LOUD and CLEAR

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The Shout! House in San Diego Tickles the Ivory And Caters to All

Typing in 'dueling piano bar' in a search

engine will bring up more than 200,000 entries to peruse. The fact is, with the resurgence of 80s pop culture, heavy entertainment demands and the trend of less alcohol consumption in a more premium form, the move towards all night revelry has found a niche in programmed entertainment — and piano bars are once again on the rise.

One that caught the attention of *Nightclub & Bar* is The Shout! House in San Diego, Calif. Amongst the 100 or more operators clamoring for cash in the competition of The Gaslamp district, The Shout House is a destination for the young, the old and those who simply love to sing along.

Worth the Search

The building, located a few blocks off of the popular Main Street in the Gaslamp, is a destination that has a history all its own.

"It is an old, historic sort of place," Owner Bob Walin says. "It is registered on the national registry, and it used to be a horseless carriage manufacturing place 100 years ago."

Walin, along with co-owners Kevin Clover and Roger Hunt, leased the space from Rock Bottom Restaurants and began to transform it from a struggling nightclub back in March of 2004. Just six months after they opened the doors in California, the men unveiled another Shout House in Minneapolis — a true testament to the viability of the concept.

Operating six nights a week, the San Diego venue can accommodate 350 people at capacity, with 275 of them comfortably seated.

"If you are walking on either side of our restaurant, you can't hear the sound. But, as you get closer, you start to hear the pianos going," says Sales and Marketing Manager Charice Leabo. "It definitely draws people in. We are not on Main Street, so people either have to know where we are, or find us by chance."

Bang for the Buck

Whether customers stumble upon the worn-brick building by accident or seek it out on purpose, what they are treated to inside is top-notch entertainment value for their dollar. The Shout House employs 10 servers, seven bartenders and five piano players — all five of which have been on staff since the beginning.

"On Friday and Saturday night, the show starts at 6:30 p.m. and goes non-stop until 1:30 in the morning," Walin says. "We have rotating teams of two piano players. The audience has request forms on the tables, and they can request songs. All of our piano players know 500 to 1,000 songs," he says. "So, they are pretty hard to stump."

It is this team of enthusiastic staff and seasoned theater musicians that, according to Leabo, "sets The Shout House apart from other venues in The Gaslamp.

"The biggest thing we look for when we hire," she says, "is personality. We want someone that is not afraid to have fun. They have to enjoy the concept, because a lot of our business is based on audience participation. The audience stands up, and we get them involved in the show. So, we can't have a shy staff."

To truly get a crowd going, the piano players use a method of "showtimes" during the night. Calling out a "showtime" signals the staff to stop what they are doing and jump either on stage or on top of the bar for a quick dance routine and singing.

"There are about 10 different 'showtime' songs," Leabo says. "So when the piano players call a 'showtime,' it can be very improvisational for some of the new employees."

The Sellable Spectrum

Just as The Shout House management is not afraid to trek outside the boundaries of modest entertainment, they are equally aggressive in targeting a broad spectrum of the patron market. A typical night includes a customer age range from 21 to 80. The venue appeals to groups such as bachelorette parties, divorce parties, business convention groups, wedding anniversaries and tourists, and the management has set up a reservation system for large tables to be blocked off for these occasions.

To ensure that The Shout House name stays vibrant in the San Diego nightlife scene, Leabo uses a door-to-door approach of marketing.

"When I first started as the sales and marketing manager," she says, "I went around to all the hotels and introduced myself to the concierges. We get a lot of customers that come in as a result of our friendships and business relationships with the hotel management, concierges and other restaurants. We all work together to help each other out. I go to a lot of convention and chamber of commerce mixers," she says. "It gives us an opportunity to show off our venue and in return, they send us business."

The Shout House team also throws appreciation parties for the industry employees who have helped them out periodically throughout the year to keep the relationships strong. "You just never know who you are going to be entertaining," Leabo says.

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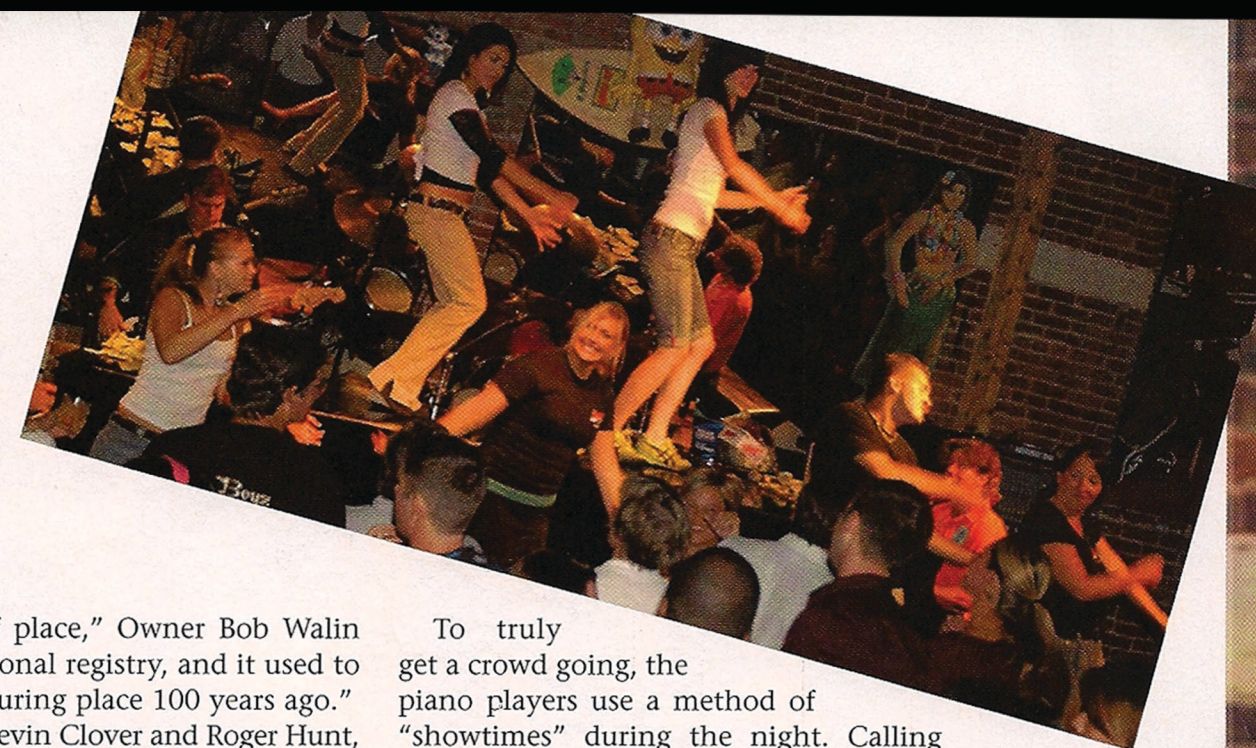
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photo courtesy of Rob Howard