized that if I eliminated e-mails that were really over the top it would be okay. Now, it’s just funny and I don’t think anyone comes off that bad.

DeBELLIS: When I started stand-up it was easy compared to the dues you had to pay.

GABE: When I started it was before the Improv, and there were no comedy clubs, and very few young stand-up comedians. The only place to work was at open mikes or what they called Hootenanny's in the village. They had a talent night every Tuesday night at the Bitter End and maybe they'd put on two comics.

DeBELLIS: What kind of material did you do?

GABE: Some semi-funny stuff I wrote and I stole George Carlin's names for a birth control pills bit, "Pregnot and Womb Broom" I did that bit for about six months.

DeBELLIS: Did Carlin find out?

GABE: Yeah, he didn't like it. Even though I was just a kid, it was wrong. Later on people started stealing my stuff and I knew how he felt. Your jokes are your children.

DeBELLIS: Where were your first paying gigs?

GABE: I sort of went the Lenny Bruce route and started working in strip clubs. There were a couple of agents that booked strip clubs out of the city. I'd walk into an agent's office and say, "Hey, Harry I got a great act..." And he'd say, "Do you have a car?" Because the most important thing was that you had to drive the stripper to the job. I told the agent I had a car, so the next week he calls me into his office and says he got me a job in Massachusetts, and it would be my first paying gig. He asked, "How much time can you do?" I said, "About twenty-five minutes." He said, "The stripper is gonna do fifteen minutes. The guy's gonna want an hour and ten minute show, so he's going to want you to do fifty-five minutes, so what are you going to say?" So I said, "I'm going to say I can't do that much time." "No you're gonna sound like an amateur. So when he asks you to do fifty-five minutes you say to him, 'I can't do a concert,' that will sound professional." I rehearsed all week saying, "I can't do a concert." So I drive the stripper up there, and she doesn't say a word the whole trip. I meet the owner of the club and he says, "I want an hour and ten minutes, the stripper is gonna do fifteen minutes and don't tell me you can't do a concert!"

DeBELLIS: So what did you do?

GABE: I told every joke I ever heard, even stupid ones that high school boys tell each other and I did OK, but the stripper got drunk, and wanted to kill herself on the ride back. She tried to get out of the car and run into traffic, I didn't know suicide prevention was part of my job. I then worked at the Stardust Club in St. Louis for about five months. It was a real old time strip club. I would have to go on after every girl and do five minutes. As I worked some guys would get hand jobs under the table. Sometimes I'd be in the middle of a joke and I hear a guy go "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" I thought I said something really funny. There's some guy getting off in the red booth.

DeBELLIS: You didn't record your sets?

GABE: I did the worst jokes imaginable in those clubs. "Hey guys, on the way over here I ran into a queer nail, son-of-a-bitch blew my tire." In 1969 I started working the Playboy Clubs and writing all my own material, it was great. Six hundred dollars a week and there were available women in every club. I was on

stage two or three times a night doing original material. It felt like you were really in show business.

DeBELLIS: It must have been an amazing time.

GABE: It was, being a twenty-four year old guy driving from one Playboy Club to the next. I would finish at 2 a.m. on a Saturday night and have to be in the next city on Monday night at 7 p.m. I always formed a relationship with one of the girls who would drive with me. It was a great drive from wherever to wherever, can you think of a better thing to do when you're a comedian and you're twenty-four years old?

DeBELLIS: I'd drive from the Improv to Catch with guys like Larry David, and Gilbert Gottfried, the exact opposite of your trip. The thing that was the same was the power of "The Tonight Show."

GABE: I tried to get on "The Tonight Show" around 1970. The talent coordinator was Craig Tennis who every comic knew, because getting on "The Tonight Show" was everything for a young comedian. I auditioned for Craig Tennis twice, at the NY Playboy Club, and the Ice House in Pasadena. He didn't like me. In 1972 I stopped working the Playboy Clubs and was doing some new iconoclastic material at the Improv. One night I was supposed to do a set and they told me that Craig Tennis was here. So I said, "He didn't like my mild stuff, so he's definitely not going to like my new stuff, it's too far out." Afterward he came up to me and said, "Do you want to come on 'The Tonight Show.?' We'll put you on this week." I said, "I can't do any of this material." And he said, "I don't care, do whatever you want."

DeBELLIS: What changed his mind?

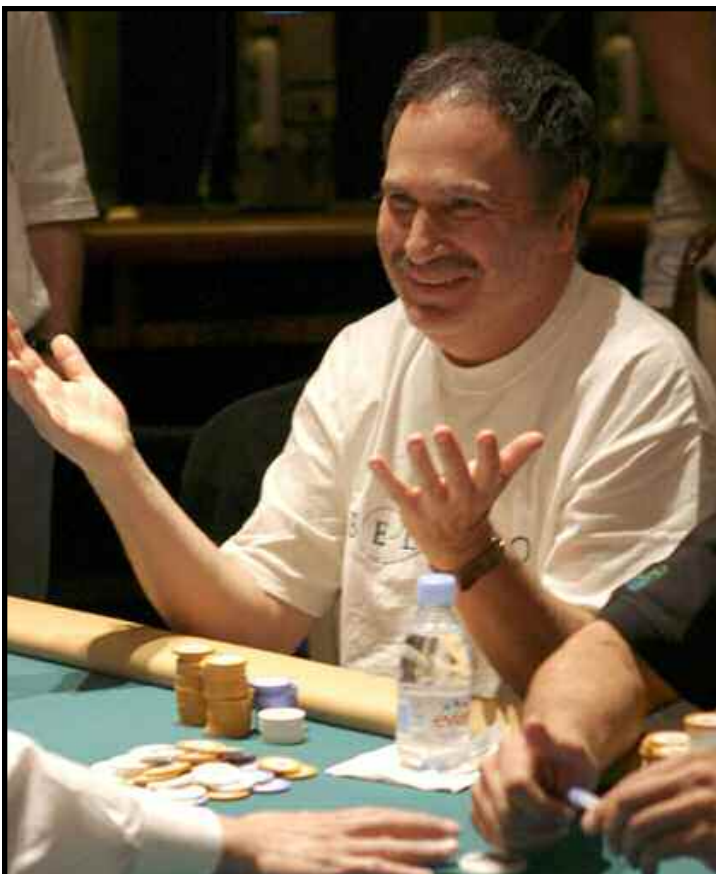
GABE: He just thought that I was hip and cutting edge. I wound up doing material that he had already rejected at the Playboy Club and at the Ice House. It was a bit about old people on the "Dating Game." Then I started to get on every television talk and variety show in the mid '70s.

DeBELLIS: What did your parents think of all this?

GABE: My father would never come to see me perform because it made him too nervous. He never thought I was funny. I would do similar stuff as a kid and he hated it, he called it "silly non-



Gabe Kaplan with professional poker player Phil Ivey at the Doyle Brundson Roast on July 27, 2006 at The Bellagio Hotel and Casino Resort in Las Vegas, Nevada.



Gabe Kaplan competes at the World Poker Tournament held at the Mirage Hotel and Casino Resort in Las Vegas, Nevada on July 31, 2004.

sense and disrespectful." The first place I headlined was the Playboy resort in Great Gorge, New Jersey. The hotel was sold out. My parents came, but there were no rooms left, so I let them stay in my suite with me. My mother came to the first show and my father stayed in the room. So between shows I hear my parents talking in the other room. My father says, "So you went to the show." And my mother says, "Yeah." And he says, "Was there anybody there?" And she says, "It was packed. You couldn't get a seat. Every seat was taken." And he says, "And he went on stage?" And she says, "Yes he told his jokes." And he says, "And they laughed?" She says, "Everybody was laughing at everything he said. When he started out they laughed at the first thing he said, and they laughed throughout the whole show." And my father said, "What did they look like, morons?"

DeBELLIS: Now I know why you became a comic.

GABE: He just couldn't believe that anybody in their right mind would laugh at me.

DeBELLIS: Your crucifixion bit, which I love, might even be more controversial today.

GABE: I wanted to do the ultimate Howard Cosell Impression. Well, the ultimate event in human history was the crucifixion, so I did Howard Cosell describing the crucifixion as an event. I went on a college tour and people loved it. It didn't occur to me that I was Jewish, that someone might have a problem with that.

DeBELLIS: I'm sure some people took offense.

GABE: I was doing it at the Improv one night, and a coffee cup came whizzing by my head and crashed into the wall. The last time I did it, other than colleges, was in Central Park. I was working with the Righteous Brothers. They'd opened for me when I got really big and then I'd opened for them. We went

back and forth according to whose career was hotter at the time. So I'm their opening act and I'm doing the crucifixion bit, and rocks come flying at me. People are throwing rocks. I'm looking at a rock bouncing on the other side of the stage.

DeBELLIS: Can you give us a few lines from it?

GABE: Some of that routine was like, "As Christ was climbing up the hill, Howard Cosell was saying, 'Don't forget to change your calendars to AD as soon as this is over,' and when the cross is raised Cosell says, 'Up goes Jesus, up goes Jesus.'" It was clever and wasn't anti-Christian or anti-religion...

DeBELLIS: The crucifixion bit had a little to do with how Kotter came about.

GABE: I did a record where "Welcome Back Kotter" came from. One half of it was me talking about the New York city school system and how they always try to categorize you into a class. 6-1 was for brightest kids in the sixth grade. 6-4, which was my class, was the next to dumbest, actually the dumbest because if you were in 6-5 you were criminals. 6-5 was sort of the *sweat hogs*. I did this bit based on particular guys I went to school with who would rank on (mock) each other. That was the first half of the record. On the second half the record company wanted the crucifixion bit and other stuff like that. I said, "You don't know what happened to me doing that kind of material, I might get shot." I didn't have the balls, so we did the record with other stuff on the second side. My whole life would have been different if that bit was on the record.

DeBELLIS: So the *sweat hogs* came from your life and started to gel on the record.

GABE: We based the *sweat hogs* on my friends in school. There was me, an Italian guy, a black guy, and there was a guy that was part Puerto Rican. We were a group, but not a clique because nobody else was trying to get in.

DeBELLIS: So where did Mr. Kotter come in?

GABE: The first idea Alan Sachs, who co created the show with me, and I had was to base it on four 27 or 28 year old guys that never grew up. They were still living with their parents, and still doing the same things that they did when they were 16. Our second idea was for me to become the teacher and instead of my contemporaries, the sweat hogs would be my students. They liked that premise, the treatment, and the pilot. And all of a sudden it's 1975 and I'm the star of a television show.

DeBELLIS: You made the teacher as funny as the kids so in a sense he was the leader of the sweat hogs.

GABE: Kotter became the teacher that everybody wanted to have. It was an unrealistic situation. Television in the '70s didn't want realism. Yet no matter where I went everyone knew someone like Barbarino, Horshack, Epstein, and Washington.

DeBELLIS: You had a great theme song.

GABE: They were looking for someone to write the song. I told them there were so many singers and song writers from the '50s and '60s that aren't working that would write a song on spec. I suggested about ten. Two were Dion and John Sebastian. Dion wrote a fantastic song that was as good as John Sebastian's. They finally decided to go with the Sebastian song. But I think Dion's would have been a hit also.

DeBELLIS: To change subjects a bit. You have a show on the *Game Show Network*.

GABE: Yes, it's called "High Stakes Poker." It's a real poker game, not a tournament designed to have one winner. Players start out with a minimum of a hundred thousand dollars and they play with their own money. People get to see how they play at that

level of poker. And this season coming up, there's going to be one table for three or four shows where everyone has to buy in for a half million dollars minimum. I really enjoyed being the commentator because I know most of the players.

DeBELLIS: How did you start playing poker?

GABE: I was working Vegas in the mid '70s. I'm a gambler and I was starting to lose a good portion of my paycheck playing baccarat and black jack. I played poker as a kid and I was pretty good. I saw that the hotel I was working at had a poker room. I sat down and had more fun playing poker than playing baccarat or black jack, and I won money. And then they started playing hold'em, and I had the same fascination that everyone has now with it. What started the current fascination is the hole card cameras.

DeBELLIS: That was huge.

GABE: I put poker over the top. People could see what players have and how they played. There's more and more poker on TV and the tournaments are getting more entries.

DeBELLIS: Didn't you win a major tournament?

GABE: I was the first celebrity to play in the World Series of Poker. I got knocked out the first day. There were about 42 players that year in 1978, and last year there were 8,700. There were only two poker tournaments then, the World Series and Amarillo Slim's Super Bowl of Poker. In 1980 at the Super Bowl of Poker there were 38 players and I won. Then I played in the World Series of Poker, and we got down to the last six players, all legends of poker, Doyle Brunson, Stu Ungar, Johnny Moss, Jay Heimowitz. And I had the most chips. I had a real good shot at winning both tournaments in the same year. The pros didn't want me to win the two tournaments, because it invalidated what they did. It was good for poker for me to win one. So they were on my side at the "Super Bowl" but rooting for anybody else to win the "World Series." I had three bad hands in a row. Doyle drew out

on me and everyone was cheering. Then Stu Ungar beat me and they continued cheering, and on the last hand I flopped three fours and Johnny Moss had a flush draw and he went all in. He even put his Rolex in the pot, I took off my watch and called him, he made the flush and I was out of the tournament in sixth place. That was the first year Stu Ungar won.

DeBELLIS: And now they have all these new players, many from the Internet.

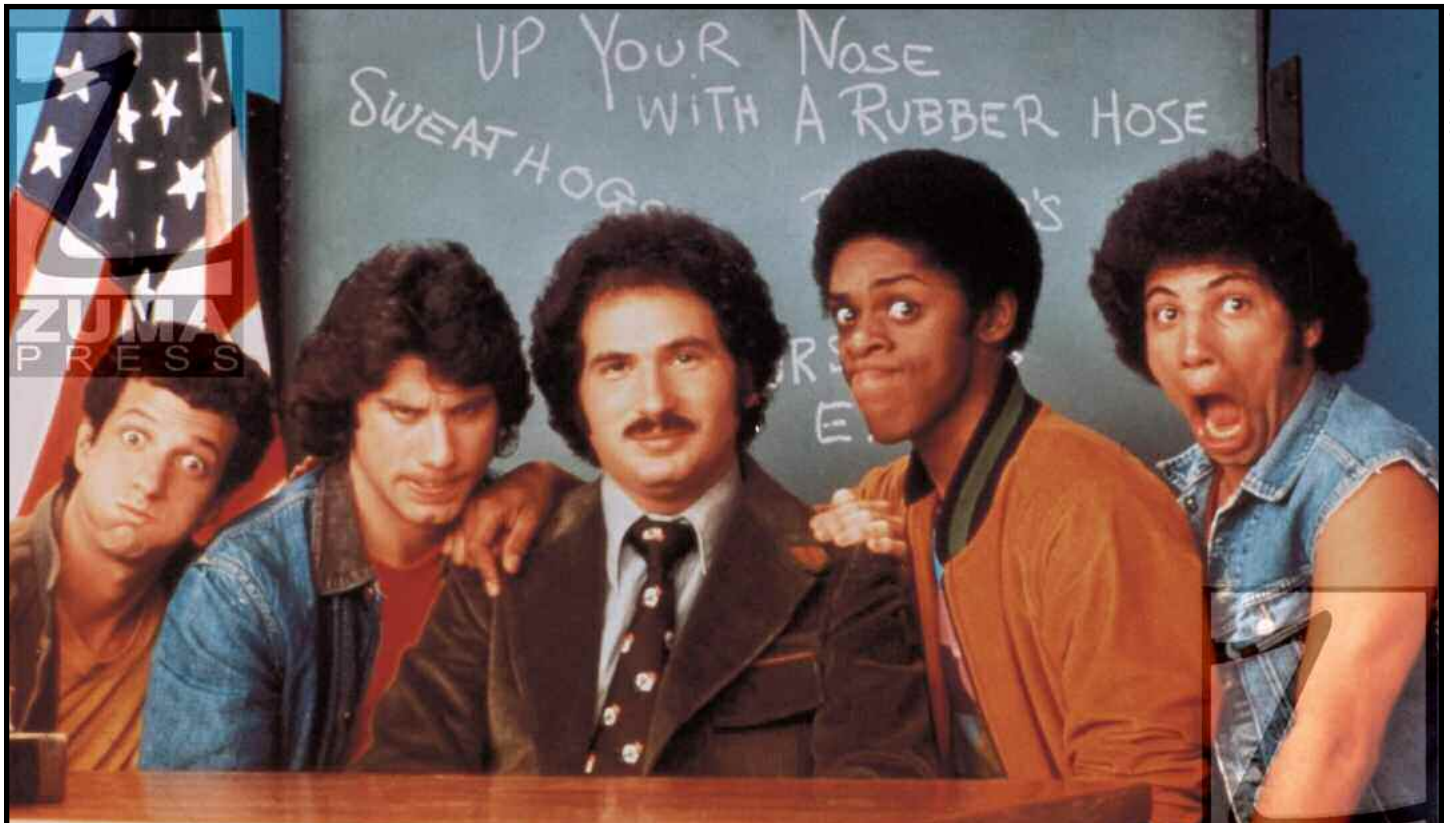
GABE: If you have some comprehension on how to play, anybody can beat anybody, and win a tournament because of how important luck is in poker. Some players can be lucky or unlucky for a couple of years, eventually the percentages are going to even out and the best players are going to win. In chess, a great chess player is going to beat anyone who's even a good chess player. There's no chance. Having the luck factor in poker makes it interesting to play.

DeBELLIS: What makes a good poker player?

GABE: You have to be analytical and a good judge of character. Someone's good if they can pick off someone who's bluffing and call when they have a marginal hand. That's not easy to do. They're good if they are able to judge if a player has them beat. It's especially difficult to get away when you have a good hand. The best players are able to do that. You just have to trust your instincts. And if you have the right instincts you can make tremendous lay-downs.

DeBELLIS: From all the exposure on TV the poker players have become recognizable figures.

GABE: I used to walk to a couple of places in Vegas with the poker players, and no one would know who they were and everyone was recognizing me. Now when I walk with them, people recognize the poker players and they don't now who I am. "Hey there's Johnny Chan. Hey, there's Phil Hellmuth and who's that old guy standing next to them?" ■



Cast from the hit TV series "Welcome Back Kotter." Ron Palillo, John Travolta, Gabe Kaplan, Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs, Robert Hegyes — 1975.