

Diversions

The Daily Nebraskan's Entertainment Revue



Boehmer

Mark Davis/Daily Nebraskan



Chuck Williams of Albert Collins and the Ice Breakers.

Andrea Hoy/Daily Nebraskan

Not just a 'dark hole in the wall'

Zoo built reputation on blues music

By Kyle Foster
Staff Reporter

Certain places and certain buildings seem to radiate a life all their own. The Zoo Bar is such a place.

The small, dark bar at 136 N. 14th street comes alive at night with a blues band pounding out a heartbeat. The walls breathe the heavy smoke-filled air and the floor drinks gallons of spilled beer. The air is a murky mixture of the stale beer and smoke characteristic of the Zoo Bar.

Larry Boehmer, owner and keeper of the Zoo, loves what he does. He has an art studio above the bar, and considers the bar "sort of a hobby."

Boehmer strikes a confident pose behind his cluttered desk. He regularly receives and makes calls to some of the most well-known and respected blues artists in the nation, many whom he considers close friends. For example, Chicago's Magic Slim is his oldest son's godfather.

Boehmer said "the blues world is a small world. You can go from city to city

and country to country and when you find people who are into the blues it's like you're old friends."

Boehmer's interest in the blues dates back to his childhood, he said. He grew up on a farm near Pawnee City.

"I used to listen to a blues program at night as I was going to bed," he said. "It was on station KAAV from Little Rock, Arkansas. At the same time I was buying Jazz records through Columbia Records."

His addiction to the blues intensified during college, "I was in the art department, but I hung out with blues musicians," he said.

In 1972, while still attending college, Boehmer became acquainted with the Zoo through friends who owned it.

"When I first walked in it felt like a honky-tonk bar. . . small, dark, just like a lot of the bars across the Kansas/Nebraska border I used to visit as a kid," he said.

"I told them that if they would let me put a row of Blues music on the jukebox I would bring in some students," Boehmer said. "We'd sit around,

listen to the music and have a beer."

His role at the Zoo gradually increased. In the summer of 1973 he booked the bar's first musical act, The Cotton Blues Band. During Christmas of that year he booked the bar's second act, Charlie Burton. By the Summer of 1974 Boehmer began to book bands three nights each week. In 1975 Boehmer began to book bands to perform nightly.

At that time the bar had no PA system. Today the Zoo has an 800-watt PA and Boehmer said he feels that he has a "real good sounding room for the Blues."

The PA isn't the only thing that has changed at the Zoo over the years. Boehmer said that the quality of bands has improved. He said that today's audience is more sophisticated than audiences of ten years ago and there is pressure on bands to perform well.

With exception to the PA and the quality of music, the Zoo has not changed much since it opened in 1973. Boehmer's philosophy behind that, he said, is that "it's always a viable experience to go into a funky little bar and listen to music. I think it's timeless,

and that's why the Zoo doesn't change much."

Today the Zoo is considered as one of the nation's finest small music clubs. Not just anyone can play there, and those that do are usually talented, serious musicians, Boehmer said.

The bar is in an enviable position. It showcases blues, rhythm and blues, roots rock 'n' roll and jazz, none of which have mass appeal for today's audiences. Because most bands that play this music don't have the popularity to sell out concert halls, they play at small bars like the Zoo, Boehmer said. Hence, some of the nation's best blues artists, country rock 'n' rollers and the like can be found at the Zoo each night.

The Nebraska Educational Television Network has produced and aired four thirty-minute blues programs for their channel, filmed at the Zoo. NETV is currently considering having the programs shown in Germany where blues is very popular.

Four albums have been recorded at the Zoo Bar, and Magic Slim has recorded two of them. A soundtrack

featuring various artists, titled "Live At The Zoo," has also been recorded there.

Boehmer's interest in music extends far beyond the blues, he said. "I like the old basic rock 'n' roll, reggae, bluegrass, R and B, all types of roots music. If it's musical and there is something going on I like it."

Boehmer is a musician as well as a fan. He plays bass guitar in his band, Cocktail Shorty and the Tablerockers, who appear regularly at the Zoo. He also played in the now defunct Little Jimmy Valentine and the Heart Murmers.

Boehmer applies his own philosophy to the Zoo, "We don't try to please everyone. We try to do what we do well."

As for the somewhat sinister reputation that the Zoo has, Boehmer said that it can be a problem.

"People are scared because it's a little dark hole in the wall, they're afraid of the unknown," he said. "But it's really a pretty hassle free bar. Women have told me that it's one of the few places they can go without being hassled."