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# READER



Still ghoulin'  
after all  
these years

A conversation with Chicago's  
legendary horror host, Rich Koz,  
on 40 years of Svengoolie

By SALEM COLLO-JULIN 12



# ARTS & CULTURE

## SMALL SCREEN

### Still ghoulin' after all these years

A sven-tillating conversation with Chicago's legendary horror host, Rich Koz, on 40 years of *Svengoolie*, celebrity fans, and BERWYN!

By SALEM COLLO-JULIN

Local television legend Rich Koz doesn't need an introduction to most of our readers, especially when he is dressed as his character Svengoolie, wearing his classic raccoon-eyed ghoulish face paint and top hat. But many might not realize that he's been working in Chicago broadcasting since the 70s. Koz is the affable and spooky host of *Svengoolie*, the long-running Chicago television program that airs classic horror, sci-fi, and B movies intersected with comedy and trivia by Svengoolie, his friends, and an arsenal of rubber chickens. *Svengoolie* the show is the antithesis of slick, with its parody songs, low-budget set, and audio cues culled from 30s movies, but it's also an incredibly important (and hilarious) link to 50s and 60s television. Koz created his own version of the character with the input and blessing of Jerry Bishop, a radio and television announcer who originated Svengoolie while hosting WFLD's *Screaming Yellow Theater* program in the early 70s.

In 2011, Koz and the *Svengoolie* crew started making their mark on the national stage when locally owned network MeTV (current home of *Svengoolie*) started airing the show on its national cable broadcasts. The national version is pretty much the same as the old show, with the same lineup of spooky but not really gory horror fare, like *Creature From the Black Lagoon* and the 1931 *Frankenstein*. You can check it out almost every Saturday on MeTV, but I also recommend finding and watching the *Son of Svengoolie* show that aired on WFLD in the days before the Fox network. A great highlight from those years: "Blob of Red," a parody song to the tune of the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann," created for an 80s airing of the 1972 in-

dependently produced British stinker *Beware! The Blob*.

The Museum of Broadcast Communications is celebrating Koz's 40 years playing Svengoolie with a new exhibition that will feature the *Son of Svengoolie* coffin and other items from the original set. The exhibition kicks off with a gala at the museum on Saturday, October 26, at 7 PM. Tickets are \$50 and include a meet and greet with Koz; proceeds benefit the museum. We e-mailed some questions to Koz and, amazingly, he was able to get out of the coffin during this busy Halloween season and answer a few for us.

**You recently were honored by 15th Ward alderman Raymond Lopez and the Chicago City Council for your 40 years of Svengoolie. What were the early days of the show like? Was it a smooth transition taking over from Jerry Bishop, or did you have to build an audience?** Well actually, it wasn't immediately going from Jerry to me! There was a little over six years in between his show and my show. To trace the Svengoolie history, Jerry was the staff announcer on duty (live) on Friday nights in late 1970, back when all TV stations had live announcers on duty. I had just graduated from high school earlier that year, and tuned in for the movies at first. He started doing funny rejoinders to the movie, and it evolved into his character, and went from voice-overs to actual video eventually. I was a fan of his radio and TV work, and sent him

some jokes and material, strictly as a fan. He liked what I sent him, found out I was a broadcasting student, and invited me to a taping.

I ended up working with him, and after the show was canceled, worked with him in radio. A friend then asked him about doing Svengoolie as a sort of summer fill-in show on a TV station. Jerry didn't want to play the character again, but he decided I could be "Son of Svengoolie." It was pretty flattering that he felt I could be the character! We had some

**THE MUSEUM OF BROADCAST COMMUNICATIONS CELEBRATES 40 YEARS OF RICH KOZ AS SVENGOOLIE**  
Sat 10/26, 7-11 PM, Museum of Broadcast Communications, 360 N. State, 312-245-8200, museum.tv, \$50. Doors open at 6:30 PM. "Berrr-wynners will attend a private reception with Rich Koz before the event from 5:30-7 PM for \$150, which includes admission to the event as well as a personalized photograph with each guest and Sven."

*Svengoolie* airs locally on MeTV Saturdays at 7 PM and on the U Saturdays at 11 AM.

false starts on the idea, and it didn't end up happening. We went on to various things, together and separately, but then Jerry was hired to do a morning show in San Diego, and he asked what I was going to do. I told him I

might try to pitch a local station on a TV show. He then said if I wanted to try to do the *Son of Svengoolie*, I had his blessing. I shopped it around, and eventually got on the air—ironically on the same station Jerry had been on. I did have to kind of rebuild the audience, since time had passed and, of course, here was a different guy playing a variation on the original character... but we succeeded!

**As a lifelong Chicagoan, tell us about some of your local broadcasting favorites from growing up.** Radiowise, it was the guys on WCFL: Jerry, Jim Runyon, Ron Britain, and, of course, the great Dick "Chicken Man" Orkin, who I actually got to work with in my pre-Sven days—guys who were being creative. TVwise, it started with Two-Ton Baker, the *Lunchtime Little Theatre* folks (am I showing my age yet?!), and then all the WGN talent: the Bozo cast, Ray Rayner on various shows, Frazier Thomas, and then, on WFLD, the wonderful Bill Jackson, and, again, Jerry.

**Many fans know you for the Sven character, but I have fond memories of *The Koz Zone* [a program Koz hosted and acted in on WFLD from 1989-1993]. What was the genesis of having your own "out of character" evening show?** It all started when, on what would have been the tenth anniversary of the *Son of Svengoolie* show, Rob Feder wrote an article saying it was a shame that the show wasn't still around, and the folks at WFLD (then having



Svengoolie spooking.

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## ARTS & CULTURE

become Fox 32) must've been worried that it made them look bad. So they called me in and said they wanted me to host movies again. Their semilame idea was "the Fox Phantom" who lived in the station basement and showed movies. I told them that was an idea that one of the country cable stations was already doing, and that I had my own idea.

Somewhat recently, then, there was the famous incident of a pirate broadcaster breaking into the Channel 11 and WGN airwaves, with a guy in a Max Headroom mask. I proposed that we do a takeoff on that: that I was a former disgruntled employee (ahem) who breaks into the airwaves every week and shows a movie. They bought it, and we even did promos. The promo started as a normal spot, then there was static, and you'd see me working on some equipment, with a sign reading "Friday 10:30" in the background. It'd then fade back for the end of the normal promo. A lot of people thought it was real. I was told the FCC actually called the chief engineer and asked if they should investigate. They were supposedly not pleased when he told them it was just a promotional gimmick.

We had great fun doing that show. The only reason it ended was that the Fox Network was starting its own kids' block, and demanded that there be local hosts in every market. They assigned it to me, and the daytime *Koz Zone* was born. I always remember them being confused that they suddenly had a lot of adults watching the kids block—it was obviously my fans tuning in for the stuff I was doing!

**Back to Sven—one of my favorite moments from the *Son of Svengoolie* era was when Jon Pertwee [the third *Doctor Who*] came on to promote a *Doctor Who* convention in town. Can you tell us anything about how that came to pass?** My director at the time, Joe Oher, and I were both fans of the *Doctor Who* shows, which were then on every Sunday night on WTTW. When we found out that Jon was going to be in town for the convention, we reached out and happily snagged him for a guest spot. He had the idea of coming out of my coffin, as if it was the TARDIS. So I'm standing downstage and he throws open the coffin door, proclaiming "I am the Doctor!" Unfortunately, the coffin lid hit a huge (and heavy) pillar on the set, which came crashing down, just missing us! Without missing a beat, Jon commented, "That must be the Master's work!" He was a very nice guy and a lot of fun.

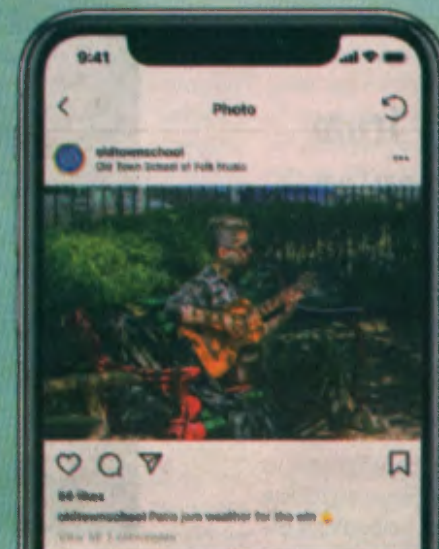
**You have a reputation for being supremely gracious with your fans at conventions and appearances. Do you have any favorite memories of people you've been able to meet throughout your career?** One of the truly amazing things is the number of people I've met who have Svengoolie tattoos on various parts of their anatomy! A lot of the artwork is quite good, and it is very flattering, but it still boggles my mind. I mean, people in my own family would never get a tattoo of me! Also, people come up to me and thank me for doing what I do... It means a lot to them, and so that means a lot to me, especially the ones who tell me that I helped them get through some dark days in their lives.

The other great memories are meeting celebrities who are fans—recently, at the New York Comic Con, the great makeup and special effects master Rick Baker specifically sought me out to meet me. Robert Englund, Freddy Krueger himself, was a fan. The publisher of DC Comics, Dan DiDio, actually stood in line to meet me—that's what eventually led to the current "Svengoolie Meets the DC Universe" chapters, starting in all the DC books starting October 30, running for four weeks. It's amazing when people whose work I admire actually like what I do. Though we have yet to meet in person, Mark Hamill contacted me to say he's a fan, and we've had everyone from Bill Hader and Jamie Farr to Gilbert Gottfried and Jerry "the King" Lawler as fans—heck, even Elvira likes me! She really likes me!

**Why Berwyn?** OK. When Jerry G. Bishop was starting his *Sven* show, Johnny Carson and Rowan and Martin made small-town jokes about Burbank. And back when he was working in Cleveland, famous horror host Ghoulardi (Ernie Anderson) made fun of a local suburb, Parma. Jerry wanted a local equivalent to poke fun at and settled on Berwyn, since, at the time, the main drags there were loaded with car lots and savings and loan companies. He decided Berwyn would be it, and I've carried on the tradition. The great thing is—the people of Berwyn KNOW that I'm only kidding, and they love it and have always been just great to me (with the exception of one short-term mayor who didn't like the jokes but still would come over to get his picture taken with me when I appeared there!). And now, the whole country responds to the cry of: "BERWYN?!" 📍

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