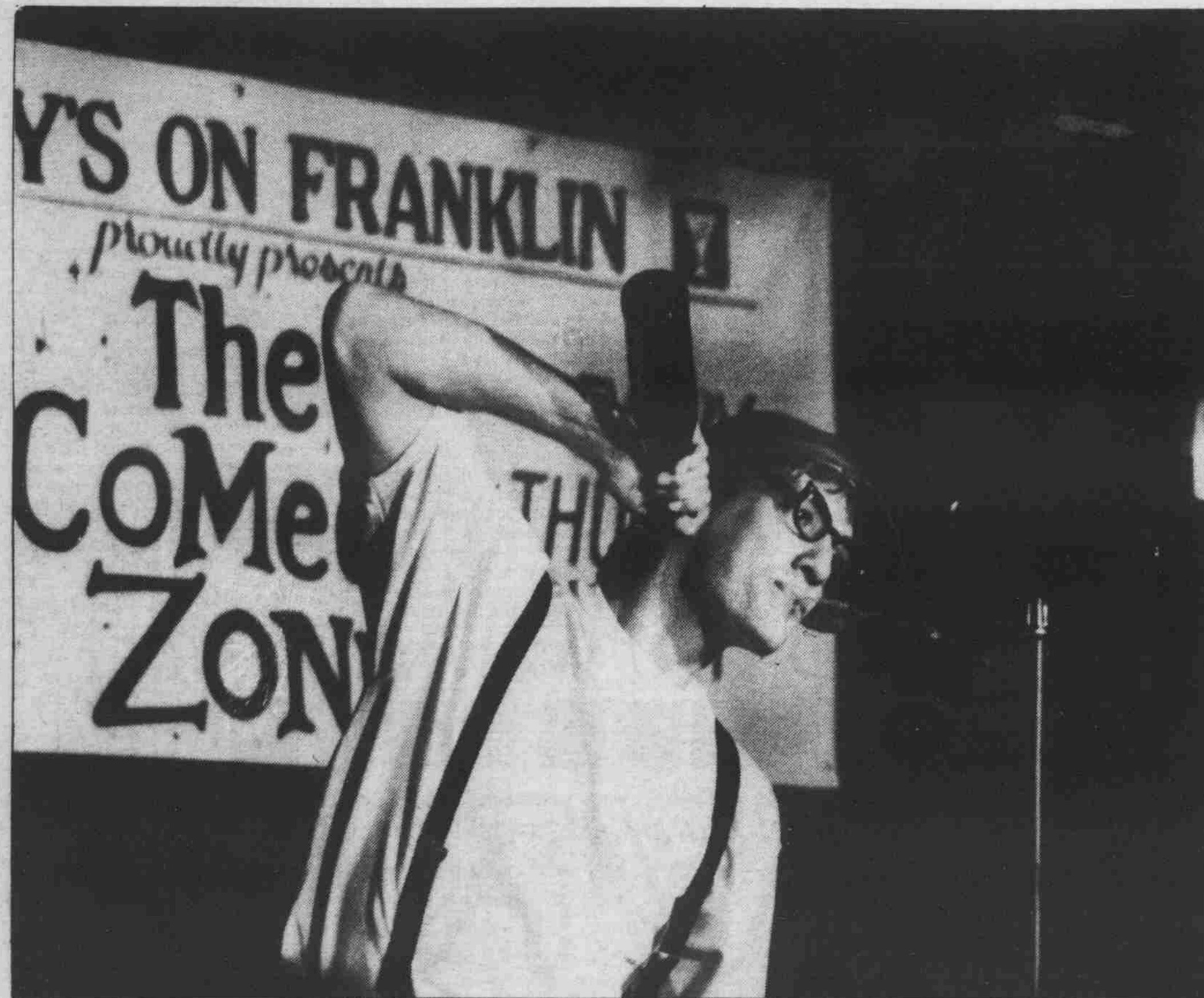


Laughing all the way to the bank



Comedy hit the Chapel Hill scene last year with hilarious performances from the The Comedy Zone

By CHRIS CAIN
Staff Writer

"Comedy . . . is an unnatural act," once said the bug-eyed funnyman Marty Feldman.

Talk to a comic for more than five minutes and the truth of Feldman's maxim begins to sink in: Being seriously funny is hard work. But it's work that more and more men and women are choosing to take on nowadays. And for many, it's work that has proved to be unnaturally successful over the past couple of years. Tom Williams, founder of Charlie Goodnight's Comedy Club, puts it simply: "There's no question. Comedy is hot."

Obviously, hot is a good thing to be, and like most good things in this land of opportunity, it means lots and lots of money. Money enough to bulge Feldman's eyes out were he still around, and enough to cause local performers and business people to take a second look at the art form that has been around since bushmen and banana peels — Comedy.

Performers like Chapel Hill's own Dan Barlow, who after years of writing humorous pieces for the odd newspaper or magazine has decided to give it a shot as a professional stand-up comic.

And business people like Mark Tharrington, owner of the newly opened La Terraza, who believes there is a place for comedy even in clubs such as his that until now have featured exclusively musical forms of entertainment. He is not alone in realizing that "comedy is more popular than it once was. I think there is an audience here." Consequently, Tharrington has secured a list of comedy booking agents — he even went so far as to book nationally known Ian Shoales (a regular on National Public Radio and Nightline), but he had to cancel at the last minute to appear on NBC.

Well, Dan Barlow isn't exactly a household name either in Chapel Hill dwellings or anywhere else, but his path thus far, as well as his aspirations, are perhaps typical of the rising new comedians. A 1973 UNC graduate with an English degree and many semesters of creative writing under his belt, Barlow began writing freelance humor for a couple of local newspapers and a skiing magazine here and there before he decided to give comedy a try.

"I noticed that Steven Wright was doing some of the stuff I was writing," he said. He gave stand-up a shot for the first time last summer at the Carrboro ArtsCenter's Monday Night Live.

The ArtsCenter, like La Terraza, specializes in live music, but on Monday nights in the summer anything goes, including a fair amount of comedy. Mary Ruth, theater director at the ArtSchool, says that although the summer amateur nights are over, you'll still hear laughter in the halls of their new building on West Main Street, particularly on a Thursday evening. It is then that "Transactors" take the stage, a group of four actors/comedians who keep the audience laughing with what she dubs "performance improvisation." In essence, the way it works is simple — and, in practice — often simply hilarious. The group asks the audience for, say, a current event and an object. Then, with "the mining of the gulf" and "eggplant" as their guides, they jump immediately to cable Iranian TV and a how-to show on disguising a mine as an eggplant.

Ruth says that as far as conventional stand-up comedy goes, "We haven't considered it seriously, so to speak. But it's not barred from the realm of possibility." Presently, she plans to concentrate on building an audience for the Transactors.

But back to Barlow, the representative comic. He went from the ArtCenter to a total of four shows at what comes closest to a true comedy club in Chapel Hill, Theodore's on Franklin Street. It was Barlow's start as a professional comedian.

Indeed, Theodore's has given quite a few comics an audience to entertain, and it also gives the money collected at the door — generally about \$100 — to the winner of its amateur night. The bar is owned and operated by two students, John Treece and Mike Ussery, who are now seniors at UNC and N.C. State, respectively. They opened the "Bar and Comedy Club" last spring because, Treece said, "at the time comedy was really booming. So we figured we'd bring comedy to Chapel Hill."

Though they have found their plan thus far successful, the proposition is not as simple as it may sound. "There are a lot of misconceptions about comedy," says Treece. "It's not cheap, believe me." It can cost from \$550 to \$1,200 a night to bring a comedian in, often on top of a night's lodging and meal. And because Theodore's only seats 85-90 people, the two owners sometimes find it tough to get a return on their investment. Though he says their comedy line-up is "kind of haphazard right now," Treece hopes within a couple of weeks to be featuring comedy every Thursday night, per-

haps with the help of The Comedy Zone, a major booking agent.

But Barlow didn't stop with Theodore's. He has just finished a five-night run at the granddaddy of area comedy clubs, what Barlow calls "one of the better nightclubs in the country outside of New York and L.A." — Charlie Goodnight's in Raleigh. In comedy, all roads seem to lead to the neighboring comedy club. As Ruth of the ArtsCenter says, "Charlie Goodnight's has got the market cornered. And they do a good job."

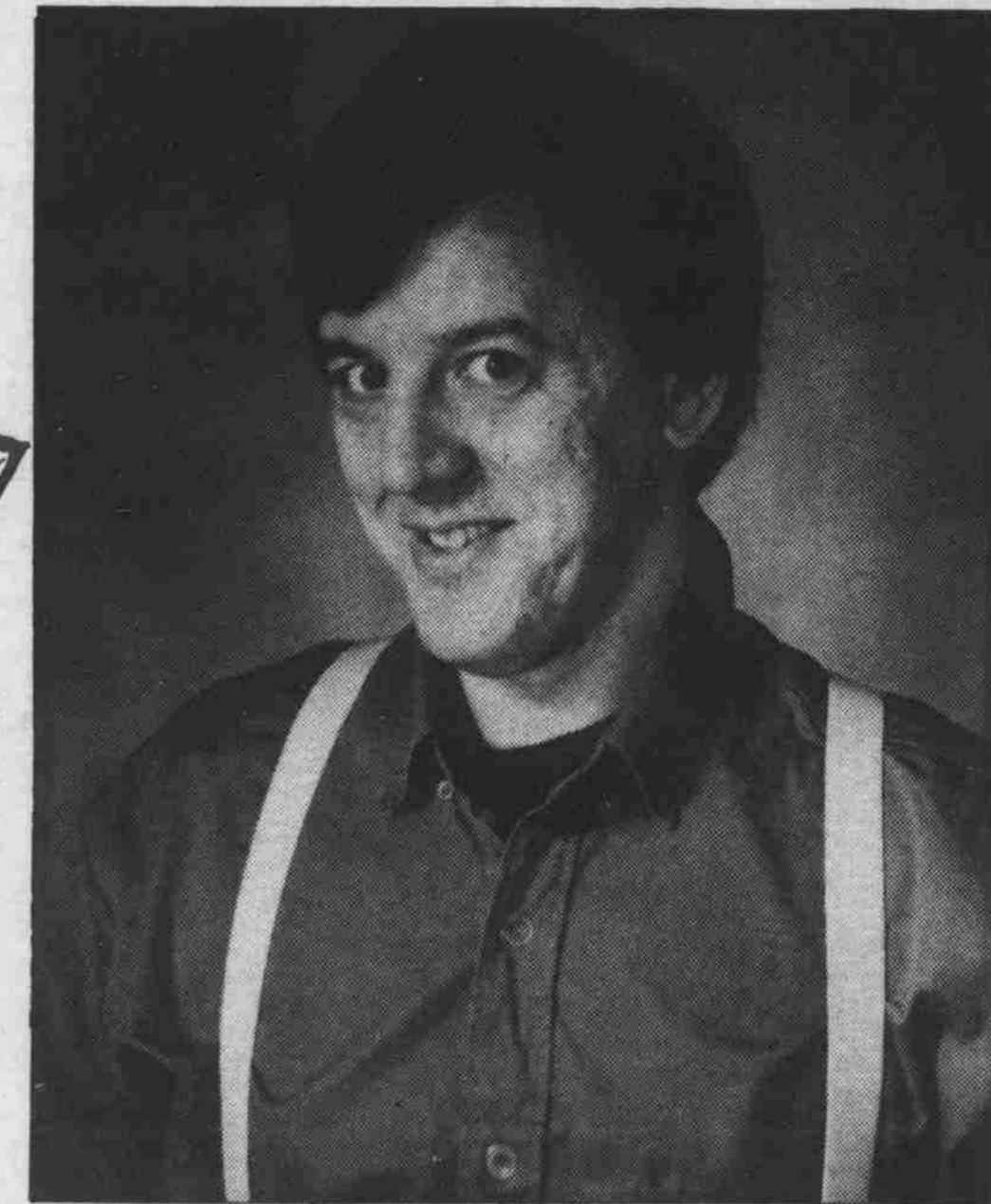
But, says owner Tom Williams, a good job doesn't come easy: "We've paid our dues . . . by stubbing our toes a little we built our club into one of the best clubs in the country." When he started the venture four years ago it was the first full-time comedy club in North Carolina. After a lot of learning from mistakes and from other clubs in larger cities, "We book the best comedy in the country . . . comics like Jay Leno (who will be performing at Raleigh's Memorial Auditorium Oct. 15 as part of Goodnight's 4th anniversary celebration)," Williams says. "When we first started you could put anyone up there. Now people want more sophistication. They don't want some joke about AIDS or the Irish."

Becky Barnes, Goodnight's publicity manager, credits the area for coming out to see a more sophisticated humor. "Obviously the Triangle area has a tremendous sense of humor. Research indicates that intelligence correlates with a sense of humor. Well, they're very perceptive around here. You've got to be quick to pick up on comedy. You can't exactly wake up and get it the next day."

Barnes' flattery of the Triangle, misplaced or not, raises an interesting question: What is it that makes people around here laugh? Theories about laughter range from those branding humor an expression of human aggression to Freud's notion of joke as sexual release mechanism. Williams tends to take a lighter view of the art: he sees it as based in common experience.

"Everybody's been in the 7-11. Everybody's been behind the guy who won't run the yellow light. That's the basis for comedy."

Barlow says his deadpan variety of comedy went over very well at Goodnight's. Asked what he does for a living outside of comedy he replied, "I translate driver training manuals into braille" — just deadpan enough to keep one journalist quietly scribbling for a couple of seconds. He also works "part time on an ant farm



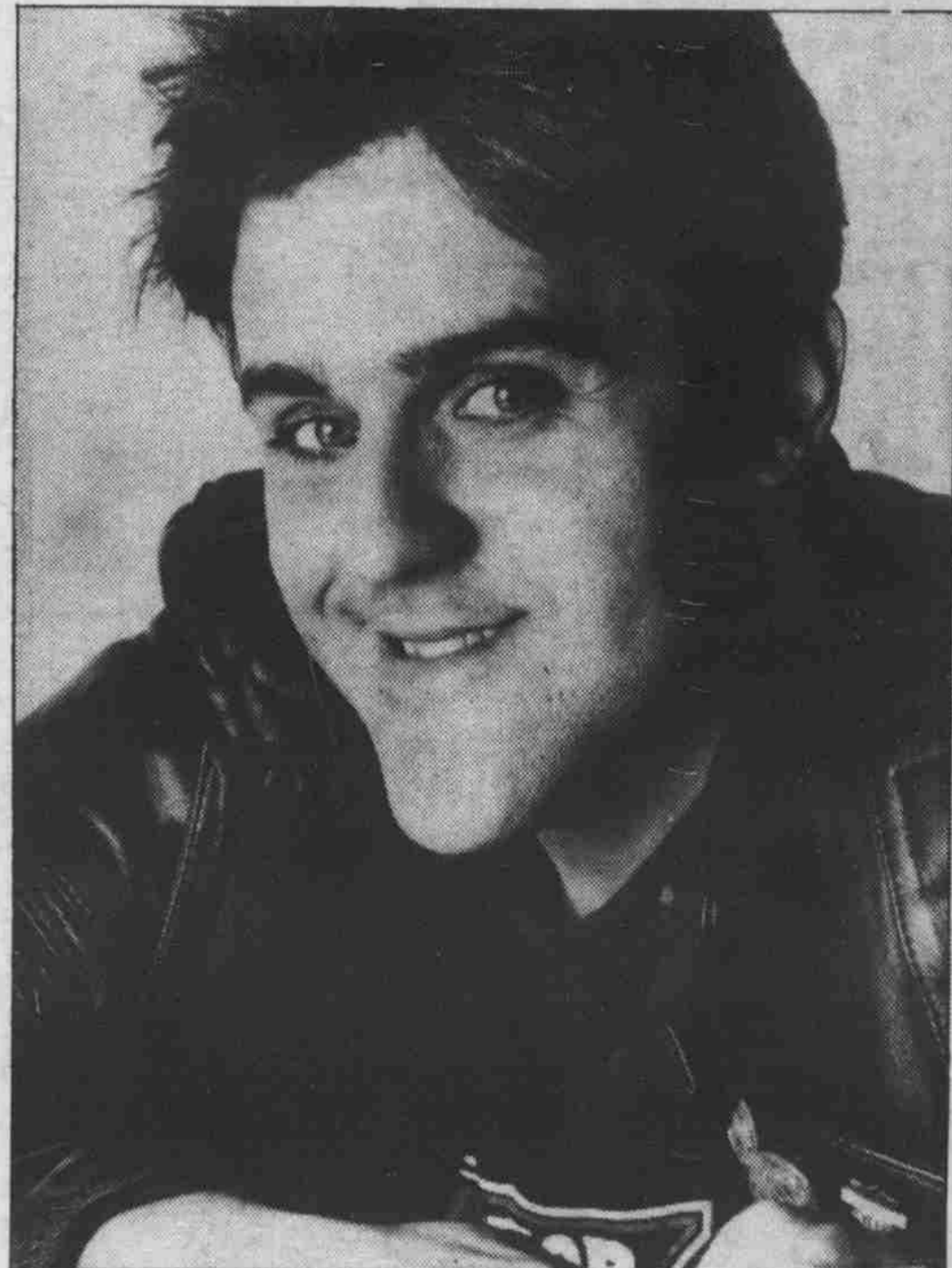
Comedian Don Barlow is trying his luck as a stand-up comic

cleaning mud out of the grooves in little tiny tractor tires." Along with a few "Wheel of Fortune" jokes, Barlow also includes some specifically local humor in his act, notably concerning one Dean Smith.

UNC humor also figures into the dual act of Rodney and James, and for good reason — they're both students at the University. The pair of speech communication majors have performed at Theodore's twice (to "buckets of laughter," according to owner Treece) and hope, as most area comics, to make it to Charlie Goodnight's eventually. Most of their routine, according to Rodney Honeycutt, is built from "things we come up with just sitting around talking." A good portion is based upon childhood memories, "a think-back-to-things-that-you-have-experienced type comedy," says Honeycutt, reminding not to forget the hyphens. Sexual jokes don't figure heavily in the show. "We figure we should draw from experience," he says. He claims most of the profanity comes when the audience heckles.

Around the nation, however, whether audiences have been heckling or rolling in the aisles, they have been going out in unprecedented numbers to see, and pay for, comedians. Honeycutt believes stand-up comedy to be more popular now because "comedians are getting respected as actors." He notes the box-office success of ex-stand-ups such as Eddie Murphy and Whoopie Goldberg.

Becky Barnes sees television as doing much for comedy, especially the recent increase in cable viewers. Spots on HBO and Showtime have increased comedians' audiences tremendously and have made watching stand-up comedy an acceptable form of entertainment, she believes. Williams views comedy's popularity as not only good for him and his club, but also for the folks on the other end,



Jay Leno will perform Oct. 15 at Raleigh's Memorial Auditorium

whether a housewife with three screaming kids or a student who's just failed an exam.

"Laughter is a great therapeutic device. It's used for therapy for depression," he said. "Here's 1½ hours that nothing's going to go wrong," Williams says, "and he's

telling jokes about flunking tests and crying babies."

Perhaps, then, as trusty Reader's Digest claims, laughter is indeed the best medicine. Certainly for Williams and an increasing number of local comics and businesses, it seems to be just what the doctor ordered.