ARTS

"Hope doesn't mind bad weather."
HOPE CAROLE KING

Generations of improv troupe reunite for 40th anniversary

BY SIMRAN RANDHAWA
STAFF REPORTER

Saturday morning's rehearsal for Just Add Water featured quite an interesting scene: three of the improv musical group's alumni were catapulted onto the stage, current members of JAW in the audience yelled unrelated prompts at them and then, without any hesitation, the alumni began snapping their fingers and harmonizing to an old-timey tune, making up verses on the fly.

It had been decades since some JAW alumni had graced the stage at Yale, but after a couple demonstrations, they were back in the swing of things as they gathered on campus for the group's 40th reunion show. The two-hour anniversary performance featured nearly 50 improvisers, compared to the approximately 13 in a typical JAW show.

"At first, they were timid, but ultimately, they completely threw themselves in there," said Isabel Tiburcio '28, JAW's director and the organizer of the reunion show.

On Saturday evening, generations of JAW members — or Jawbies — flooded Linsly-Chittenden Hall to celebrate the group's 40th anniversary. Founded in 1986, JAW has spent four decades as not only an improvisational comedy tradition but also a community whose members continue to return long after graduation, Tiburcio said.

With the performers spanning from all the different generations of JAW, they were not all familiar with the same improv games. JAW performances are organized by set lists, which assign improvisers to different improv games. Tiburcio said she assembled the set list after laboriously piecing together the strengths and weaknesses of alumni.

Yale is home to four active improvisational comedy groups — the Ex!t Players, the Purple Crayon, the Viola Question and Just Add Water. Each has its own distinct culture and humor, but JAW distinguishes itself through emphasis on music.

Co-founder Steve Bodow '89 recalled that JAW was not originally a musical improv troupe. Its musical identity developed over time, as traditions were passed through generations of Yalies.

According to JAW's official history, the group was created in 1986 when "a mysterious man" posted signs advertising improv comedy around Yale's campus. Students who followed the signs arrived at a classroom to find a question written on the chalkboard: "Do you Just Add Water?" The mysterious man happened to be Bodow, who went on to co-found Just Add Water with Jo Miller '88.

Bodow recalled that "Just Add Water" evoked instant foods, like instant potatoes, that could be made simply by adding water.

Though the details of the first JAW performance now escape Bodow, he said, the feelings it brought forth did not.

"A big one was the satisfaction of proving to ourselves that — we could do this!" Bodow wrote in a follow-up message. "We could put on a show, some audience would show up, we could get some good laughs, we could fail at some things and survive, and we had a ball doing it."

Bodow described the group's history in terms of generations. While a human generation spans several decades, a college generation lasts only four years, he said, adding that 10 generations of students have had the opportunity to introduce new traditions into the group in JAW's 40-year-old history.

The spirit of JAW, however, remains unchanged by the tide of time.

"I would say it seems like it's around 95 percent the same," Simon Rabinowitz '22, a JAW alumnus, said. Although the names of certain traditions have changed, he said, the group's energy is nearly identical to what he remembered.

For many alumni, the group was foundational to their Yale experience. Will Wegner '22 described JAW as fundamental to his friendships and creating his sense of self. The group provided a supportive environment in which he felt comfortable taking risks, he said.

"I would not be the same person that I am," Wegner said. "That's for sure."

He recalled rehearsals as a space where members could escape the pressures of the outside world and just exist in silly, fictional scenarios, uplifting each other and building on each other's "ridiculous nonsense."

"We were building a world together," Wegner said. "Where the outside world didn't matter."

Responding to Wegner, Alec Zbornak '21 reiterated that freedom from the outside world was important.

"That rehearsal time was sacred," Zbornak said. "It was like a way to just support each other by being as silly and stupid and dumb as we could be without the pressures of having to feel smart."

That sentiment of shared community continues with the current Jawbies.

"This is the closest thing to family that I have had outside of my family in my entire life," Tiburcio said.

During the performance, Bodow found himself in a scene alongside Wyatt Fishman '27, playing a pair of "safari-monks" who couldn't stop bathing themselves in imaginary mud.

"It was pretty fun, though, to be not just free but even expected to do silly goofy s--- for an evening," Bodow wrote. "And to remember that things that brought you joy at age 19 might well still do that at 59, or whenever."

When asked whether they could sing, the group burst into an improvised song.

"This great article for the YDN," Leo Levitt '28, current member, chanted.

Rabinowitz picked up the song, singing, "Don't know if this reporter is foe or friend."

JAW holds alumni reunions approximately every five years.

Contact
SIMRAN RANDHAWA *at*
simran.randhawa@yale.edu



COURTESY OF ISABEL TIBURCIO
Nearly 50 former and current members of Just Add Water, the improv group that was founded in 1986, gathered on campus on Saturday for a reunion show. Although some details of traditions have changed, members said, the spirit has remained the same.

Student groups collaborate for evening of Ethiopian, Eritrean jazz

BY EMMANUEL EBEGBE
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The Yale Ethiopian and Eritrean Students Association and the Yale Undergraduate Jazz Collective co-hosted their second annual evening of jazz on Saturday.

The event, held in the Davenport College common room, highlighted the jazz traditions of Ethiopia and Eritrea, neighboring countries in east Africa. According to YEESA President Liana Markos '28, jazz runs deep in the Habesha community, the shared cultural identity of Ethiopians and Eritreans.



EMMANUEL EBEGBE / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
In their second annual collaboration, the Yale Ethiopian and Eritrean Students Association and the Yale Undergraduate Jazz Collective spotlighted the Habesha community's jazz traditions in the Davenport College common room on Saturday.

"The Habesha community has very rich jazz music, and it's ingrained in our culture as a whole," Markos said. "So we thought it would be a really nice idea to incorporate that into our community here at Yale."

The collaboration began last year, when YEESA approached YUJC about partnering, according to Solomon Geleta '28, a member of YUJC's board who performed at the event. Geleta said his group knew right away they wanted to take part and that the first soiree, or evening party, was a "really big hit."

"It's great to be able to highlight Ethiopian and Eritrean jazz, especially considering jazz is Black American music," Geleta said.

Geleta said part of the event's appeal was the chance to spotlight a lesser-known branch of the genre's history.

The two groups split the work. YEESA coordinated much of the "heavy lifting" behind the scenes, Geleta said, including booking the space and arranging food and drinks aligned with Ethiopian and Eritrean culture. YUJC helped promote the event and provided the music.

Markos said the biggest challenge in planning was finding a space because of the restrictions student groups face when reserving larger spaces on campus. She said she also wanted to ensure the music captured the essence of both Ethiopian and Eritrean jazz while still representing the broader Habesha culture.

The evening, which drew a sharply dressed crowd, paired the jazz performance with an open mic, where students shared spoken-word poetry and songs. Amen Fisseha '30, who attended the event, described the atmosphere as calm and welcoming.

"I liked how the night provided a space for students to show off their creative skills," Fisseha said, adding that the music was "authentic Ethiopian jazz" that reminded her of jazz clubs in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital city.

Some students' families traveled from all over the country to attend the soiree. Markos said the most rewarding part for her was watching parents and other adults experience the event.

"They often are just so amazed how we're so tapped into not just the dancing, but the roots of the culture, and what jazz music can do," Markos said.

She added that working with YUJC is always a highlight.

Both organizers hope to grow the event, as Markos aims for a bigger venue and more outreach to the broader Yale community, beyond the Habesha students the event has mainly targeted so far.

Geleta suggested bringing in another affinity group or African student organization and expanding the size of the performance itself.

"Maybe a bigger band, even, because we've always done a smaller five-person combo," he said. "The people who do come always have such a good time, so the more people we can reach would be amazing."

YEESA also hosts a spring soiree, which Markos described as a counterpart to the fall event. It features less jazz and more songs tied to the Ethiopian and Eritrean New Year.

The Yale Undergraduate Jazz Collective was founded in 2012.

Contact
EMMANUEL EBEGBE *at*
emmanuel.ebegbe@yale.edu