

## 'Mad Men' Actor James Wolk on the Mystery of Bob Benson

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Jimmy Wolk as Bob Benson on 'Mad Men'

Jaimie Trueblood/AMC

By NICOLE FREHSEE

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As soon as the closing credits started to roll on **last week's episode of Mad Men**, James Wolk's cell phone rang. "It was my mom," he says. "She was totally shocked." And for good reason: Wolk, 28, plays **Bob Benson, this season's most buzzed-about character** – despite the fact that he hasn't banged anyone's wife, stabbed anyone with a harpoon or even smoked a joint.

He did, however, make a pass at Pete Campbell, a move that sent fans into a frenzy, but one that still hasn't quite cleared up **the mystery surrounding his character**. Conspiracy theories abound: Is he an FBI agent? A corporate spy? Don's time-traveling son? A very well-dressed homeless man living in the Time & Life Building? (Wolk's favorite theory: Benson is Peggy and Pete's love child, back from the future.)

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"I think Bob genuinely cares for Pete," says Wolk, choosing his words carefully. "There are a lot of ways to care for someone. Sometimes it's love and sometimes it's just caring. Bob has a big heart in general – he's helped Pete (he found a caretaker for Pete's mother) and Joan (he accompanied her to the hospital when she had a medical emergency). He feels things and cares for people."

Wolk has no comment on his character's motivations: "Matt [show creator Weiner] has told me things about Bob that I can't repeat. I'll only say that at every moment, Bob is striving to be his best, and I always keep that in mind." In fact, Wolk prefers that Benson remain ambiguous. "If Mad Men went on for 10 years, and if it were up to me, Bob would continue being mysterious. I love characters that catch you off guard." He mentions Aaron Stampler, Ed Norton's character in **Primal Fear**, and Keyser Söze (Kevin Spacey in **The Usual Suspects**). "They're so much more interesting."

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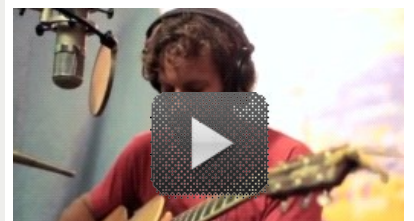
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For Wolk, playing the preternaturally grinning, eager-to-please Benson isn't a huge stretch. He established his salesman skills early on. Growing up in suburban Detroit, he had an Al Bundy-esque job: Fitting women for shoes in his father's shoe store. "You have to be captivating and confident," he says. He also honed his performance chops as an emcee on the local (and very robust) Bar Mitzvah circuit, flying back to Michigan from his post-college home in New York on weekends to lead throngs of screaming girls in the Hora. "The moms went a little wild," he says.

*Mad Men* has been Wolk's biggest TV gig to date, but his career has been revving up since 2010, when he starred in a FOX series called *Lone Star* – which got axed after two episodes. Last year alone, he co-starred with Sigourney Weaver in the miniseries *Political Animals*, and he snagged recurring spots on Showtime's *Shameless*, ABC's *Happy Endings* and in the indie comedy flick *For A Good Time, Call*.

Wolk won't say whether he'll be back at Sterling Cooper & Partners after season six concludes on June 23 – "if they'd have me, I'd love to be there" – but come fall, he'll be popping up at another ad agency, this time in Chicago. He's starring alongside Robin Williams and Sarah Michelle Gellar in *The Crazy Ones* on CBS (the network is positioning it as a hit; it'll air on Thursday night after *The Big Bang Theory*). Wolk plays Zach, the right-hand man to Williams' zany Simon Roberts. (Gellar plays Williams' Type-A daughter.) "My character is a total bullshit artist," says Wolk, who, in the premiere, duets on an innuendo-laced McDonald's jingle ("It ain't the meat, it's the motion") with **Kelly Clarkson**.

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Also in the works: *There's Always Woodstock*, an indie rom-com (due out in 2014) co-starring Katey Segal, Jason Ritter and Brittany Snow. "I play a young, Jewish doctor who lives in Woodstock," says Wolk. "My mom's dream come true."

In the meantime, Wolk is gearing up for the final two episodes of this season's *Mad Men* – and the onslaught of calls, texts and emails he may (or may not) get from friends and family if something "significant" happens (a prospect he'll neither confirm nor deny, of course). But one thing's certain: He won't be tweeting after the show. "**Bob Benson has his own Twitter**, which is so bizarre," says Wolk, adding that he's not the force behind it. "I don't even have enough time to keep up my own account, and when I do tweet, it's never savvy-enough shit," he says. "I'm clearly feeling a lot of Twitter guilt."

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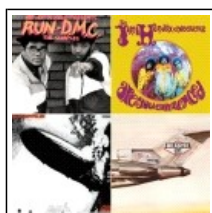
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