

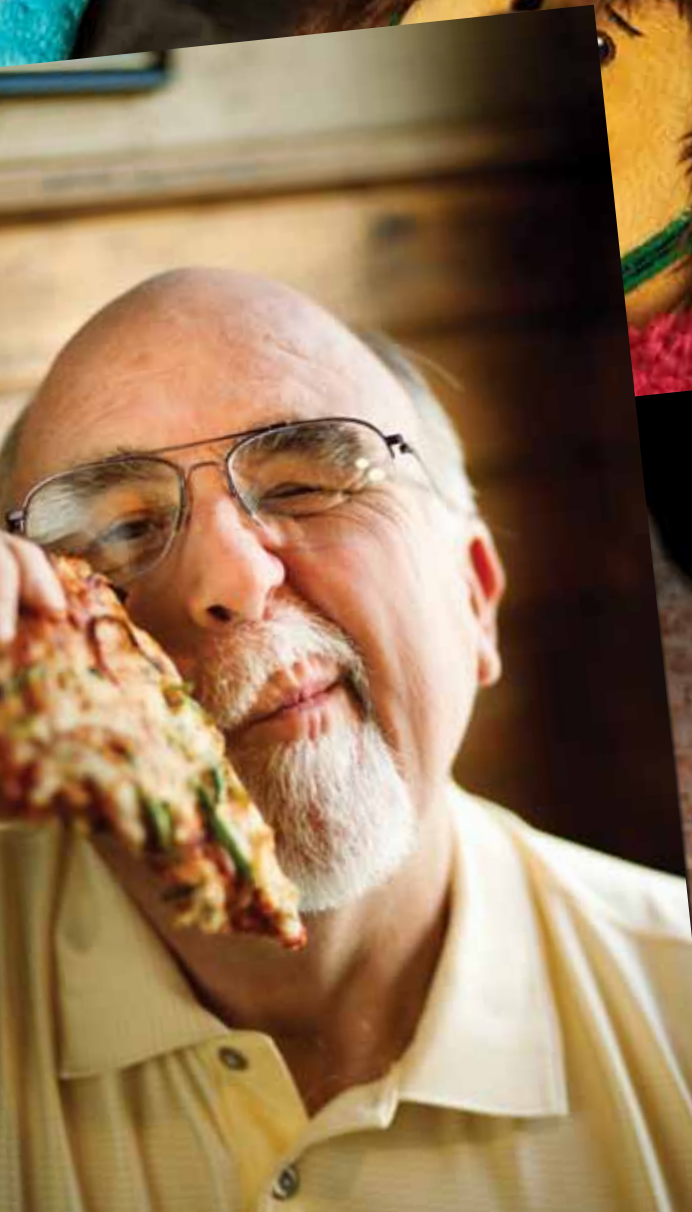
(clockwise, from top left) The Comedy Attic's proprietor, Jared Thompson, surrounded by cuddly friends. Tig Notaro, the opening headliner at last year's Limestone Comedy Festival, gets down to the level of her audience. Photo by Tall + Small Photography. The marquee at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. Photo by Tall + Small Photography. Bloomington-based touring comic Ben Moore. Pizza-magnate and longtime Comedy Caravan supporter Ray McConn.



By Jeremy Shere • Photography by Shannon Zahnle

# COMEDY IN BLOOMINGTON

The Art and Business of Making People Laugh







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une 8, 2013. The Buskirk-Chumley Theater is packed. It's the closing night of Bloomington's inaugural Limestone Comedy Festival. The

sold-out crowd, buoyed by the festival's success thus far, buzzes with anticipation. As the house lights dim, the buzz grows louder until, with the announcement, "Ladies and gentlemen, Pete Holmes!" it bursts into an avalanche of applause. The gangly 6-foot-6-inch comedian bounds onto the stage, the crowd settles in, and the laughter begins.

Holmes, like fellow festival headliners Maria Bamford, Tig Notaro, and Doug Benson, is a topflight, cutting-edge comedian who frequently appears on TV comedy specials, late-night talk shows (Holmes now has his own), and at top venues around the country. So what the heck are they doing at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater?

Actually, Bloomington has a surprisingly long and storied history as a comedy hotspot. But this past summer's festival, produced by the owner of The Comedy Attic, Jared Thompson, and locally based comic Mat Alano-Martin, has taken the town to another level.

"Through the Attic, and now the festival, we've built up a very sophisticated audience that the smartest comedians really appreciate," says Thompson. "Bloomington has become a place where you can see comics you otherwise wouldn't be able to see outside of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles."

For Brad Wilhelm, a longtime master of ceremonies on the local comedy scene and director of Rhino's Youth Center, stand-up comedy deserves to be recognized as an art form alongside music, dance, and theater. "Stand-up is as disciplined as ballet, as creative as jazz, as difficult as opera, and all things in between," he says. "To be a good stand-up comic you need a fully articulated set of skills that take years to develop and a sharp, creative mind."

#### THE PLACE FOR LAUGHS ON MONDAY NIGHT

Long before The Comedy Attic and the Limestone Comedy Festival, Bloomington

(top) Mat Alano-Martin and Jared Thompson welcome the audience to the first Limestone Comedy Festival. (center) Comedian Pete Holmes, headliner at the Limestone Festival's closing show. (bottom, left) Mat Alano-Martin tells a humorous story while Jared Thompson looks on. (bottom, right) Emcee Brad Wilhelm engages his audience. Photos by Tall + Small Photography

enjoyed a golden age of comedy. It began in the late-1970s and owes a debt, indirectly, to the launch of television's *Monday Night Football* telecasts. For a few years, before most people had big TVs, football fans flocked to Bear's Place on East 3rd Street — one of the few establishments featuring "large-screen" sets. But once sizeable TVs became affordable, the owner of Bear's Place, Ray McConn, was left with a gaping, football-sized hole. He'd toyed with the idea of hosting stand-up comedy, yet the one show he'd tried, but didn't promote, had flopped.

What McConn didn't know was that stand-up comedy was experiencing an unprecedented boom in other places. During the late-1960s and throughout the '70s, stand-up had evolved into something resembling an art form. Masters of the craft, including George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, and Robin Williams,

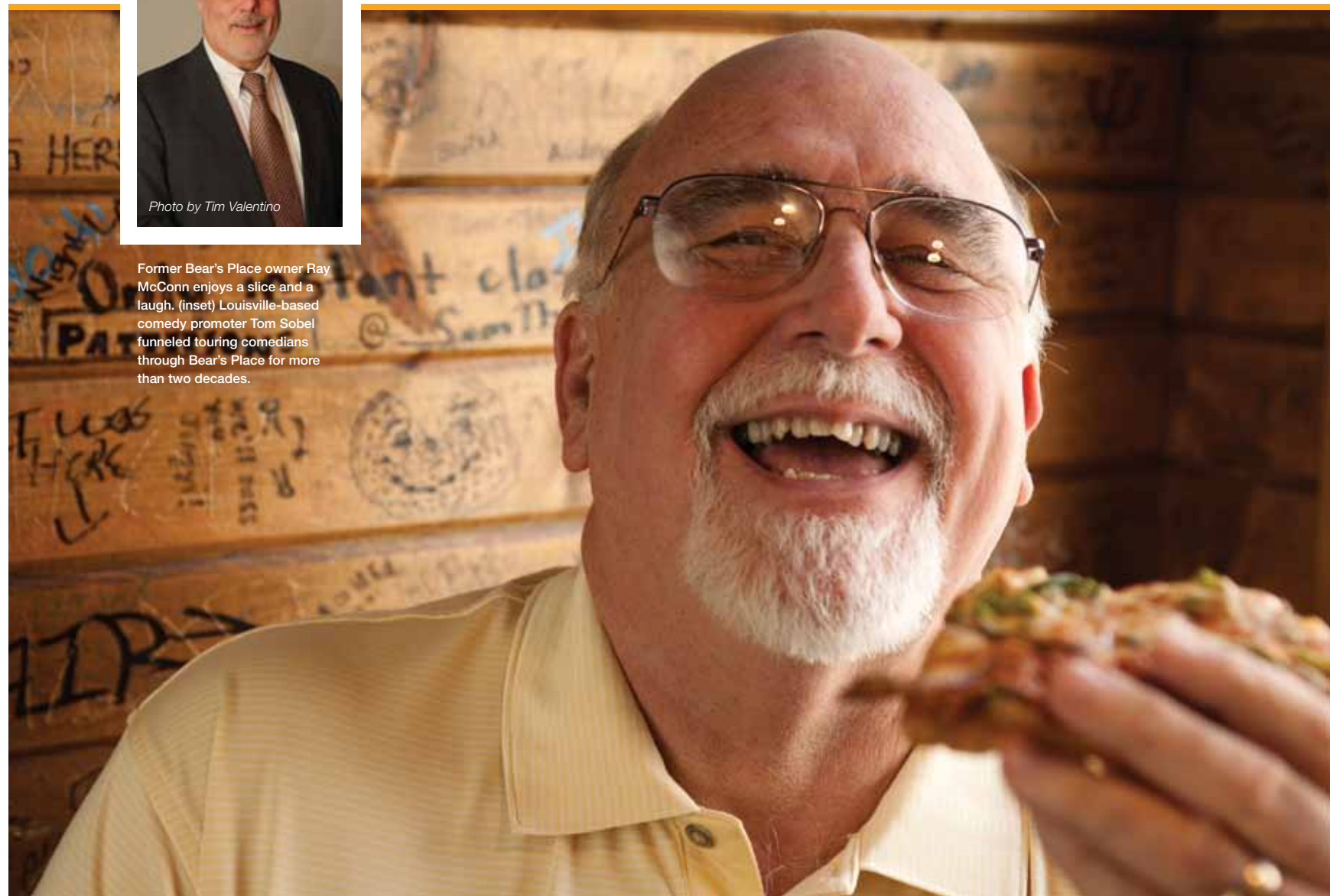
led the way, introducing fans to a new brand of smart, socially conscious comedy. By the mid-80s, comedy clubs based on the East and West coasts had spawned national franchises while TV shows such as A&E's *An Evening at the Improv* and HBO's *Comedy Hour* and *Young Comedians Show* provided wide exposure for soon-to-be stars such as Whoopi Goldberg, Sam Kinison, Andrew Dice Clay, Paul Reiser, and Roseanne Barr. Comedy clubs were popping up in cities large and small.

McConn got a firsthand taste of the boom in 1982 when, during a trip to Louisville, Ky., he decided to catch a show at a club called the Comedy Caravan. To his astonishment, McConn found the place packed. He sought out Tom Sobel, who owned the club and also booked comics into venues around the Midwest. A few years earlier he had pitched McConn the idea of having a comedy night at Bear's Place.

"Is this what I've been missing?" McConn asked.



Former Bear's Place owner Ray McConn enjoys a slice and a laugh. (inset) Louisville-based comedy promoter Tom Sobel funneled touring comedians through Bear's Place for more than two decades.



He and Sobel agreed to try comedy at Bear's Place on Monday nights. This time, McConn promoted the show heavily, and on Monday, Jan. 10, 1983, comics Rob Haney, Dea Staley, and Teddy LeRoi played to a full house. The show was so popular that McConn decided to do two shows — an early and a late — the next Monday. Both sold out, kicking off a string of shows that for the next 28 years would establish Bear's Place as one of the best venues to see comedy in the Midwest.

"Comics liked the room because it has a corner stage, focusing the attention of the audience on a single point," Sobel says. "Ray set the tone. He cared about the show and did everything he could to make it successful. Here's a guy who took a bad night of the week, competing with *Monday Night Football*, and turned it into decades of having to turn people away."

According to Brad Wilhelm, the longtime host of the Comedy Caravan at Bear's Place, McConn and Sobel made a good team. "Tom



was a smart, tenacious businessman who knew the comedy business inside and out and who kept supplying Bear’s Place with solid talent even as the comedy boom was petering out by the early-90s,” he recalls. “Ray, meanwhile, understood the importance of treating people well, the wait staff and kitchen workers as well as the comics.”

One of McConn’s most-appreciated gestures was supplying free pizza from his other business just down the street — Mother Bear’s. Many comics, Wilhelm recalls, would order a whole pizza, eat a few slices, and save the rest for the long drive to their next gig.

“When people are working for me I want them to feel appreciated,” McConn says. “Plus, we got some good press out of the free pizza.”

Bear’s Place was not the only spot in Bloomington to offer comedy. Starting in the early-1970s, the Indiana Memorial Union Board ran a Campus Comedy Competition, one year awarding the finalists a chance to open for performance artist Gallagher (known for smashing melons with a sledgehammer) at the IU Auditorium, where other nationally known comedians also regularly performed. For those more into sketch comedy, the Collins Living-Learning Center featured the Collins Improv Troupe.

Still, for stand-up regularly featuring the best up-and-comers, Bear’s Place had no rival. Comics such as Ray Romano and *Saturday Night Live* cast members A. Whitney Brown and Patton Oswalt played there. The CBS program, *48 Hours*, came to interview regular performer Mark Klein for a program focusing on the hard life of comics on the road.

**BOMBING AT BEAR’S PLACE**

Bear’s Place was an early stop in the comedic career of Roseanne Barr — and it didn’t go well. In fact, she left the stage in tears. Of the experience, Barr has said, “I got booed off the stage by 300 college punks.” “She was horrible,” remembers McConn, who described her act as consisting mainly of fat jokes.

Another very successful comedian, Paula Poundstone, also bombed at Bear’s. She remembered the night so vividly that the first time she was scheduled to appear on *Saturday Night Live* she immediately called Sobel and told him to book her at Bear’s on the following Monday. She said she had something to prove to those Bloomington folks — and her subsequent show was an unquestioned success.

Throughout the late-80s and ’90s, the Comedy Caravan had established a tried-and-



The Comedy Attic continues to bring big-name comedians to Bloomington, including in the past year, Paul Reiser and Janeane Garafalo, who is pictured here. *Courtesy photo (opposite) Microphone in hand, The Comedy Attic’s Jared Thompson fields questions at his club. Photo by Tall + Small Photography*



true rhythm. Of the two Monday shows, each costing \$4, the 7:30 p.m. show was for locals, mostly adults who appreciated sharp comedy that made them think as they laughed. The late show, starting at 10:15 p.m., catered to an audience of mostly fraternity guys and sorority girls whose rowdiness created a “combat comedy” environment. The comedians had to fight to get attention and wring laughs from a crowd resembling a drunken mob.

“Comics knew they’d be playing to two very different audiences,” Sobel says. “And they liked it, because performing for different crowds forces comics to do two completely different shows and use all the material in their arsenal. It’s a good challenge.”

**THE DECLINE OF THE COMEDY CARAVAN**

Until, that is, the late shows, in Wilhelm’s estimation, began to get too rowdy. “After a while it almost didn’t matter who the comics were. You could put a bucket up there and throw stuff at it and people would still come to the show. Comics had to be really strong. If you showed any weakness you were in trouble.”

The beginning of the end of the Comedy Caravan’s run began in 2004, when an exhausted McConn sold the business to Indianapolis businessman Gary Neumann. “I’d lost my passion for it,” McConn says with a sigh. “You’re running a bar, a nightclub, and a restaurant all at the same time. It takes lots of energy and devotion to make it work, and I was married and had kids, so I wanted to do something less stressful. I just couldn’t keep it up.”

In Wilhelm’s view, the change in ownership put a greater emphasis on drink specials, which created a different kind of atmosphere that was not conducive to stand-up. As word spread throughout the comedy world, Sobel stopped sending his best acts. It also didn’t help that the new ownership no longer offered the free pizza. By 2005, attendance at the Monday night shows began declining. Wilhelm says he considered quitting a dozen times but hung on out of loyalty to Sobel and the history of the Comedy Caravan.



**THE RISE OF THE COMEDY ATTIC**

In 2007, Jared Thompson walked into Rhino’s Youth Center looking for Brad Wilhelm. Thompson, who had moved here from Baton Rouge, La., in 2000, had recently quit his job at Insight Communications and was thinking of opening a comedy club. He had been told that Wilhelm knew everything there was to know about comedy in Bloomington.

“When I first met Jared and he told me his plans, I thought he was crazy, and I told him so,” Wilhelm recalls. “He had no experience booking comics or running any kind of business. Yet he wanted to open a full-time comedy club in a small town.” Plus, the location Thompson had in mind on East 4th Street between South Washington Street and South Walnut was, in Wilhelm’s opinion, not good. Patrons would have to walk up a flight of stairs and the L-shaped room would be awkward for performers.

Thompson was undeterred. “The level of comedy [at Bear’s Place] was second-tier — lower-level comedians doing stale, outdated material,” he says. “I knew I could do better.”

Still, the prospect of opening a club at the height of the Great Recession was daunting. Although Thompson and his wife, Dayna, both loved comedy, as Wilhelm noted, neither had any experience in the business. But Thompson trusted his instincts and understood that while the comedy boom of the ’80s and ’90s was over, a new generation of funny, irreverent, stand-up comics was on the rise.

Soon after the club opened in 2008, one of Thompson’s first moves was to hire Wilhelm as the host of the new club, originally called The Funny Bone (the name was changed to The Comedy Attic in 2010). During his years hosting the Comedy Caravan at Bear’s Place, Wilhelm had become a skilled emcee, adept at setting just the right tone and paving the way for laughs. He is a large, affable, slightly doughy man with a rapid-fire onstage patter and self-deprecating sense of humor. Part of his success derives from the fact that, unlike many of his peers, he has no interest in becoming a comic himself.

“It’s a different skill set,” says Wilhelm, who today divides his time between running Rhino’s and hosting at The Comedy Attic. “You need to be funny but you’re not really telling jokes. You’re pumping up the audience but also laying down the ground rules for the show, like telling people to turn off their phones without making the audience feel like you’re lecturing them.” The most important attribute of a good host, Wilhelm says, “is understanding that you’re not the star. It’s about setting the table for the comics and doing my best to make sure everyone has a great time.”



While still the emcee at the Comedy Caravan, Wilhelm did a few guest-host gigs at Thompson's club. According to Wilhelm, he had permission to do so from both Sobel and Bear's Place manager Jim Reef. Still, when Neumann found out about it, he ordered Reef to fire Wilhelm, which he did, over the phone. [Neumann declined to be interviewed for this article and sold the bar last March.]

"I'd worked at Bear's for 15 years, I met my wife there, and suddenly I was done," Wilhelm says. So when Thompson offered Wilhelm the regular hosting gig at The Comedy Attic, he jumped at it.

Says Thompson, "I knew Brad would be a perfect ambassador for the club onstage and off. He knows everyone, and he's a professional host, which is rare in the comedy world." Wilhelm also had devoted fans who followed him to the new club.

With Wilhelm on board, things began falling into place at The Attic. Unlike most clubs, which rely on bookers who divide their attention among numerous venues, Thompson did the booking himself. His strategy was to hire the best touring comedians instead of going after "name" comedians, many past their prime.

Despite his inexperience, Thompson turned out to be an astute booker and businessman. Before long, The Comedy Attic gained a reputation among road comics as a place where they were treated well and where they played to enthusiastic audiences. By its second year, the club was firmly established as part of Bloomington's downtown entertainment scene.

Meanwhile in the comic world, a positive feedback loop developed: The club's growing reputation attracted better comics, who in turn kept pushing The Attic's cachet to greater heights. Many of the smartest and most-talented comics came here, including Jimmy Pardo, Amy Schumer, Maria Bamford, Tig Notaro, Marc Maron, and Doug Benson. In 2013, Amy Schumer in *USA Today* named The Comedy Attic as one of the top 10 comedy clubs in the country.

"It's incredibly humbling," Thompson says of the recognition, "but it also validates my original belief that Bloomington could support a full-time comedy club and that people here would respond to truly great comedy."

The success of The Comedy Attic has also fostered a rich local stand-up scene. From its earliest days in 2008, Thompson scheduled open-mic nights for aspiring comics and hosted competitions to highlight homegrown talent. With The Attic at its center, the local scene has produced several comics on the rise, most notably Mat Alano-Martin and Ben Moore.



Bloomington comic Mat Alano-Martin awaits inspiration.  
(opposite) Alano-Martin tries out new material on his best friends.



#### MAT ALANO-MARTIN

To judge by the tattoos covering his arms, you might assume that Mat Alano-Martin, 40, is an edgy comedian working on the fringes of stand-up. You would be wrong. "When I was first starting out, people thought I was going to be this weird, alternative guy, but I'm really not," he says. "My material is pretty much down the middle, about common, everyday things."

Growing up in Clark County in southern Indiana, Alano-Martin spent countless hours listening to song parodist "Weird Al" Yankovic, radio personality Dr. Demento, and recordings of Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor. He dreamed of becoming a comedian, but without a local comedy club, the path wasn't obvious.

Gravitating instead to music, he learned to play the guitar and channeled his creative impulse into songwriting. But after college at the University of Southern Indiana, while opening for bands and touring throughout the Midwest, he began to reconsider comedy as a career option. "My songs were very dark but my talk between songs was light and funny, and people started asking me if I had CDs of my banter," he says. "It was the first indication that maybe I could do comedy."

In 2009, Alano-Martin told jokes at an open-mic night, got some laughs, and was hooked. Unlike music, which the audience all too often treated as background noise, he liked that comedy was immediate, posing the challenge of forging a bond with the audience. Intrigued by the challenge of writing jokes, which had the appeal of mental puzzles, he spent the next year doing open mics, honing his writing and performance skills. He worked hard at developing an appealing onstage persona, combining an easygoing, knowing manner with sharp



insights about the small absurdities of everyday life — like the unpredictable functioning of automatic water faucets in restrooms — and culling material from his background as a self-described "trailer park American."

After getting past the first round of a stand-up competition hosted by The Comedy Attic, he decided to more seriously pursue comedy as a career. Although then in his mid-30s, older than most novices, he had energy to spare, doing as many road shows as possible, often in redneck bars where the TVs stayed on during his sets. "Those shows are tough, but they're great for young comics because they thicken your skin and help build your ability to handle any situation," he says.

By early 2012, Alano-Martin was "all-in" on comedy. Armed with a website featuring a video of a seven-minute set, he reached out to bookers and agents, entered every comedy contest he could find, and took any bookings he could get. Late in the year, his big break arrived in the form of a phone call from a friend working as the personal assistant to Ralphie May, a finalist on the TV show *Last Comic Standing* and one of the country's most popular touring comedians. Would Alano-Martin consider joining the tour to replace a recently fired floor manager? Although loath to take time away from his developing stand-up career, but eager to supplement his meager stand-up income, he said yes.

Alano-Martin had experience as a road manager for rock bands and that was all May knew about him. But at one performance when a video of the comedian's stand-up material used to open the show was misplaced, May had nothing and no one to precede his act. Told by his assistant that Alano-Martin had done some stand-up, May asked him to open with a 10-minute set. Suddenly, he was on stage in front of 1,500 people.

Recalls Alano-Martin, "I didn't think Ralphie was going to watch, but he did, and he must have liked what he saw because afterwards he came up to me and said, 'So you're a real comic.'" Alano-Martin became May's regular opener, making some real money and honing his act in front of theater-sized audiences. "I couldn't have had a better mentor than Ralphie," he says. "By observing him, I learned so much about timing, how to use facial expressions, body language."

Opening for May kick-started Alano-Martin's career in ways that any new comic would envy. In 2013, he did more than 150 performances around the country and debuted a one-man show, "Trailer Park American: Story of a Progressive White Trash Liberal," at the Indianapolis Theatre Fringe Festival. In 2014, he is scheduled to perform at the Memphis Comedy Festival, the Black Box Comedy Festival in Atlanta, and the Green Gravel Comedy Festival in Toledo, Iowa.





Comic Ben Moore in action on The Comedy Attic stage, gesturing and accepting a “well-done” handshake from emcee Brad Wilhelm.

such as an elaborate bit about what it might have been like to experience a Facebook-like “friend of a friend of a friend” avalanche of random communication before the Internet, have a way of starting simply and then spiraling into heights of absurdity. He also has an unwavering desire to improve. “I’ve been insanely driven to make it as a comedian,” says Moore, who recently took another step up the ladder by guest hosting an episode of the nationally syndicated Bob & Tom comedy radio show. “This is what I’ve always wanted to do.”

Since he was a kid growing up in Terre Haute, Ind., Moore had a nose for show business. He was drawn to Bloomington in 2000 by the availability of public access TV. “In the days before YouTube, the idea that pretty much anyone could get on TV was mind blowing,” he says. Ben and his identical twin, Nick, dreamed of one day being on *Saturday Night Live*. But with no real plan for jump-starting their show business careers, when their jobs as waiters and security guards allowed, they developed a half-hour sketch comedy show that they performed monthly at The Cinemat — a video store/performance space that closed in 2009.

During the sketch show’s five-year run, Ben began considering stand-up. Despite their complete lack of experience, the brothers approached Brad Wilhelm, then still hosting the Comedy Caravan at Bear’s Place, and asked if they could each do a five-minute set.

Remembers Wilhelm, “I should have asked Tom [Sobel] first, but I just went ahead and said OK because, by then, the late show had become such a train wreck that I figured what’s the worst that could happen?”

So nervous that the only way he could get the courage to go on stage was to drink, Ben surveyed the wild, inebriated crowd and told his first joke: “The older I get the more I realize I have my father’s body and my mother’s love of giving that body a handjob.” The joke killed. “I’d been getting laughs at the sketch show, but this was completely different,” Moore says. “It was like going from coffee to crack.”

Still with no concrete career plan, Moore began doing short sets at Bear’s Place twice a month, getting more and more obsessed with

developing new material and refining his technique. But still terrified of not getting laughs — “I was so scared it felt like the fear of someone who was going to die” — he continued to drink before each show.

And then, he quit. “I was so determined to make it in comedy that I was afraid one day I’d look back and realize that my drinking is why it hadn’t worked out,” Moore says. “So comedy became my drug; I exchanged one drug for another.”

As the Comedy Caravan continued to go downhill, Moore began looking for other outlets. When, in 2008, he heard that a full-time comedy club was going to open on East 4th Street, he tracked down Jared Thompson, who offered him a chance to perform and then later to do a 20-minute set between the opening acts and the headliner. “When people ask me how to get into comedy, I tell them to be standing next to the owner of a new comedy club when it opens,” he jokes.

Moore gradually developed a steady process for creating new material. He’d think of five things he found funny, then try them on stage. “It’s like throwing junk against the wall,” he says. “You go up and talk, and if something gets a laugh you keep it, if not, you throw it away.”

To make a living, he cooked eggs at The Village Deli. “I feel lucky that my life was still kind of shitty then, because it drove me to succeed at comedy,” Moore says. He produced a video of a live set, then sent it out via email to hundreds of club bookers. A few responded and Moore began playing clubs in small towns such as Appleton, Wis., and eventually in larger places, including Indianapolis and Cincinnati.

In 2011, Moore decided to audition for Dave Stroupe, an influential comedy club booker and owner of several clubs around the country. Some of his comedy colleagues, feeling Moore wasn’t ready yet, discouraged him. But Moore went ahead and managed to impress Stroupe, who booked him into bigger clubs, resulting in yet more gigs and a burgeoning reputation as a comic on the rise. In 2012, Moore appeared on *The Bob & Tom Show* and eventually became a regular guest.

“That’s a really big deal,” says Thompson. “Ben has really come a long way since he began featuring at The Attic. We’re all proud of him.”



Emcee Brad Wilhelm primes The Comedy Attic audience for the evening’s comedy program.

## BLOOMINGTON’S PLACE IN THE COMEDY WORLD

Bloomington will never challenge New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, but for a small city, it has staked out a noteworthy place on the national comedy landscape, thanks not only to the legacy of the Comedy Caravan at Bear’s Place and the growing reputation of The Comedy Attic, but now to the initial success of the Limestone Comedy Festival. Last year’s festival featured more than 60 comics performing at five downtown venues, drawing fans from across the Midwest. And miraculously, for a new venture of this sort, it finished financially in the black, though only slightly.

The 2014 festival is slated for May 29-31. Thompson and Alano-Martin hope that with headliners Patton Oswalt, Jimmy Pardo, Emo Phillips, and a supporting cast selected from more than 500 applicants, this year’s festival will be even more successful.

“Lots of festivals have so much happening at the same

time that people are forced to make hard choices about which shows they want to see, which can get really stressful,” Alano-Martin says. “We’ve worked hard to create a schedule so you don’t have to miss anything.”

For his part, Thompson is pleased by the festival’s success and has great hopes for the future of comedy in Bloomington. “The Comedy Caravan is an important part of the history of stand-up in Bloomington, and I’ll always be grateful for what it did for this town,” he says. “My hope for The Comedy Attic, and now for the Limestone Festival, is that we can keep pushing things forward and take comedy in Bloomington to even greater heights.” ✨



**VISIT**  
**magbloom.com/**  
**comedy** for videos  
of Mat Alano-  
Martin and Ben  
Moore performing  
onstage.

