



Photo provided / Michael Ayers

# Chasing the magic

Jim Belushi returns to stand-up roots with the Board of Comedy, performing Thursday at LMC's Mendel Center

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO  
HP Features Writer

**BENTON HARBOR** — Jim Belushi was a 16-year-old living in Chicago when he first saw what he calls “the magic” of improv comedy.

It was 1970, and his older brother John was on stage with Harold Ramis at The Second City creating comedy made up on the spot, imitating Mayor Daley and a series of other characters that would become part of improv lore.

“It was probably, to date, the best Second City show ever done,” Jim Belushi says by telephone from his home in Los Angeles. “The scenes they did in that show have become classics that have and still are being performed by the touring company. There was the funeral, there was Hamlet. I never felt that kind of feeling. It inspired me, and I said, ‘OK, how do I get in on that?’ It was magic. And since that moment on, I’ve been chasing magic.”

It was 1977, when Jim Belushi joined Second City, which at the time had a cast that could sometimes be too esoteric. Seeking his brother’s advice on how to respond to a teammate’s obscure intellectual references, John suggested using the simple phrase,

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” and he’d be the one to get the laugh, because the audience also wouldn’t know what they were talking about. It worked.

Since then, Belushi has used his average-guy persona to propel him through a career, now in its 39th year, that includes a stint on “Saturday Night Live,” films such as “About Last Night” and “K-9,” and an eight-year run on his own sitcom, ABC’s “According to Jim.” Recently, however, Belushi decided it was time to recapture some of that improv magic.

He gathered fellow Second City alums Larry Joe Campbell, Megan Grano, Brad Morris, Joshua Funk and Trey Stone to form Jim Belushi and the Board of Comedy, an improv ensemble that performs Thursday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

“It’s an improvisation show,” Belushi says. “We basically do what the audience wants to see because we take their suggestions. We’ll probably do about eight or nine different, for lack of a better word, games. I know for sure that The Three Tenors will be there.



Photo provided / Gary Lupton

Jim Belushi, above, and his Board of Comedy cast, top, featuring, from left, Trey Stone, Larry Joe Campbell, Belushi, Joshua Funk and Megan Grano, perform Thursday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage. Cast member Brad Morris, not pictured, is also scheduled to perform.

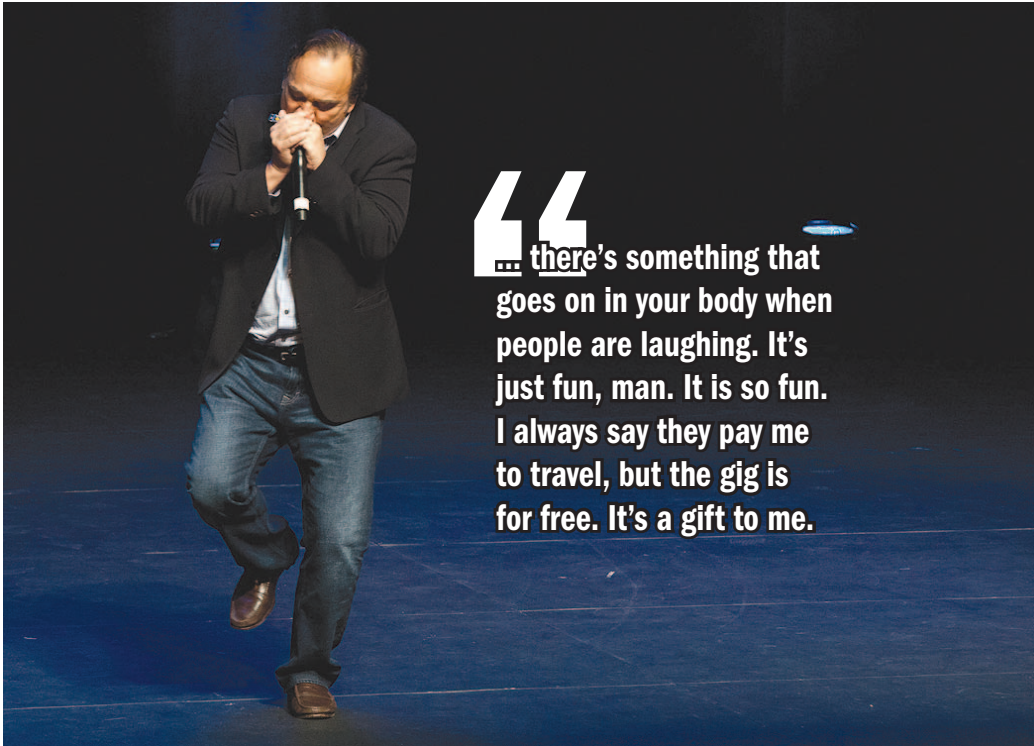
They make up arias for different people in the audience. But there are no set pieces. We make everything up on the spot, and we’re having the time of our lives.” After graduating from Southern Illinois University, and three years as a resident member of The Second City, Belushi left for Hollywood in 1979, where writer-producer Garry Marshall cast him in the Paramount Television series “Who’s Watching the Kids.” In 1983, he landed in New York City, joining the cast and writing staff on “Saturday

Night Live” for two seasons. “It was like being dropped from a helicopter into the battlefield,” he says. “That was SNL. It was the toughest thing I’ve ever done. Every thing has been easy since — including divorce. I loved every minute of it, don’t get me wrong. I loved the education and the work and the people, but it was the toughest thing I’ve ever done.”

It was his work in Edward Zwick’s “About Last Night” with Rob Lowe and Demi Moore that

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Rebuilding new friendships with old ones



“... there's something that goes on in your body when people are laughing. It's just fun, man. It is so fun. I always say they pay me to travel, but the gig is for free. It's a gift to me.”

Photo provided / Jerry Schulman

**Jim Belushi, who still performs concerts alongside Dan Aykroyd as the Blues Brothers, breaks out the harmonica during a Board of Comedy show. Belushi and the Board of Comedy are bringing improv comedy show to Benton Harbor.**

## BELUSHI

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brought Belushi his first serious attention as a film star. In the 1986 feature, he reprised the role that he had played on stage in David Mamet's Obie Award-winning “Sexual Perversity in Chicago,” from which the film was adapted. It was that role that made him a sought-after character actor, appearing as James Woods' spacey DJ buddy, Dr. Rock, in Oliver Stone's “Salvador”; the mentally handicapped dishwasher befriended by Whoopi Goldberg in the Andrei Konchalovsky film “Homer and Eddie”; and the defiant high school principal standing up to drug dealers in “The Principal.”

It was his return to television in the ABC hit comedy “According to Jim,” however, that made Belushi a household name. The series, which ran for 182 episodes from 2001-09, centered on Belushi as a husband and father of three striving to make his family life work.

“I remember 9/11 just happened and our show started Oct. 8,” Belushi

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Jim Belushi and the Board of Comedy

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday

**Where:** Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

**How much:** \$36-\$55

**Contact:** 927-1221 or [www.lmcmainstage.org](http://www.lmcmainstage.org)

**Artist info:** [www.jimbelushiandtheboardofcomedy.com](http://www.jimbelushiandtheboardofcomedy.com)

says. “The timing of society in that moment, people wanted family again, and no one else was doing family shows. I think people were just ready to see a fun show about raising kids and how to get along with your wife. We got lucky with the magic of ensemble. It was really the chemistry. Larry Joe Campbell, to me, was the star of the show. And Courtney (Thorne-Smith) and Kimberly (Williams-Paisley) had just razor sharp comedic timing. We'd all make each other laugh.”

It's a similar chemistry, Belushi says, that makes the work he and the rest of the Board of Comedy cast do on stage so rewarding.

“It's the purity of ensemble and the joy that comes with that; the camaraderie, that we're in it together,” Belushi says. “We're going to either score or die together. There's no ball hogs. When you're playing on a team, you go to a higher place. It brings your adrenaline up and makes you think quicker and smarter. It's such a personal thing, it's hard to explain. But there's something that goes on in your body when people are laughing. It's just fun, man. It is so fun. I always say they pay me to travel, but the gig is for free. It's a gift to me.”

That's why Belushi somehow managed to perform 52 Board of Comedy shows in a prolific 2014 that also included 20 Blues Brothers shows with Dan Aykroyd, the filming of four feature films and an HBO miniseries. He just wrapped “North of Hell” with Katherine Heigl; “The Man on Carrion Road,” with Patrick Wilson and Ian McShane; “A Change of Heart,” with Virginia

Madsen, directed by Kenny Ortega; and “The Whole Truth” with Keanu Reeves and Renée Zellweger, directed by Oscar-nominated Courtney Hunt. “Show Me a Hero,” the highly anticipated HBO mini-series, stars Belushi as Angelo Martinnelli, the mayor of Yonkers, N.Y., during the 1980s housing crisis. Written by David Simon (“The Wire”) and directed by Paul Haggis (“Crash”), the cast also includes Jon Bernthal, Alfred Molina and Winona Ryder.

“My biggest challenge these days is scheduling, but you'll never hear me complain,” Belushi says. “I've been very fortunate. I've been very lucky. I'm constantly getting gifts, and I'm grateful.”

Belushi suddenly turns the subject back to the Board of Comedy, and the gift of improv comedy – a gift, it's clear, that he's excited to be sharing again.

“When people come to this show, they're never going to forget it,” he says. “It will be just like when I was 16 and watching Second City. I'll always remember it.”

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