

The Comedy Business

**An Interview with Caroline Hirsch,
Owner and Chief Executive Officer, Carolines Entertainment, Inc. and Founder, New York Comedy Festival**

EDITORS' NOTE *Caroline Hirsch, founder and producer of the annual New York Comedy Festival, which she launched in 2004, is a highly successful entrepreneur, producer, visionary, and innovator in the entertainment industry. During an illustrious 40-year career, she is also the founder of Carolines on Broadway, the iconic New York comedy venue which operated for four decades as one of the country's most popular destinations for live comedy. A Brooklyn native, Hirsch graduated from St. Brendan's High School and attended the City College of New York and the Fashion Institute of Technology.*



Caroline Hirsch

EVENT BRIEF *Launched in 2004, the New York Comedy Festival (nycomedyfestival.com) is produced by Carolines (carolines.com) and created by Caroline Hirsch. Each year, the NYCF brings together the best comedy talent from across the country and throughout the world – from top-tier headliners to new and emerging talent – to perform in more than 150 shows across all five boroughs in such iconic venues as the Apollo Theatre, BAM, Beacon Theatre, Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden, The Theater at Madison Square Garden, Town Hall, and The Venue at Hard Rock Hotel New York, just to name a few. This year, the NYCF runs from November 3-12 and will feature acts including Dave Attell, Bill Burr, Nicole Byer, Jimmy Carr, Margaret Cho, Tim Dillon, Giggly Squad, Ilana Glazer, Brett Goldstein, Nate Jackson, Anthony Jeselnik, Matteo Lane, Sam Morril, Nick Mullen and Adam Friedland, Atsuko Okatsuka, Pod Meets World, Donnell Rawlings, Jeff Ross, Robyn Schall, Daniel Sloss, and Michelle Wolf.*

Will you discuss your career journey?

I was born and raised in Brooklyn and attended the City College of New York and the Fashion Institute of Technology. I started my career in the fashion industry, working in retail at Gimbels, but soon left the company to open a small cabaret club in Manhattan's Chelsea district in 1982 with my friends, Bob Stickney and Carl Christian. With the popularity of stand-up comedy rapidly on the rise, we began booking comedians, including then-unknown talents Jay Leno, Jerry Seinfeld, Sandra Bernhard, Pee Wee Herman, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams and, later, Chris Rock, among others, to perform at the club.

In 1987, I moved the club from its Chelsea location to the South Street Seaport where it became a full-fledged comedy nightclub with two restaurants. Carolines quickly became a rite of passage for young stand-ups on the way to making it in the comedy business. To meet the growing audience demand for comedy, in 1992 I moved the club uptown to Broadway and 49th Street. Carolines on Broadway, as it became known, was an integral part of and a cornerstone in the revitalization of Times Square. Throughout the club's history, it

served as a launching pad for comedians including Dave Chappelle, Kathy Griffin, Kevin Hart, Tracy Morgan, Sarah Silverman, Jon Stewart, and many others.

In 2004, we created and launched the New York Comedy Festival. It came a year after we celebrated our 20th-anniversary gala celebration at Carnegie Hall the year prior, when we brought together many of the great comedians who had

come through the club over the years, including Lewis Black, Richard Belzer, Gilbert Gottfried, David Alan Grier, Susie Essman, Paul Mooney, Colin Quinn, to name a few. At the festival, we've presented the very best comedians from across the country and around the world at New York's most iconic venues. We are thrilled that, after nearly 20 years, the festival continues to bring together a wide array of talent to venues across the five boroughs of my hometown, New York City.

Did you know at an early age that you had a passion for comedy?

I always stayed up to date about what was happening in the entertainment industry, especially during the '80s. With the debut of *Late Night with David Letterman* in the 12:30 AM slot, I had a feeling something different and exciting was happening. Watching all the great comedians and actors as guests on his show, I just knew I had to be part of this new wave of entertainment, and that's when I started my journey in comedy.

What have been the keys to Carolines strength and leadership in the industry?



New York Comedy Festival press conference announcing the 2023 headliners at the Hard Rock Hotel New York. Left to right: Kelly Curtin, Executive Vice President, NYC Tourism + Conventions; David Salcfas, General Manager, Hard Rock Hotel New York; Tom Harris, President, Times Square Alliance; Caroline Hirsch; and Kelly Rizzo, Co-Chair, Scleroderma Research Foundation event



Caroline Hirsch at the New York Comedy Festival press conference announcing the 2023 headliners

Throughout my 40+ year career, I have always been dedicated to creating my own path and really focusing on finding great talent. I did not care what everyone else was doing at the time, as I always had a desire to create something special and unique. When I entered the comedy business, comedy was an overlooked artform. I wanted to create a venue that elevated comedians and gave them the opportunity to showcase their talents.

What are the ingredients needed for a successful comedy club?

Respect your clientele, respect your talent, and focus on the overall club experience. At the start of Carolines, the club found its identity as a great venue for a night out, with a lot of first dates happening at our shows. In 1985, Stephen Holden wrote a story for *The New York Times* about Carolines where Robert Morton, then a producer on *Late Night With David Letterman*, described Carolines as “the first yuppie nightclub.” Carolines was one of the first of its kind to offer high-quality entertainment along with food and beverage all within an upscale environment, elevating the art form of comedy to an experience it had not been before.

You were recently honored with an exhibit at the National Comedy Center. What did this recognition mean to you?

I am incredibly honored and humbled. To have recognition among the greats of comedy like George Carlin, Carl Reiner, and Johnny Carson, especially in the birthplace of Lucille Ball, is something so special to me. While our brand is going to continue to expand in new ways in the coming years, we’re thrilled that the Carolines on Broadway story will be preserved and celebrated at the National Comedy Center for generations to come.

You will be hosting for the 19th year the New York Comedy Festival in November. Will you provide an overview of the upcoming festival?

It is exciting for us to produce the New York Comedy Festival, which is the largest comedy festival in the United States. This year, we will be back bigger than ever, expanding from 7 to 10

days starting Friday, November 3, and running through Sunday, November 12. This year’s festival headliners include Conan O’Brien, Dave Attell, Bill Burr, Nicole Byer, Jimmy Carr, Margaret Cho, Tim Dillon, Giggly Squad, Ilana Glazer, Brett Goldstein, Nate Jackson, Anthony Jeselnik, Matteo Lane, Sam Morril, Nick Mullen and Adam Friedland, Atsuko Okatsuka, Pod Meets World, Donnell Rawlings, Jeff Ross, Robyn Schall, Daniel Sloss and Michelle Wolf.

Over the 10 days, we will bring together over 200 of the best comedians – from the established headliners to new and emerging talent – from across the country and throughout the world. There will be more than 100 shows at some of the most prestigious venues across New York City, including the Apollo Theatre, BAM, Beacon Theatre, Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden, The Theater at MSG, Town Hall, The Venue at Hard Rock Hotel New York, and many more.

Did you always have an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own business?

Yes. When I was in retail, I was always looking for trends and new creative opportunities. Once I started in comedy, I used my marketing and advertising skills to help promote the club and the comedians. I saw something happening with comedians and built my brand around headliner talent, something that didn’t exist at the time, and used that same spirit to build the brand I have today.

What advice do you offer to young comedians beginning their careers?

The advice I would give to anyone just starting out is to be original. Never copy material or follow what anyone else is doing. Win people over by working hard, creating your own material, and getting stage-time. And, most importantly, write, write, write! ●



Caroline Hirsch with the late Bob Saget. Caroline will be honored this year with the first-ever Bob Saget Award presented by the Scleroderma Research Foundation (SRF)