

## IN PERSON



**Ronnie Hirschberg and Chuck Clough, recording their music-oriented podcast, Above the Basement, at the Wood Hills Table restaurant in Concord.**

W. MARC BERNSAU

## ENTREPRENEUR | RONNIE HIRSCHBERG AND CHUCK CLOUGH

# Out of the basement

A podcast on music, from a doctor and a musician, tackles topics from leadership to policy and more.

BY JAY FITZGERALD  
Special to the Journal

What do you get when you team up a physician and a former financial services professional to produce weekly podcasts? If you guessed “wonky discussions about health care finance, the Affordable Care Act, insurance-versus-single-payer systems or the cost of pharmaceutical drugs,” you’d be wrong.

In the case of Ronnie Hirschberg and Chuck Clough, their regular “Above the Basement” podcasts are about their shared passion: Music. But their discussions range far beyond what makes musicians and music lovers tick. They are exploring topics from ways music inspires business leadership to how it is helping with addiction recovery.

Among their past guests have been singer-songwriters such as Jewel and Sally Taylor, Boston Pops conductor Keith Lockhart, Eagles drummer and singer Don Henley and Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart. But the podcasts have also included chats with well-known people who just love the arts and music, such as local TV arts reporter and critic Joyce Kulhawik and Boston Celtics owner Wyc Grousbeck, who plays the drums.

“We’re basically two suburban-dad band members who got together,” says Hirschberg, who plays the piano and who’s a physician at Massachusetts General Hospital and Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital.

“We just want to talk to musicians about their passions and lives,” says Clough, who plays the guitar and who started Above the Basement LLC after he was laid off by Bank of America in 2016.

Since the founding of Above the Basement two years ago, their podcasts have steadily grown in popularity, recently hitting approximately 100,000 downloads. The podcasts usually last anywhere from a half hour to 40 minutes, and the conversations can range from guests talking about their lives and their art, as well as letting them play a tune or two, if they wish.

There’s no formulaic structure to their interviews, says Hirschberg, a co-host on each podcast. “We try to keep it organic, no rules. We just want people to talk,” he said.

Though they’ve hosted national and international figures on their more than 100 podcasts, an underlying mission of Hirschberg and Clough is to shine a light on, and to promote and strengthen, the Boston music scene. The podcast’s name itself, “Above the Basement,” derives from the idea of bringing proverbial basement-band members to the forefront – or at least out of the basement. And that’s where Hirschberg and Clough are now looking to take their podcast: to the next level.

Their success so far has relied mostly on word-of-mouth growth, along with “patron” contributions, or, as Clough puts it, “anything people want to give.”

Ideally, Clough said he’d like to find paid sponsors

### ► CLOSER LOOK

#### Ronnie Hirschberg

**Title:** Physician, MGH and Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital

**Age:** 47

**Education:** Bachelor’s degree, cultural anthropology, University of Vermont, 1993; medical degree, University of Vermont, 2002.

**Residence:** Acton

#### Chuck Clough

**Title:** Founder, Above the Basement LLC

**Age:** 50

**Education:** Bachelor’s degree, history, Northeastern University, 1991; associate of occupational studies, American Academy of Dramatic Arts, 1994

**Residence:** Carlisle

for Above the Basement – even a formal syndication agreement with a radio station or network. He said he’s been in touch with a few radio outlets about possibly teaming together with Above the Basement. But before they get too far down that road, there’s another big decision that has to be made: To keep Above the Basement a for-profit entity or become a nonprofit, something that might better fit with their “public-service” vision for the company and that could attract nonprofit partnerships.

“We’re seriously exploring our options,” said Clough.

In the meantime, the two plan to keep plugging away, lining up future interviews, getting the word out, experimenting with formats and enjoying the podcast journey.

“We’re in a good place now, but we’re ready for the next step,” said Clough. “It’s sort of turned into a mission for us.”

Hirschberg, who until recently played in a rock/pop/blues band

called “The Butler Frogs,” agrees that Above the Basement is poised to have a voice of its own. They’ve recently tackled the sensitive subject of musicians and drug addictions, for example. He also said Above the Basement has and will remain flexible, such as its recent experiment with live podcasts.