

Analysis: Benefit shows prove live bands' loyalty to Texas Star Tavern

By JOHN RIGHTER
Of The Battalion Staff

Last year offered little optimism for local live music.

A year ago this month Eastgate Live closed its doors, only to reopen as the Guitar Shop's new location. Last fall the Cow Hop, Northgate's mainstay for quality bands, also bailed out of the troubled live scene.

Parthenon has been replaced by Club Fahrenheit, a dance club that owner Randy Hermes says will not feature live music on a regular basis.

In the midst of the decline of live music is the possibility that Hugh Stearns will lose his ongoing fight to keep the Texas Star Tavern open.

During the past seven months, Stearns has fought problems with a suspended liquor license, a court hearing about noise and parking problems and the disintegration of his partnership with Patsy Fry, the owner of the Tavern and surrounding property.

With his back against the wall and time and money running out, Stearns got help this weekend from those he needed it from the most.

Two benefit shows by Tavern favorites Jr Medlow and the Bad Boys (with guitar great Chris Duarte) and Trout Fishing In America might prove to be the panacea for Stearns' ills.

"This whole weekend got put together by having good friends," Stearns said. "When I needed help and I asked them, they said, 'Sure.' Without these benefits the Tavern staying open wouldn't be possible."

The trouble began in July when Stearns and Fry moved from the Brazos Landing (at Northgate) to the Tavern, previously the home of Morgensterns, Dr. G's and Grins.

Because of Fry's marriage to a Messina Hof winery employee, a conflict of interest was cited and the Tavern's liquor license was suspended.

Since then, the Tavern has been strictly BYOB, costing it plenty of money in potential drink sales.

If the liquor license problem were not enough, a court hearing about noise and parking with local property owner G.H. Alani has forced Stearns to battle Alani's move to have the club removed from its College Main location.

Stearns believes that the dispute could be resolved if the two men would just sit down and discuss it.

"The fact that I can't even talk to this guy makes it real difficult," Stearns said. "I've called him three times to try and sit down with him, but he won't. He won't talk to us."

"The problems he listed in court were noise and parking. We've done a lot of reinforcement to dissolve the sound ... and my partner (Fry) bought the property next door to improve the parking situation. We're making concessions and are trying to address his concerns to work this out."

The final blow for Stearns might be Fry's dissension. In a telephone conversation Sunday, she stated her desire to have the Tavern moved and to keep the land and property.

The court hearing and pending liquor license renewal (Fry claims her marriage no longer should influence the Tavern's license renewal) have exhausted her interest in keeping the Tavern open.

Still, selling the property is an alternative she hopes to avoid.

Alani declined to comment on the situation.

If there is hope for Stearns and the Tavern, it was received through the tremendous support he received

last weekend. The two shows drew exceptional crowds.

Both Medlow and Trout Fishing said they were more than happy to lend their support.

"The Tavern is a wonderful place," said frontman and singer Jr Medlow. "Hugh is a wonderful guy and College Station has been a tremendous place for us to play."

"We appreciate Hugh having the faith in us and we're trying to return that faith to him."

Duarte added, "Hugh has helped us out so much and been a big support of the music here in College Station. When you see something like that ... it's just right to help him out."

On Saturday night, Keith Grimwood and Ezra Idlet, the popular duo of Trout Fishing in America, were adamant in their support for Stearns.

Grimwood said, "We believe in this room, this really good room. I really like Hugh Stearns. We think he is a good man who is doing a lot ..."

"This club is working exactly like it should work. The people are here, the music is here, everything is working. I see so many live music clubs that don't work, and fold because they're not successful."

"This one is successful, and to watch a successful live club go under bothers me. Something is wrong here."

Guitarist Idlet said, "I'm not sure of all of the political ramifications, but I know this is a good live music club. Hugh is a responsible manager and a strong community figure. He must have stepped on the wrong toes, because there is no explanation other than political that this club is having problems."

Just as demonstrative in their support for the Tavern were the hundreds of patrons who attended both shows. To them the Tavern is a special place that attracts an older, loyal crowd.

"It would be a great tragedy to lose this place," said Tavern patron Larry Hickman. "It's a great source of live music... it's irreplaceable."

Longtime patron Liz Porter said, "We'd have to go Austin or Houston for our live music without the Tavern. We've been coming here since it was Morgensterns and it would be a great loss to have it close down."

All Stearns can hope for is continued support from patrons and bands alike. The Texas Twisters and The Kerouacs are scheduled to perform benefits early next month. A regular weekend performance schedule will begin soon.

This weekend might have been the first step for Stearns to settle the Tavern issue. A great turnout and two wonderful performances can only gather support for him.

But Stearns also realizes that a lot remains to be accomplished before the Tavern can be self-sufficient.

"It's going to happen," he said. "I've been working on this too long and too hard for it not to. It's not going to be easy, but with the kind of support we've been getting it's got to happen."

In his support of keeping the Tavern open, Medlow said, "It's like our song 'Worst Kind of Way.' You have this love for another person or thing and the knowledge of how devastating it would be to lose it."

"Not saying you have lost it or you will lose it, but saying that the potential for loss is there, and what you would do knowing that something you cared about that deep was threatened."

Apparently, Hugh Stearns knows.

Ashburn's straightforward philosophy blends focused ambition, relaxed fun

Editor's note: The following is the first in a semester-long series of features about local bands.

By JOHN RIGHTER
Of The Battalion Staff

"Our philosophy is based on three rules," explains guitarist Chip Patterson of the local band Ashburn. "We never practice before 11 in the morning. We've always got to have beer at the practice ... and what's the third one?"

"You've got to turn the amp down if someone is talking," offers singer and rhythm guitarist Phil Wattenbarger.

"No, the third one is basically we have to sound-proof everything," concludes drummer John Klement.

"We play too loud, extremely too loud. It drives the neighbors crazy, so we've had to staple cardboard all over the kitchen."

Patterson, Wattenbarger, Klement and bass player Teddy Swigart already have learned the first rule of amateur music: Never take it too seriously.

Seven months and countless performances at Kay's Cabaret, Double Dave's, the recently-defunct Cow Hop, Texas Star Tavern, Waivers and Mama's Pizza have developed a definite perspective for the alternative-minded Ashburn.

Nothing has fazed this group. Not local apathy, or an early group member change (Klement took over as drummer after the band's first show). Not even an accident that left Swigart with a broken collarbone and Ashburn out of action for two months. And not a run-in with a local restaurant owner after a boisterous performance.

"You know most of the bands in this town have four times the talent we do, but they do covers. We're not talented at all, but we do what we want. It's why we're happy and most of the other bands aren't."

— Chip Patterson,
Ashburn guitarist

"We take it all in stride," Wattenbarger says.

"We don't mean to sound casual 'cause we're not," Swigart adds. "It's just we're having fun doing what we like."

Patterson claims, "You know most of the bands in this town have four times the talent we do, but they do covers."

"We're not talented at all, but we do what we want. It's why we're happy and most of the other bands aren't."

Talented or not (and I disagree with Patterson), the group has endeared itself to a regular following. People come back to listen as much for the group's spontaneity and rapport with the crowd as for its mixture of original material and diverse cover songs.

Ashburn has a characteristic stage attitude that magnifies their hyper, unrestrained personalities. Swigart and Wattenbarger are especially demonstrative, jumping and swaying through every song, while the whole group joins in walking on a line between



Photo by Scott D. Weaver

Ashburn's lead singer Phil Wattenbarger (left) and bassist Teddy Swigart jam at Kay's Cabaret.

self-parody and enthusiastic bashing.

The group has grown from being primarily a cover band to one that performs almost all original material. The band's satisfaction with its growth in songwriting inspired them to record a demo last week at Austin's Lonestar Studio.

The five-song tape is still in the packaging process, but the band hopes to release it soon.

Saturday night's show at Kay's Cabaret featured a few cuts from the demo, along with other originals (some never performed live before) and covers from a diverse range of influences.

Tracing the band's influences would reveal a hybrid of groups slightly to the modern left (R.E.M., The Replacements and Hothouse Flowers) and a sprinkling of ancient psychedelia.

For now, the band takes its music day by day. All four members agree that they do not need to look too far ahead. For the moment they seem content to play the College Station circuit as much as possible.

"The scene here is pretty much 'throw them in there and get some entertainment to sell more beer,'" Klement says. "We don't mean that personally against any of the owners, 'cause we've gotten great support from most of them."

Swigart adds, "It's really kind

of cool because it gives us a lot of freedom."

Still, the band has its sights on playing elsewhere. They have hired a new manager (John Tonkelson) and are anxious to promote their demo in Houston, Austin and Dallas. But foremost among their priorities is to keep a focused yet casual perspective.

"We want to play elsewhere when the time is right," Wattenbarger says.

"Reunion Arena called us, but we've decided not to do that," Klement says to much laughter.

"Yeah, they wanted us to pick up popcorn," Swigart adds to more laughter. "You've got to start somewhere. Who knows? It might be fun."

By TODD STONE
Of The Battalion Staff

The filmmakers advertise, "Trust him...he's a cop."

Instead, trust me...it's a flop.

Despite strong performances by Richard Gere and Andy Garcia, "Internal Affairs" collapses under the weight of a murky and unrealistic plot. "Internal" uses the conventional "good cop-bad cop" plot. In an effort to find a different angle to this overused story device, the film tries to shock you with unrealistic relationships and events.

The film starts out well enough, introducing some potentially interesting characters and plot schemes.

Gere stars as Dennis Peck, the bad cop. He is the leader of an entire cocaine network operated by police officers. He trades favors within the police department to get officers to ignore his suspicious activities.

The system has worked well for this guy. Peck has three ex-wives, each owning \$2-3 million in real estate assets, all provided by Peck.

He drives a classic Corvette and seems to run the show at the police department. No one has noticed for quite some time, until...

Enter good cop, Raymond Avilla, played by Andy Garcia. Avilla has just joined the Internal Affairs Division of the police department, and it is his job to make sure all police officers have their halos on straight.

INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Starring Richard Gere, Andy Garcia
Directed by Mike Figgis
Rated R

Through small-scale investigations of other officers, Avilla discovers Peck's illegal enterprises and the corruption throughout the department that is directly linked to Peck. Avilla also suffers marital problems as he tries to juggle his marriage and career.

Garcia works hard as Avilla and gives the film some much-needed intensity at moments. However, screenwriter Henry Bean doesn't provide Garcia with much to say to express Avilla's troubles and doubts. Avilla gets mad a few times, but never says anything revealing.

Gere seems to have fun with his cold-hearted character. He is often effective in portraying Peck as the typical '80s bad guy — he's resourceful and intelligent, with hints of being completely wacko.

However, the moment you want to take Peck seriously as a threatening villain, Bean again comes up with a twist that has you saying, "Come on, you've got to be joking."

In one scene, Avilla is trying to capture a person who can reveal Peck's crimes. Suddenly, the SWAT team shows up shooting at everyone, including Avilla, even after he identifies himself.

I just hope there wasn't some bonehead in the theater thinking, "Wow, that Peck guy sure can

do what he wants with the police. I'm shocked."

Sure. That's right. Get one cop with a cocaine ring going, and he can control an entire police force. No problem. There isn't anything wrong with a far-fetched plot ... until the success of the film depends on taking it seriously.

Further problems with the film include throwing in several sexual relationships among the characters, most of them involving Peck. Perhaps the filmmakers wanted to add a twist of perversion to make up for the police-corruption plot's shortcomings, but it all makes the story seem more of a farce.

It's a shame the movie doesn't work any better. A few tense and suspenseful moments follow a promising beginning, but the plot falls apart, leading to a contrived climax that comes out of nowhere.

Gere and Garcia are great with what they are given. Unfortunately, they aren't given much.

Director Mike Figgis seems to do the best he can. He gets about as much suspense and intrigue out of the story as he can, but he cannot overcome its shortcomings and lack of character development.

At many moments, action was completely lacking, and even the shoot-'em-up scenes were boring. The editor also must have taken the day off, because the film was an unnecessary two-hour-plus long.

"Internal Affairs" fails to deliver as a suspenseful cop-thriller, but if you need a good laugh, go see this movie and try — just try — to take it seriously.

Strong performances not enough to salvage unrealistic premise of 'Internal Affairs'