



CATS Are from Mars?

TV star and kitty sage helps the planets align for peaceful feline-human relations

Feline behavior expert Jackson Galaxy didn't set out to become the patron saint of conflicted cats. "I never wanted to do anything besides be a singer-songwriter," says the tattooed, goateed, pierced rock guitarist. But one night, while working as an animal caretaker at a Colorado shelter, Galaxy single-handedly soothed dozens of anxious, yowling cats and realized his life was meant to go in a different direction.

Around the shelter, he became known as the guy "who was speaking 'cat' pretty fluently and effecting change." Before long, his supervisor asked him to visit families who were planning to relinquish a misbehaving pet. "I'd go to their house, make very, very basic changes, and the cat would stay," he says. The volunteer gig eventually became a full-time business, one that led Galaxy to a new city and the lead role in an Animal Planet reality show.

Today, armed with a guitar case full of cat toys and training tools, the *My Cat from Hell* star calls on Los Angeles pet owners whose kitties are ruining the house and relationships. Galaxy puts the misunderstood cats on the couch along with their owners, turning around seemingly hopeless situations and keeping families together.

In this edited interview with associate editor Arna Cohen, Galaxy talks about his special calling to help cats and people coexist.

What inspired you to work in a shelter?

I was working dead-end jobs, and I just wanted to do a little bit of good and stop living such a self-centered life. I figured working with animals and scooping some poop would be good for me and would also allow me to pursue music at night.

Before that, you were living with your bandmates and a houseful of kitties.

When did you realize that you have a knack for working with cats?

I just understood their body signals instinctually. I went to grad school for acting. Whether you're an actor or a songwriter, your goal is taking everyday observations of people and turning them into art. There's an established vocabulary for dogs. You can see a dog assume a play bow. You know exactly what that means. Cats, not so much. By observing a cat, you're saying, "What does this body posture mean in this time and space?"

When I first started working at the shelter, I found we were euthanizing totally healthy cats because they were being deemed unadoptable in a totally crowded shelter. They were displaying fear behavior—not eating or always facing the back of the cage. All it took was getting into an understanding place with that cat so that I could affect that behavior enough to get them to face the front of the cage. Then they would go home. The stakes were really high. It wasn't just, "I love to study cats." It was, "Gee, this is one less cat that we have to kill because of something very basic."

After reading how cats communicate affection, you calmed a roomful of fearful kitties by exchanging slow blinks with them. Was that your epiphany?

Yes, totally. It was the first time that I understood that I could affect behavior on a large scale. There were like 45 cats in that room. It took me a few hours, but we went from absolute hysteria to absolute quiet. Knowing that could happen was like finding my Rosetta stone. It was amazing to know that these guys just needed to be reassured.



What other changes were you able to bring about?

Housing is one thing. Part of my tenure there was helping to design and raise funds for a new state-of-the-art building. We went from cats in cages to cats in group living. Being able to see cats in big rooms where they can climb and where they can show themselves as the tree-dwellers and the bush-dwellers that they actually are is a massive change in animal shelters. I can't understate that.

In the home environment, what's an example of a misunderstanding that keeps people from getting along with cats?

The nature of life with a cat is compromise. If you don't understand that and try to bend them to your will in the way that we've historically been able to train dogs—that's not what a cat is. My assertion is that's not why you brought a cat into your home to begin with. You brought a cat into your home because there is something about the nature of wild in your life that you appreciate.

Clients say, "My cats are peeing on the drapes." I say, "You have feral cats walking all over your neighborhood. If yours are peeing territorially because they're feeling threatened, I'd like you to put a litter box underneath that picture window. It will give them a positive place to put their scent. They'll be able to walk by that window and say 'I own this' and keep walking." The level of pushback I get on that is staggering. They'd almost rather have pee on their drapes than a litter box under the window. I can't just say, "Hey, tough luck." Then that cat's going to wind up in the shelter. I say, "There are plenty of litter

boxes that are actually disguised. An outsider wouldn't even know it's a litter box."

What have been some of your most difficult cases?

I've dealt with a number of cases where the psychic damage to an abused animal was so severe that nothing was going to help besides a long-term plan and just time. The hardest ones that I've dealt with are post-traumatic stress disorder. I can't wave a magic wand. It can take years. It's the client's patience level. Under my own roof I've had two cats who took seven years to successfully be in the same room at the same time without the specter of violence hanging over them. It wasn't a failure on my part. It was just the two of them getting to know each other well enough to respect their boundaries.

In your forthcoming book, *Cat Daddy*, you describe how your cat Benny expanded your understanding of cat behavior.

Benny came to me when I was working at the shelter and proved to be my biggest challenge in the 14 years that I had him. Behavioral challenges, medical challenges. There was always something about him that every time I tried to make a sweeping generalization about cat behavior, he would thumb his nose at me.

It teaches you patience and refocusing your eyes and staying humble. I don't care what you think you know about cats and dogs, you are going to meet a teacher at some point who brings you to your knees. When that happens, you then have an expanded level of empathy that you can bring to the species as a whole.

As we're planning the book tour, I've said to the publisher, "If you want to put me in a Barnes & Noble that's fine, but I want to make sure that at every stop I get to go to a shelter and raise some money." It's nice for me to be able to stay with rescue and sheltering. Staying in that realm keeps me grounded, because so many TV shows keep you anything but grounded.

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