

# Interviews: Paul F. Tompkins, Cast of 'Sullivan & Son' at 2013 'Just for Laughs Chicago'

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- A Christmas Story [2]
- Ahmed Ahmed [3]
- Chicago [4]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [5]
- Interview [6]
- Just for Laughs Chicago [7]
- Owen Benjamin [8]
- Patrick McDonald [9]
- Paul F. Tompkins [10]
- Peter Billingsley [11]
- Roy Wood Jr. [12]Steve Byrne [13]
- Sullivan & Son [14]
- Swingers [15]
- <u>TBS</u> [16]
- Vince Vaughn [17]

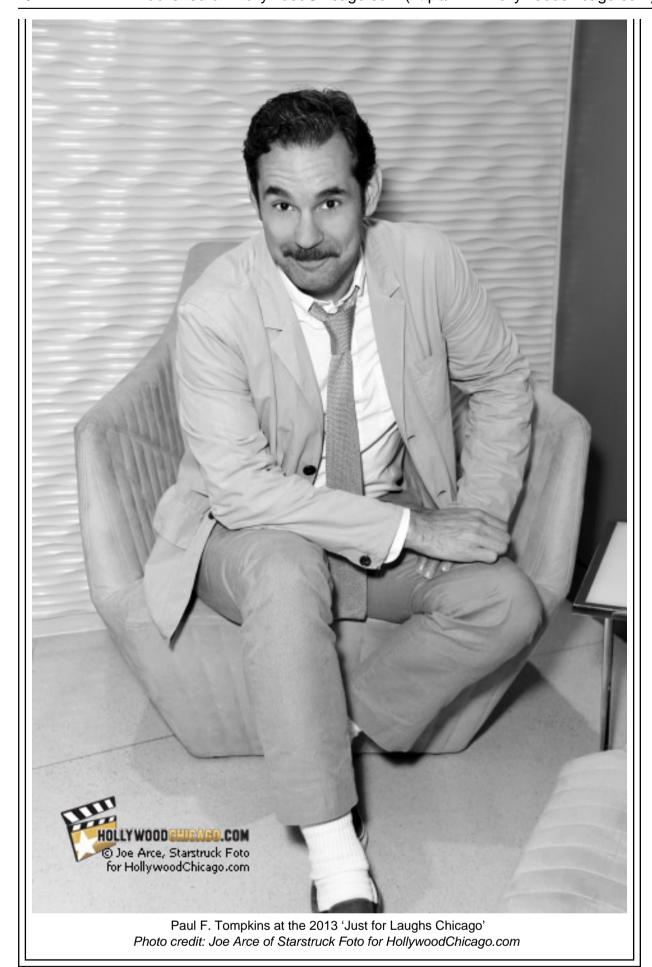
CHICAGO – The hottest comic and comedy show came together at the 2013 TBS "Just for Laughs Chicago" festival in June. Paul F. Tompkins – podcaster and host of VH1's "Best Week Ever" – had a show, and also at the event were the cast of comedians that make up the TBS sitcom, "Sullivan & Son."

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Tompkins and the "Sullivan & Son" cast, as they talked about the comedian's life and sitcoms in the age of YouTube.



The multi-talented Tompkins has conquered most of the comic media – he has hosted "Best Week Ever" on the VH1 network, has had two comedy albums, he's appeared in the film "Anchorman" and oversees his own "Pod F. Tompkast" podcast. He also currently produces a weekly web series called "Speakeasy," in which he speaks with entertainers at local Los Angeles bars.





HollywoodChicago.com: You are an advocate of the podcast. How has the flexibility of that medium changed your comic sensibility, if at all?

**Paul F. Tompkins:** I think it's a way to keep working out, essentially. You can keep being creative on your own schedule, without having to book a gig. It's been a great way to connect to people, especially realizing there is an audience listening. They generally gravitate to my sensibility. I love it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You grew up in the Philadelphia area. How did that background, and your family dynamic, contribute to your comic viewpoint?

**Tompkins:** I came from a big family, with not enough attention. It's classic. [laughs]. I wasn't the baby, but was second to last. It's absolutely the same story that most people have in this business, they're the middle children. I've encountered some people, and it's weird to me, that they were the youngest in their family. I don't understand how that works, they got the attention.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you remember the first joke you told in front of a microphone?

**Tompkins:** I don't. The first time on stage is such a blur to me. I remember how it felt more than anything. I remember everything about the day before I went on stage – what I ate, the first person I met in the club, how I felt beforehand – but the actual being on stage is a total blur.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've been described as an 'alternative' comic. What does that descriptive mean to you?

**Tompkins:** I think that 'alternative' means more like alternative venues in my case, I'm outside of the traditional comedy club. For me, I did the clubs for years, and it finally just felt like they were competing with the restaurant business, and I'm in the entertainment business. In the clubs, the entertainment and the restaurant business are at war with each other. You get crowds that are not the greatest, and it becomes like a babysitting job, rather than doing what you want to do. I have a more deliberate pacing in my act, and having a half interested audience is



death. They have to hear what I'm saying for it to pay off.

HollywoodChicago.com: Here in Chicago, we're in the midst of another comedy boom, equivalent to the last one in the late 1980s. Since you've been in the business for awhile, what do you think determines ebb and flow in the comedy game?

**Tompkins:** Technology has been a big part of it, with podcasting and YouTube type sites bringing the show directly to the fans. It spills over to people who don't seek comedy all the time, but have friends who do. As you said, I haven't seen comedy as popular as it is now since when I started, in the late 1980s boom. It feels like that again, in that it's everywhere, and it's great to see.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, you are putting together a dinner party with your comic influences, living or dead. Which five people are at that table?

**Tompkins:** Wow. I'd seat Bob Newhart, Steve Martin, Bill Cosby, John Candy and Phil Hartman.



## Cast of "Sullivan & Son"

In 2012, a new sitcom called "Sullivan & Son," produced by Vince Vaughn and Peter Billingsley (the former child actor who portrayed Ralphie in "A Christmas Story," now a producer), premiered on the TBS network. Since TBS presented "Just for Laughs Chicago," they brought in the team of comic actors that make up the cast of S&S. Lead actor Steve Byrne had lifted the premise a bit from his real life – as a half Korean, half Irish resident of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – and that is where the show is set. In "Sullivan & Son," Byrne is son Steve, with his father Jack portrayed by Dan Lauria (who was also Dad on "The Wonder Years"). Steve comes back to work at the bar owned by his family, to deal with them and his various friends, played by Owen Benjamin, Roy Wood Jr. and Ahmed Ahmed.





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HollywoodChicago.com: Steve, this is loosely based on your life. What are the differences between the sitcom and your family and friends?

**Steve Byrne:** The major difference is that in my real life I don't like black people, so I don't have any black friends. [laughter]. Or white friends, really. I stick exclusively to Asians. Or half Asians.

HollywoodChicago.com: What joke about an Irish-Asian guy would be too extreme even for "Sullivan & Son"?

Byrne: That I have black hair and red pubes.

HollywoodChicago.com: How many jokes about 'The Wonder Years' has Dan Luria endured and what was the funniest?

Byrne: Zero! That's a show that had 40 million viewers.

Roy Wood Jr: And went on for eight seasons. He's also a critically acclaimed Broadway actor, so you don't mess with him.

**Ahmed Ahmed:** We shut up and listen. He played golf with Sinatra. He did. He tells us all these old stories about he and Frank going to places like Blockbuster video.

Owen Benjamin: He and Peter Falk were best friends. He's totally old school, and has four Emmys.

**Byrne:** He's the father on the set, and he will invite us to his house on Sundays for a barbecue. Afterward, he'll get us to watch an old black and white classic film, like Preston Sturges, and then analyze it shot-by-shot. I just say 'Dan, we're on a sitcom in the middle of July, we're not going to win an Emmy.

**Benjamin.:** He always says that whenever there is a cut in a scene, an actor is about to lose his job. [laughs] He's so staged that he hates it when they yell 'cut.' He just wants to do the master shot.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are a traditional three-camera-in-front-of-a-live-audience sitcom, do you perform the show on taping day continuously, like a play, or through another technique?

**Byrne:** There are now four cameras. We tape a couple times on performance day, like the '70s and '80s sitcoms, starting a 3pm with a straight run-through, flubbed lines and all. Second taping is at 6pm, when you get the beats down and know where the laughs are, and at that time we do every scene two or three times.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since this is the first time for all of you on a TV series, what has been the most interesting transition in doing it?

**Wood:** Not being poor. [laughs]. And working with other people to reach that 'funny point,' which is different from just making it funny by yourself in stand-up.

Ahmed: It's all about the team, it's not individuals.

Benjamin: We are a bunch of lone wolves who have formed a pack.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** When are the most changes in the script made – at the first table read, first rehearsals or on set? Does it allow for improvisation?

Ahmed: We pitch in here and there, but mostly I just want to say the goddamn line.

**Byrne:** We'll do some alternate takes on some lines. Vince [Vaughn] is there at all the tapings, and he'll improv some stuff. Half of the really great lines are from him.

**Benjamin:** When there are ten actors, ten writers and five producers, I try not to say anything. There are so many people ahead of me with ideas, I just try and figure out the best way to say it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Is there anything on set that is an homage to that other great barroom comedy, 'Cheers'?

**Byrne:** Remember that still picture in the credit sequence, a guy holding up a paper that says, 'We Win'? I was going to put that photo somewhere on the set. But we have these legal teams, and although no one would ever notice, they did catch me putting it on the set, so they made me take it down.

We do try to have a lot of fun things decorating the set, like the leg lamp next to the juke box for Peter [Billingsley]. Above our on-set storage room there is a license plate that says 'DBL DN 11,' meaning 'Double Down on 11' from the movie 'Swingers,' which is for Vince.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Steve, since Pittsburgh has changed so much in the last couple of generations, what still remains funny about that town?

**Byrne:** Honestly, there may be more Fortune 500 companies there and it's not a steel town anymore, but there is still a blue collar mentality. Which means there is still a culture of 'ball busting' in the town. It will bring you back down to earth, no matter who you are. That's why I love that city.

**Benjamin:** One of the tweets I read was 'I can't believe they're making a show set in such a piece of sh\*t city.' I looked at the user name, and he was from Pittsburgh. [laughs]

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HollywoodChicago.com: I'll let you all think about this for a second – the five comics you invite to a dinner party, dead or alive...

Ahmed: I'd invite Sebastian Maniscalco, Richard Pryor, Ellen DeGeneres, Eddie Murphy and George Carlin.

Wood: Chris Rock, George Carlin, Doug Stanhope, Bill Burr and Paul Mooney.

Byrne: Anybody who doesn't perform at the UCB comedy clubs. You can put that in bold. [laughs]

See video, hear podcasts and check out all the fun from the 2013 TBS Network "Just For Laughs Chicago" by clicking here. [18]



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