

## **Grrrrr! - Inside The “Animal”**

(An Interview with Jonathan Zuchowski: The Man Behind the Growl)

**W**hat looks like Conan the Barbarian in fur, sounds like the tiger cage at Ringling Brothers Circus, and directs traffic? Why, “Animal” of course! If you’ve been to a *Chiller Theatre Toy, Model & Film Expo* the last nine years, then you’ve met a colorful character at the main entrance who looks like a *Road Warrior* cast member. If you didn’t see him at first, you’d soon know of his whereabouts by the colorful phrases he utters in his stentorian growl: “Ticket-holders to the right; those without tickets, children, and other members of the food chain to the left!” Or you may have heard him make some announcements over the PA system in his gruff-yet-loving snarl—grrrrr! If any of these occurrences have been your experience, then you’ve been introduced to Chiller’s most beloved barbarian—Animal. You see, at a convention where you could just as easily see a drop-dead gorgeous *Scream Queen*, a vampire in full regalia, or a *Star Trek* crewmember walk by, Animal is part of the security staff, and he can keep the peace with little more than his imposing persona and a growl.

In real life, Animal has been known to go by the innocuous-sounding name of Jonathan Zuchowski. Currently, he hales from Ogden, Utah and he flies in for the Chiller conventions. He’s become a reassuring fixture at each convention, a reminder that you’re in for a weekend of fun and make-believe mayhem. How did Animal become such a welcome fixture at Chiller? Well, let’s start at the beginning:

**THP:** *How was “Animal” born?*

**JZ:** Animal was born like all other mutants (laughs). He had two other siblings in the womb but they were eaten before he came out.

**THP:** *How did the name actually get started?*

**JZ:** Just look at him!

**THP:** *I think you mentioned, at the last convention, something about being a roadie?*

**JZ:** A long time ago I was a roadie—worked for a bunch of bands—punk bands, metal bands, DJ’s and I used to not only work as a roadie but as security. It was my job to load the three hundred-pound speakers up three flights of stairs and stuff like that. Basically, people just started calling me an “animal” (laughs) and the name stuck. After awhile it was like, “Hey Animal, come here, lift. Animal, do this. Animal kill!” You know, that sort of thing (hearty laugh).

**THP:** *How did you and Animal get associated with the Chiller conventions?*

**JZ:** Well, oh God, about ’91, I think it was ’91, ’92, a friend of mine was working for *Femme Fatales* magazine and I basically came along as his roadie to help him load all his stuff (at the *Chiller Theatre* convention). I met these people who were doing security—all dressed as Klingons and they’re like, “I like your costume!” I had entered a costume

competition. I had the costume in tow and I entered it in the competition. Ironically, I lost to a bunch of people who were cheering the Klingons. Obviously, it was a packed audience against me and I'll just have to hunt them down and kill them all personally! Afterwards, they asked me to join their security group as a *Road Warrior* [type character]. The rest is history.

**THP:** *How did the costume come about? How did it evolve?*

**JZ:** I've always been a big *Road Warrior* fan. Tie that in with *Heavy Metal* magazine. I love the artwork and when I was a little kid I used to read my brother's issues—I wasn't supposed to and it probably demented me for life, but what the hell (laughs). I was totally fascinated by the outrageousness of the characters, and the armor, and everything. The *Road Warrior* movie kind of tied in with that [same kind] of outrageousness—wearing shoulder pads, crossbows, and all that *Heavy Metal* type scenario. Living out in Jersey, where I was raised, you kind of know that it IS a *Road Warrior* situation (laughs)!

**THP:** *Yeah, The New Jersey Turnpike has a lot in common with George Miller's vision, doesn't it?*

**JZ:** Exactly! You know, it's like you slam a car off to the side, you steal the gas and you run (big laugh)!

**THP:** *Sounds like New York on a given afternoon.*

**JZ:** Well, in New York they'll try to pick your bones clean as well. This is why I get along there.

**THP:** *How do kids relate to Animal at the cons?*

**JZ:** Well, it's really weird. A lot of times they'll be terrified of me, mostly because [Animal] regards children as the lower part of the food chain (laughs). If they're eight years old their bones are still soft, you know.

**THP:** *Easier to get to the marrow, eh?*

**JZ:** Easy—let me tell you! Just one bite and you're right there. It's like a Tootsie Roll Pop (laughs). Ah one, a two—CRUNCH—three! A lot of kids are usually terrified of me at first. Then, after they've been coming to the cons for as many years as some have, they are now looking ME in the eye (laughs)! They've grown up and they're still pretty cool about it.

**THP:** *Could you relate one of the funnier things that have happened to you since you've been doing security at the cons?*

**JZ:** I can relate a very interesting incident I remember happening a couple of years ago. I was coming out of my hotel room and right across from me this family was coming out

of their hotel room too. I was all decked out in gear, ready to go on for duty and this one kid was jumping up and down, he was so excited. This was the second day of the con and apparently the parents had arrived late and I was off duty. They thought that they had missed seeing me. The con before, this little kid had seen me and was completely taken by this gargoyle, Conan-ish monstrosity—realize now, that this kid in about twenty-five years is going to be on America's Most Wanted (laughs)—he's jumping up and down he's so happy. You know, "Mommy, Mommy!" and all that stuff and the parents are explaining to me that he's my biggest fan. I was like—what do you do in a situation like that? Here it is, I'm supposed to be a badass. So I picked the kid up like a potato sack and flung him over my shoulder and carried him off to the elevator alongside his family (laughs)! The kid loved it! I mean, he probably crapped in his pants or something—I don't know. Some kids are terrified, some kids will utterly shy away from me, others are bold, brazen and come right up. It's cool.

**THP:** *Maybe it had something to do with their fathers.*

**JZ:** You know, there was another scary incident too. I was doing another convention very, very early on. Here I am in full regalia—this was a different costume with horns and a mask. I'm there directing traffic when all of a sudden this little girl—three years old—comes running up, throws her arms around my leg and yells, "Daddy!" You see, [Animal has] a very simple philosophy. As soon as the kids hatch out, they have five minutes to dig out of the nest and swim away, otherwise they get eaten. I thought, "Wait a minute. Did this one escape? I don't recall this [one] (long laugh)!"

**THP:** *Anybody ever try to pick a fight?*

**JZ:** In all the years I've been doing security, from the time I was a bouncer, to a roadie, to doing the *Chiller* conventions, no one has ever tried to pick a fight. Growing up in Jersey City, I had over thirty-two bones broken before the age of twenty-one. So I've seen my share of fights—not to mention I survived Catholic School.

**THP:** *So, maybe the costume works?*

**JZ:** That, or my bad breath—one or the other. I make sure not to bathe for four or five weeks before doing a show (laughs). I have a very simple philosophy I live by—did you ever hear of the rabid dog theory of thought?

**THP:** *Rabid Dog? Usually it's to shoot them!*

**JZ:** Right! You're only afraid of the rabid dog until he bites you. Once he's bitten you, you've already got rabies—you're screwed. So it doesn't matter what you do now. You might as well go in there barehanded and go at it. That's always been my philosophy. It's going to be tense until you make the move. Once you make the move I really don't care what happens to you. Okay, you may kill me but guess what? You're going to join me! Maybe you will kill me but think about this. Every time when you wake up and

touch that empty socket that used to be your eye you'll think about me and wonder if it was worth it.

**THP:** *Let's do a couple of "Animal" questions. What are Animal's favorite movies?*

**JZ:** Animal's favorite movies: obviously, *Road Warrior* (he thinks it's a documentary); *Heavy Metal*, the movie and Ralph Bakshi's *Wizards*. Let's see, he does love the *Barney* movie.

**THP:** *He does?*

**JZ:** Don't forget, there are kids in that thing, so he looks at it as a smorgasbord.

**THP:** *If Animal met Barney, what do you think would happen?*

**JZ:** It depends (chuckle). How long does it take before Barney's cooked to a turn (heartily laugh)?

**THP:** *He'd have a purple rug in front of the fireplace?*

**JZ:** You might see a new part of a pelt hanging from Animal's armor.

[At this point, Jonathan asked me to hold on a minute. He said he had something cooking in the oven and he didn't want it to be black. I decided to ask him what it might be when he got back.

**THP:** *Was it anybody we knew?*

**JZ:** No, but they screamed an awful lot.

**THP:** *What would be Animal's idea of a perfect day?*

**JZ:** Does Animal actually believe in a perfect day? Animal just exists. He's there because he's not dead. And as long as he's not dead he's going to do what entails survival—which means [at the] expense of others.

**THP:** *Other than, I guess Humungous on Road Warrior, does Animal have any heroes?*

**JZ:** He used to watch WWF when the LEGION OF DOOM was on. Of course, his hero was [his] other namesake, Animal from WWF. He remembers watching things called cartoons. This was before the "big explosion." And his favorite was He-Man. Let's see—anyone else? Oh, at one time there was this crazy Australian, who used to do the Energizer commercials, named Jocko. He appealed to Animal's sense of survival—which is, "Go play Rugby without your helmet (laughs)!"

**THP:** *What's Animal's opinion of the Crocodile Hunter?*

**JZ:** He's doing it all wrong. He's catching alligators, and snakes and all that. They're an okay food source but humans taste so much better.

**THP:** *Jonathan, originally you lived on the East Coast?*

**JZ:** I lived on the East Coast—Jersey City born.

**THP:** *What brought you out west?*

**JZ:** I'd been living in Jersey City my whole life and I wanted a change in my life, plus I wanted to go to Australia. So, this move west was actually a step in that direction. Why? I don't know!

**THP:** *Have you ever been there?*

**JZ:** No I haven't, not yet. But [I'm] still on the way. I've actually had a little detour in time because of this heart problem [Jonathan had open-heart surgery a couple of years ago]. Being dead twice, you kind of change your perspective on life.

**THP:** *So why Ogden? What made you pick Utah?*

**JZ:** It could have been Utah, it could have been Colorado—it could have been anywhere out West. It was just that a couple of friends were moving out here, so I tagged along with them so I could get my feet started—pick up some money and go on to the next step.

**THP:** *Do you like it out that way?*

**JZ:** The landscape is beautiful. I look out the window; I see mountains, not smokestacks. It's beautiful to live out here but let's just say I'm not used to the philosophy out here. They're all like—*Jeezus!* and *G-o-d!*

**THP:** *Oh, that's right—you're in Mormon country out there!*

**JZ:** I'm out in Mormonville. Did you ever see that [movie] *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*? There's a Mormon version, *Seven Brides for One Brother*! I mean, on their own they're okay but let's just say I am not part of that hive mentality. They all believe they are this one huge communal family. In fact, I think I'm the only one out here not related to everyone else.

**THP:** *Oh, a very close gene pool, eh?*

**JZ:** Oh yeah! I lived in Jersey thirty-two years, I think I saw *Deliverance* on TV once. I've been out here two-and-a-half years; I've seen it seventeen times (laughs)!

**THP:** *So that happens to be where you stopped on your way west to Australia.*

**JZ:** Right. See, I wanted to prove the earth was round. So I'm just going to keep traveling west 'till I wind up in Jersey again.

**THP:** *Does Animal think the earth is round, or flat?*

**JZ:** Does Animal think that... Animal doesn't think too much. He doesn't care. Can he find enough to survive for that day? If he dies tomorrow—who cares? Only if he survives today! It could be square; it could be a triangle. He could walk to the edge and fall off for all he cares. Animal doesn't worry about details like that. Animal worries about details like—food! Woman! Basic, primal needs—that's all he is.

**THP:** *Will we be seeing Animal at the next con [in October 2000]?*

**JZ:** Provided he isn't dead again, yeah, and if Kevin [Clement] wants him there.

**THP:** *How are you doing by the way?*

**JZ:** I'm doing fairly well. My good days are outnumbering my bad days. Awhile back it was very touch-and-go. Walking across my living room floor would knock the crap out of me. When [they] do open heart, they have to replace all these parts on you... By the way, I am also a certified mutant.

**THP:** *A certified mutant? How'd that occur?*

**JZ:** I have been diagnosed with what they call Marfan's Syndrome (also known as Arachnodactyly). [It's] a mutation whereby my connective tissue will deteriorate. Normally, with Marfan's they have the problem that their heart gives out pretty early, like about the age of thirty five and normally they would die about that age, but because of modern medicine and technology, they're able to keep them alive much longer.

**THP:** *Did you know Abraham Lincoln had Marfan's?*

**JZ:** Abraham Lincoln and Akhenaton [Amenhotep IV]—Tutankhamen's father [Actually, Tutankhamen was the son of Amenhotep III.]. If you notice, Marfan's [people] seem to stand out in a crowd. I don't know why (chuckles).

**THP:** *They realized that Lincoln had it when they looked at his photographs and [noticed] his limbs would be a little blurry because there was a slight tremor in his legs and his arms. [This was due to the long exposure times for old photographic plates].*

**JZ:** That's from a little bit of deterioration of nervous tissues. I don't suffer from any tremors. I did have the heart problem (chuckles). Ironically, I have a wonderful combination. My family genetics—I came from very sturdy Polish stock. Basically, my dad in his younger days could put two railroad ties on his shoulders and walk off with

them. When I used to train in the gym when I was a power lifter, a leg press of fourteen hundred pounds was common.

**THP:** *Oh, wow!*

**JZ:** I used to do things when I was a roadie where they'd load up the van and I'd brace myself, they'd take off the brake, and I'd push this thing up hill. It's kind of like I have one extreme thing where my muscles are extremely adaptive to strength. However, the connective tissues weren't holding up so well. So the heart is what basically took the turn for the worst. So it's kind of like this really strong shell but the internal heart was a bit of a problem—but they've fixed that now.

**THP:** *Did they find out about the Marfan's from the heart...?*

**JZ:** Yeah, pretty much. I wasn't diagnosed with it until after I had the heart surgery, like, "Why do you have this problem at thirty five?" (laughs).

**THP:** *I'm glad everything has been working out for you.*

**JZ:** Yeah, it's working out. I mean, I'm probably going to end my days sooner than everyone else will but that's just what happens. A hundred years from now it ain't going to make a difference anyway.

**THP:** *I saw a bumper sticker I think you'll get a kick out of. It says: "Eat right, exercise, you still die."*

**JZ:** Yeah, basically. You can't take life seriously 'cause you will never get out alive. I've already done it twice. That was pretty cool.

**THP:** *They revived you...?*

**JZ:** Yeah. They didn't learn their lesson, did they (chuckles)?

**THP:** *Do you remember any of it?*

**JZ:** Actually, there was absolutely nothing. There was no tunnel of light; there was no old man in a bathrobe; no little fat kids with wings; no voices—nothing. It was just—turn off a switch and when I came out of it there was the intense pain of all the surgery (chuckles). It's kind of like the exact same memories you had before you were born.

**THP:** *(long pause) Yeah, which is nothing.*

**JZ:** Yeah, not even aware that you were ever aware. With that in mind it's kind of like—I'm not afraid of shit now! You want to kill me? Fine—I've been there! I'm not worried about it. I mean, there are a lot of religious people out there who are going to

want to argue differently and it's their right to. Hey, if you want to believe in something, you believe it. You want me to believe in it—you prove it.

**THP:** *You married?*

**JZ:** No, I'm sane (laughs). I think, therefore I'm single (big laugh).

**THP:** *No little "Animals" on the horizon?*

**JZ:** I won't permit that. No, it's actually a bad idea with my DNA, because with Marfan's there's a 50/50 chance I would bring that over and I really wouldn't want to see a kid going through that. It might come out worse, it might come out not as [bad]. Knowing that I willingly did that to someone else because I wanted to have progeny, or whatever you want to call it, just to carry on my name is really not nice to do. I'm not programmed to think like that.

**A**t this point, the interview was pretty much over. We talked about some of the odds-and-ends details of finishing this article and I have to admit I was disappointed to have to end my chat with the interesting fellow who brings us Animal at the Chiller cons. As is usually the case, there is a lot more going on behind the scenes in people's lives than we can imagine and it is these things that go into a "character" portrayal. Don't tell Animal I said this, but I suspect he's really a softy around those little ones scampering around his ankles—and woe betide anyone who would try to harm them!

During one of those priceless moments just before signing off, Jonathan added a bit of his personal philosophy concerning his love of the horror genre, his portrayal of Animal and the people he meets.

**JZ:** You want to know something? [Some of the people at the cons] actually scare me more than any horror movie because a lot of them—and you can tell when you look at them or talk to them—they cannot separate the reality. I'm serious when I say that. It's like, I do it—it's for fun. I'm playing Animal and I want you to believe I'm Animal—blah, blah, blah. But there are people who sincerely believe that what they see sometimes in these movies is a documentary. It's really scary! I've met incredibly wonderful people at [those] convention[s]. You know, what bugged me for awhile was, when I was originally doing [Animal], I have to be a badass. I have to yell at people, I have to direct—"You go here; you go there!"—stuff like that. What I used to do early on was I used to go to the vendors and apologize to them. I wanted them to realize it was all in fun and I was doing it as a character. Basically the public is paying to see a show. They want to see all the stars, they want to see special effects people—all that stuff. I'm just setting the theme at the door. I don't want the vendors to take it personally. I mean, a lot of those vendors are really cool people.

**THP:** *Yeah, they make the con work.*

**JZ:** They do. They are a [major] link in that chain—they're an important link and I don't want them to think [I think] they're just vendors and they don't count. [They're] an important part of the con—a lot of times people just come to the con just for the vendors. That's how I look at it. I would feel bad. It's like, "I'm sorry I yelled at you (laughs)."

**THP:** *I always realized you were in character. I always gave you a wide berth though!*

**JZ:** You're giving Animal a wide berth—this badass, this gatekeeper. In reality, talking to me, I think Jonathan's a bit different.

**THP:** *All right! Well, good. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk with you and I hope you like the article when I get it done.*

**JZ:** I'm sure I will.

**T**here you have it—the first-ever interview with everyone's favorite "Animal." So, the next time you enter the doors of the hotel into another *Chiller Theatre – Toy, Model & Film Expo*, and meet up with a tall, fur-and-armor-clad barbarian, don't cut and run. Just show him your wristband and head where he directs you. Remember, you've been warned!