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## Detroit native Keegan-Michael Key makes the most of his Fauxbama

### Signature role on 'MadTV'

BY ALEX P. KELLOGG • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 21, 2008

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He can play an overzealous valet, an unbelievably bonkers high school coach, or a slang-spittin' gangster-wannabe for equally squeamish glee.

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But among the most promising character studies for "MadTV" comedian Keegan-Michael Key right now is his hilariously straitlaced, mildly bland Barack Obama. It's an Obama endlessly juggling the same two worlds -- black and white -- that produced Key.

The comedic actor has fortuitously made this role all his own: After all, it's regarded as one of the toughest, and timeliest, impersonations to pull off right now. Along with a recent series of funny commercial appearances for General Motors, the 37-year-old Detroit native hopes the Obama parodies will help propel him to greater acclaim.

Earlier this month, "MadTV," the edgy Fox sketch comedy show now in its 14th season, premiered with a hilarious Obama-McCain send-up.

In it, Key's Democratic presidential hopeful and his wife, Michelle, hold a dance-off against Republican John McCain and his wife, Cindy, all played by cast members. The skit mocks Fox's prime-time competition "[So You Think You Can Dance](#)."

### On 'MadTV,' Fauxbama busts a move



RENE MACURA/AP

Keegan-Michael Key relies on subtle mannerisms to portray Sen. Barack Obama on "MADtv."



RENE MACURA/AP

Makeup helps Key transform himself into Obama.

So far, Key's Obama has been a hit: A spoof from the show's previous season featuring him and Hillary Clinton, played by fellow "MadTV" veteran Nicole Parker, topped 11 million hits on YouTube. It turned their distaste for each other upside down and into jungle fever. Another sketch featuring Obama stealing Clinton's spotlight garnered 400,000-plus hits this spring.

Meanwhile, "Saturday Night Live," "MadTV's" old-school big brother and mightiest competition, has struggled to pull off even a chuckle-worthy Obama.

Still, Key knows well that "SNL" regularly pummels "MadTV" in the ratings, with "SNL" pulling in about three times as many viewers of the series' premieres on Sept. 13.

That's part of the reason he's hoping to land on an even bigger network, in a prime-time role. Key's proponents feel his acumen for pulling out nuances even in tough reads like Obama will help.

"He does the best Barack Obama in America, hands down," says David Salzman, one of the creators of "MadTV" and its executive producer. "In real life, he's incredibly Obama-like. He has this magnetism. Whenever people meet him, they just like him. ... I think Keegan has real star potential."

### Getting into character

Like Obama, Key's biological mother is white, and his father black. It's a coincidence that doesn't inform the potential president he tries to portray, he says.

Key was adopted at 3 months old by biracial parents who happen to be the same racial mix. One of eight siblings -- if you count his many families, as Key does -- he reconnected with his biological mother as a young man and through her, to God, he says.



In the season opener of "MadTV," Keegan-Michael Key portrayed Sen. Barack Obama in a presidential dance-off.

(RENE MACURA/AP)

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He'd come to find out that his blood parents met while [working](#) at a bank in Detroit, he says. But Key knows almost nothing about his biological dad, who, like his adoptive father, is deceased.

"To be completely honest, I would love if I had the opportunity to see a picture of my father, just once," he says.

It's not something that haunts him, however. His biological mother, Carrie Herr, now lives in Texas, and he sees his ties with her as a bridge between the childhood he knew and the family he never did.

His adoptive mother, Patricia Walsh, says Key was born at a time when searching out an adopted child's biological parents wasn't easy.

A social worker like her former husband, she says she always wanted to adopt, and like Key, she is comfortable sharing the details of his life. She isn't crazy, however, about some of the more vulgar elements of "MadTV," a show that isn't afraid to get a bit raunchy.

"It's just not for my age group, he just keeps reminding me," she notes.

Key's unusual background helped him develop a keen eye into the inner lives of others and led him to play characters who are amusing but also deeply sympathetic.

"He could always imitate other people's voices and mannerisms," says Walsh. "I think he gets inside them and feels what they feel, and then he can perform them better."

### **A talented mimic**

Before beginning his professional career, Key studied theater at the University of Detroit Mercy and later at [Penn State](#), where he earned a master's degree in fine arts.

He's one of the founders of Hamtramck's alternative Planet Ant Theatre, a feisty little outfit with hip street credentials. As a kid, he attended Catholic schools in the city and suburbs, learning not just urban lingo but suburban sensibilities along the way.

"Because it's always been a city that's hanging on by a thread -- you actually see real theater, not spectacle," says Key, who performed in many Detroit venues early in his career. "In a community theater, that's all you see, theater."

Former associates fondly recall his talents.

"He can do anyone, he really can," says Arthur J. Beer, chairman of the theater department at U-D Mercy, and one of Key's teachers. At U-D shows in the early '90s, for example, "he used to do these beautiful Spanish accents, as if he were actually from the old country," Beer says.

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As a young professional, Key plied his craft locally for years, both with Planet Ant and the Second City Detroit, the satellite branch of the famed improv troupe, which is renowned for producing comedic talents John Belushi, Bill Murray, Stephen Colbert and Tina Fey. He later moved up to Second City's granddaddy franchise in Chicago.

In all, he spent more than six years with Second City, winning awards and developing, in textured shades, characters such as Jorge, an angry Mexican employee at a fast-food spot named Taco Hell, and a guy who furiously derides the restaurant's inauthentic food.

It was in Chicago where he was discovered by Hollywood.

### **'MadTV' and Motown roots**

Many of Key's unforgettable characters on "MadTV" have roots in his earlier days in the Motor City.

Coach Sandoval Hines, a high school tyrant whose threats to out-of-line students are bigger outrages than their transgressions, is based on coaches he and other childhood buddies had.

### **Coach Hines' class is in session**

Or take Eugene Struthers, a water and flower delivery guy with a lisp who regularly stumbles across and accosts celebrities with witless charm. Key admits Struthers' catchphrase -- an emphatic declaration of how he's taking things to a "whole 'notha level!" -- was pulled from the lingo of a giddy actress he once worked with in the D.

"The greatest place to mine characters is your own life," says Key. "So I kind of open up the encyclopedia of my life."

Still, with Obama, "it took me a while to unlock the voice," he admits.

"I kind of play him proper, almost like a black guy who talks like a white guy," with a dash of Bill Clinton and Montel Williams thrown in, he says.

Key is among the many comedians on record saying parodying the Illinois senator is not easy. It makes putting him in funny situations like a faux dance-off even more important.

"It's hard finding something to make fun of him about, trust me," says Key, a liberal independent who says he voted for McCain in the 2000 primary.

"SNL" hasn't had much traction with its Obama impersonation. Last year, the show was questioned by critics for allowing Fred Armisen, who is a mix of creeds but not African American, to portray the candidate.

"He's doing the best he can," kids Key, who admits he's not that crazy about Armisen's Obama. "But we're friends," he says, "so it's not as if I was like 'Gotcha!' "

Key, meanwhile, has earned kudos for his take.

"He's really kind of nailed Obama," says Robert Thompson, a professor of TV and pop culture at Syracuse University. Key plays up less noticeable mannerisms like his gesticulating hands and measured speech, Thompson says.

"He hits subtle things about Obama that I don't think I'd noticed before."

"MadTV" producer Salzman says Key shares some similarities with Obama. He's well-positioned to gain greater name recognition, and he's arguably his show's most polished actor right now, he says.

Indeed, he is one of the few cast members who has the green light to tweak scripts with little oversight, be it to tone down bawdy humor or simply better fit his image of a character, Salzman says.

### **Those NBA commercials**

Even after years of exposure on late-night TV, Key's turn as an overly friendly parking attendant in a series of Yukon Denali commercials during the [NBA](#) playoffs garnered him his widest exposure ever.

The commercials aired during prime time and were a big hit, gaining tens of thousands of YouTube hits in various formats.

In them, Key's attendant speaks to an unseen NBA player who's sitting in his SUV as he comes and goes over the course of an NBA season.

In one, he declares, "we were never underdogs ... we were never under anything," attempting to ingratiate himself with the noticeably silent player. At the end of that commercial, the player's team has just won the NBA championship.

"We mighta been under suspicion of winning the championship!" Key's attendant says gleefully.

The commercials offered a lighter brand of humor than some of the "MadTV" sketches, Key says. But he says the often-bawdy humor of "MadTV" doesn't bother him or his born-again sensibilities.

Comedy is "almost more of a lifestyle," says Key, who now lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Cynthia Blaise, a dialect coach in Hollywood. "One can separate one's faith from one's work."

Plus, "they bleep a lot of those bad words and stuff out," he notes with a laugh. "So it doesn't bother me."

Yet Key has already said this season, his sixth on "MadTV," will be his last.

He'll soon be with another major network, something he's still coy about as details are hammered out. He also has a small part in the film "Role Models," a comedy scheduled for release this fall.

He's praying these positive developments are a small sign of what's to come.

"What I really want to do is make my way into doing more films," says Key, "hopefully in the very near future."

If his star rises as rapidly as Obama's did, he might just get what's he praying for.

Contact **ALEX P. KELLOGG** at 248-351-3693 or [akellogg@freepress.com](mailto:akellogg@freepress.com).

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chiefjimbo wrote:

I knew this guy from Gesu days (elementary school), and we would just stand around him laughing our guts out. As kids, we read Marvel comics, and Keegan would act out an entire issue (with his own comedic dialogue thrown in). He did a bit on Marvel's "Secret Wars" that I still remember 25 years later. Not very long into our talks about comics, I'd realize "We're no longer a bunch of kids talking about comics here, we are being ENTERTAINED!...by Keegan!!!" I don't recall Keegan being in the plays at Gesu, but none of us ever doubted that he had major talent for making people laugh. I'm not a frequent Mad TV viewer, but I was watching a show in '04 and nearly jumped out of my chair when I saw Keegan on the show!!! Best of luck on the new deal, Keegan! Jimmy and Raphael couldn't be happier for you.

Signed,

Your buddies from Gesu  
09/21/2008 9:12:17 p.m. EDT

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outofmichigan wrote:

MadTV is comy. I'm sure there's a better match than this out there. They should have conducted a nationwide search for a real look-alike, rather than create a phony one. I would never mistake this random individual for the senator, with or without all the makeup. I'll be glad when the elections are over so people can stop trying to make a mockery of and cash in on the election/political process. We have financial institutions to bail out to the tune of billions and the joke is on the American taxpayers. Try turning that into a laughing matter.

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appliance\_guy wrote:

I used to love the second city when Michael and the guy from according to Jim were on it. I used to go every time the show changed. It has sucked since they left. It really started sucking after it moved to Novi.

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this is a long article about nothing.

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