

# Coffeeshouses: The New Generation



## By Michael Giltz

Pop music can be frightfully dull. Hit singles are played ad nauseam over the airwaves and on MTV. Eventually, even the songs you originally liked become tiresome and mundane.

Most bar bands also must resign themselves to playing covers of those very same Top 40 hits. The precious few that do get a chance to play original music often compete with noisy crowds and people who, when thinking of licks, do not think of guitars.

The person longing for direct contact with an artist, the person who is searching for meaningful music, the person who thinks thrash is trash, must think there is no hope.

But there is.

Tucked away in various corners of Gainesville is a string of coffeehouses; places where musicians can share their music with small, intimate, interested crowds. The emphasis is on acoustic music and the atmosphere is laid back and friendly.

Unencumbered by disinterested drinkers and commercial pressures, coffeehouses are Gainesville's alternative to alternative music.

On any given night, you're likely to hear everything from folk and rock classics to traditional Irish jigs — all spiced with healthy doses of original songs penned by the performers.

"The performers really seem to enjoy playing there. So, of course, that makes their performance all the better," said Doug Hornbeck, who frequently goes to the Acrosstown Coffeehouse.

Established about three years ago, the Acrosstown Coffeehouse is the longest-running and best-attended coffeehouse in town. On the first Sunday of every month, musicians perform for about 50-100 people on the stage of the Acrosstown Repertory Theatre.

Located at 619 South Main Street in the Baird Center, the Acrosstown requests a \$2.50 cover charge to defray the cost of rent and to pay the artists.

Despite this nominal honorarium, the coffeehouse is clearly a chance to play in front of an enthusiastic and receptive audience. This open, friendly atmosphere compels both the audience and the musicians to attend.

At the Acrosstown Coffeehouse, the roster of artists changes from month to month. It is usually comprised of solo musicians and groups who often provide backup for each other during their individual sets.

"Most musicians aren't competitive with each other, which makes it (playing in Gainesville) really nice. People play a lot in different formations," said Janet Rucker, a local musician who is a member of the popular Rhythm and Blues Revue.

"If I'm short a person, I can always find someone to fill in. For the money, of course,



but also because we all enjoy playing together," she added.

Rucker performed at the Acrosstown Coffeehouse in December. Her set was notable for her warm, clear voice, sharp originals and casual, friendly stage presence reminiscent of Carole King. She is indicative of the surprising and delightfully high quality of musicians who play at the coffeehouses.

In the past year, the Acrosstown Coffeehouse has been joined by two others. The Reunion Peace Center Coffeehouse, at 1240-1/2 NW 21st Avenue, in the office building behind the Pizza Hut on Northwest 13th Street, is held on the second and fourth Friday of every month.

The Third Friday Coffeehouse takes place at the United Church of Gainesville on Northwest 17th Street and Fifth Avenue. Both employ an "open mike" format.

David Beede is involved with the Reunion Peace Center and often acts as master

of ceremony for the coffeehouse. Because it is intended as a fund-raiser for the center, which is run on "a shoestring and a prayer," the musicians donate their services freely.

The goal of the Reunion Peace Center is to promote the idea of the internal peace movement as a necessary prerequisite for the external peace movement. Simply put, they believe that men must be at ease with themselves before they can deal effectively with the world around them.

"It's a real easy place to offer your music," Beede said. "The audience is open-hearted and friendly."

Like the Acrosstown Coffeehouse, the Reunion Peace Center features 15-20 minute sets featuring artists of various styles, with the rest of the evening open to any musician who wishes to play. Beede thinks this format is ideal.

"If someone's great, you're left wanting more," he explained. "If someone's not so great, well, you know they'll be gone in a few minutes."

As of now, the Reunion Peace Center Coffeehouse is strictly "open mike." Any musician who arrives early and signs up is given a chance to play. But, according to Beede, the coffeehouse is considering a change in format that would allow it to devote half an evening to "open mike" and half an evening to a featured act.

Judging from the support in the local community, the coffeehouses are fulfilling an important function. The Acrosstown Coffeehouse has a mailing list with more than 200 names and it grows every day.

"People will go out of their way to see it," said Bob Freeman, a production manager and one of the founders of the Acrosstown Repertory Theatre.

"Of course, there isn't as much acoustic music on campus as there used to be," noted Alan Agresti, business manager of the Acrosstown Coffeehouse. "Ten or 15 years ago, you could walk across campus and find people playing music all along the way."

Because of this absence, Agresti felt certain "there was a real need for this type of music."

A visit to Acrosstown on the first Sunday of any month bears him out. The theater is buzzing with a crowd of people, many of whom are regulars and know each other.

"The atmosphere is very warm and friendly," Hornbeck said. "The audiences are friendly to the performers and each other."

Musicians sit with friends and well-wishers until their set. Encouraging banter often passes between the crowd and the performers. Their positive attitudes, coupled with Acrosstown's intimate surroundings, make you feel perfectly at ease, as if you were sitting in someone's living room and listening to a friend pick out a tune on the guitar.



# Coffeehouse

from page 1

As of yet, however, this family includes very few UF students. Agresti confirms this. But, he said, "We'd certainly like to reach out to the students."

Students do not attend coffeehouses for two main reasons. First, advertising resources are simply too scarce, so many people don't even know the coffeehouses exist. Secondly, even if they have heard of the coffeehouses, students aren't quite sure what it would be like.

That's not surprising. As recently as four years ago, there were no coffeehouses. There were almost no venues for acoustic music at all. But there was Ed Hoovler.

Hoovler, who is a member of the Cloggers and the Burr Oak Ensemble, began the Acrosstown Coffeehouse and ran it for more than a year. As Agresti said, "He started it all."

Hoovler said, "The first impetus for the coffeehouse was when the Florida Arts Celebration was trying to get off the ground with a representation of everything that was going on in the arts."

Their plans included symphonies, art

festivals and the like. But Hoovler wanted to do something that would involve the entire community.

"I told them, 'This is the high-white stuff. Where's the music and activities for the people that aren't high-white?'"

Their polite disinterest only spurred him on.

"I got together with Malcolm Meekes," Hoovler continued. Meekes was one of the founding members of the cross-cultural, multiracial, avant-garde Acrosstown Repertory Theater, according to Hoovler.

"I said, 'Let's try an acoustic music night with music, poetry, stories, comedy, anything that's good.'"

"We did and the house was always full. And it was the mid-whites instead of the high-whites, you know what I mean? We were drawing a different audience, but not (the multiracial one he'd been hoping for)," Hoovler said.

Though it didn't live up to his idealistic goals, Hoovler considers the Acrosstown Coffeehouse a success. "It gives the people that are playing the music a chance for people to listen to them — not like in bars," he said.

For an example, he pointed to Janet

Rucker. "Janet has been playing around here for years, but seldom does she get a chance to have people just sit down and listen."

Rucker agrees. "The coffeehouse is the only place I get to play my original songs."

Thanks to recent growth, the Acrosstown Coffeehouse is becoming even more ambitious. Having incorporated, Agresti said it recently applied for status as a non-profit organization.

"Eventually," Agresti said, "we hope to sponsor concert series similar to those done by the Gainesville Friends of Jazz."

As for the moment, the coffeehouses are offering their small but loyal audiences something they can't find anywhere else. And, as Hoovler said, there's no lack of talented local artists who are ready and eager to perform.

"I've never been to a place with more musicians," he said.

"In some cities, there's one musician for every 10 potential audience members. But, in Gainesville, it seems like there are 10 musicians to every one audience member."

"There's not much of an outlet for

acoustic music, but there's a terrific audience for it," Freeman agreed. "Like the theater, people really like it when they get used to it."