

## Sing us a song, we're at the piano bar

### From Sinatra to pop, tunes take us back

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A cultural icon from the 1940s, piano bars are working their way back onto our social calendars. This time around, they're more than just an old guy hammering away at the ivories in a dim corner of a smoke-filled bar.

Sometimes, they feature glitz, glam, drink specials and - oh, yeah - music. But after that, they're as different as, well, the notes on the keyboard that the night still revolves around.

For example, on a recent Saturday night, Angelo Martelanno, the owner of Angelo's Lounge, belted out tunes from a corner stage, crowned by a string of white lights and to the awe of his patrons.

Eyes closed and fists clenched, he sings three songs before whipping out a trumpet. Under the lights, his black vest, with gold buttons and an embroidered Angelo's logo, glistens.

Martelanno has been ruling this musical roost for the last 16 years, providing a place for would-be lounge acts. A piano accompanies impromptu guest singers, who are an octave better than what you might find at a typical karaoke bar. On this night, there wasn't a bad singer in the house.

Unaware that this is no place for sweet, drizzled martinis, I ask for one, preferably chocolate. Martelanno's answer: "We only have one kind. Do you want to gamble with it?"

In a quick but fluid dance, and careful to keep the sleeves on his satin apricot shirt from getting wet or singed, he rims the glass, pours the liquor and lights a lemon rind, which he snuffs out and drops into my martini (\$6). He adds the signature olive, too.

### Group therapy with cocktails

On the other end of the spectrum is Lucille's Rockin' Pianos. Looking inside from N. Old World 3rd St., I see a crowd of about 50 people wiggling their elbows to the Chicken Dance. Is a wedding in progress?

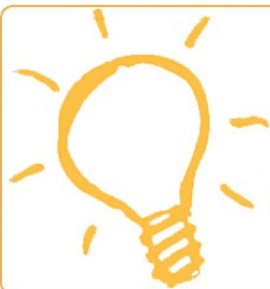
Close. Inside, I notice a lot of women wearing wedding veils, with their gal pals in tow, proof that this is a popular place before officially tying the knot. Dueling pianists near the window crank out one tune after another, creating an arc of pop hits.

As I slip the doorman my \$5 cover, the theme song from "The Brady Bunch" starts, and a soon-to-be bride comes rushing out of the bar.

Clutching my bottle of Blue Moon beer - my companion was nursing a Beck's - we were shoved into a tight corner near the bar. Soon, we are singing along to the Oscar Mayer jingle. Had we seen through the crowd, we might have taken advantage of the nightly \$1.99 special: a half-pound burger, brat or hot dog. There's also homemade pizza from Durango's Pizzeria in Kenosha.

Melissa Plautz of Pewaukee is here for one last night out with the girls before her wedding. She is wearing a tiara and purple feather boa.

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"I've been here before and really like it," she said, after putting in her request for Def Leppard's "Pour Some Sugar on Me" and Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back." "It's fun."

According to owner and partner Brian Bernier, since Lucille's opened in June 2004, the club has six scheduled bachelorette parties and 15 more strolling in on a typical weekend night.

Later that night, three bartenders jump onto the wooden bar and dance to "The Time Warp" from "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." Now that's what I call entertainment.

"This isn't your mother's or your father's piano bar," Bernier said later in an interview. "This is group therapy with cocktails."

## Martinis and Ol' Blue Eyes

Owners Bobby Head, and Giovanni and Giuseppe Safina opened Centanni in the summer of 2002.

"We all sat down and thought it was a good idea," Head said. His love for jazz began when he was working at Jilly's Piano Bar in Chicago, named after Frank Sinatra's bodyguard and friend, Jilly Rizzo.

On a Wednesday night, a friend and I ordered \$5 martinis (the Wednesday night special) - Fly Me to the Moon, and Too Marvelous for Words, a malted milk ball martini - and no sooner had the bartender zipped off when I heard "I got dreams, baby" in a syrupy, soulful voice. Later that night, local jazz group Mrs. Fun performed in a corner nook and the place took on new energy. Romantic couples appeared to blossom, abandoning their seats for spots on an impromptu dance floor. The lights from flickering tea light candles bounced off the Tuscan yellow walls.

Martinis at Centanni generally are \$9 and \$10, but for the not-so-budget minded, there is a 23-Karat Gold Martini with flakes imported from Germany (\$30), which might best be enjoyed in the VIP lounge, near the bar's entrance but behind black velvet drapes. Obviously, this isn't a place for tennis shoes.

Curious about tip-jar etiquette? According to Head, patrons should throw in \$2 to \$5, leaning higher if the pianist fulfills a song request.

Pianist Kris Crow, who Head said has a rock 'n' roll edge "and a voice like Rod Stewart," performs on some Saturdays, packing the place. On Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, Joe Hite entertains.

## Lake Country after dark

Five years ago, there wasn't much of an after-dark life in Pewaukee. The owners of Piano Blu, a swank two-story bar, changed that when they opened the place in October 2004. Late on a recent Wednesday night, I had to wriggle through a crowd on the first floor listening to pianist Joe Hite.

Upstairs in the Rhino Room - where a replica rhino head that co-owner Ed Seckinger, a former medical-device salesman, picked up in South Africa, is mounted - there's a full bar along with sleek, black leather furnishings. Seckinger's wife, Amy, is an interior decorator, and it shows.

"We're feeding into a lot of needs that aren't (met) west of the city, be it martinis, fine-dining and private parties," said Ed Seckinger.

Piano Blu offers live music nightly, accompanied by an ambitious menu of entrees, a varied wine list and signature martinis, such as the Blu and chocolate-chip espresso.

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Pewaukee resident Peter Harken is a regular. "There's not been an upscale restaurant-type place (here) like Milwaukee," he said. "Because of the growth of the area and what has happened out here, (we) needed it."

## 'A song for everybody'

If you've been through the Pfister Hotel's Lobby Lounge in the last 25 years, you've heard Jeffrey Hollander. He performs most nights at the grand piano, wooing guests with what he calls a 19th-century salon concert, covering hits from the 1920s to 1940s, especially songs by George Gershwin and Duke Ellington.

"It's like a home away from home for folks. A lot of times, out-of-towners will tell me they feel like they're in a beautiful living room," said Hollander, who loves to take requests and sits in the window near the fireplace. "I'm basically doing mini-concerts for them."

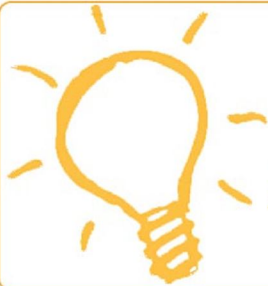
Hollander has played for Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Debbie Reynolds, Maya Angelou and - before each of his concerts - Doc Severinsen.

And U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl (D-Wis.). "I do have a special song for him, a little waltz called 'La Plus Que Lente.' Every time I see him I play it, and he stops in his tracks and gives me a wave," Hollander said.

"I have a song for everybody," he said. "I try to find out what they like. If I don't know, I take a good guess."

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