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Scott Hansen

If the legend is to be believed, Scott Hansen was born into comedy. Or rather, he was born because of comedy.

“My mom claims that her water burst one night while she was watching a clown on television called the Banana Man,” Hansen deadpans. “He was a character, a mime act, who would come out and pull all these props out of his costume and get surprised by things and make a noise. She was watching and started laughing so hard that she went into labor, and we were off.”

Whether that story is true or not, Hansen was a comedy fan from a young age. He used school writing assignments as his first foray into comedy. “I’d try to make them funny, try to make people laugh,” he recalls. “It made it easier and more interesting for me.”

Like many other future comedians of his generation, Hansen got his first exposure to stand-up watching *The Tonight Show* on television with his father. “He would let me stay up for the comedians,” Hansen says. “I loved it. My favorites were always the guys who could make the other comedians laugh. I knew it was something I really wanted to do. Either that or become a priest. Anything where I could perform in front of a crowd.”

His desire to try comedy may have been with him early on, but the opportunity to get onstage wasn’t. That is, until he met Bill Bauer.

Hansen’s first encounter with the future wild man of Twin Cities comedy was through Bill Bauer’s brother Tim, who was a school friend of Hansen’s. “One time I was over at his house, and Bill had

just returned from Vietnam,” Hansen recalls of their first encounter. “Bill bursts into the room and goes, ‘I brought an entire gunnysack full of pot back with me, and I’m going to smoke all of it.’ To the best of my knowledge, that’s exactly what he did.”

A few weeks later, Bauer signed up to compete in the comedy contest at Mickey Finn’s, and he invited Hansen to come watch the show. That night, a connection was made.

“I didn’t perform that night; I just watched the show,” Hansen says. “The thing about that show was, when you put up a sign that says ‘Comedy Contest,’ people come out of the woodwork. Everyone thinks they’re funny until they try it. So there were a lot of guys who had never done it before who weren’t all that good. But I still couldn’t believe there was a show that was all stand-up comedy.”

After a few return visits to Mickey Finn’s and keeping a low profile in the audience, Hansen finally got up the courage to get onstage himself. “I was scared shitless,” he says of his first time performing. “I waited a few weeks because I was so scared to try it. I had a horrible fear of public speaking. I’d practice my jokes at home and try to memorize things because that’s how I thought you did it.”

He also got in the habit of creating cheat sheets to help prompt him into his next heavily rehearsed joke. “My very first joke would be, ‘I’m Scott Hansen, and I come from a mixed marriage. I’m half Lutheran and half Catholic. Are there any Catholics here tonight?’” Hansen remembers. “And some people would clap, and then I’d pull out my little cheat sheet and say, ‘Great. Anybody want to buy a raffle ticket?’ and then set it on the stool as my crutch.”

Hansen would continue practicing the same jokes over and over, performing the exact same set week after week until he found himself becoming more comfortable onstage. Around this time, he approached Jeff Gerbino, who had taken the reins at the Mickey Finn’s comedy nights. Hansen made it clear to Gerbino that he was interested in becoming a regular fixture of the comedy scene. “I stopped him in the little hallway where the comics would wait before they went onstage and told him I wanted to keep doing this, and he called me later that week,” Hansen explains. “Jeff had a place to do comedy, but he needed comedians and people he could depend on. So to-

gether, he and I decided to start calling all the people who had been in the contest to see if we could get them to come back and perform again. It didn't matter if they were any good or not; we just needed to get more guys onstage."

As for his own comedy, Hansen has always been known among his peers as a prolific writer. But his writing didn't translate to the stage right away.

"I was always writing; I had notes everywhere," he says. "Even to this day, I still write almost every single day. Quite honestly, I've probably forgotten more comedy material than most people have ever come up with. But putting it together was much more difficult. I remember another comic saw me perform one night and said, 'With how good your material is, you shouldn't be bombing as often as you are.' The thing I didn't realize yet was that I needed to find the right character that the audience would be comfortable with. You can write the funniest lines in the world, but if the audience doesn't connect with who you are onstage, it doesn't matter. It took me years to find the right character, and I really had to figure out who I was."

Part of finding that character, Hansen explains, meant not relying on the trendy, easy jokes of the day. As a fairly large man, he made the choice to avoid doing the same-old self-deprecating material about his weight—doing "a few only because they were expected of me," he adds. Instead, Hansen wanted to focus on creating a unique experience for the audience. "Every time I performed, I tried to make sure that what people saw onstage is something they could never see on television," he says. "I wanted it to feel like a very personal performance that was just for them. That meant lots of personal jokes and using those jokes as a way of getting information from the audience, then finding ways to wrap that around what I already had prepared. People didn't realize that my ad-libs were probably two-thirds of the way done before I got onstage, and it was just finding the personal connection for that show. Besides that, I never liked doing political jokes, but I really focused on local things that made people feel like I was talking to them directly."

Developing his comedy meant finding more opportunities to perform. At the time, however, there weren't many existing stages



The Twin Cities, long considered a frigid outpost of Nordic solemnity, has recently become a hotbed of humor. Here's a look at some of the area's funniest stand-up comedians, and what it's like to get laughs for a living.

Scott Hansen

It happens every time I get up here—people stare at me. I know what you're thinking: "Boy, is that guy tall."

SCOTT HANSEN IS TALL, but, more obviously, he's big, "a mountain of a man," as one critic put it. He uses his weight disarmingly in his act, assuming a quiet, modest demeanor that's weirdly out of synch with his proportions.

Hansen, 29, runs the Comedy Gallery, which he started two years ago after a year with the Comedy Cabaret. Often he books national acts at the Gallery, with local comics as openers. Hansen himself performs every weekend, though not always in the Twin Cities—he has done his act in Los Angeles and New York City.

If there had been a degree available in stand-up comedy, Hansen might have stayed

at the University of Minnesota, where he studied theater. Instead, he became a warehouse worker. In 1978, after canceling out twice because of nerves, he went on stage at Mickey Finn's, first making sure that he had 20 good laughers in the audience—his friends and relatives. "It was the scariest feeling I've ever had in my life," he remembers, and it was two years before he overcame that stage fright. He still has anxieties. "Basically I'm nervous that I'm going to forget something, so I've had to develop tricks," he says. "I write things on my hand—see?" Recently he bought a home computer to store his material. "You forget so much," he laments.

Obviously, business is picking up. As a warehouse worker, he sometimes was performing five or more nights a week, while having to be at the warehouse job at 7:00 A.M. His wife, Michele, encouraged him to devote full time to comedy. "I still couldn't make a living at comedy," he says, "but it's getting better." He is trying to create a comedians' clearinghouse, to find work for local comics that will keep them in Minnesota, and he's trying to develop a local comedy show for cable TV.

Hansen even dreams of a national TV appearance. "I've got a file of things for when I get on the *Tonight Show*," he admits. "One of them might be about the smallest show I ever did." Let's see . . . that would be back in 1981, the day President Reagan was shot. When Hansen stepped out for an open stage that night, he found only one person in the audience. She had a dollar-off coupon for the 99-cent show. "Why are you out?" he asked. "Don't you read the newspapers?" She explained, "My coupon expires tonight."

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"I write things on my hand—see?"

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Scott Hansen outside of Shinders bookstore and newsstand in Minneapolis, as pictured in Minnesota Monthly magazine, April 1984. (Courtesy of Scott Hansen)

beyond Mickey Finn's, so it was up to Hansen to create those opportunities for himself. "Locally, we were able to get connected with a guy named Bill Warner who owned a few different bars around town," Hansen says. Warner recognized the attention Hansen and

other comics were getting over at Mickey Finn's, and he decided to take a chance on Hansen. Warner also recognized that it was cheap entertainment. "He had the Artists' Quarter, Williams Pub, and a place called the Country House, and he was paying us fifty bucks a night to hold shows at all of these clubs."

However, just because the bar was willing to host comedy didn't mean the patrons became comedy fans overnight. "Each club had its own flavor and its own customers," he explains. "The Artists' Quarter, for example, was a biker bar, and the bikers wanted it to be their bar. So a guy coming in to tell jokes and make fun of the bikers didn't always work out."

Still, as comedy gained traction locally and nationally, each club Hansen performed at would help to build an audience, as well as encourage new comedians to test their chops. Despite this expanding market, Hansen still wasn't sure where comedy fit into his long-term goals. "I would have been very happy to make [comedy] a hobby, something I could do for fun," he shares. "My goal long term in my head was to be a television writer or a radio DJ. Around this time, I actually did audition for Brown College to see if I had the diction and the voice to be in radio. I had read that George Carlin, who was always one of my favorites, started his career in radio and then became a comedian. I figured that if I started as a comedian, I could make my way into radio. But then I started to see all the radio DJs in the area were coming out to our shows and trying to be stand-up comics. That's when I realized there was a pecking order, and the way it was, I was above them. So I decided, I'll stick to this."

He decided to pursue his hobby full time. "I'm getting paid like \$200 a week, which was big money back then, so I figured, hell, I'm quitting my job."

At the time, Hansen was working as a warehouse manager for a vending company. He had worked for the company since he was fourteen years old, thanks in part to the fact that his father was the president of the company. By now Hansen was married to his wife, Michelle, and the couple was expecting their first child. Despite the uncertainty that came with pursuing his artistic passion, in an industry that had yet to be established, he knew deep down comedy

was what he wanted to do. He also knew he was fortunate to have an incredible support system. “Michelle gave me all the support I could ask for,” he says. “She knew this was what I wanted, and so she said, ‘quit, quit, quit!’”

And quit he did, in dramatic fashion. “I was sitting there at four in the morning cleaning floors, and the commissary guy walks right across my freshly mopped floor,” he recalls. “So I lost it. I hauled back and smacked him in the face with the mop and decided I was done. I talked to my dad and explained I just couldn’t do it anymore, that I was going to do comedy full time and I didn’t care.”

With the support of his wife, a broken mop handle, and several nights of shows lined up each week, Scott Hansen had made the move to become a full-time comedian. And then, just three weeks later, Bill Warner decided he no longer wanted to have comedy at any of his bars. “A lot of times, we’d come in and do these shows and build an audience,” Hansen says, “and all of a sudden the owners would think they don’t need comedy anymore. They’re not thinking that maybe the comedy was why people were coming in at all.”

Eventually, Warner reconsidered and allowed the guys to once again host comedy shows in his bars. But Hansen realized he needed to think bigger if he was going to make a real living in his newfound profession.

“We had started getting calls because of the press we were getting locally,” he remembers. “We’d also make calls to the college towns and see if we could get ourselves booked. There was one show we did in Mankato where we were treated like kings. They put us up in a fancy hotel and fed us these amazing dinners. Then the day of the show, the local radio station came to us and said they wanted to broadcast it live. A few months after that, a guy from Northfield who was with National Public Radio came to us and said he wanted to put together some comedy shows that he could broadcast nationally. Pretty soon, people all over were starting to find out about us. It was pretty fun.”

As the new decade rolled around, stand-up comedy was catching on nationally. Comedians like Steve Martin and Rodney Dangerfield were breaking big with Grammy-winning live albums, and new com-

edy clubs were opening across the country. Things continued to grow in the Twin Cities as well, with a new influx of talented performers arriving on the scene. Meanwhile, Hansen and the rest of the original five were beginning to see their own hard work pay off with new opportunities for stage time and a growing fan base. But with tensions growing within the group, capped off by the fight between Hansen and Bauer, things had broken down to the point that Hansen was prepared to walk away for good.

“After the incident with Bill, I got out of there and came home and told my wife that I can’t do it anymore,” Hansen says. This was around 1980, just before the birth of his first son. “It was getting really, really crowded,” he said of the exploding comedy scene at the time. “So I took a year off and tried a couple of different businesses.”

Coffee salesman, manager for a seafood warehouse, and even playing Santa Claus door-to-door were all ways he was able to make ends meet. “It was fun, but honestly I was doing anything to raise cash,” he says.

Around that same time, Hansen saw an article in the local paper announcing that Mickey Finn’s alum Gail Matthius had been tapped to join the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. “I called to congratulate her, and I didn’t realize she was living with Scott Novotny, another comedian who had started to steer clear of the drugs and all the bullshit at Mickey Finn’s,” Hansen recalls. “So we started talking, and I told him we should get a place together. A lot of the comics had been calling and saying they were sick of Mickey Finn’s and were looking for a new place to perform.”

That conversation planted the seed that would sprout the next phase of the Twin Cities stand-up scene.

