

## The Birth of the Comedy Gallery

When Scott Hansen decided to make the move to J. R.'s Restaurant and open a new comedy club, he realized it was time to create a new comedy experience to go along with it.

"The Comedy Cabaret was still a cabaret," Hansen says. "There was juggling, sword swallows, and musical acts. Then you had Mickey Finn's, where you could see a whole bunch of comics, but there wasn't really a structure. I decided to make my club the first real comedy club in Minneapolis."

Peter Staloch remembers the first time Hansen broached the idea of splitting off from the Cabaret and starting a new club: "In early 1982, Scott Hansen approached Lee [Schmidt] and me, feeling us out if we wanted to start a new comedy venue with him. He was in discussions with the owner of a restaurant downtown called J. R.'s. There was a space upstairs of the restaurant, where there was a bar, that would be a perfect venue for stand-up comedy."

The club had about a hundred seats in a room above J. R.'s on LaSalle Avenue North in Minneapolis. Hansen knew he had the right space, the right people, and the right audience. Now he just needed the right name for the outside of the building. "At our first meeting in the new downtown space, the task was to come up with a name for the club," recalls Staloch. "Something a bit more classy than Chuckles or HaHa's or Wacko's. We scoured our brains until Lee Schmidt finally came up with the perfect name: the Comedy Gallery. Descriptive and classy, it denoted a bit more sophistication and variety."



*The stage at Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery, located upstairs at J. R.'s Restaurant and Lounge. (Courtesy of Mike Gandolfi)*

With the lease signed and the room ready, the Comedy Gallery opened in March 1982, and Hansen got to work creating buzz for the new club. He put up posters, contacted the local media, and placed full-page ads in the newspapers. "It was the first time I had been in touch with the media myself," Hansen says.

While he was new to being the face of a particular club, Hansen had a knack for promotion. The ads featured him pulled up at a dinner table, fork in hand, with the caption: "When Scott Hansen isn't eating at J. R.'s he's working there. Now that's funny."

"I knew I had to come up with ads that would get people's attention," he recalls. "Whether that meant using funny props or making fun of myself like that J. R.'s ad, I had to be different."

The Comedy Gallery had to be different, and it had to be good. Hansen brought with him a handful of the area's best performers to help get the club off the ground. Joel Hodgson, who had become the most talked about comic in town, became exclusive to the Gallery. Hansen also brought the comedy duo of Peter Staloch and Lee Schmidt, plus Jeff Schilling and Ron Douglas.

“Our club was the first to do the traditional lineup of an opener, a feature middle act, and a headliner,” Hansen says. “The idea was to create structure for the audience, but also for the comics. Now if you were a comic, you knew that you could work as an opener and



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*Ad for Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery at J. R.'s Restaurant*

then work your way up to a middle and then a headliner and make more money.”

The opening weekend was set for March 18–20. Hodgson and the tandem of Staloch and Schmidt were the first headliner and middle acts, respectively, in Comedy Gallery history. Hansen, who controlled the booking and arranging of talent, relegated himself to the role of emcee. “I didn’t put myself up as a headliner for a very long time,” he remembers. “I’d say the first two years I only emceed.”

Billing itself as “The Premiere Comedy Nightclub,” the Comedy Gallery was an instant success. Featuring talent that was seen as more polished than at Mickey Finn’s and more focused than at the Cabaret, the shows routinely sold out.

“What followed was a parade of stand-ups, some already well honed in their chops, some still needing to work out their timing and their bits in clean, five-minute segments,” says Staloch. “The Comedy Gallery became popular, because you could have dinner at J. R.’s and then come upstairs for drinks and a show.”

Though Hansen moved the club away from the variety act stylings that had come through the Comedy Cabaret, he wasn’t entirely opposed to mixing things up now and then. “We had this clown named T. C. Hatter,” Hansen recalls. “Bauer refused to put him on at Mickey Finn’s. He’d sit there and complain, ‘I’m not putting some fucking clown onstage!’ But he [the clown] was hilarious, and that was all I cared about. So I gave him the opportunity.”

Hansen also began promoting group shows, similar to the model Louie Anderson and Dudley Riggs were using with the Minneapolis Comedy All-Stars. And Hansen didn’t shy away from using creative and sometimes borderline offensive taglines to build buzz. “For me it was about finding a unique way to advertise the shows so people would notice,” Hansen says. “For example, there was a comedy duo called Two Much and Company that was two black comedians. So we paired them up with T. C. Hatter and called the show ‘Two Blacks and a Colored Guy.’”

Similarly, a group of comedians that included Steven Powell (an African American), Bruce Murray (a Native American), Joe Minjares



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The opening weekend of the Comedy Gallery in March 1982 featured "comic magician" Joel Hodgson, the comedy duo of Staloch & Schmidt, and Scott Hansen.



*Five of the six performers in the "Three Blacks, a Mexican, an Indian and a Jew Review": (clockwise from lower left) Steven Powell, Bruce Murray, Michael Jacobs, Joe Minjares, and Glenn Tanner*

(a Latino), and others was packaged in a show entitled, “Three Blacks, a Mexican, an Indian and a Jew Review.” “You certainly couldn’t get away with naming shows like that these days,” Hansen acknowledges.

Minjares, who owned the popular Pepito’s Mexican restaurant in Minneapolis for many years, caught Hansen’s eye around 1982 when he started performing at some of the open stages Hansen ran around town. Minjares was invited to be an emcee for some Comedy Gallery open mic nights, which brought him more attention and opportunities. “Scott called me one day and gave me the pitch [for ‘Three Blacks, a Mexican, an Indian and a Jew Review’]. He told me the title, and I thought it was great,” Minjares recalls. “When you’re doing a group show like that, it’s really important to have a good title. Scott was great at coming up with those.”

The show itself proved to be massively successful, selling out full weekend runs at the Comedy Gallery on a regular basis. While the title would certainly raise eyebrows today, Minjares says the controversial name actually diversified the club’s audience. “It was a little bit of a dangerous name, right there on the edge,” he says. “But it brought in a more diverse audience than we’d have on other nights at the club. It was a really smart idea.”



*Joe Minjares at Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery. (Courtesy of Mike Gandolfi)*

Another innovative move was that Hansen put the talent to work even when they weren't onstage. Everyone, including Hansen, was always working when they were in the club, whether it was taking tickets or ushering audience members to their seats. "We wanted people to enter laughing," Hansen says. "I wanted to set a tone right away that you were going to get a good show. Odds are if you came to one of our shows, for quite some time it was one of the comedians that night who would be seating you personally."

With shows Thursdays through Saturdays, Hansen was always hustling to put fresh talent onstage in order to keep customers coming back. Thursday nights were local talent showcases, branded "Catch a Rising Star" nights. Fridays and Saturdays were reserved for bigger, more well-established acts, both local and national.

While the open mic night was a proving ground for many locals who would go on to become marquee names at the Comedy Gallery as well as at other clubs around town, plenty of less impressive performers came and went without their star rising. Ken Bradley, who worked for Hansen and became a regular emcee of the open mic night, recalls more than one would-be comic who was memorable for all the wrong reasons. "There was one guy that we used to call the Snatch Comic," Bradley recalls. "He was a scary dude who would show up to the open stage, and every one of his jokes would end with, 'And then I grabbed her in the snatch!' And it was not funny, and it made everyone uncomfortable. To his credit, Scott would still let him up, but he'd tell me to give him the light [comic-speak for telling someone that their time is up]. I'd give him the light, and he wouldn't get off. So I'd be sneaking up onstage to the point I'd be standing next to him trying to take the mic out of his hand. It was so offensive."

Rick Carney, another regular in Hansen's lineup as an emcee, also frequently had a front-row seat for the cringeworthy newbies. People were usually fairly polite in the face of these less polished performers, but Carney remembers one night when Alex Cole lost his cool over an open mic-er. "I remember this guy, David Foss, and he would get onstage with a banjo, and all his jokes were written on note cards," Carney recalls with a laugh. "I never saw him play the banjo, and he'd



read his jokes right off the cards. So you would be trying to give him the light to get him off the stage, and he wouldn't even look up."

Carney explains that it was kind of an unspoken rule at the time that if a comic like Alex Cole or Tom Arnold or someone at that level came in and wanted to go onstage to work on jokes during an open mic night, they could go right up and stay on for as long as they wanted. "One night Alex came in while David Foss was onstage," Carney continues, "and he's waiting and he's waiting, and finally David gets off and Alex goes on. After about nine minutes, the guy who was working the light for us that night flashed it, telling Alex he only had a minute left. Alex went ballistic. He's screaming, 'Fuck you with that light! I had to watch that fucking note card guy! I'll go as long as I fucking want to!' It wasn't David Foss's fault, but it was just funny to hear him get called out like that. I don't think he showed up at another open stage after that night."

Another performer who never quite made it out of the first gear of his comedy career was a guy named Gomez O'Prey. "Gomez was another interesting character," Bradley remembers. "He worked for Scott tearing tickets and doing some other things. Gomez was in charge of driving around the headliners who would come into town, and he would try to pattern himself after them. Whoever was the headliner the week prior is what Gomez's act would be the next. So if Will Durst, who did political stuff, performed one week, the next week Gomez would do political stuff."

Carney says he didn't even know O'Prey was a comic—despite the fact he saw him onstage more than once before performing himself. "The first time I ever went to the Comedy Gallery, me and my girlfriend went to see Bill Bauer," Carney recalls. "Gomez was the emcee, and he'd come out and talk and bring people up. The next time I was there was actually to perform for the open stage, and I followed Gomez. He came offstage and I said, 'You're a comic too?' I thought he was just sort of the house announcer who told you where to get drinks and how things worked."

Ron Douglas, who had been one of Hansen's most reliable comics, was the first black performer to headline the Comedy Gallery.

Lizz Winstead, who went on to have a tremendous impact both as a performer and as a mentor to other women in town, was the first female comedian to headline. Gerry Bednob, the only comedian from Bangladesh touring in the United States, performed there and presented a picture of life that had never been seen or heard on most American stages, let alone in Minnesota. Hansen brought him to the club within the first few months as a headliner. And, naturally, one of the most popular headliners who performed at the club was Louie Anderson.

Anderson had begun to make a name for himself out west, with appearances on *The Tonight Show* and regular slots at the Improv. Still, when Anderson came to the Comedy Gallery, he considered it a homecoming. “I was very proud of my success,” he says. “And I was still very much a hometown guy. I really loved Minnesota, and I considered the success I had all of our [the original five’s] success in a way. The public picks who is going to be the most popular and most successful, unfortunately. It’s just how life works. But I got to where I was because of their help, and when I would come back I wanted the same for them.”

Audiences also considered Anderson a homegrown star whenever he returned to perform at Hansen’s room. He admits his level of fame was noticeable among his peers, which might have created tension. “I probably thought I was a big shot in some ways,” he says. “I hope I wasn’t an asshole to anyone. When you become successful, it automatically takes you into another space. It just happens. But I never forgot the guys I started with, and I wanted to send some light their way. I don’t think anyone came back to perform as much as I did.”

While the Comedy Gallery stage presented plenty of familiar faces to audiences, the club was progressive in embracing new talents and concepts. Hansen produced female-led shows, like when comedian (and later daytime talk show host) Jenny Jones came to perform at the club. She made her event an all-women show, and men were not allowed to attend. Even all the servers and bartenders for the evening were women.

Hansen was also one of the first promoters to bring in openly gay performers, though one night he didn’t know that’s what he was



*Bill Bauer, Louie Anderson, and Alex Cole at Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery. (Courtesy of Mike Gandolfi)*



*Scott Hansen, Bill Bauer, Alex Cole, and Louie Anderson at the Comedy Gallery. (Courtesy of Mike Gandolfi)*

doing ahead of time. "Sometimes we'd only get maybe ten or fifteen people at our open mic nights," Hansen remembers. "One night we had like a hundred people in the audience, which was pretty unusual. Sometimes we'd have a new guy who would come in and bring a bunch of friends, and that's what this particular night was. So this guy gets up onstage and says, 'I've got a nephew named Billy, and Billy asked me the other day, Uncle Jack, you have an earring in your ear. Does that make you gay? And I told him, no Billy, the fact that I like to suck cocks makes me gay.' Then he looks at the front row and says, 'Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa—I'm a homosexual.' People literally ran out of the room crying. He had his entire family there, and he decided this was how he was going to come out. By the time he got offstage, there were thirteen people left in the audience."

By September of 1982, Hansen had another idea that would not only secure the Comedy Gallery's place as the number one comedy club in Minneapolis but put it on the map as one of the most talent-heavy clubs in the entire country. In a circle-of-life moment that brought Hansen back to his roots, he decided to host a comedy contest. But unlike the Mickey Finn's competition five years earlier, this competition would have much higher stakes.

The first-annual Twin Cities Comedy Invitational brought together comedians from all over the country for a two-week competition featuring a \$500 grand prize. "I was the only comic with a good enough credit rating to get some money to put on this thing," Hansen said in an interview with the *Twin Cities Reader* leading up to the big throw down.

Another aspect of this contest that was very different from the one at Finn's was that the talent was screened and narrowed down ahead of time, and contestants were placed into different divisions based on



Two of the Class A competitors in the first annual Twin Cities Comedy Invitational will be Houstonian Jeff Schilling, left, who is called the "one-man crowd" because of his multiple characterizations, and mime-clown T.C. Hatter, known for involving his audience in the fun.

## Comedians: Thrive on competition

Jeff Schilling (left) and T. C. Hatter (right) were two of the participants in the inaugural Twin Cities Comedy Invitational in September 1982. (From the St. Paul Dispatch)



experience. This was similar to how bigger contests were structured in Los Angeles, St. Louis, or Chicago, where some of the original five were beginning to build reputations. Louie Anderson, for example, had taken third place in a contest in St. Louis the year prior, finishing behind a singer and a clown. Jeff Gerbino had recently made it to the finals of the Los Angeles Comedy Contest.

For the Comedy Gallery competition, comedians were put into Class AA, the more polished and professional group, if they had won or been a finalist in a competition before. This group included Gerbino, along with fellow original Alex Cole, local breakout Joel Hodgson, Chicago comics Frank Hooper and Ed Fiala, and Jeff Wayne, who came in from Los Angeles.

The Class A group was for comics who had performed in a previous competition, been recommended by a trusted performer, or been seen often enough and considered talented enough by Hansen himself. Among the comics in this group were Frank Poynton from Chicago and Jeff Schilling from Houston, who submitted videotapes to Hansen in order to get into the competition. They were joined by some familiar faces from around town, including Jeff Cesario, Bruce Murray, Staloch & Schmidt, Two Much and Company, and T. C. Hatter, to name a few. Right away, Hansen was proud to see how seriously the acts were taking his contest.

“Being in a comedy contest looked good on a résumé,” he said in an interview about the competition. “It helped Louie, and I already booked the guy who had finished ahead of him to perform at the Comedy Gallery. Plus, it was a chance for the crowds to see the acts at their best. It was the very best fifteen minutes they had to offer, because they had something to shoot for.”

The competition kicked off with preliminary rounds at the Comedy Gallery and at a bar called Crocus Cabana, located on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. Over the course of the next several days, the contestants would perform six times for hand-selected judges encompassing members of the media, talent agency representatives, and comedy patrons who graded competitors on the quality of the material, stage presence, and audience response. When the dust settled,

Hodgson had won the title and the prize money at the inaugural Comedy Gallery competition, securing his place as a bona fide home-grown comedy star.

Hansen continued the competition for several more years, and it got more and more hotly contested. “I actually won the contest one year,” Minjares says. “But once I had won, especially as a newer comedian in a group with a lot of more experienced guys, it definitely started to become more competitive. It also opened a lot of doors for me, because it allowed me to start opening for some of the national acts that Scott was bringing in.”

The national acts Minjares mentions were coming through the Comedy Gallery thanks to the club’s growing reputation with comedy bookers, talent agents, and comedians. But Hansen wasn’t content to simply sit back and let the talent come to him. Instead, he hit the road and found talent in other cities that he thought would be a good fit for audiences back in Minnesota.

“I liked to get out of town and perform in Chicago sometimes,” Hansen recalls. “And I found so many acts there that I knew the Minneapolis crowds would go crazy for.” One of the first was a woman named Judy Tenuta.

Armed with an accordion, a tiara, and a sharp enough tongue to hang with any crowd, Tenuta billed herself as “unofficially one of the top accordionists in the country.” Her tongue-in-cheek megalomania and twisted take on traditionally tame topics made her a regular fixture of the Chicago club scene before Hansen saw her perform at the same club where he was performing on a rare travel weekend. “She was incredible,” says Hansen. “I had never seen anyone like her. I knew if I wanted to make the Comedy Gallery different, I needed to find acts no one had seen before, and Judy was a hit the first time she performed at the club.”

Another comic Hansen discovered during a trip to Chicago was Emo Philips. Today regarded as a pioneer of alt-comedy, with his unconventional presentation and personality, Philips was onstage one night in Chicago, performing for a crowd of about twenty people, when Hansen first laid eyes on him. And it almost didn’t happen.

As Tom Hansen recalls: “I got a call from Scott that his car broke



*Judy Tenuta at Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery. (Courtesy of Mike Gandolfi)*

down in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, so I had to go pick him up, along with a comedian named Bruce Murray, and drive them to Chicago to a club called Who's On First? ... We get to the club in Chicago, and it's completely flooded. It's underwater. So another comic suggested we go to a one-nighter they had in a Catholic church down the road. I watched Emo onstage for over an hour, playing around with a trombone. The entire time he was onstage, he kept taking this trombone apart and putting it back together, and he never played a note."

Like much of the crowd that night, Tom was blown away by Philips's performance. Scott saw the potential to bring Emo to a brand-new audience. "I thought to myself, Minnesota is going to love this guy," Hansen recalls. "I talked to him after the show, and he stayed in character one hundred percent. So I got him to Minneapolis, and the town loved him. Only problem is that I'm paying him \$350 for the week, and he can't afford a hotel. So I let him stay with me and my family in our little house in Minneapolis."



*Emo Philips onstage at Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery. (Photo by Donald Black, Minneapolis Tribune, from the Minnesota Historical Society Collections)*

With one child at home and another on the way, Hansen and his wife, Michelle, were hesitant about allowing a performer into their home. But with few other options, they reluctantly welcomed in Philips. It would be the last time Hansen let a comic stay with him.

"Emo has this thing where he likes to test his character on people and see how far he can push it," Hansen says. "I didn't know that until I talked to Judy Tenuta a few weeks later. I was just like, 'That would have been something you could have mentioned.'"

One day, Hansen came home to find Philips standing in his front yard playing the trombone on the lawn while neighbors and passersby looked on in confusion. Another time, Philips and Hansen were in the kitchen when Philips asked if he could make an egg. "I didn't think anything of it at first, which was my mistake," Hansen says with a sigh. "He takes out a skillet and throws an entire raw egg into the pan, smashing it. Then he's sitting there flicking the shells out onto the floor. I let him go for a minute before I said, 'Emo, do you know how to make an egg?' And in that real high-pitched voice he goes, 'I



guess not, Scott.’ Eventually, I found out that you had to say, ‘Hey, Phil’—which is his real name—‘stop being Emo,’ and then he would drop the character. Otherwise, he was always in character. He did that because he was always writing. It was brilliant, but it made me want to kill him at first.”

Although he may not have been welcome as a houseguest, Philips became a regular at the Comedy Gallery before and during his rise to fame. He was also responsible for one unique differentiator of the club. “We were the first club in town, and maybe the country, that was completely smoke free,” Hansen says. “It started with Emo. He was so allergic to the smoke that we did away with it when he came to town, and people really enjoyed it, so we kept it that way.”

Hansen’s eye for talent was incredible, but that isn’t to say that every act connected with audiences. “I brought in this comedy duo, Leo Benvenuti and Steve Rudnick, who had been part of Second City [in Chicago]. They got the worst review in the history of the club,” he says with a laugh. “Not a single person laughed. Finally, someone stood up and said, ‘You’re too smart!’ You probably wouldn’t know those names until I tell you about what they went on to do. They wrote a lot of films like *The Santa Clause*, *Space Jam*, and *Kicking & Screaming*.”

One name from Hansen’s Comedy Cabaret past also became a regular at his new club. Tom Arnold was a frequent part of the evening lineup at the Comedy Gallery. In fact, that’s where he met Roseanne Barr. “We managed to book Roseanne for \$350 for the week,” Hansen remembers. “She had opened for me at Comedy Works in Denver. The minute she walked off the stage, I hired her for the Comedy Gallery.”

After booking Barr, he called Arnold. He told him he had a “woman headliner, Jewish comic from Denver,” and he thought Arnold would be perfect for the middle spot. The following week, the couple met at the Comedy Gallery, and they got together soon after. Both Hansen and the club would be depicted in the 1994 made-for-TV movie produced at the peak of Barr and Arnold’s fame, *Roseanne and Tom: Behind the Scenes*.



*Roseanne Barr and Tom Arnold at Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery at Galtier Plaza in St. Paul. (Courtesy of Scott Hansen)*

Not only would the Comedy Gallery bring the comedy power couple together; it also opened the door for other comedians whom Arnold and Barr invited out to work with them later in California.

After featuring a handful of up-and-comers and comics on the cusp of stardom, Hansen finally booked his first major act—at the suggestion of his mother. “My mom calls me one day and says, ‘You know who you should use at your club?’ and I’m rolling my eyes, like I’m going to take comedy tips from my mother. She says, ‘Jay Leno.’ At that point, he hadn’t even done Carson yet. He was just hitting his stride on David Letterman’s daytime talk show, which my mother watched all the time.”

Despite his initial skepticism, Hansen looked into Leno and decided to bring him in for a two-night engagement. “It was \$7,500 to get him for two nights, which at that point was more money than I had ever spent in my entire life,” Hansen remembers. “It was like one-fourth of the cost of my first house.”

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*A flyer for Jay Leno's first visit to Scott Hansen's Comedy Gallery in Minneapolis*

Much to Hansen's delight, his mother's intuition was correct. "We were supposed to have him for Wednesday and Thursday, and we sold out both shows. So then we added a Friday show and sold that out. Then we added a Saturday show and sold that out too. We decided to add a Sunday show."

Hansen's big gamble was paying off, but he narrowly avoided a potential disaster involving Dayton's department store, which was selling tickets for the shows. "They accidentally sold double the tickets they were supposed to for the Sunday show," Hansen recalls. "We called Leno's agent, expecting to either have to refund a bunch of people or pay him a ton of money. Leno said, 'Let's just add a second show for Sunday.' And he agreed to work for the same amount of money. He could have easily said, 'You fucked up, so you're going to give me a hundred percent of the door.' But he didn't. He knew I supported him and found incentives to help him make money, so he supported me right back."

Leno's flexibility was a welcome relief for Hansen, who says the future talk show host's amicable personality was on display all week. "One night I'm coming downstairs to the restaurant, and I see Jay carrying a woman up the stairs," Hansen recalls. "She had crutches and he insisted on helping her up. That's just the kind of guy he was."

The Leno gig also helped Hansen to showcase his own comedian-friendly outlook and business acumen, which made him a hit with bookers and helped give the Comedy Gallery a strong national reputation. "Once Leno played at our club, a couple of weeks later we got a call from Jerry Seinfeld's manager. He had heard good things and wanted to come in. We had people calling us because they knew we paid well and we were going to treat them well."

Seinfeld made his Comedy Gallery debut in the fall of 1985. At the time, he was a regular guest of Carson and Letterman but was still several years away from sitcom superstardom. Crowds packed the Gallery for six shows across three nights, shelling out eight dollars a ticket along with a mandatory two-beverage minimum for the opportunity to see the comic dig beneath the surface of everyday observational comedy. A review in the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* called Seinfeld, "pulverizingly funny, without stooping to the slurs,





*Scott Hansen and  
Jerry Seinfeld at  
Scott Hansen's  
Comedy Gallery.  
(Courtesy of Mike  
Gandolfi)*

put-downs and profanity to which less talented performers resort.” It would be his first of many visits to the Twin Cities and the beginning of a long relationship between himself and Hansen.

Seinfeld’s connection to the club also helped to steer the careers of many Comedy Gallery regulars, including Joel Hodgson. As Seinfeld’s opener, Hodgson was able to showcase his deadpan style and unconventional approach, and the two became fast friends. They have frequently performed together, and Hodgson appeared on the first season of Seinfeld’s web series, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*.

Joe Minjares was another comedian whose life was changed by Seinfeld’s affinity for the Comedy Gallery. “When I opened for Seinfeld, it was my wedding anniversary that same night,” Minjares recalls. “I opened for Jerry and did very well, and then my wife and I went downstairs to J. R.’s for dinner. A few minutes later, the waiter brings by a bottle of wine signed by Seinfeld saying ‘happy anniversary.’”

A nice bottle of wine was just one way Minjares benefited from the connection. “A year later, I was walking down Melrose in Hollywood, and I see Seinfeld walking toward me with Larry David. I kind of figured he wouldn’t remember me, but as we got closer he smiled, and I waved to him. He stops and says, ‘Joe Minjares. Larry, this is Joe Minjares from Minneapolis.’ He asked me what I was doing out there, and I told him I was looking to get into more television and

film roles. He got me an audition for his show, and when I got there, he said, 'You're not reading. You've got the part.' He just gave me the role right there on the spot."

Meanwhile, back in the Twin Cities, the Comedy Gallery was lapping its competition. "Mickey Finn's didn't bring in anybody," Hansen says. "And the Cabaret was bringing in out-of-town acts, but they were still more of a variety show. I was really the only one bringing in big names from all over the country on a regular basis."

Rob Schneider, Larry Miller, and Bill Hicks would all grace the Comedy Gallery stage in the years following. All the while, Hansen continued to grow as a comic. "I would book whoever I thought was the best comic to open for certain acts," he says. "If I thought I was the best fit, I would book myself. I put myself with Leno and a few others, but in general I was trying to get in one show a week."

The Comedy Gallery at J. R.'s was the hottest ticket in town. In fact, it had become too big for its current home. Hansen needed to think bigger once again. It was time for the Comedy Gallery to grow.