

Make 'em laugh

Popular Louisville comedian Mark Klein travels the country with pro-America, pro-business humor

Voice-Tribune Profile



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In the Middle Ages, the term "comedy" often meant a written work that had a happy ending, not punch lines (Dante's "Divine Comedy" is one example: Its story ends in heaven).

That meaning has been lost, but it still applies to Louisville's most famous comedian, Mark Klein.

In an industry that can chew up talented performers and spit them out, he has survived, thrived and honed his act to reflect not only his sense of humor, but also his continually maturing philosophy about life in America.

This week, Nov. 26-28 and 30, hometown fans will have their first chance to enjoy Klein's performance at the Comedy Caravan, at 1250 Bardstown Road in the Highlands, since last spring. They also may get a few jokes from his new career path - corporate entertaining - as he expands his repertoire for his role as "The Corp Jester."

Any stage would do

Born and raised in Hikes Point, the son of (now retired) furniture retailer George Klein, Mark Klein graduated from Seneca High School and moved to upstate New York to earn a bachelor's degree in English at Colgate University.

Like other young men at Colgate, he was on the wrestling team - but unlike them, he also worked hard after hours to find opportunities to hone his stand-up comedy routine.

"I began performing in strip joints and at fraternity parties,"

he said, "any place that would put me on stage so I could try to work this stuff out. I thought, there's a way to get paid for going to a bar, having a couple of drinks, flirting and telling jokes? I'm going to do all of that anyway!"

A spreading spotlight

Klein's first big break was more of a process than a single event. Tom Sobel, who owns the Comedy Caravan, knew Klein in the early 1980s, when they were a booking agent and a rising comedian, respectively. Sobel's interest in Klein was a plus, because he was in a position to help expand his career into a nationwide touring act, as opposed to remaining simply a local comic.

Two decades later, however, Klein continues to call Louisville his home and lives in the St. Matthews area with his wife Jacqueline, a real estate agent with Wakefield Reutlinger & Co. Realtors, and their 8-year-old son, Max.

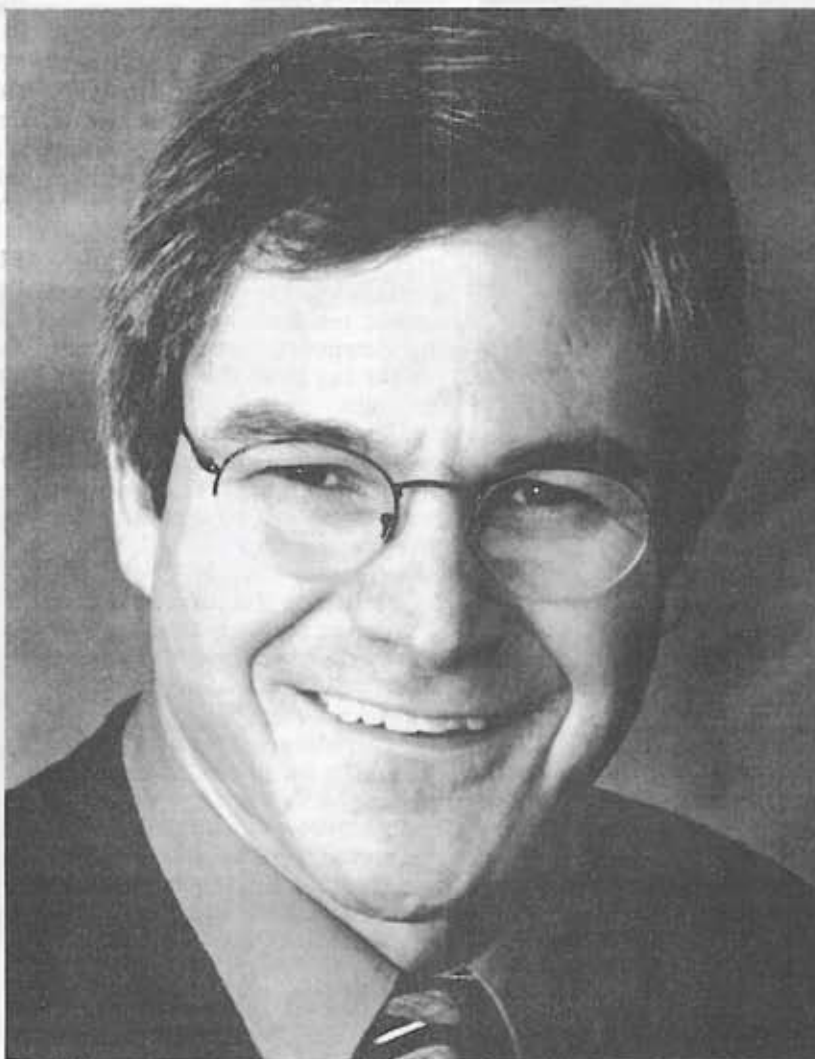
In the years since he first began to hit the big time, Klein's clipped diction and rapid-fire material have earned him a loyal following, and the industry has taken note.

CBS's television magazine "48 Hours" and A&E's "Comedy on the Road" shone the spotlight on him, and GQ magazine wrote an eight-page article that called him "King of the One-Night Stand-ups." He often performs in Las Vegas and other top comedy destinations.

Stand up and cheer

In about 1999, however, Klein began converting his business from that of primarily a nightclub entertainer to that of a corporate entertainer and speaker. Being The Corp Jester brings financial rewards, but it also gives Klein the chance to bring a serious message, in a funny way, to a different audience.

"It is, amazingly, not a message that people hear from Hollywood: If you show up at work, do



MARK KLEIN

your job, play by the rules, pay your taxes and turn a profit, you're a good guy, not a bad guy," he said. "They'll never hear that on a college campus, from Barbra Streisand, or from an economics professor. This ocean of freedom we swim in every day called America allows us choices beyond the ability of the other inhabitants of this world to imagine.

"The proof is that millions of people want to come here, and nobody wants to leave."

That message, when delivered with humor ("that's the trick") also resonates with audiences in comedy clubs, Klein added: "They respond to it with standing ovations because for all of the bitter, angry comedian types you

see on TV, that's not how people live their lives or feel about things. It's exhilarating to know that I'm not off base in what I believe and how I express it.

"It's depressing that the people who are in control of the message we get from our media are so egregiously mistaken about how ordinary people think, feel and believe."

Nightclub push-ups

In the past three weeks alone, Klein has done two weeklong comedy nightclub stints on the road and four corporate appearances: for Microsoft in Las Vegas, a pharmaceutical company in Philadelphia, a law firm in Birmingham, and the Jefferson-town Chamber of Commerce.

"That's the kind of schedule I want to keep - a mixture of corporate and club events," he said. "My business is now about half corporate speaking."

However, Klein still relishes the comedy club circuit, describing nightclub shows as "the push-ups and sit-ups I do to stay in shape to do better and better corporate shows."

"My public-performance future is going to be in corporate and public speaking; there's no question about that. That's the direction I'm moving in, happily, but I'd like to think that I can keep that balance as long as I choose to."

No drop-out

Many of his peers have not been able to stand the rigors of being professional comics - to achieve that balance - for nearly as long as Klein has.

"This is a tough business, and the dropout rate is high. You get tired of spending hours on the phone every day begging for work and being turned down; of close personal friends saying they can't use you this year," he said. "But for every person who drops out, five more get into comedy. The public sees you on stage in front of people, and everybody's happy. Who wouldn't want to do that? But the job is doing a college one night, a corporate event in Buffalo the next night, making your Friday night show in St. Louis, then getting home Saturday to watch your kid play in Little League.

"The reward you get is the 45 minutes on stage when you get to say what you feel, the way you feel it, and people laugh at it," he added. "But that's the reward, not the work."

Legitimate at last

Over the years, Klein can point to several milestones that have been particularly rewarding, especially concerning his parents.

"They used to come see me when I was terrible, in places you wouldn't go in on a bet," he

Klein Bio

Name: Mark Klein
Position: Stand-up comedian and corporate entertainer
Age: 49
Education: Seneca High School; B.A. degree in English, Colgate University
Family: Wife Jacqueline; son, Max, 8
Birthplace: Hikes Point

Klein to perform at Comedy Caravan

Comedian Mark Klein of Louisville will perform at the Comedy Caravan in Mid-City Mall on Bardstown Road Nov. 26-28 and 30.

Tickets range from \$6 to \$12.

For details, call the Comedy Caravan "Laff Line" at 459-0022.

said. "I'm so glad that my mother lived long enough to see me headline in 'A' rooms all around the country. My father still comes to see my shows in Louisville and even Las Vegas. Knowing that my parents saw the front end of that process, as well as the good times, is a wonderful and gratifying feeling for me."

The "48 Hours" profile legitimized his career decisions not only in his own mind, but for his parents' as well. And the countless non-famous shows in which he said exactly the right thing at the right time confirm to Klein that he is making a living at what he was meant to do.

"There are plenty of nights at 2 a.m. when you're driving through a snowstorm, trying to get home from Jefferson City, Mo.," he said. "You wonder, what am I doing here, at my age, in

See Profile, page C-8