

ALASKA SPOOF SHOW WON'T GO AWAY; FOLLIES HAS FANS

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Author: KIM RICH Daily News reporter; Staff

Just what is this phenomenon called the "Whale Fat Follies"?

This thing that set out in July to run a mere six weeks, and is now hitting 41½ months? This entity that has lured about 14,700 Alaskans from their homes, some of them up to seven times?

We're not talking Mikhail Baryshnikov at the Kennedy Center here, folks; we're talking about a barroom comedy show at the Fly by Night Club, a sleazy Spenard bar.

Just where did "Whale Fat" come from and, more important, can it be stopped?

We know who's to blame: Mr. Whitekeys, Fly by Night owner, piano player and creator/ringmaster of the "Whale Fat Follies."

Like the fictional Dr. Frankenstein, Whitekeys assembled "Whale Fat" from assorted pieces. In Whitekeys' case, those pieces included songs, news, satire and unidentifiable bits of Alaska life he'd collected for 15 years. He planned the show for months; still, he was scrambling to put it all together as the curtain rose opening night, July 8.

"We kept making changes and adding things," he said, "and that's why our 90 minute show wound up at 21½ hours."

For example, a sight gag involving Kim Clifton Moore as an Alaska Statue of Liberty didn't even happen until the first night. "Kim looked out and we had all these props on stage, the crab hat and the Milepost and the oosik . . ." His voice trails off in wonder.

"Whale Fat" is billed as a multimedia extravaganza; that means colored lights and a slide show combined with nonstop gags, songs and assorted craziness. Whitekeys isn't alone to blame: The other cast members developed their own characters and routines.

In addition to Whitekeys, "Whale Fat's" unindicted coconspirators include:

*Clifton Moore, a singer who slinks through a knockout Marilyn Monroe routine and oozes around the stage costumed (just barely) as a Spenard hooker.

*Michael McDonald as Sourdough Mike, a burly, bearded, overalled percussionist who occasionally rumbles onto the spotlight to offer tips for Alaska living.

*Jim Henderson, who comes out from behind the tech board to assume different personas: fish expert Jacques Cousteau ("An' zen zee male zalmon rolls over an' says, "Waas eet good for you, too?" ") and TV commentator Andy Rooney ("Have you everrr noticed how Alaska has three seasons: last winterrr, this winterrr, and next winterrr?").

*Jesse Barksdale, who just stands to one side and plays bass with a knowing smile on his face.

The show may have initially lurched into the limelight, but soon it found its legs and was off and running. Passing the first six-week cutoff, it kept on . . . and on . . . and on. Six weeks turned into nine, nine into 13, 13 into well, who knows?

Whitekeys has tried several times to kill the monster he's created. The last scheduled execution date was Nov. 1.

"It seemed the only person on the face of the Earth who wanted to end it then was me," he said.

Don't get Whitekeys wrong; he loves the show. After all, he said, it's earned him "two new shirts, a new pair of pants and a new pair of running shoes."

Nonetheless, Whitekeys insists he has to end "Whale Fat" to make room for his "Christmas in Spenard" show. And now, with "Whale Fat" extended to Nov. 22, he'll have less than a week to fully prepare for the yuletide revue. Maybe this is why he sounds like a desperate man when he talks about "Whale Fat" these days.

"It has to go," he said, almost pleading.

Whitekeys began this kind of nonsense back in the early '70s when he used to play at another Spenard bar, Chilkoot Charlie's, in a band that called itself the Whale Fat Follies the first half of the evening and Rudy Palmtree and his Exotic Fruits the second half. (Whitekeys' combos were also known by such eccentric titles as the Oosik Music Company and the Jayne Mansfield Memorial Jug Band).

The "Whale Fat Follies" continues Whitekeys' irreverent march through life by stabbing fun (poking is too soft a word) at some of Alaska's most cherished institutions: Winnebago travel, macho big game hunters and perennial politicians such as Rep. Don Young. Just when it's least expected, the show leaps into the realm of good taste but quickly recovers.

"Whale Fat," for example, is the only show in town that features a genuine copy of the local police mugshot taken of actor Steve McQueen. He was arrested for hot-rodding through the center of Anchorage in the early 1970s.

Because of lowbrow things like that, "Whale Fat" advertises itself as the show that the Alaska Division of Tourism does not want you to see. Guess what? Not only has the manager of the local office seen the show, she liked it.

"I thought it was very clever," said Mary Pignalberi. "Even though it's a real spoof, it's a real hype about Alaska. In fact, the night I was there I wanted to go backstage and introduce myself to Mr. Whitekeys, tell him I was from the Division of Tourism, and say he has my blessing."

"I'm surprised," said Whitekeys. "The Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Alaska Visitors Association all these people are diggin' it. It leaves me to believe that the government of this state is in real trouble."

Cast member Henderson sees things differently. "This show allows people to feel proud to be Alaskan," he said.

"Proud Alaskans" are also hauling in their out of town guests, exposing these innocents to tales of such non-celebrities as Bush resident Nimrod Bodfish. Bodfish once worked for Wien, an airline that, Whitekeys says, "filed for bankruptcy a full two years before it became a fad."

Real Alaska celebs like poet Robert Service or author Jack London don't even rate a line, much less a song.

So what keeps people coming back? Cast member McDonald puts it this way: "It's real accessible, and it's cheap."

Cheap means five bucks American. Accessible means its humor is on the low side of brow. Whitekeys, pointing out the exploits of mushers Libby Riddles and Susan Butcher, announces that "Next year the Iditarod will have a men's division!"

When the crowd roars approval, he growls, "Hey, what do you think this is? Opening day at the Nordstrom boot sale?"

In addition, the show is always changing. Like Johnny Carson's nightly monologue, "Whale Fat" reflects current local events, such as the financial woes of developer Pete Zamarello.

Jim Henderson is a self-confessed "Whale Fat" junkie. "I'd do a breakfast, lunch and dinner show," he said. "I'd like (Whitekeys) to just accept the fact that it can ride for a year."

Whitekeys has. Although the show will end as planned, like Frankenstein's monster, "Whale Fat" will live again.

"We certainly intend at this point to do a summer Alaskan show. It's going to have to be done every summer," Whitekeys said.

After all, he said, "Whale Fat" has to log another 5,555 performances or so to catch up with "The Alaska Show," a perennial summer production staged by Larry Beck.

Well, with fans like Jackie Crotts around, Whitekeys may catch up sooner than he thinks. Crotts recently drove the 127 miles from Seward to get in a standby line for the show. She was not even assured of a seat.

But there she stood next to the door, smiling, even after hearing the show was sold out.

"Oh, I'll come back," she said sweetly.

P.S. She got in.

Meanwhile, the "Whale Fat Follies" continues its inexorable roll toward Nov. 22, providing Alaskans with what Whitekeys calls "a sleazy show about a sleazy state, in a sleazy bar, performed on a sleazy street in a sleazy town by a sleazy cast."

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Curtains in Spenard for Fly By Night - FINALE: The last "Whale Fat Follies" show will be Sept. 8, says maestro Mr. Whitekeys.

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Author: ROSEMARY SHINOHARA Anchorage Daily News; Staff

Kiss the Spam capital of Spenard goodbye.

The Fly By Night, a comedy club that traffics in Spam jokes and pokes fun at politicians, is going out of business after 26 years. It's the death of a popular, offbeat Anchorage institution.

The last show, "Whale Fat Follies," is Sept. 8, said Mr. Whitekeys, Fly By Night owner and maestro of the show.

Whitekeys, 59, said he doesn't want to be in charge of a bar and restaurant anymore but will stay in Anchorage and continue to entertain people. "That's what I do. I'm a piano player. A sleazy piano player from Spenard."

Allen Choy, owner of Al's Alaskan Inn, and partner Jeff Matosky bought White-keys' liquor license and the real estate, which someone else owns. Whitekeys keeps all the show props, "a lot of things that have offended a lot of people," he said.

Choy and Matosky are renaming the place Players House of Rock. Instead of celebrating canned meat, the new bar will glorify the Alaska Aces hockey team and Monday night football, Matosky said. It will also carry over some Whitekeys features, such as live music and poetry slams, he said.

Customers can check Players out at an unofficial opening Sept. 11. KWHL deejay and Aces announcer Bob Lester, who is working with Matosky, e-mailed an invitation Wednesday that said the party will commemorate the 9/11 tragedy, the new club and the seasonal return of "Monday Night Football." Plus, promised the invitation, "the meanest midgets on the planet" will fight.

OK.

The real opening is tentatively set for Sept. 15, Matosky said.

The new owners are old friends. Choy has a rambling Old Seward Highway bar, in the news lately because he's trying to add a railroad car to the building. Matosky was general manager of Latitude 61 on the Old Seward, which closed in June. It was the bar that drew Aces supporters wanting to watch away games on television.

Matosky had been trying to buy the now defunct Latitude. He discovered it needed a \$400,000 sprinkler system, Matosky said. He didn't buy it.

He and Choy came up with the idea of buying the Fly By Night instead.

The sale came together quickly. Whitekeys told his staff about it Saturday, said Kelly Cameron, 26, the club's current leading lady. Cameron had been leaving anyway, heading off to try her luck in Hollywood.

"For me, (the Fly by Night) has been phenomenal," she said. It's the best gig an actress-vocalist can get in Anchorage, she said.

The shows changed seasonally, from the summertime "Whale Fat Follies" aimed mostly at tourists to "Christmas in Spenard" and "Springtime in Spenard," both popular with locals. Naked rear ends, animals copulating, salmon skits and tributes to Spam never got old in Whitekeys' bent-humor shows.

Nor did satire of politicians from Sens. Ben and Ted Stevens to President Clinton.

Whitekeys went national in 2004 with a ditty about President George W. Bush: "The Liar Sleeps Tonight," a take-off on the 1961 hit "The Lion Sleeps Tonight."

"The Liar" grew into one of the most-requested songs on "The Dr. Demento Show," a nationally syndicated radio program.

Whitekeys, whose real name is Douglas J. Haggard, came to Alaska with a friend in 1970. One of his first jobs was at Chilkoot Charlie's, another Spenard institution. Whitekeys turned a temporary job there into a five-year run.

He is responsible for Chilkoot's original slogan, "We Cheat the Other Guy and Pass the Savings On to You."

He started the Fly By Night in 1980.

The club began in a building on Lake Spenard where the Millennium Alaskan Hotel is now. Over the years, the Fly By Night building was the Idle Hour Club, the Lakeshore Club, the Fancy Moose, the Red Baron, the Flying Machine Mexican Restaurant, VFW Post 1689, the Co-Pilot Club and the Oar House, he said.

"That was the whole story of the Fly by Night Club," he said. "We took over a space that had been going out of business regularly for 30 years."

Later, the Fly By Night moved to 3300 Spenard Road.

The property at 3300 Spenard Road is owned by Charles Walsh, who once owned another Spenard night club, the Flying Machine, and the Millennium Hotel when it was called the Clarion Hotel, Whitekeys said.

Choy, the new owner, said he and Matosky are paying more than \$1 million and less than \$2 million for the whole deal. He declined to be more specific. Doug Griffin, state Alcoholic

Beverage Control Board director, said liquor licenses for bars generally sell for around \$200,000 because their numbers are limited.

Whitekeys said he sold the business mostly because he is just tired of working 80-hour weeks.

"I'm just looking for a few days off," he said. "And then to go back to work at an easy little job."

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Caption: Photo 1: Keys_081706.jpg

Mr. Whitekeys said he'll stick around to entertain after the Fly by Night club closes.