Seaholm grad 'banks' on comedy

By Bob Sadler
special writer

It's the stuff mini-series are made of.

The title? "From Birmingham to the Big Time."

The plot? Young man graduates from high school during the height of the chaotic '60s, spends almost 15 years criss-crossing the country as folk singer, discovers he can reap fame and fortune by being someone else and becomes a star through the intercession of a mysterious benefactor — a premium Scotch whiskey.

What sounds like potential ratings bonanza for the next sweeps month is actually the unlikely story of Stuart Mitchell, Birmingham Seaholm Class of '68.

Mitchell played guitar and sang in a folk music trio while still at Seaholm. One of the group's members, Christine Lahti, is now a motion picture actress in Hollywood. Upon graduating, Mitchell took his guitar and a repertoire of Peter, Paul & Mary songs, intertwined with the Beatles and others on the road.

From here, the story doesn't change much until the '80s, when Mitchell had a couple weeks off.

HE HEARD about a club in Lansing that was hosting a comedy open mike night. By simply deleting the more serious tunes in his act and emphasizing the amusing ones, Mitchell landed a week's worth of shows at the club, known as The Wit's End.

What poignant thing did he learn from this one week stand?

"I found out I could make the same money in one set of comedy that I could in five sets of folk singing," said Mitchell, 39, in a recent interview.

So much for the nobler pursuit of art.

After a transition period of about three years, Mitchell became strictly a comedian, headlining in clubs around the state. But still a few pieces of the puzzle were missing.

One piece was found during Mitchell's first trip to perform in Los Angeles. Naturally, it was his wife who made the discovery.

"I was a tall, skinny guy with a guitar and a string tie," Mitchell said. "I was the only one back in Detroit, but when I got to L.A., there were about 30 of me. I used to do characters in the car and for the kids — but not on stage. She (his wife Shirley) said I should try it."

And so Heywood Banks, Mitchell's onstage alter ego, was born.

"We went to a Salvation Army store and picked up a pair of plaid polyester pant, paisley shirt and a wild tie. I parted my hair on the side and found a pair of safety glasses."

BUT IS this character as weird as he looks?

Heywood Banks is Stuart Mitchell's alter ego.

"He's a 21st Century eccentric," Mitchell said. "I don't think he's a nerd or a geek or anything. Heywood's totally an innocent. He's unaware that he's not cool."

The final piece fell into place last year by a strange quirk of fate. A local club owner happened to double book Mitchell with another headliner. Mitchell was told not to show up that night. A national search for new comedic talent was taking place in Chicago, and Mitchell went there instead.

The mysterious alcoholic benefactor? Johnny Walker.

Mitchell and his alter ego edged out 90 other comics in The Windy City and swept through the finals in Los Angeles to win the first Johnnie Walker National Comedy Search. With the victory, he won $3,000, performance dates at various Improv's across the nation and a featured slot on the television show "Evening at the Improv." Winning the competition also brought him an appearance on an HBO "Young Comedians Special," as well as increased money on the club circuit.

And so now, Mitchell sits in his home near Ann Arbor with his wife, two children (son Colter, 10, and daughter Molly, 7) and an irrepressible persona that has turned his life upside down.

If it's not a mini-series someday, maybe Robin Leach will pick up the story.

Heywood Banks will appear Thursday through Saturday, June 8-10, at the Mainstreet Comedy Showcase, 314 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Showtimes is 8:30 p.m. with an additional show at 11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 996-9080.

COMEDY CLUBS

Here are some listings of comedy clubs in our area. To let us know who is appearing at your club, send the information to: Comedy Listings, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

● BEA'S COMEDY

Rob Lederman, Altaro Shelton, Al Langston and Jef Brannan will perform Friday-Saturday, June 9-10, at Bea's Comedy Kitchen, 541 Larned, Detroit. Showtimes are 9 p.m. and 11:15 p.m. There also is a new comedy show at 9:30 p.m. Thursdays. For information, call 961-2581.

● CHAPLIN'S EAST

Jerry Elliott will appear Wednesday-Saturday, June 7-10, at Chaplin's East, 34244 Groesbeck, Fraser. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 792-1902.

● CHAPLIN'S PLYMOUTH

Mike Toomey will appear Thursday-Saturday, June 8-10, at Chaplin's Plymouth in the Plymouth Hilton, 14707 Northville Road, Plymouth. For information, call 454-4660.

● CHAPLIN'S WEST

Jim Wiggins will appear Tuesday-Saturday, June 6-10, at Chaplin's West, 16890 Telegraph, south of Six Mile, Detroit. For information, call 533-8866. Shoemaker will be appearing in a special engagement Friday and Saturday. Tickets cost $10 those nights.

● COMEDY SPORTZ

Comedy Sportz at the Heidelburg will have improvisational comedy at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The club is at 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For reservations, call 995-8888.

● HOLLY HOTEL

Tim Allen will perform along with Don Borza and Sean Hunter Thursday-Saturday, June 8-10, in the 1891 Room Comedy Club of the Holly Hotel, 110 Battle Alley, Holly. Sowtimes are 8:30 p.m. Thursday and 8:30 and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 634-5208.

● JOEY'S

Ted Norkey will perform Wednesday-Saturday, June 7-10, at Joey's Comedy Club, 36071 Plymouth Road, west of Wayne Road, Livonia. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Thursday is no-smoking night. For information, call 261-0555.

● LOONEY BIN

Rubin Rubin will perform Friday-Saturday, June 9-10, at The Looney Bin at The Roxy, I-94 and Haggerty. Showtimes are 9 p.m. Friday and 8 and 10 p.m. Saturday. There's a $5 cover charge. For information, call 699-1829.

● MISS KITTY'S

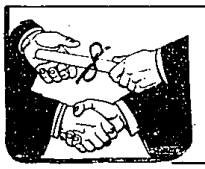
C. Wayne Owens and Michael Blackman will perform Thursday-Saturday, June 8-10, at Miss Kitty's Comedy Club, Long Branch Restaurant, 595 N. Lapeer Road, Oxford. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Thursday; 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 628-6500.

● RIDLEY'S COMEDY CASTLE

Barry Diamond will appear Tuesday-Saturday, June 6-10, at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle, 2593 Woodward, Berkley. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 542-9900.

● WOLVERINE LOUNGE/ LOONEY BIN

Peter Berman along with Andy Jensen and Tom Frank will perform Friday-Saturday, June 9-10, at the Wolverine Lounge and Looney Bin Comedy Club, 1655 Glengary, Walled Lake. Showtimes are 9 p.m. Friday and 8 and 10 p.m. Saturday. For information, call 669-9374.



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On March 21, over four thousand high school students jammed Masonic Temple to kick off the prom season campaign to "Celebrate Safely. Celebrate Drug Free."

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Our special thanks to 7-Eleven and the Junior League of Birmingham for their generous support.

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