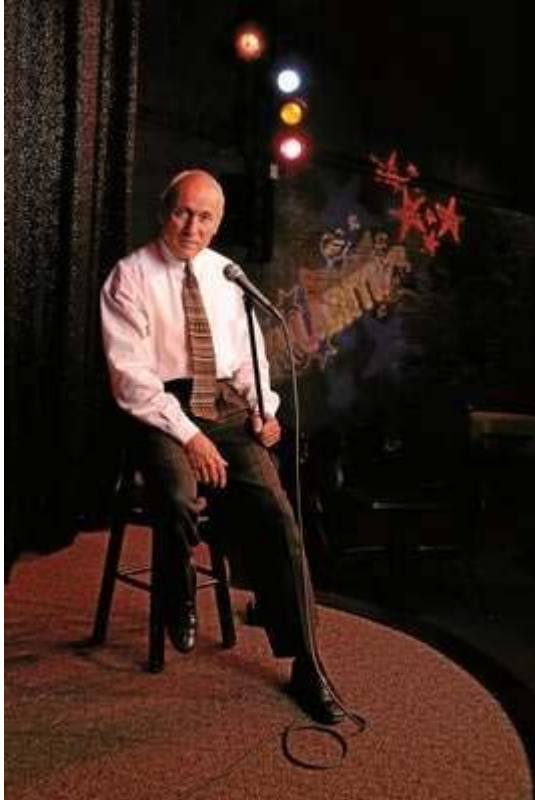


By **John Benson**, For *The News-Herald*

POSTED: 05/01/15, 2:03 PM EDT | UPDATED: 1 DAY AGO



Submitted

Nick Kostis is the longtime owner of the comedy club [Hilarities](#), which has had a few locations in its 30-year-history but for many years has been on East Fourth Street in Cleveland.

Cleveland sports teams aside, [Hilarities](#) has been Northeast Ohio's source of comedy for three decades.

The man responsible for keeping the Rock Hall City in stitches is New York City native Nick Kostis, who came to the Buckeye State for college in the '60s. He actually started out as an educator before becoming the Oberlin City Schools and Tallmadge City Schools director of pupil personnel services.

Eventually, in 1984, Kostis opened a small downtown Cleveland bar before deciding to parlay his love of comedy into opening [Hilarities Comedy Club](#) in Cuyahoga Falls. This was during the comedy boom of the '80s, which is why Kostis saw potential in the downtown Cleveland Warehouse District.

"We opened a 500-seat venue in 1986," Kostis said. "At the time, we were, if not the biggest, one of the two biggest in the country. It was really just before comedy exploded and just the kind of a test. Within a year we were open full-time."

“Because it was such a big room, we had gone to the expense of hanging drapery to cut off the back room. Ironically, we never used them. The room filled because the comedy boom was on, and we were right at the front of it. As they say, the rest is history.”

During Hilarities’ first incarnation in the Warehouse District, some of the biggest names in comedy — Jerry Seinfeld, Paul Reiser, Tim Allen, Steve Harvey, Drew Carey and other — came through the room.

A decade later, Kostis was forced to relocate. He eventually landed at the Hanna Theatre in Playhouse Square, but that location was temporary.

He later found a home on East Fourth Street, which today is one of the city’s most thriving entertainment areas. However, when Pickwick & Frolic, which includes Hilarities 4th Street Theatre, Kevin’s Martini Bar & Tap Room, the Frolic Cabaret and Northeast Ohio’s only champagne bar, first opened its doors, the street was a ghost town.

“It was a happy conclusion,” Kostis said. “It was a street that had far more potential than the previous site because of the nature of the street being compact and intimate. It really was the last street to kind of recapture the spirit and vibe of old Short Vincent Street, which was for so many years the downtown nightlife entertainment strip in our region. It was home to the Theatrical and old Roxy burlesque house. It was a happening little spot.”

The current Hilarities 4th Street Theatre is described as a hybrid 400-seat venue capturing the intimacy of a club with a theatrical flair, due to its balcony.

“The room is unlike any other, and we’re very proud of it,” Kostis said. “It’s a bit of a departure from what most club experiences are.”

There’s also a bit of history in the club that Kostis relishes. The massive brick wall, which serves as a backdrop to the comedians, is actually the last remnant of the old Cleveland Opera House. Its ambiance and feel is touted as one of the nation’s best by comedians.

ANNIVERSARY MONTH

Hilarities is dedicating May to its 30th anniversary celebration. This includes appearances by comedians Bob Marley (April 30 through May 2), Kenny Rogerson, Carl Labove and John Caponera (May 8 and 9), Rocky Laporte (May 11 and 12), Kevin Nealon (May 15 and 16), Bill Bellamy (May 21 through 24) and Sebastian Maniscalco (May 28 through 31).

“Sebastian Maniscalco, this kid is fantastic,” Kostis said. “He’s one of the hottest tickets in comedy in the country. He’s really terrific. Also, this month we’re bringing back our martini show, which played every Friday and Saturday for five years. We also have a new Vegas burlesque show that will premiere in the month of May.

“Then on Mother’s Day, it’s our first collaboration with the Cleveland Pops Orchestra with (conductor(Carl Topilow. We have two dinner options. It’s a Mother’s Day treat if there ever was one.”

Hilarities 4th Street Theatre has become an important cog in the thriving entertainment district that is downtown Cleveland’s Fourth Street. Kostis said the state of live comedy in Northeast Ohio remains healthy and vibrant.

“Comedy is a very communal experience,” Kostis said. “You’re enjoying it with a lot of other people who are as equally as strange to you as you are to them. But you’re all concentrated on one focal point, that stage.

“And from that, laughter is what we share. Comedy is like church, it’s uplifting. It lightens your spirit. It can be cantankerous and combative but it always relates to the culture and it’s listening and watching. These are people who are not philosophers or historians, but are interpreting the popular culture in the same way we’re experiencing it. So the perspectives are theirs but the comedy is for all.”

For more information, visit pickwickandfrolic.com.