

San Francisco Bar Succeeds With Live Bluegrass, Singalongs

Acoustic Music, Doyle Lawson Songs Draw a Crowd

Nicole Solis

In San Francisco's Mission neighborhood, where hipsters in \$150 sneakers share the sidewalk with Mexican guitar-and-violin duos strolling from one burrito joint to the next, you might not expect to hear Jimmie Rodgers songs pouring out of the swinging doors of Amnesia. But on Monday nights, fans flock to the red-lit bar to hear local bluegrass and country bands, and the truly dedicated stay past midnight for the weekly Doyle Lawson sing-along.

Shawn Magee, Amnesia's 30-year-old owner with surfer blond hair and a wide, warm smile, books live acts throughout the week and doesn't charge a cover. "We want people passing along the street to feel welcome if the music catches their ear," he says. With the doors open on this unseasonably warm March Monday, a casual crowd in their 20s and 30s gradually fill the bar over the course of the band's first set. Stefan, a North Carolina transplant, wandered in to wait for his wife before dinner. "Bluegrass?" he asks. "Every Monday?" His reservation is looming, but he promises to come back.

Tonight, singer-guitarist Toshio Hirano earns his billing as the Japanese Jimmie Rodgers, entralling the crowd with sincere, authentic tributes to the Singing Brakeman, Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, and other classic country musicians.

"Would you like to hear a fast song or slow song?" the middle-aged Hirano asks the crowd in some of the most polite stage banter you're likely to hear. "Fast!" comes the enthusiastic reply. "Well, the fastest song in the world is 'Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms.' Has to be fast," he instructs Mayumi, the fresh-faced fiddler who's joined them for the end of their first set. After the song, Hirano says, "My arms. Ow. I have to give my arms a little rest, so how about a slow song? Is that OK?"

Magee bought Amnesia five years ago from a Belgian named Jean-Paul who convinced the city to reinstate the bar's liquor license, a casualty from a previous incarnation as a punk club. Jean-Paul established the bar's renowned selection of Belgian beer and Magee has added local brews like Anchor Steam and Lagunitas. He offers tastes of anything on tap but is happy to serve up bottles of Bud and Pabst Blue Ribbon or make cocktails with soju, a Korean rice liquor that slides in under the bar's beer-and-wine-only license. Magee says the ginger lemon drop is popular, but "You don't get too much of that on bluegrass night. Bluegrass night, people drink beers. I sell a lot of Budweiser."

David Adams, his very first regular, comes by to bid Magee goodbye for the night. "This is the nicest bartender I've ever met," Adams says. "The second time I came in here, he remembered my name." Ariela Morgenstern, a sing-along regular, describes it as her Cheers. A couple in their 70s are Monday-night regulars. Magee says, "I treat this place

like it's my living room and expect people to act accordingly. I don't mind if somebody spills a beer or breaks a glass--as long as they're not throwing it."

Not long after he bought the place, Magee decided to start a bluegrass night. And not long after that, John Norwood happened to come in to ask if Magee was booking bluegrass bands. Norwood's band, Homespun Rowdy, played the next Monday and became one of the house bands, along with Hirano and the Barefoot Nellies. DJs still play on weekends but other weeknights are home to karaoke, jazz, and a monthly country night, hosted by the Whoreshoes. Ever since the country night started in late 2006, Magee says local bands have been beating down the door to play in front of the "desert plains" backdrop the Whoreshoes hoist up on the stage.

Magee describes his customers as "people who are maybe tired of getting their ears blown out by loud, thumping electronic music and like the feeling of simply acoustic instruments and voices singing in harmony." When Hirano sings "I Fall to Pieces," Magee leads the crowd in an "oo-ah-oo" refrain.

That's just a hint of what's to come. When the band's set is over, the banjo intro to Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver's "Blue Train" blasts through the speakers. It's time for the Doyle Lawson sing-along.

The weekly ritual started when Norwood gave Magee a CD of his favorite tunes by the famous harmony-driven bluegrass band, telling him, "It will blow your mind." It did.

"John and I would play the disc and sing along at the top of our lungs as a way to scare people out of the bar at closing time," Magee says. But some people stuck around. "They even memorized the lyrics and joined in. It got to the point where we had a dozen strong singers crooning 28 DL&Q hits into the wee hours of the morning."

Tonight, Magee starts the CD around midnight, after a few repeated requests from sleepy-eyed patrons. A handful of animated regulars, some showing up just for the sing-along, gather around the end of the bar, singing note-perfect harmonies to "Blue Train," "Hard Game of Love" and other Quicksilver classics. Now that Norwood has moved to Louisiana, Magee is the sole ringleader, filling in the harmony parts that no one else is singing and acting out a well-formulated repertoire of gestures and movements.

"The singalong has evolved into a tradition," says Norwood, who joins in whenever his job brings him back to town. "Something like <I>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</I>. We have a whole series of jokes that we tell in between songs, hand gestures, dance moves." He posted some rules to the sing-along's MySpace group (<http://groups.myspace.com/dlsal>), offering this example: "No matter how off-key we're singing, at the end of each song, we all high-five and say, 'We nailed that one!' I guess it's hard to explain. You really have to experience it."

Amnesia is located at 857 Valencia St. in San Francisco.

[NOTE: I uploaded low-res versions of the photos to <http://www.flickr.com/photos/nsolis/sets/>. I have higher-res versions. If you need higher-quality images, I can have a more experienced photographer take some.]