

Fairfield Now

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STAND UP GUYS

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Meet Lead McEnroe, five Fairfield alumni trying to make it in the Manhattan improv comedy scene





Lead McEnroe are, from left to right, Rob Williams '05, Dan Scivoletti '07, Mike Barry '05, Tim Eberle '05, and Nick Benaquista'05.

STAND UP GUYS

BY ALISTAIR HIGHET

It's a cold Friday night in the dead of winter on West 29th Street in New York. On a dark street, squeezed next to a couple of restaurants, is the Magnet Theater — basically, a foyer with a bar that leads to a small black box theater that seats — literally — 50 people.

But the room fills up around 7:45, and the laughter of anticipation quietly builds as the audience tucks their hats and scarves under their chairs. They are all here to see Lead McEnroe (pronounced “lead” as in Led Zeppelin), a

five-person improv group of guys in their early 20's, all of whom are graduates of Fairfield University, and who first developed their improvisational chops during their time studying theater at the University.

The lights go down, and the group shuffles onto the stage in T-shirts and jeans. Nick Benaquista '05, steps to the lip of the stage and welcomes everyone — and gets a whoop of response from the crowd.

“Somebody give us a location,” he demands of the crowd, and someone sitting in the front row shouts out, “Monopoly.”



With that, the show is off and running. Lead McEnroe performs what is called “long-form improvisation.” They begin with a single suggestion from the audience (in their case, a specific location) and from that alone, spin off a web of characters and situations that pinball back and forth between the absurd and the oddly touching for about 45 minutes. (For example, the group's name came from an improvised scene with member Dan Scivoletti '07, who was playing a part in a rehearsal exercise and was asked, “Who are you?” The response was that he was Lead McEnroe, aging lead singer of the band Lead McEnroe. He was promoting his latest release, *The Pineapple Album*. “Naturally,” said Tim Eberle '05, in an interview later, “the name kind of stuck.”)

So, Monopoly: Two actors sit at a table and an imaginary game begins, one of them mocking the other, raking up the money, buying up the board. Mike Barry '05 buys a railroad — a Ronald Reagan railroad, a “supply-side railroad.” Cut to Baltic Avenue. Hanging around the corner, Tim Eberle takes a drag from an imaginary cigarette and laments, in a Mittel-European accent, the demise of Baltic Avenue. “Now there are six hotels on Baltic Avenue,” he shakes his head. Baltic Avenue is not the neighborhood it used to be.

As one scene hits its peak, one of the performers standing on the sidelines will jump on to the stage and tag-out one of the performers, taking his place, entering the scene and taking it off in a new direction. Suddenly, we are in an apartment and “Sexton” (Benaquista) shows up uninvited but with all his belongings. He is a

“Facebook friend” and has come to stay, like, forever maybe, because that's what being a Facebook friend is all about. He thinks he'll invite some more Facebook friends to come and hang out as he hangs his tapestries on the wall, discovering the wife of his host (Rob Williams '05) where she has been trapped behind the fridge. As the absurdity mounts, so do the laughs, and the show comes to end with a pair of reluctant killer bee assassins who have been assigned to assassinate Ronald Reagan (him again) by insinuating themselves into his limousine. This tactic of taking a concept or character from one point in the show and weaving it back in at different points in the show (a “call-back”) requires that the actors develop an almost intimate understanding of each other, and is where much of the comedy lives.

Currently, the guys from Lead McEnroe are at the Magnet every Friday night at 8:30, a prime slot in the improv theater's schedule. Every night the show is different, but the process remains the same. It's high paced, completely spontaneous, and right now the Fairfield-formed group is beginning to make a name for themselves. The tiny theater is beginning to fill up, “and not just with people we know. We are starting to see people who have heard about us from their friends or reviews — not just people who we've been sending so much e-mail spam to they feel obligated to come,” joked Williams during an interview. In January, the group performed to sold out crowds at the Charleston Comedy Festival in Charleston, S.C.

“We all have regular jobs to support what we do,” Eberle explained. During

the day he works for a financial services firm. Mike Barry works for PricewaterhouseCoopers; Williams is an engineer in Trumbull; Benaquista works in Human Resources for Liz Claiborne; while Dan Scivoletti is a production assistant at Comedy Central.

But live comedy is their passion. “Our first goal is always to sell out the theater,” said Eberle. “Then we want to take this comedy thing as far as it will go.”

For more on Lead McEnroe's performing schedule and to watch a performance online, go to www.leadmcenroe.com.

The core of the group – Eberle, Barry, Benaquista, and Williams — studied long-form improv together at Fairfield under adjunct professor Heather Parady. They performed at the Quick Center and the PepsiCo Theatre before being joined later by Scivoletti. After college, they wanted to continue working together and went to the Magnet Theater for further study before working their way into the coveted Friday night slot. “We just made the decision after Fairfield that we wanted to keep going,” Eberle said. “What we had developed at Fairfield was so tight that we thought, ‘let’s take it further.’”

“I think the most important thing that we got from Fairfield is that we had a very supportive atmosphere,” Eberle went on. “We had the freedom to fail. You know, acting and comedy can be so competitive, but at Fairfield it was never about who could play the wackiest character or who was going to stand out; it was really about the process of doing the work, and how you arrived at what was funny, how you got there. That was really instilled in us as part of the program and that is still how we work,” he explained. The characters have to develop organically; they have to be believable; and they have to have human dimension or they can’t develop over the course of the improv, Eberle explained. If you do the work properly, you can arrive at some strange and wonderful places but, as Eberle put it, “you have to earn crazy-town.”

“One thing about Fairfield,” Williams continued, “is that you are given the encouragement to try out wherever you are headed. I never felt that we couldn’t go where we wanted to go. We were given the freedom to explore.” ■

