

**EDIBLE ICON:**  
Kastner mocks  
those for whom a  
bagel is the main  
identifier of  
Jewishness



# But He Sure *Looks* Jewish

A Canadian filmmaker examines the importance of other peoples' perceptions

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**W**ITH HIS JEWISH-sounding last name, nimbus of chestnut curls and decidedly non-goyish nose, Toronto-based documentarian Jamie Kastner certainly has all the outward markings of a bonafide member of the tribe. And heaven knows, he's certainly been asked about his background countless times for as far back as he can recall — by Jews and non-Jews alike.

Why do they want to know, he's always wondered, and what difference does it make, anyway?

To answer his own musings, Kastner embarked upon a self-described "faux personal journey" in the provocatively titled documentary, "Kike Like Me," in which he adopts a Jewish identity, which may or may not be an authentic one — to discover how people react to it. Kastner steadfastly refus-

es to reveal his true identity, adding an element of intrigue. He says he prefers to keep audiences guessing to get them to consider the bigger picture, which is "Why do we care and why does it matter?"

"Kike Like Me" forces us to examine those questions and explore our own feelings about identity. "What it means to be Jewish is what it means to be perceived as Jewish; that may be the more meaningful identifier," Kastner says over a light breakfast at a convivial French bakery in a tony Toronto neighborhood.

In "Kike Like Me," Kastner explores what it means to be perceived as a Jew in different countries, hopscotching across North America, Europe and Israel, meeting known personalities and orchestrating impromptu experiences. What he discovers is both entertaining and unsettling. In Brooklyn, a "yes" to the question of his Jewishness prompts a young Lubavitcher to

embrace him and put phylacteries on him. Then it's on to the Mitzva Tank (a van kitted out to spread the faith) where Kastner is proffered a box of matza and told of the imminent arrival of the messiah. In Israel, he gets into a debate with diaspora disparager novelist A.B. Yehoshua about whether it's possible for Kastner to live a fully Jewish existence in Canada. Yehoshua takes up the cudgel because, believing Kastner is a Jew, he feels entitled to impose his own views on him. His *perception* of Kastner as a Jew impacted the nature of his discourse.

Elsewhere, Kastner's openness about his ethnicity has a more sinister outcome. The most striking example takes place in Paris, when Kastner visits the suburb of Sarcelles, a supposed multicultural oasis amid the ethnic tensions that have run rife in the French capital in 2007. He chats with some Arab youths whose expressions change rapidly when Kastner asks their reaction if they



were to learn he is Jewish. "If you're Jewish, we don't like you" is the emphatic response.

The scene in Paris represents one of the turning points in the film, and there's a definite shift in Kastner's wisecracking, aloof persona toward a more solemn demeanor. Kastner's armor cracks a little further in Germany, ("Nazi home turf," he says upon arriving in Berlin), following his visit to the capital's Holocaust memorial; and then in Poland, where his visit to Auschwitz leads to some of his sobering conclusions, namely, "You're always a Jew, and you're never the right kind of Jew and you also have no meaningful say in the matter."

The marked contrast between reactions of Jews and non-Jews upon learning of his supposed ethnicity is also revealing. While stereotypes about Jews — whether innocuous or with an anti-Semitic bent — often bubble to the surface in his interactions with non-Jews, elements of tribalism occasionally surface in Kastner's encounters with Jews. As in the case of the Lubavitcher in Brooklyn, the film's Jewish subjects feel a kinship with him due to a supposedly shared heritage, something which leaves him nonplussed. "Why do people automatically assume a realm of characteristics and a kinship with me if they think I'm Jewish? I could be a complete asshole," he says. "Why does my Jewishness mitigate that?"

**T**HE INSIGHTS PROVOKED BY the film and the questions it raises seem to resonate widely. "Kike Like Me" has sparked much international interest from 10 broadcasters, including the BBC's series Storyville, the Sundance Channel in the U.S., VPRO in Holland and SBS in Australia. Kastner recently completed a deal with Israel's Channel 8, and is currently in talks with American, Canadian and French distributors. To date, the film has been screened at Toronto's Hot Docs festival, North America's largest documentary festival, and the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, earning rave reviews and attracting full houses.

"It's edgy — it takes a point of view that a lot of filmmakers haven't wanted to take or have been afraid to take," says Larry Ankiewicz, program coordinator for the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, which screened the film in the spring. "We thought it was a bit out there, that it was something that would cause a certain amount of controversy and would encourage discussion and debate by the audience and the commu-

nity." Adds Sean Farnel, Hot Docs program director, "Among the 130 or so films in the Festival this year, I can't think of another that people have talked to me more about."

The film has also left people talking about Kastner's true identity. His steadfast refusal to reveal his ethnicity adds an element of intrigue, and he prefers to keep audiences guessing. The reason, he says, is to get audiences to consider the bigger picture, which is "Why do we care and why does it matter?" "Kike Like Me" forces us to examine those questions and explore our own feelings about identity.

Ruth Rohn, a Jewish educator in Toronto, saw "Kike Like Me" at Hot Docs. "For Jews," she says, "Jewish or non-Jewish is an important distinction because once we identify it, we move to a certain way of commu-

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nicating with the person. Once I've got that distinction, I can move more easily — I know what I can or cannot say and do." While Rohn acknowledges she may err in attributing an automatic connection to a person she learns is Jewish, it's a way of "narrowing the field down in a way that makes it more manageable." There's also an element of basic curiosity: "Sometimes it's nothing more lofty than that," she says.

But perhaps Canadian Jews are more preoccupied with others' Jewishness than their American counterparts. "I think American Jews are more assimilated and therefore these things don't mean as much to them," says Ankiewicz. "Jews in Canada are always said to be a generation or two behind Jews in the U.S. when it comes to the level of assimilation."

As long as audiences leave the cinema eager to discuss issues of identity, prejudice, anti-Semitism, and even blind philo-Semitism, then Kastner says he is gratified. "I've tried to make an entertaining, enigmatic film that will get people to think about these topics afresh," he says.

Farnel says the choice to screen the film was made because aside from its "unique and provocative look at contemporary Jewish identity," it "would polarize audi-

ences in interesting ways and spark discussion and debate."

Ankiewicz attributes the film's popularity to its provocative bent and Kastner's pluckiness. "The title grabs you right away, although you don't know what the film will say," he says. "Then there's the chutzpa Jamie showed in tackling a topic that might be considered too politically incorrect by many people, especially in the media."

Although the broader themes are universal, and Kastner wouldn't categorize "Kike Like Me" as a Jewish film, he says that Jews are an interesting study because no matter how deeply they penetrate the "gentile mainstream," they are never allowed to forget their ethnicity. "This exists," he says, "even though for the most part Jews are not a visible minority."

This brings us to part of the reason why Kastner chose the pejorative term "kike" for the film's title. "Jews cannot be subsumed into the mainstream no matter how white they appear, but on the other hand, they're never a hip minority either," he says. As Kastner colorfully puts it: "You're never going to see white suburban kids slapping each other five and calling each other 'Yo my kike' and downing a fifth of Manischewitz on a street corner."

The use of the word "kike" within the film's title made several broadcasters uncomfortable when Kastner first pitched the film back in 2005. "Most broadcasters who expressed interest agreed around the table that they loved the project but the title would have to be changed — it was just too 'in your face.' Nobody in polite circles used that term," says Michaelle McLean, director of the Toronto Documentary Forum, a body that helps filmmakers raise co-financing for their projects. "But in the end that's part of why they were interested and why it was appealing to them. Jamie's approach in the film is 'in your face' and is exactly suitable to the subject matter — a subject too often swept under the rug."

**C**LAD IN AN OLIVE GREEN ZIP-up shirt and yellow Converse sneakers, Kastner is a youthful 35-year-old with a hipster look who isn't afraid to show some classic Jewish chutzpa, a trait that is amply on display in his film. In person, though, he's far more muted and expresses concern about providing unnecessary or boring details as he expands upon certain points. An engaging conversationalist, he's both garrulous and reflective and, like most people who have a



lot to say, is prone to tangents.

Kastner cut his teeth in the business at 19, starting off as a music critic for the Toronto Sun daily. He's written for several Toronto newspapers and has held a number of positions in television, including working as a producer and director for several shows that aired on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

His first documentary, "Free Trade Is Killing My Mother," was a black comedy about anti-globalization protesters that was released in 2003. He followed this in 2005 with "Djangomania!" which explored the cult surrounding the late gypsy jazz guitar legend Django Reinhardt and was bought by a number of stations and networks, including the BBC, Sundance Channel in the U.S. and ABC Australia. Kastner says the overwhelmingly favorable response to Djangomania! helped lay the groundwork for him to successfully pitch "Kike Like Me."

The idea for his latest documentary came from Kastner's numerous encounters with people trying to determine whether or not he's Jewish. He says some go about it discreetly while others take more euphemistic approaches, asking him about his last name and where his parents are from. When he replies "Canada," they ask where his grandparents are from (they hail from Germany). "You know all they're asking is 'Are you Jewish?' and there's something kind of uncomfortable about all that prodding," he says.

One thing's guaranteed: there's an inverse relationship between the success of "Kike Like Me" and the likelihood that people will stop asking Kastner the question that so grates on him.

"On the one hand, for someone who is irritated by being asked the question, I seem to have chosen the very project to ensure that I will always be asked by people who feel perfectly at liberty to do so," says Kastner, even though the point of the film is not to ask the question.

And, in case you were wondering, yes, this reporter did ask him the question. Kastner played coy, dropping a few hints (when mentioning his wife, he reveals that her last name is Sniderman, and then playfully insists he's not "admitting to anything"). He speaks of his family background as it relates to his career — Kastner's mother is a writer and journalist who was a longtime columnist at the Toronto Star. His uncle, John Kastner, is a three-time Emmy award-winning documentary maker; his aunt has worked as a TV journalist and his grand-



**BONDING:** Upon 'discovering' Kastner's Judaism, a Habadnik eagerly instructs him in putting on tefillin (phylacteries)

mother worked as a magazine editor and also translated the works of Bertolt Brecht.

So does Kastner have audiences fooled? Although he says non-Jewish audiences seem perplexed as to his true identity, an informal poll revealed that Jews viewing the

film seem to have it figured out. "Really just the fact that he doesn't go into it I think gives you the answer," says Ankiewicz. "I think the Jewish audiences sort of clue in on the evidence and innuendo. Just look at his face!"