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The Laugh Track

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The Laugh Track

Six former Iowa Staters are laughing in the spotlight.
"Because the Midwest isn’t always a hot spot for entertainment or ‘big city life,’ we have to create our own fun, which is always the best kind. Also, I think Midwesterners are humble and polite, which makes for some great self-deprecating humor.” — Carrie Seim

“People from the Midwest have a very wry, sardonic sense of humor, different from a lot of people I’ve encountered in California. What I’ve noticed most is that a lot of people not from the Midwest don’t get sarcasm, which I find hilarious. It’s fun to mess with them.” — Leana Benson

“As far as performance style or my sense of humor goes, I feel mine is very self-deprecating, which seems to be representative of the Midwest for me. People seem to have more of a sense of humor about themselves in the heartland.” — Mark Leiknes

“There are easy basic stereotypes that work well for non-Iowa audiences. In a comedic arena, I present myself as one of the enlightened few who made it out of hick-infested Iowa. In reality, it has been my experience that people from Iowa are equally if not more enlightened to the general masses.” — Josh Bryner

“Iowa is kind of isolated and removed from most of the stuff that happens in the country, so we always seem like we’re outside, looking in on things. We have the ability to have a removed perspective on every situation.” — Jason Taylor

The Stephens Auditorium crowd is transfixed on Jake Johannsen. They hang on every word rolling off his sharp tongue. As the words pass by his lips, Johannsen’s left hand moves constantly. It weaves each joke, then slides into his left-pants pocket or brushes through his wavy, dark mane. His right hand is fixed chest-high, clutching the mic. His tan, moon-shaped face contorts into various exaggerated and animated expressions. His eyes bulge.

“I was reading the Daily, so I know a little bit about what’s going on now,” he begins. “I was busy just before the show fabricating my sexual assault.”

Laughter and applause erupts from the crowd. Standing center stage, he is surrounded by the usual equipment: silver stand with microphone, wooden stool and two 20-oz. bottles of water. Johannsen is on, mining the crowd for laughs and basking in their approval.

“Yeah, I’m thinking bigger — like six women,” he adds to another roar.

This is how Jake Johannsen makes his living, chasing laughs twice a month at comedy clubs across the country. He is arguably Iowa State University’s biggest claim to show-business fame, but a growing crop of recent grads is attempting to change that. Some are linked to Grandma Mojo’s Moonshine Revival, ISU’s no-boundaries sketch comedy group. Some stumbled into the business. But a drive to amuse and the rush of performing link all. And each has a sense of humor shaped by their Midwestern roots and ripe with self-deprecation and sarcasm.

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Jake Johannsen has successfully conquered the stand-up circuit. With more than 30 appearances on Late Show with David Letterman, Johannsen might as well own the seat next to Dave. He had his own HBO special, This’ll Take About an Hour, which People Magazine dubbed one of 1992’s 10 Best TV Shows and TV Guide touted as one of the 50 Funniest TV Moments of All Time. That’s not too shabby for a former honors student who bounced along trying three majors — veterinary medicine, chemical engineering and advertising — before dropping out in 1982.

photos by Eric Fatka
Jump to earlier in the day, before his Stephens performance. Johannsen is relaxed. Sprawled out on patio furniture, he's munching on sandwiches, sipping a Diet Coke and fielding questions about life as a comedian. Little things tell you Johannsen is a natural and practiced performer: his quick wit, his animated hands and his grip on an ice cream bar, which resembles his mic grip.

"Stand-up is like being a hit man," Johannsen says. "You fly in somewhere and you're the guy. You show up, you stay in a hotel, you do the show, and then you get back on the plane and leave."

"People want to know how you know that you can do it," says Johannsen on his decision to make comedy a career. "You know that you want to and so you try."

Lunch ends, and Johannsen's ready to tour Ames for the first time in about six years. He's feeling nostalgic and remembers tending bar at Aunt Maude's, where he was tipped $100 for his politically incorrect Halloween costume, "Blind Bob." "People would order a drink, and I'd stumble around behind the bar and I couldn't make it," he recalls. "I could have gotten into a huge amount of trouble, but luckily the manager of the restaurant thought it was funny."

He stares out the passenger window as the Blazer rolls around Elwood Drive. One thing is certain: Johannsen's hands are in motion as he speaks. His hands reflect his cerebral nature, constantly churning like his mind. Johannsen recalls his decision to leave ISU at age 21 and move to San Francisco to try stand-up. It was not easy. Or sane.

"That was crazy to drop out," he says. "If this doesn't work out, you're waiting tables or you're back on his shifts at the restaurant." "After four years it was like, 'I have to quit my day job because they're going to fire me for not showing.'"

Movie roles aside the likes of Mathew Broderick would follow. But even Jake struggles with the notion of success. "A lot of people don't get that you can have made a nice life for yourself in show biz without being famous," he says. "Not a lot of people know who I am, but I've got a really sweet life."

Three former ISU students are based in Los Angeles, trying to catch the same breaks that eventually came Johannsen's way. Carrie Seim, Leana Benson and Mark Leiknes are studying at The Groundlings School of Improvisation, which boasts all-star alumni including Lisa Kudrow of Friends, Paul "Pee-wee Herman" Reubens and several Saturday Night Live cast members such as Chris Kattan, Will Ferrell and Ana Gasteyer.

When Seim moved to Los Angeles, one of the first things she did was audition for classes with The Groundlings. "I was just kind of itching to be a part of it," she says. "It was very scary to audition because I'd never been to a professional audition. Everyone there had resumes and head shots and had starred in this soap opera or this episode of that. Lots of professional actresses are there just trying to add another skill to their resume."

While growing up in an Omaha suburb, Seim's desire to perform and entertain was evident. Now it's snowballed. "There is something so magical about performing in front of a live audience," she says. "It's this amazing mutual experience that is unlike any other. You give your energy to the crowd, and they give it back to you tenfold."

But it wasn't until Seim's freshman year at ISU that her short-lived stint in the engineering college suffocated her creative energy, which she says forced her to feed her creativity with something. That something happened to be Mojo's, a newly formed sketch comedy troupe.

"I was so miserable in engineering," she recalls. "It was motivation to audition for Mojo's, to find a creative escape from the incessant studying of calculus and chemistry. Similarly, I think the funniest people I know come about their humor out of necessity."

The Mojo's alumna aced her audition and has progressed to the fourth level of Groundlings class work, the writing lab. After a one-year wait to get into the lab, she's back taking classes. "The closer you get, the more you want it," she says.

It's at The Groundlings Seim recently bumped into Leana Benson, when the two spoke for the first time. That wouldn't be unusual if they hadn't been living seemingly parallel lives.

Both graduated from ISU with journalism degrees and lived in Miller House on the third
floor of Oak-Elm Hall without ever meeting. "It's crazy because I think we lived two doors down from one another," Benson says.

Benson never intended to do comedy when she moved to California. After being passed over by the Iowa Department of Transportation for a job she was hoping would be hers, she was at wit's end. At her cousin's urging, she packed up and headed to Studio City, Calif. "I thought the DOT was going to offer me a job and they didn't, so I was jobless," she admits in a soft, whispery voice.

Working as a corporate communications writer for LaserFiche, a software company in Torrance, Calif., hasn't made Benson rich. She's had to sacrifice some of life's simple pleasures. "Milk is $2.50 a gallon, which is insane," she says. "So I stopped drinking milk."

While Benson hasn't got milk, she's got a blossoming stand-up career. After badgering friends about wanting to try comedy, they finally told her to try it or shut up. So Benson began taking an improv class and later a stand-up comedy class with Pauli Shore's sister, Sandi Shore. The class with Sandi led to an in at Hollywood's most famous comedy club, The Comedy Store, owned by Sandi's mother, Mitzi Shore.

"I actually got to perform in the main room of The Comedy Store," Benson says. "It went OK, but I was super nervous because Mitzi was in the audience.

That same nervous feeling coupled with the attention motivates Benson to continue performing. "It's that moment right before you walk out on stage, and you're absolutely petrified," she says. "Then that feeling of being onstage and getting your first laugh and being able to completely let yourself be. It's the best high.

Ideally, I want to get paid to do stand-up and travel. It can happen to anybody, so I figure why not me? Why can't I be famous?"

An obsession with entertaining brought Mark Leiknes to The Groundlings. Leiknes' passion to perform was left unfulfilled after graduating from ISU and leaving Mojo's, which he helped create with former ISU student Josh Bryner and Becky Witt. "I just wanted to try and take it to the next level," Leiknes says.

Leiknes says entertaining is his passion, one that might have deep, psychological roots. "As a child, I'd put on little comedy shows for my family so I wouldn't have to go to bed so early," he says. "Maybe that's it. My desire to entertain comes from a deep-seeded fear of having to go to bed early."

The Groundlings introduced Leiknes to improvisation, which he feared initially. "You're out there and you have no idea what you're going to say," he says. "They teach you that out of that gray area, which is like this no man's land where you really don't know what the hell is going on, can come some of the funniest stuff."

Just as improv was scary in the beginning, so was the jump from Iowa to California. But the move was better than wondering "what if?" Leiknes says. "LA is pretty much my first big-city experience. It was very rough initially to get adjusted to it and of course not knowing anything or anyone, but I'm out here giving something a try and I can't really fault myself for that."

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Not everyone headed west for comedy success. Mojo's co-creator Josh Bryner is on the East Coast pursuing a theater career and working in the administrative offices of the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. His love of sketch comedy still lingers. "I definitely want to get back to it," he says.

Bryner realizes he's at the age when many would-be performers quit. "My pure goal is to force myself to stick with it because I know some people will give up, and I know some people who have given up on it," he says. "I think you've got to pay your dues and stick with it and eventually something's going to come up if you have any talent at all."

Some have already quit once. His peers will tell you he's one of the most talented performers they've ever seen, but former Mojo's member Jason Taylor quit comedy his senior year of college just to try stand-up. "I was going to take my studies at The Second City in Chicago after three months, "I remember thinking that compared to Mojo's this was nothing," he says. "I didn't really feel like I had a future there. If I had a future, it was going to take a long, hard struggle, and I would much rather go do something that I would have fun doing."

So Taylor returned to Iowa, moving to Rock Valley where he became a youth pastor at the First Reformed Church. "I'd kind of given up comedy, but since coming here, the least likely place, in the middle of Pedunk, Ia., I kind of got sucked back into it."

Taylor has revived his one-man show, Don't Encourage Him, at Northwestern College in Orange City, where his wife attends school. "I always tell people that it's all the stories about your family that you're not supposed to tell," he says about the show he wrote for a 1998 performance at ISU's Fisher Theater. "Really crazy stuff, like I cut my brother's finger off. I actually did. To me, that's the funniest part of the show."

While his brother's finger was sewed back on after a trip to the emergency room, he isn't the only family member who's made it into Taylor's show. Taylor's grandma, whose leg was lost in a riding-lawnmower accident, is also a target. "Strangers would e-mail me and say, 'My uncle lost his leg in a car accident and all those stories were hilarious,'" he says. "It's really neat to be able to move people to that point where they leave the theater reflecting on their own lives and stories."

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Passing by Mary Greeley Medical Center, Jake Johannsen talks about failure. "I always think that 'didn't make it' makes it sound like someone fired them from show business," Johannsen says. "All of those people who didn't make it, not to take anything away from them, but they all gave up."

Seim says she won't give up. Bryner says he won't. Taylor already did once. Life as a comedian isn't easy. Johannsen just makes it look that way.

His hands are moving, guiding the words from his mouth. "I had thoughts about, 'Gee, I might have to go back to school,' but I quit my day job after four years," Johannsen says. "The question is how bad do you want it."

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