

Press-Gazette

Estimated printed pages: 3

March 11, 2004

Section: Weekend

Page: 06H

Think you can do stand-up? Give it a shot at IQ's  
Thomas Rozwadowski, trozwado@greenbaypressgazette.com

They can be disinterested in his William Hung and Rue McClanahan jokes. They can even refuse to crack a smile as he unloads on guys who gratuitously flash their barbed wire tattoos at the gym.

But halfway through a set and not even one disparaging remark tossed his way? Budding stand-up comic Nick Mortensen definitely takes the lack of heckling personally.

Such is life for a local funny man trying to determine in front of a microphone whether his material is actually, well, funny.

Every Tuesday night, Mortensen and other would-be performers take to the open mic at IQ's bar to compete with clanging bottles, free-flowing conversation and whatever happens to grace the television screen.

Depending on which week you go, the combination of comedy, improv, spoken word and poetry at the east-side Green Bay tavern can be hit-or-miss with the crowd. At times, there's a packed house on hand to hear talented poets interspersed with the lighthearted approach of stand-up newcomers. Other nights, it's a two-man act, with Mortensen and host Kevin Leurquin giving their material a test run in front of scattered pool players and a seemingly inattentive roundup of bar staples.

Either way, the comics are carefully combing the audience to see who's paying attention and most importantly, who's laughing.

"It's a ton of pressure. When no one's laughing, it can take the whole standard of who you are, your whole self-image, and ruin it," said Mortensen, 26, a Southwest High School graduate.

"But really, my goal is just to get 30 percent of the people to come over and check out what I'm all about. It's been said that you can't do comedy for people who don't want to hear comedy, but sometimes I prefer it if they don't want to listen. I mean, giving it back to someone who heckles you ... you can't go wrong. I just want to be in front of a mic to get that chance."

By securing IQ's as an open mic venue, Leurquin said his hope was to not only give comics and poets a chance to connect with a live audience, but also provide free entertainment for the area. So far, the experience has been far more rewarding than say, practicing in front of a mirror with a wooden spoon.

"It's something I wanted to get off the ground for myself and other people who are looking to get in front of a crowd and become better," said Leurquin, 25, who started the showcase in December. "I'm hoping people find an interest in it. I think it's something very different for the community."

Leurquin, a sales rep at The Razor (94.7 FM), said he's been taking comedy classes in Milwaukee as a way to learn the "nuts and bolts" of the business. While there's still a degree of nervousness to his act, the open mic has allowed him to improve his routine, he said.

"When I'm done with a set, I just sort of blend back in with the crowd and get feedback on how I did," Leurquin said. "Constructive criticism every week -- it can only help."

For Mortensen, anytime he can get in front of a microphone without having to drive to clubs in Madison is a bonus. In fact, for a guy who's been in the comedy game for a mere six months, Mortensen is remarkably polished and comfortable on stage.

"Everytime you do comedy you improve, so it's nice to have somewhere local to do it," he said. "It takes a lot of nerve to work yourself up and get on stage in the first place. I think the reason I started doing it is I just reached a point where I didn't want to have it in the back of my head anymore."

Prior to his comedy run, Mortensen said he would trade barbs with friends and do his best to wryly comment on whatever bothered him most in the pop culture universe. At times, that approach causes the Green Bay resident to worry that his humor may be a bit obscure. But he's fairly confident the 18-to-35 year-olds who do "get it" will find him funny.

Even that has been challenged in the past, however.

Case in point: Back in high school, Mortensen joined Southwest's cheerleading squad as a way to get in front of a crowd and deliver a few laughs. His preferred method -- sticking a kazoo down his pants -- however, didn't go over with his peers as he expected.

"I sort of got dragged though the mud after that because people didn't know it was a prop," Mortensen said. "So for awhile there I was like, man, that was totally not funny."

"But later, I saw Johnny Knoxville do the same thing on (MTV show) 'Jackass' and I said to myself, 'No, that was a pretty good joke.' That made me feel better."

Mic check

A combination of comedy, poetry, spoken word and improv, the open mic is only as successful as its willing participants. The free session takes place at 9 p.m. every Tuesday at IQ's, 2105 University Ave. According to host Kevin Leurquin, anyone who wants to step up to the mic can do so simply by showing up.

---

Copyright (c) Green Bay Press-Gazette. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.