



ABOVE: The Mezcab Brothers play a swing for Zoo Bar patrons Saturday evening. The Zoo Bar specializes in bringing in Blues bands for its nightly entertainment.

wildthings

Zoo Bar serves up nationally acclaimed blues

It's 10 p.m. on Thursday at the Zoo Bar. The Mezcab Brothers, the opening act for The Deviants, play to a crowd of about 20 people.

It's a slow night, but the 20 people scattered throughout the bar listen attentively as the band plays a variety of rockabilly tunes.

A few middle-aged and older men line the bar at the front of the room.

A man and woman in their mid-50s sit sipping beer and smoking cigarettes at one of the two half-oval tables on the north wall about 10 feet from the stage, which sits at the back.

They gaze at the stage and subtly nod their heads to the music, only taking time to talk between pieces.

Another five middle-aged women camp out at one of the six round tables lining the center of the bar, but they only sit there for about 30 seconds at a time.

With each new song the band plays, the women look at each other with a smile and make a quick head gesture toward the stage.

They spring up and dance for the duration of the song, positioning themselves directly in front of the stage, close enough to smell the beer on the breath of the lead singer.

When the song ends, they return to their seats but only long enough to take two sips of their mixed drinks and two drags from their cigarettes. Because when the next song starts, they go back to the front to dance.

Toward the end of the performance, some of the women even get on stage and dance while the band plays.

Rounding out the Thursday night crowd are two University of Nebraska-Lincoln students taking notes for their history of rock music class.

The two girls sip imported beer, smoke cigarettes and sway to the music in between their note taking.

They sit next to a huge Charlie Musselwhite sign. Behind the girls are old promotional posters that show pictures of the Mighty Joe Young, The Legendary Blues Band, and Bobby King and Terry Evans. These posters, stained yellow from age and cigarette smoke, are plastered throughout the bar and serve as wallpaper for the room.

When one envisions a thriving blues scene, Chicago or Kansas City immediately comes to mind.

But in another neck of the Midwest, nestled in the middle of downtown Lincoln, sits a blues haven called the Zoo Bar.

At 136 N. 14th St., one block off O Street and two short blocks from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus, the dank little bar's presence could easily be overlooked.

In the front window, promotional posters for coming shows surround a red and blue neon sign reading "The Zoo Bar."

These are the only exterior characteristics distinguishing the bar from the rest of the businesses lining 14th Street.

The other noticeable, but most important, characteristic of the bar is the blaring music that can be



Charlie Johnson stands on his standup bass for the last song of the night Saturday evening.

heard each night coming from inside.

It's that blaring music coming from behind the poster-filled window that has made the bar a gem for live music for close to 27 years. In 1993, The Zoo Bar was even presented the "Keeping the Blues Alive/W.C Handy Award" by the Kansas City Blues Society.

Legendary is one adjective that has been used repeatedly to describe the Zoo Bar.

Faithful patrons, performers and music lovers from across the country have used the term, and judging by the bar's lasting popularity and attention, the term may be being well applied.

At 10:40 p.m. Thursday, The Deviants, made up of a guitarist/lead singer, stand-up bass player and drummer, take the stage.

More people begin to stroll in, but the bar is far from full.

"There's a few people on stage and a few people out there," the lead singer says before introducing his band mates. He also says how happy they are to perform at "the legendary Zoo Bar."

It is obvious the band and the patrons don't mind the small crowd.

"Take it off!" one man hollers from the bar as the stand-up bass player takes off his jacket.

Once again, the patrons listen attentively and dance when the band begins to play its rockabilly



LEFT: Katie Schlentz, with a backdrop of band advertisements, while waiting to check customers' IDs.

BELOW: The Zoo Bar, which has been open for nearly 27 years, serves live music six nights a week, as well as spirits for its customers.



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