



JERRY ZOLINSKY/staff photographer

Tim Harrold (left), Bill Barr and Mike Van Dyke participate in a comedy skit at Ann Arbor Heidelberg's "Comedy Sportz." In "Comedy Sportz," a comedian can get the brown-bag treatment for committing a foul during his/her act. Here Van Dyke is receiving his punishment from Barr, who is the referee.

## Spots to get your yuk yuks

If you love to laugh but don't know where to go to get a belly full, take a look at the following list of the area's abundance of clubs. Then get up and take off.

Comedy club performers are generally a mixed bag of the great and the grating, so — before sticking your hand in — a telephone call ahead of time might be a good idea. That's if you want to know if getting off the living room couch is worth it.

Headliners and others completing bills at most of the clubs change nearly every week.

• Alexander the Great, 34733 Warren, Westland; mostly stand-up comics, 326-5410.

• Bea's Comedy Kitchen, 541 E. Larned, Warren; mostly stand-up comics, 961-2581.

• Chaplin's, 34244 Groesbeck Road in Fraser; mostly stand-up comics, 792-1902.

• Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle, 2593 Woodward, north of 11 Mile; stand-up comics, open mike Monday nights; 542-9300.

• Comedy Sportz at the Heidelberg, 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor; improvisational games, 995-8888.

• Duffy's, 8835 Cooley Lake Road, Union Lake; mostly stand-up comics, 363-9469.

• Historic Holly Hotel, 110 Battle Alley, Holly; mostly stand-up comics, open mike starting this month; 634-5208.

• Komedy Korner, Riverside at Quetelle, Windsor; 1-519-252-6848.

• Long Branch Comedy Club, 595 N. Lapeer, Oxford; stand-up comics, open-mike competition starting this month; 628-6500.

• Mainstreet Comedy Showcase, 314 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor; stand-up comics, 996-9080.

• Mr. Mike's, 35323 Ford, Westland; Ken Masey and Chris Elder perform jokes and musical comedy songs on weekends, 722-8882.

## These places are good for laughs

By Tim Smith  
staff writer

"Hey waiter, bring me some turtle soup — and make it snappy."

Heartfelt agony and despair usually overcome shellshocked comedy club audiences when such an obviously bad pun is delivered by aspiring Jay Leno-types.

But at Ann Arbor's Heidelberg, home of the improvisational "Comedy Sportz," turtle soup cracks are treated a bit differently.

Oh sure, crowds there persist in the usual good-natured jesting. But wait, there's more. Comics know there are "Actletes" are penalized for bad humor by referees of all things.

According to Comedy Sportz manager Bill Barr, the show's "groaner" penalty is the most-called "foul" at the totally off-the-cuff program. The show patterns comedy after sporting events, complete with national anthem renditions.

"IT'S POT LUCK," Ridley said of the sessions where locals sign up, then are picked at random to provide rib-tickling punch lines. "I talked to customers one night, and out of 16 only two or three enjoyed it."

"But on other nights, they liked every act. They either laugh out of sympathy, or because they're really funny," said Ridley, with a small chuckle.

"AND THAT APPLIES to the crowd as well," he added. "If someone yells out anything that's brown

bag material, they get the same penalty."

Comedy Sportz is a strange-but-wonderful twist in the local world of joke palaces. But those seeking out a good, hearty laugh have many other choices to consider.

At Mr. Mike's in Westland, the team of Ken Masey and Chris Elder serve up musical comedy, with generous doses of lyrical parody.

Stand-up comics also yut it up at such places as Chaplin's in Fraser, Long Branch Comedy Club in Oxford and the Historic Holly Hotel, among others.

But perhaps the best known comedy club in the area is Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle, on Woodward-11 1/2 Mile in Berkley's Northwood Inn. One never knows what to expect there.

Every Monday night open mike sessions, anybody who thinks they're funny have 10 minutes to prove it. Many times the gags are good. Other times people gag on the goods.

The offending player comes up to the edge and starts and apologizes for insisting the crowd, Barr said, adding that there are other calls for obscene humor and comic indecency, or "waffling."

If obscenity does creep in, brown paper bags are unfurled, Barr said.

"I'm not happy unless it's to the taste of the crowd," Barr said.

Within the soft, gray-powdered interior of the building, Baker continues to run his sort of business that makes him something akin to a metro area institution.

His club on Detroit's west side, the venerable Baker's Keyboard Lounge,

was inherited from his father. Even though the 53-year-old club has been sold at least twice, it always comes back to Baker's stewardship.

Baker, fired from the booth with a white-gold ring, is toying with the idea of maybe selling the old place again. Remaining vague, he says he might be tempted into selling if the right person with the right idea showed up.

He's been commuting between his

To add spice on open mike nights, Ridley said a few working comedians are tossed in with the novices to set an example about "how it works up there."

During the rest of the week though, particularly weekends, such plays are seldom if ever needed. That's because Ridley's club has quite a track record.

Many prominent national comics and performers have shown up at Comedy Castle, including, he listed, Leno, Gallagher and Dave Coulier, star of ABC's situation comedy "Full House."

Some eventually wind up on Showtime's Comedy Club Network, a program that regularly airs between movies on the cable channel.

OTHERS, LIKE current headliner Bill Maher, crack up people like Johnny Carson on "The Tonight Show." Johnny Carson said it was the single longest laugh they ever got for a comedian "on the show," Ridley noted. "They had to stop the act because the people couldn't stop laughing."

"It's quite a compliment when you bring the house down on the Tonight Show."

Ridley's Comedy Castle isn't the only place trying the open mike format some nights.

Both Chaplin and Long Branch Comedy Club are rejuvenating amateur nights this month.

**'People like a good laugh; it's a good form of entertainment. Besides, they're (comedy clubs) a good alternative for people who can't dance.'**

— Mark Ridley  
Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle

OXFORD'S Long Branch club is holding a six-week contest for comedic neophytes, with survivors grabbing trips to Florida, said general manager Cal Quindt.

THOUGH MOST CLUBS feature stand-ups, local laugh-seekers have some other options, notably Comedy Sportz and Westland's Mr. Mike's.

Comedy Sportz, teams such as East Side Endorphin and Ann Arbor Halfwits race through a slate of comic games — such as Slo-Mo renditions of underwater basket weaving or Javelin catching.

"It's like the events of a track meet," Barr explained. "An audience member judges each round, and there are two players off-stage who are announcing play-by-play."

Barr said some comics suffer "in-

juries" during Comedy Sportz competition. One player left because of "lip-lock."

"Everything they create is right off the top of their heads," he said. "We look for people who are able to think on their feet and to act."

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION is also a key at Mr. Mike's in Westland, performer Ken Masey said.

"We do an oldies medley and change the words to make them comical," explained Masey. "The audience gets involved, and the act kind of feeds on that as well."

No matter the format, comedy clubs are here to stay, according to Ridley.

"People like a good laugh; it's a good form of entertainment," Ridley said. "Besides, they're a good alternative for people who can't dance."

## Supper club serves up jazzy tunes

Clarence Baker leans forward in his seat along the sidelines in his Pontiac supper club, Uptown Baker's. "There's not a bad seat in the house," he says matter-of-factly.

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venerable Baker's Keyboard Lounge, was inherited from his father. Even though the 53-year-old club has been sold at least twice, it always comes back to Baker's stewardship.

Baker, fired from the booth with a white-gold ring, is toying with the idea of maybe selling the old place again. Remaining vague, he says he might be tempted into selling if the right person with the right idea showed up.

He's been commuting between his

Southfield home, the Detroit place and the Pontiac supper club since the new business opened its doors in July. The new club draws an Oakland County patronage, mostly from the Birmingham-West Bloomfield area.

"I'm not happy unless it's just right. I have to see it myself to believe it," he said. "I'm just one of those guys that has to do it that way. I spend 2 1/2 hours each day in my car

going between the two places."

That attitude permeated the project that's reclaiming an old building in the heart of Pontiac. "I don't know why I'm here," Baker said. "I have the other place. Jim Fitzpatrick, of the Pike Street Company and the Phoenix Development Corp., came to me with an idea and at first I had no interest in it. Then I got a little excited about it."

"I got excited about it and went to Earl Klugh and he got excited," he said. Klugh, one of Detroit's best known jazzmen, are partners in the Pontiac club. Klugh, a recording and道路 to the house band, Collaboration with Sandra Fava on vocals.

Unlike the traditional jazz showcases at the old club, the new location features the music in its young upstart form, fusion.

It's a project to which Baker evidently gave painstaking attention. The Birmingham design firm of Peter Hansen was hired to renovate the interior of the building which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

They left patches of the building's original plaster to mingle with the new gray wall covering and the humongous gray banquettes with their black accents. "When I first saw the design I got mad," Baker said. "I said 'people will think we ran out of money.' We did run out of money. The bar was supposed to have been done in marble."

Baker laid out the house, insisting on elevated seating so patrons are assured of a good look at the bands.

Even the bar, set like a gemstone in the middle of the room, offers good seating for performances. In fact, the bar is the only thing the whole room remains focused on the empty stage. Dull, late autumn sunlight somehow manages to highlight the

patina of its wood floor. Off to the right side of the stage, carefully covered, stands the club's \$24,000 Steinway concert grand piano.

Tucked in a corner near the kitchen on the opposite side of the room stand the control booth for the club's \$100,000 sound, light and video system designed by Ann Arbor Audio.

"They're the best," Baker said.

But after 40 years in the business, Baker knows it takes more than a well-appointed room to succeed.

"You have to know the capacity of your business. How much you can take in; how much to charge. You have to know what the market is. You have to know how to buy right. You have to know when to hire a band. You have to know when to turn your back on them."

Operating a jazz club under the economic rules of the '80s requires a new attitude. "There was a time when I could hire any jazz artist in the world one night after another," Baker said. "I can't do that anymore."

He charges a \$4 cover on ladies' nights, Thursday and Sunday evenings. "A cover charge was un-

sual here but dinner doesn't begin to cover the cost of the band."

Big names require club owners to dole out big bucks. "The bigger the name, the more advertising you have to do," he said. Advertising in the major metropolitan newspapers can run \$1,200 — more for a big name.

For a time Baker sent out newsletters to more than 5,000 patrons. "That cost me \$1,200 to put out. I didn't see where I was getting it back."

The nuts and bolts of the operation requires more money than it once did. A 19-day electrical bill for Baker's Uptown recently ran over \$2,000.

If old time big names have grown too expensive, it's become just as difficult to latch on to bright new talent. "Where are they coming from? There aren't any clubs for them to go play in," Baker said.

There's a new generation of jazz players, some on record contracts and accustomed to playing the big halls and renovated theaters. A more intimate club could go broke wooing the likes of young jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis.



LAURA CASTLE/staff photographer

Sandra Fava of Detroit is the featured female singer at Baker's Uptown. She wills gassy romances while Collaboration provides the accompanying jazz music.



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