

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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Pianists complement cocktail hour



RANDY DORST/staff photographer

Cocktail pianist Tom Altenburg, who plays at the Roman Terrace in Farmington Hills, practices at home in Detroit's Rosedale Park.

By James Windell
special writer

THE CONCERT PIANIST really has it made. Bathed in a spotlight he walks on stage to applause, plays in front of an attentive audience and departs with the sounds of appreciative clapping ringing in his ears.

But a cocktail pianist? Ah, now that's another matter. He plays in a corner of a restaurant or lounge and competes with dinner, clinking glasses, lovers cooing and requests for obscure songs.

That's a tall order for a talented entertainer. But several area pianists fill that order very nicely, thank you. In fact, metropolitan Detroit has been blessed with some of the finest pianists over the years — pianists who have made those cocktail hours just a little more pleasant.

DEAN OF THE cocktail entertainers is Ernie Swan, who has worked for 20 years at the Ponchartraine Hotel's Salamander Bar in Detroit. Bob's Seeley has been a regular at Charley's Crab in Troy, where he pounds out the boogie and ragtime as well as any body in the country.

Over at the Roman Terrace in Farmington Hills, pianist Tom Altenburg has entertained the cocktail and dinner-hour crowds for six years (with the exception of a one-year sabbatical when he played at a Holiday Inn).

Possessing a dramatic sense of timing, an unerring ear for popular song and the charm of a friendly salesman, Altenburg is the epitome of the cocktail pianist.

"The biggest thing about a cocktail pianist," says Altenburg, "is personality."

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WHAT HE OFFERS is friendship and it's usually through his piano that he cements the bond. A self-taught pianist, Altenburg takes notice of requests for songs that are new to him. He finds the record and learns the song so that the next time it's requested he's ready.

"I enjoy doing that," he says, and he seems sincere. When he's ensconced behind the piano bar at the Roman Terrace, his music and his personable patter with customers takes on the honesty of someone who enjoys what he's doing.

"I like to work with people around me," he explains, comparing himself to his brother, who is a talented composer in Los Angeles. "I like to feel when I see, by a tear in the eye, that I've put a song across."

Friendliness with the customers in the Trophy Lounge inside the Troy Hilton is what marks the entertainment style of pianist Jimmy Dixon.

A fixture in the lounge for four years, Dixon has a jazz-oriented style that blends with his amiable personality to create a warm, friendly atmosphere.

HIS FRIENDLINESS with the customers is as much a part of him as is the ease with which his experienced fingers glide through a standard like "The Nearness of You."

"What makes me feel good," says

Dixon, "is the repeat. The people who come back regularly — even from a long distance — to hear you play."

For Margie Hewitt at Redford's Harold's Bar & Lounge, it's the same thing. She draws her inspiration from the friends she has made over the years behind the piano bar.

In Harold's, at 25524 Five Mile Road, the people who sit around the piano bar on a weekend night are more like a family than a disparate group of strangers. What brings them together is the woman behind the piano bar who's been signing on with "Margie" for 30 years.

"I just love the people," says Hewitt, a woman who studied classical piano before turning to popular music decades ago in order to earn a living. "The people are as much a part of my life as my music."

LIKE ALTENBURG, Hewitt isn't offended by being called a cocktail pianist — although Altenburg likes to think of himself as a "piano-bar specialist." Both pianists are well aware of their function. Hewitt knows she's there to entertain the customers and to bring back the regulars and she does that through her excellent piano technique and her love of the people she meets.

Altenburg puts it another way. "I'm there for creating a mood and an atmosphere," he says. "But if someone turns around and listens to one of their favorite songs, that's all right too."

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