

# Jazz Musician Michael Wolff

**Interviewer:** The impact of TS differs from person to person. Tell us how it affected your life.

**M.W.:** It's created this whole movie (*The Tic Code*) that my wife wrote because I have Tourette, and that's been pretty interesting for me. As a kid, I didn't even know I had TS. I just thought it was my "habits." There wasn't a big diagnosis thirty years ago. (In that way) It was difficult for me.

I'm lucky I have it very mildly, I just have some motor and vocal tics. It never really interfered with school work or concentration, anything functional. I was able to do well (in school) and I always had a lot of friends.

It did make me self-conscious. Even though I'm very outgoing, I always had an inner feeling of self-consciousness. I spent a lot of energy, unconsciously as well as consciously, trying to hide it and pretend it was something else. I could never be cool and invulnerable but I told Jeffrey Kramer's kids that Tourette guys get the chicks because they think you're really vulnerable. You always do really well (with women).

I didn't get a real diagnosis, until a few years ago. I kind of figured out what I had in the mid-eighties. I was about thirty, a friend of mine who had two boys with Tourette said, "You have Tourette." And I said, "No I don't." She gave me a book to read and I recognized myself.

I didn't get an official diagnosis until I was at a neurologist's office two or three years ago for something else. He was examining me for two hours, a complete neurological exam, and while he was writing a prescription, I said "By the way, I wanted to ask you if I had Tourette." He didn't even bother to look up. He just said, "Yes, you have Tourette. Don't worry about it." He thought I knew I had it.

**Interviewer:** But as a child you had no idea why you had tics?

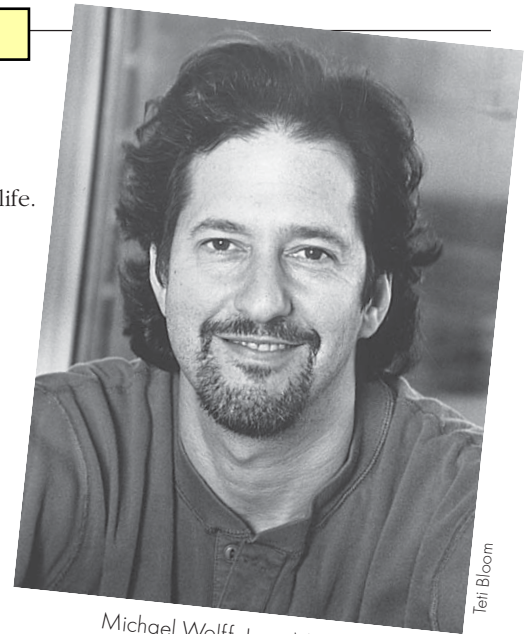
**M.W.:** Yes, and I'm very glad I wasn't medicated. I was kind of a hyperactive child and my father was a psychiatrist. They talked about medication. But my mother said, "I just thought you were interesting." I was lucky they didn't medicate me, but I was really lucky that I didn't need it. There are a lot of people that really need medication and it helps them a lot.

I really didn't know I had Tourette. Everybody knows that one weird kid. And I was him! And yet, I was lucky because I was talented in music and good with people. I had a lot going for me. I was good in sports. It was a mixed thing. I felt uncomfortable about it but I was lucky enough to have family and friends. I wasn't really teased too much about it. Things were said behind my back. A friend of mine once told me that in high school I was voted the guy most likely to be a junkie. In fact, a lot of people always thought that because I was a musician, I was on drugs. And I wasn't a drug user. When my wife, Polly Draper, and I first started going out together over eight years ago she asked me, "What's wrong with you?" She thought it was drugs, too.

At first she said I was just laughing a lot. That's one way I've tried to disguise my tics, and laughter is part of my tics anyway. And I told her I had Tourette Syndrome and she didn't know anything about it. And then she kind of got into it, started researching it. That and jazz led to *The Tic Code*.

**Interviewer:** Many people with TS find that certain activities that are both engrossing and relaxing seem to diminish tics. Playing a musical instrument is one of them that people often talk about. Do you find that?

**M.W.:** Oh, yes, I don't think I tic when I play music. I've talked to Dr. Oliver Sacks about it, too. I've realized lately, that my mind



Michael Wolff, Jazz Musician

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has a different view of music. I'm not particularly analytical about it, but when I'm playing music I'm in the moment. The energy just gets taken up. Maybe there's no room for the tics? The connections I'm making are sort of fast and I put together odd

combinations of things. I can do things (play music) backwards and in different weird ways.

I think I tic when I'm listening to music but not really when I'm performing or acting. But I was doing things when I was on the Arsenio Hall Show for five years that I knew was a tic, but no one knew it but me.

**Interviewer:** What one piece of advice would you give about pursuing dreams and goals?

**M.W.:** I don't feel I am my Tourette. Tourette doesn't make you one way or another. It's something that you have to deal with. Get a handle on it. And with people learning about it, will make it a lot easier.

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2006 Update for Michael Wolff:  
Current Employment: Jazz pianist and composer, and is currently touring as the leader of Michael Wolff & Impure Thoughts, a world/funk influenced jazz band. Was honored as a Steinway Artist in June.  
Michael has written music for the film "Who's the Man" and "Made Up," directed by Tony Shalhoub.

Whenever Michael is performing, he makes it a point to contact all the local TSA chapters and to try to meet with children and families with TS and invites them to his shows. If children aren't allowed to attend, he tries to arrange a meeting with them in the afternoon.