

Improv comics deliver laughs for 50 years

By Kathryn Reed

Comedy is more than making people laugh. It's also about getting people to think and perhaps letting them forget about their life for an hour or two at a time.

Budd Friedman didn't seek out to be the master of comedy. But now with 23 Improv clubs across the nation, that is what he is. He's celebrating 50 years of being in the business.



Howie Nave warms up audiences at the Improv at Harveys five nights a week.

Photo/LTN

"I really started out opening a coffeehouse in Times Square for Broadway singers after their show. Within a year comedians started coming in. I realized I had a better ear for comedy than singers," Friedman told *Lake Tahoe News*.

That was 1963. In 1975, the first California club opened in Los Angeles. In 1985, the push was on to open clubs throughout the country. The Stateline Improv just turned 13, having opened originally at Harrah's Lake Tahoe on Jan. 15, 2001. Now the show is at Harveys.

Howie Nave has been the emcee at the local club since its inception.

Nave first worked for Friedman when the former Reno Hilton, which is now the Grand Sierra, had an Improv. Nave said the Hilton's general manager at the time told him he wanted Friedman out and Nave to stay. Nave chose to stick with Friedman. That's what led to an Improv at the lake.

"Budd has been like a second dad," Nave said of the comedy maestro. Because of that, Nave's loyalty has been with Friedman all these years even when other venues have tried to woo him away. Their closeness is evident in the fact Friedman was at Nave's wedding a few years ago.

It's Friedman's voice people hear introducing Nave at the start of the show. The comedy leader comes to Tahoe every now and then. And when he is in town, he'll often take the stage to say a few words.

Friedman and Nave agree getting comics to Tahoe is easy. Comics are booked through July. They like what Tahoe has to offer and the crowds are always receptive. Plus, it is a diverse audience based on its being a mix of locals and tourists.

But it's not easy to get into an Improv for comics.

"You have to have a lot of credit," Nave said. He has freedom with deciding who will be the two other comics joining him each night. The Stateline showroom is dark on Mondays and Tuesdays, while there are two shows on Saturdays.

Nave said even renowned political satirist Will Durst couldn't get in to the Improv. Durst had helped Nave when both lived in the Bay Area. Nave returned the favor when he got the job in Tahoe and got Durst a gig at the local Improv. Durst was last here in December.



Howie Nave, left, and Budd Friedman opening night of the Improv in 1998 at the Reno Hilton. Photo/Provided

There was a time when the emcee got paid more than the headliner. A lot had to do with that person being at the club the entire time.

“The host is the most important job; every comic will tell you because you have to set the table, you set the tone. If it’s a s— host, you are not going to want to watch the rest of the show,” Nave told *Lake Tahoe News*. “I am the appetizer for the main course. If the appetizer is bad, you are vomiting before the main course.”

The comedy business has changed quite a bit in the 50 years since Friedman started. In the early days clubs didn’t have liquor licenses. It wasn’t uncommon for teenagers to be in the audience. Now you must be 21 to get in.

“I would love to get in a few more casinos. They are easier to run because they take care of all the liquor and booze that are necessary,” Friedman said.

But now in his 80s, Friedman is most interested in sustaining his business instead of growing it. However, this month he will be opening a 500-seat club in Irvine and closing the existing 300-seater. He said the trend is larger clubs. (The

Harveys Cabaret seats almost 300.)

Comedy isn't completely recession proof, Friedman says, but he has survived. People want and need to laugh.

"With the advent of cable, the audiences are much more sophisticated than they used to be. They know what to expect when they walk into the club," Friedman said.

But knowing what to expect can be dicey for the comics. Nave half-jokingly says comedy clubs might need to install metal detectors because of the divisiveness of the country. Political humor isn't always funny depending if you wear blue or red.

For those who've never stepped inside a comedy club, this is what Friedman says you'll get, "I would say you are going to get current events in a palpable, amusing way. It's educational, yet funny. You will learn a different slant on life. I think that is what comedy does – particularly today. Just look at Bill Maher and Jon Stewart. My wife and I watch them all the time to get the news."