

PIANO BARS

WHAT WAS GOOD FOR JEROME KERN IS GOOD FOR AMERICA

BY D.B. TIPMORE

It is not just that Puerto Rican hairdresser and television personality Monte Rock III, an individual largely noted for his performances of a song called "My Chiffon Is Wet" on the Tonight Show during the 1970s, is sitting there at the end of the piano bar, tapping his heavily ornamented fingers on the leatherette. Or that a passer-by has just given Monte a peck on the cheek and told him to "stay funny." It is not just the inflatable sex doll sitting on the piano bench beside the pianist, nor the florid medley from *Carousel*. It is most precisely the woman in a black-and-white checked pantsuit two bar stools away who is, at the moment, trying to impress upon Monte the full extent of his celebrity. "I mean you're to die over," she is saying, leaning in over a strawberry daiquiri. "Absolutely to die over."

Each detail in this scene converges to capture the peculiar flavor of a piano bar at its most typical. The flavor is both vibrant and cheesy, one in which fruity cocktails, a Vegas lingo and a fondness for synthetic glamour combine to create an oddly dated atmosphere. In the manner of poodle skirts and Dinah Shore, piano bars bear testimony to the boom years, to that confident period in recent American history when cars were long, wars were won, and Cuba was just another place to go on vacation. In piano bars, Americans are still Americans as written by John O'Hara: buoyant, ardently vulgar people, masters at good drinking and what Hemingway once called in another context "the good talk."

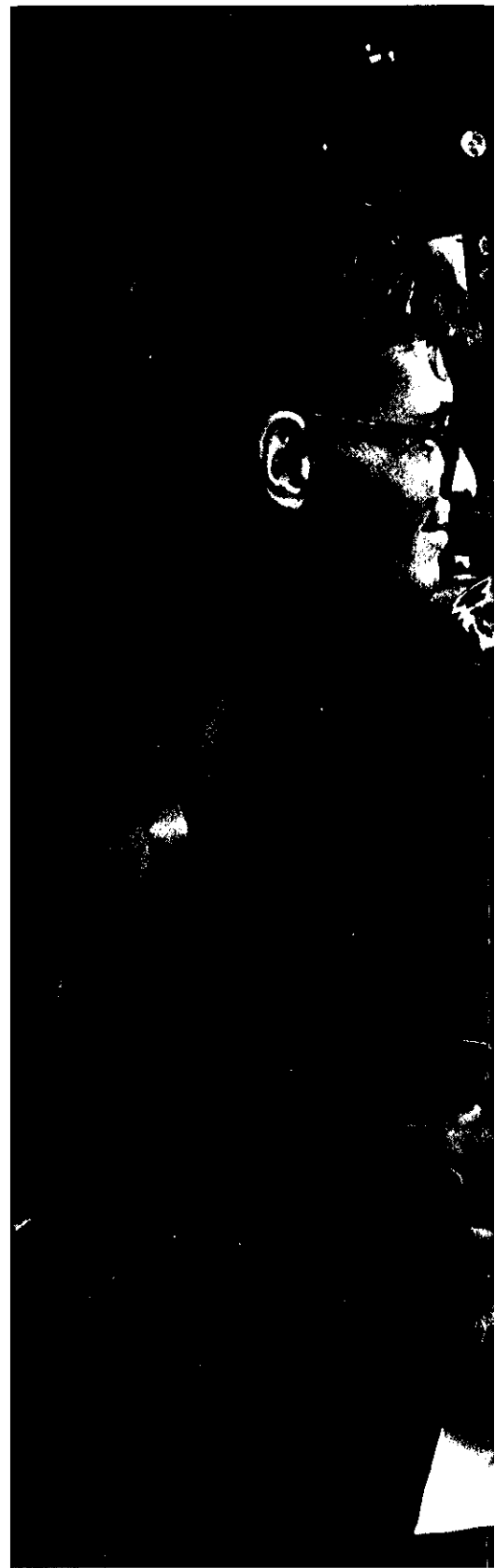
Neither of these talents is currently much in fashion, unfortunately. The volume of music in most bars nowadays is too loud for any sort of talk at all, and what used to be called "good drinkers" are increasingly hard to come by in an age

which prizes "lite" beer. In piano bars, at least, good drinkers can still attend to their main concern and its corollary passions. Here they can still chain-smoke without censure, can still extemporize about past divorces and future affairs, can still find it in themselves, after a triplet of Black Russians, to sing all the verses to "I Get A Kick Out Of You." In short, in piano bars, good drinkers can still *let go*.

Joe and Georgia are good drinkers. They're first-name people, as familiar as a pat on the back, and just as resolutely carefree. Right now they are French-kissing on the treble-clef side of a baby grand at which a short, well-built man named Charles continues to play. Charles is to die over, an imperially gifted piano-bar pianist who has the prerequisite talent to amuse, within a distance of two to six feet, groups of people in varying states of sobriety for five to six hours at a shot, five to six nights a week. The facets of this talent include a propensity for chatter and fast-thinking, a nice smile, an inoffensive voice, a musical technique of a certain style, and an ability to be simultaneously personable and yet aware of a sense of performance.

Above all, Charles has the intelligence to be magnificently unrefined. If there is anything that will kill the spirit of a piano bar, it is a cautious questioning of how much is *too* much. Tonight, here, with Charles at the piano and Georgia flushed with public passion, a man down the bar raises a more pressing issue: How is a martini like a woman's breast? How is a martini like a woman's breast: The question itself, the interest in posing it, and the very appearance of the man asking it – a man so excited about the punch line that he is unaware that the collar of his suit is standing straight up in the back – render irrelevant the niggling complaints of any misdirected visitors looking for a Palm Court atmosphere. In a piano bar, you are going to hear the jokes whether you like it or not. You are going to listen to the pianist's rendition of "Ebb Tide," complete with waterfall arpeggios and fluttering glissandi. You are perhaps even going to listen, yet once again, to someone's interpretation of "Feelings."

How is a martini like a woman's breast? Nobody around the piano knows, but then nobody is paying much attention, kidnapped as they are by one of those moments of reflective stillness that occasionally envelop a piano bar, moments of high sentimentality that occur when the songs and the style in



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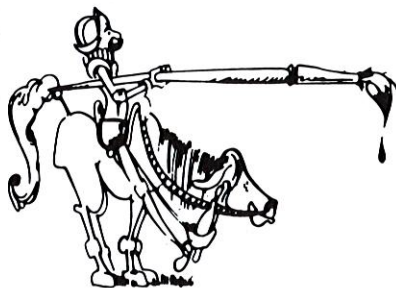
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RESTAURANTS

GATTI — 1427 West Ave.; 673-1717. For 59 years in the same location under the same ownership, this popular restaurant serves continental cuisine featuring Northern Italian specialties. Elegant home converted for dining — white linen, terrazzo floors, wrought-iron chairs. Attractive cocktail lounge. Drinks also served in the outdoor Garden Patio. Reservations suggested. Jackets required. Nightly, 5:30-10:30 pm, except Monday. Average dinner: \$22. AE, MC, V, DC.

JOE'S STONE CRAB — 227 Biscayne St.; 673-0365. Back for an incredible 71st year of operation, Joe's serves the very best stone crabs available in a down-home atmosphere. First come first served, no reservations. The wait can be long at this ever-popular Beach landmark whose reputation for fine food (steaks and chops as well as seafood) seems to spread farther across the country each year. *Holiday*-award winner since 1961. Average dinner price: \$20. Lunch weekdays, 11:30 am-2 pm; dinner, 5-10 pm. AE, MC, V, DC.

LA FONTAINE — 9650 E. Bay Harbor Dr., Bay Harbor Island; 866-8706. Luxurious, romantic French ambience, continental cuisine. Specialties include: marinated quail, breast of duckling, rack of lamb, heart of tenderloin, fresh salmon and Maine lobster. Dinner daily 6-11 pm, to 11:30 pm Saturdays. Reservations necessary. Jackets required. Average dinner price \$25. AE, V, MC, DC, CB.

LALOUETTE — 1111 Kane Concourse, Bay Harbor Island; 866-8288. Contemporary French cuisine in an atmosphere of relaxed elegance. Dine on *La Salade de Canard Alouette*, *Le Zephir de Champignon au Fumet de Morille*, *Le Poisson Frais Importé de France au Champagne* and indulge in such desserts as *Le Vacherin au Grand Marnier* and *Le Terrine de Chocolat*. Tues.-Sat., 6 pm-11 pm. Jacket and reservations required. Average dinner price: \$40. AE, MC, DC, V.

THE PALM — 5151 Collins Ave.; 868-7256. Specializing in prime steak and lobster as does their famous counterpart on Second Avenue in New York City. Average dinner price: \$60. Daily 5-11 pm. AE, MC, V, DC.

THE PORCH — Eden Roc Hotel, 4525 Collins Ave.; 531-0000. Distinctive seafood menu of international specialties: bouillabaisse, paella, etc. Also alligator steaks. Palms-and-wicker setting, small, relaxed bar. No jackets required. Average dinner price: \$20. AE, MC, DC.

Palm Beach

THE BREAKERS — 1 S. Country Rd.; 655-6611. After 50 years of service, the hotel has maintained the elegance which reflects an era of a more gracious way of life. Dine in the elegant Florentine and Circle dining rooms; have an informal luncheon at the Beach Club or a quick burger or salad at the intimate Golf Club. Lunch 11:30-4 pm; dinner 6-10 pm. Prix Fixe \$27.50. Music nightly. AE, MC, V.

CAFE PALMIER — Hyatt Palm Beach Hotel, 630 Clearwater Park Rd.; 833-1234. The hotel's sophisticated Cafe Palmier will appease anyone's epicurean longing. Continental cuisine. Average dinner price: \$25. Daily 6-10 pm. AE, MC, V, DC.

MAURICE'S — 191 Bradley Place; 832-1843. They have been here since 1946 specializing in Italian cuisine. Favorites on the extensive menu are seafood posillipo, osso buco and squid Milanese. Average dinner price: \$15. Nightly 5-11 pm. AE, MC, V, DC, CB.

NANDO'S — 221 Royal Palm Way; 655-3031. The gracious owner of the restaurant that bears his name originated the scampi recipe so popular in American restaurants. Continental and North Italian cookery. Average dinner price: \$15. Daily 5:30-11 pm. AE, MC, V, DC.

PETITE MARMITE — 315 Worth Ave.; 655-0550. Garden atmosphere and delectable fare. Pastas are homemade. Pastries and cakes are baked in the restaurant's own patisserie. Average dinner price: \$17. Daily 4-10:30 pm. AE, MC, V, DC.

TA-BOO — 221 Worth Ave.; 655-5562. With its club-like atmosphere, this has been a favorite rendezvous since its doors opened in 1941. Lunch and dinner. Jackets and ties after 6 pm. Average dinner price: \$14.50. Daily 6-11 pm. AE, MC, V, DC.

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which they are played meet in matchless evocation. Right now Charles is evoking the '40s and '50s, a period of time near to Georgia's heart. She is staring down into her third Rob Roy, slightly misty-eyed, as she listens to the movie theme from *Picnic*, then "Glow-worm," then the movie theme from *Moulin Rouge* ("Where Is Your Heart?"), then "Secret Love," then "You Belong To Me." She is, as she is encouraged to tell it, remembering a time thirty years in the past, when Joe had just bought them a navy-blue Chevrolet convertible and they were living in Washington DC, just before he went off to fight the North Koreans. The kids were

young and she can still recall putting them in the back seat and driving to Wanamaker's with the top down on a beautiful fall day, Jo Stafford singing on the radio:

*Fly the ocean in a silver plane
See the jungle when it's wet with rain
Just remember 'til you're home again
You belong to me.*

Just after the word "rain," Georgia begins to sing. This piano bar, unlike that more elegant relative where one sits and merely appreciates the music, is a piano bar where people sing, and it is during these moments, when a customer is singing and the pianist is accompanying

softly and the eyes of the crowd are bright with appreciation, that the piano bar fully lives up to its modest, but unique, potential. Here, by trusting in Jerome Kern and Larry Hart and Harold Arlen and Cole Porter, people can be led to find expression for some of their most inexpressible longings. *You are the breathless bush of evening*, Georgia can sing, or anyone, and in a pretty necklace of words communicate a memory or a confession or a promise, or a dream. A piano bar is, quite simply, a place where people can say the things that are on their minds in other people's words.

"Kristine!" Joe shouts to a woman

N I G H T L I F E

South Florida's piano bars are a various assortment, and photographed on these and adjacent pages are a four-bar mixture that will give you a taste of the selection. All models are local actors — a fun crowd,

and somehow just right for these settings.

Grand Bay Hotel
2669 South Bayshore Drive, Miami
858-9600

In the intimate upstairs lounge area of

Coconut Grove's newest and most resplendent hotel, a succession of pianists swap sittings at the Stegler up until three in the morning. In our own suitably resplendent photograph below right, Barbara Gouwens



Stan's, Ft. Lauderdale; fashions from Neiman-Marcus, credits page 64

just entering, a blonde and expressive woman who demonstrates a flair for the theatrical by tossing a kiss to Charles and her fur coat on a bar stool in one seamless gesture. "How is a martini like a woman's breast?" Kristine groans softly and deadpans the answer, "One's not enough and three's too many," to a chorus of appreciative cheers from around the bar. In one of those quicksilver flashes so characteristic of a piano bar, the mood has changed. Georgia has returned from her private revelry to join the crowd – it is crowded now, and with a high noon sense of expectancy – in spirited support of Charles' "Ain't Misbehavin'." Kristine

downs her first Manhattan, stubs out a Virginia Slim and lets fly: "No one to talk to, all by myself..." From somewhere around the bar, an admiring voice compares her to Betty Grable.

This seems a key phrase. In a piano bar, Betty Grable is still a reference point, the score to Jerome Kern's *Showboat* is a touching *kyrie* of feeling, and to "stay funny" is the consummation most devoutly to be wished. Flying in the face of time and style, refusing to give way to anything more modern than an electronic rhythm machine, the piano bar exists as a curious sandbar in the mainstream of American nightlife. Whether it will in time

be washed away by an increasing torrent of aerobics classes and Perrier water is a question to be considered – but not now, not when Charles is just ending his lovely version of "These Foolish Things (Remind Me of You)" and Kristine is warming up for her moment on the hand mike. Play it again, Charles. And waitress, another round for the guests.



Contributing editor D.B. Tipmore, whose "At Large in the Arts" column of profiles has appeared in MARQUEE since October 1982, will regularly cover nightlife beginning in the next issue.

N I G H T L I F E

(*Another World*, *Little Gloria...Happy at Last*), far left, wears silk chiffon by Judy Hornby; while Lee Krug (*The Guiding Light*, *Nobody's Perfect*) is the appreciative fellow in beige jacket and tan slacks; all clothes from Neiman

Marcus. Jon Archie, center (*Night in Heaven*, *Spring Break*, the upcoming "W.E.T.S." on tv), wearing Giorgio Armani's double-breasted navy blazer, seems understandably in the thrall of Ena Simpson (commercials

mostly — for Miller Beer, Puma Sportswear, etc.), who is draped in Marc Bouwen's white jersey dress. Again, all clothes are from Neiman-Marcus. Hair by Robert Stevenson, make-up by Stephen Farrar, both of Neiman-



The Grand Bay Hotel, Coconut Grove; fashions from Neiman-Marcus, credits above