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At Piano Bar, Rhapsodies in Twos

By Fritz Hahn, Washington Post Staff Writer, Special to The Washington Post, Friday, January 09, 2009; Page WE06

The buzz: Bobby McKey's is not a bar for the shy or retiring. The two guys tickling the ivories on stage at the Washington area's only dueling piano bar are equal parts cruise directors, comedians and overly enthusiastic party hosts. Every couple of minutes, they yell, "Clap your hands!" "Sing along! I can't hear you!" or "You having a good time?" When one kicks into "Crocodile Rock," the other gets up and starts waving his arms in the universal symbol for a crocodile's chomping jaws.

In between the goofy, endless exhortations, the hits just keep on coming from the pair of baby grands: "Bennie and the Jets," "Don't Stop Believin'," the theme from "Cheers." It's like a jukebox where every single song's an old favorite you can loudly sing along with.

Corny? Sometimes. Cheesy? Definitely. Fun? Certainly.

The scene: Checking out the crowd at Bobby McKey's, I'm shocked that no one thought to do this in the area before. The people crammed into the warehouse-style club on National Harbor's main drag range from 22-year-olds from St. Mary's County celebrating their birthdays to silver-haired veterans singing along to "Great Balls of Fire." Black and white, married and single, out-of-towners here for conventions and locals on dates or out with the girls, all bopping and singing along.

The diversity extends to the genre-busting song lists, which swing from Elton John to Justin Timberlake to Abba to Johnny Cash.



Write down a request on one of the provided cards or lined bar napkins, take it to the stage, then sit back and wait for your number to come up. There are four pianists on duty every night, trading off every hour, each with their own styles and personalities. (Tips are encouraged; at one point, a pianist holds up a napkin with requests and says,

"We like this," then holds up a napkin wrapped around some dollar bills and says, "We really like this.")



Tattoo Slover, top left, and Jeff "Perry" Ross play '80s tunes on the dueling pianos at Bobby McKey's at National Harbor. The club isn't a place to socialize or check out the singles scene: The pianists here (four every night) put on a show. (Photos By Ricky Carioti -- The Washington Post)

Of course, the audience participation doesn't let up. A different pair of pianists brings anyone celebrating a birthday to the stage for a quick singalong and a cringe-inducing R-rated version of the children's song "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" (odd, considering they edit curses out of some other songs) and later call all the veterans in the house up to take a bow before playing Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A."

Unlike at piano bars such as Mr. Smith's or Banana Cafe, you don't come here to catch up with friends, check out the singles scene and hope to hear a couple of songs you like to sing along to. This is a *show*, and almost everyone in the room stares at the stage the whole night, except when they turn to high-five their friends when the pianist croons the first lines of "Bohemian Rhapsody" or "Sweet Caroline."

Since the performers are on stage for seven hours a night and every song is suggested by the audience, there are bound to be some songs that are requested and performed multiple times if you stick around long enough. Before tackling yet another request for a certain Journey hit, the pianist asks the crowd, "You ready to hear this one again?"

In your glass: The draft beers are predictable (Budweiser, Heineken, etc.), and bottled beers just about double the choices. If you're in a group, you can save about a buck a bottle if you order a bucket of beers (\$24 for six domestics, \$26 for imports) instead of getting them one at a time (\$5.25 each). Cocktails take their names from classic piano-bar tunes and are served in birdbath-size martini glasses. The "Desperado," billed as a "top-shelf margarita," tasted more of lime juice than of tequila.

On your plate: You know this is a place for groups when the menu's main feature is a selection of dips, served with plates of chips and designed to be shared. Our bowl of Buffalo Chicken Dip came with regular tortilla chips homemade French onion dip with a bag of Lay's potato chips, beer cheese and pretzel rolls and, for dessert, chocolatey s'mores with strawberries.

If you're not in a dipping mood, hot dogs and burgers are available.

Price points: The evening can be as cheap as you want it to be, since there's no cover charge or drink minimum. There's also no happy hour. Beers are about \$5, cocktails and shooters range from \$6.50 to \$10.

Getting in: Doors open at 6 Monday through Saturday. Arrive early if you'd rather have a table on the floor in front of the stage instead of having to stand at the bar that wraps around the back of the room. (Even at the bar, the sightlines and acoustics are great.) On one Saturday night, we arrived after 9 and saw very few patrons vacate their seats before midnight. Reservations are accepted for groups of 10 or more.

instead of the promised blue cheese chips, but it didn't make much difference: We polished off the creamy, cheesy chicken dip anyway. Other options include

Need to know: National Harbor's planners included plenty of garages and open lots, which charge \$10 after 9 p.m., and limited street parking. Unless you like circling, it's better to just grit your teeth and pay.

Nice to know: Even though it feels like a national chain (check out the T-shirts and caps by the front door), this is a locally owned nightclub.

What people are saying: "We're having a great time," says Raquel Miller, a security guard from District Heights who took a moment from dancing by the bar to praise the casual atmosphere, the talented performers and, most of all, the mix of music. "I'm from West Virginia, so I'm a little bit country and a little bit rock-and-roll," she explains. "And I'm an '80s baby. They play it all." ■

Bobby McKey's 172 Fleet St., National Harbor, Oxon Hill
Information: 301-567-1488. <http://www.bobbymckey.com>.