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The last laugh at Comedy Palace

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ANDOVER -- Jay Leno may be the town's most famous son, but he's only one of many comedians who have passed through Andover.

Orny Adams, the obnoxious up-and-comer in the Jerry Seinfeld movie "Comedian," got his start here.

Robert Klein, Andrew "Dice" Clay, Chris Titus, "Saturday Night Live" alum Victoria Jackson -- they've all strutted the stage at Grill 93 on River Road, telling jokes and entertaining diners. Those big names are among hundreds of comics to perform there over the past nine years.

But the laughter has ended. The restaurant hosted its final show, and promoter Ron Sava moved his operation, called the Comedy Palace, on to newer digs last month. Grill 93 co-owners Jeffrey Katz and Lilly Soohoo both died in the last two years, and their families did not want to keep running the restaurant, Sava said.

The Nocera family, which serves Italian food at locations in Norwood, Stoughton, and Waltham, will take over the property in January, gut the building and turn it into another in their chain of Chateau restaurants.

"I would have loved to stay there, but they didn't want comedy," Sava said.

Instead, he started a new outfit called Jokemavens at the Guest House International, 159 Pelham St., Methuen. The building formerly housed Days Inn, and Howard Johnson's before that.

"It was very important to the Merrimack Valley to keep this alive," Sava said of the comedy club. "You'll see the same door people, the same waiters and waitresses. Anyone who walks in will think they're at the old club, except it's a brand-new building at a new location."

Grill 93, located off Interstate 93 in Andover's northwest corner, was part of a chain called Valle's Steak House after it was built in 1969, according to the restaurant's Web site. A Canadian firm bought the building in 1985 and ran a steakhouse called Le Biftheque until 1990, when it became Chicland for six months and then Grill 93. The building's assessed value is \$1.8 million.

Performers described the Comedy Club as a major venue -- "one of the best clubs anywhere in the country," in the words of Joe Devito, the self-described "Undisputed Heavyweight Champion of Comedy Stage Hypnosis." He said he performed there every Saturday for the past six years.

"Out of all the places I've worked, it was in the top five," Devito said. "It had a nice big room and nice people to work with."

The club sat about 300 people, he said.

Comedy clubs were widely popular in the late 1980s, but Devito said Grill 93 profited from a new surge in recent years.

"There's a lot of comedy on television, but it's not like a live show," said Devito, whose act, now transferred to Methuen, includes karate-style board-breaking, an 8-foot boa constrictor, and audience members who become hypnotized. "The audience becomes a part of the show."

Shane Kinney, a 27-year-old comedian from Maine, had been performing at the Comedy Palace for three years when he heard in mid-November that it would shut down.

"I didn't expect that at all," he said. "It was definitely a shock, a bummer."

"That place was one of my home clubs, very near and dear to my heart," said Kinney, who also performed at another Comedy Palace in Worcester. "It was definitely one of the big boys."

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