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Boheme Cafe and Wine Bar Has an Open-Mike Night That Doesn't Suck?

By Shea Serrano

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Henry Dillard doesn't look like much. Scruffy, dirty-blond hair, 5'8", maybe 145 pounds, impossibly young and old-looking at the same time; he's hardly the rocker archetype we grew up with. Holding his black acoustic Takamine guitar as he waits his turn at **Boheme Cafe and Wine Bar's** (307 Fairview) open-mike night, Dillard looks more like a burgeoning musician's little brother than one himself. But then he begins. And wow.

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Boheme: Now with 50 percent more dudes in shorts.

Dillard's classically untrained voice is intermittently a graceful tenor, but mostly it's a nasal falsetto, all but guaranteeing his live shows will always surpass his recordings in quality. His awkward confidence and songwriting style make him comparable to, say, Weezer's Rivers Cuomo, except he's slightly less nihilistic and considerably less adept at growing facial hair.

Dillard's songs address life's more serious issues, like lactose intolerance. He sings about the finer points of milk being low in fat but high in evil, and how you're guilty of taking your bowl of cereal for granted. Audience howls, handclaps and laughter combine with drink sips, indicating the late-twenties/early-thirties crowd is impressed, though not entirely caught off-guard.

In a mere ten weeks, Boheme's open mike has established itself as solid, though not quite enough to rival (yet) the one Wayne Wilkerson hosts at **McGonigel's Mucky Duck** (2425 Norfolk). However, judging by the level of conversation during the performances, the spoiled crowd has already begun totally looking these acoustic-playing gift horses in their talented mouths.

A mostly polished, cover-free lineup of some of Houston's least-discussed talent will do that. Boheme Entertainment Director Dy'Lan Williams, a noteworthy weekly performer himself, counts himself at least three-fourths responsible.

"I'm a singer/songwriter myself," says Williams, "and about 75 percent of the regulars that play here I know personally. Friendships definitely played a key role in building our list."

Some of those aforementioned regulars include brokenhearted R&B crooner Chris Carrier, who somehow manages to sound cool even while adapting Montell Jordan's "This Is How We Do It." There's Andrew Karnavas, an introspective folk musician who occasionally sounds like a less arrogant Coldplay — and who probably made his parents super-pissed when he passed on medical school to pursue his music career — and Chris Crump, a gifted songwriter, guitarist and lead singer of local band Breyland.

Clearly, part of the allure of Boheme's Tuesday gathering — sandwiched between Greg Harper & the Gypsies' Monday residency and rotating Wednesday performers — is the venue itself, even if it isn't wholly complete.

Designed by owner Morgan Holleman, Boheme has an old-style antique flair and boasts acclaimed artist Michael Winn's personal touch in the form of a Venetian-stucco accent wall. A wraparound bar is situated squarely in the

middle of the main room (the secondary room is being built as a wine room/private room), and houses a couple of genuinely pleasant bartenders found ringing up more than 50 types of wines and other beverages.

Boheme's paintings are all for sale, and swapped out monthly to feature different artists; this month it's abstract impressionist Justin Garcia. Holleman says Foreign Cinema Nights, with movies projected on a wall in the currently unfinished patio, will begin in the next 90 days, with full cafe service to begin about a month before that. (If all goes according to plan, that is.) But even in its unfinished state, Boheme is a draw.

The bar's conundrum then becomes obvious: With an appealing atmosphere, and an even more appealing no-cover talent showcase, can Boheme really sustain a rewarding open mike? Won't all the good acts eventually get gobbled up, leaving Steve the Slam Poet and Joe the Juggler to fill the void?

Turns out that's sorta the point.

"The idea is to create the open mike so that these artists really *can* move on," says Williams. "Get gigs, sell CDs, get signed by record labels, whatever. The sad thing is that I think a lot of these artists are going to get discovered.

"I really do, but for now, we have such a good [pool] of talent it really shouldn't be missed."

Last Call

Billed as "Your Favorite Rapper's Favorite Magazine," Miami-based Southern rap journal *Ozone* announced earlier this month it will host its third annual awards show/music conference in Houston August 8 to 11 at the George R. Brown Convention Center. Perfect, because we were just thinking, "Hmmm...What's the easiest way to simultaneously make traffic worse *and* double the gun count in Houston?"

Complementing *Ozone's* further announcement that an award will be given in the late Pimp C's honor, several Houston artists were nominated for awards last week. The Nightfly would sincerely like to congratulate **UGK** for their nominations: Best Rap Album (*Underground Kingz*); Best Rap Group; Best Video ("International Player's Anthem"); Best Rap Artist (Bun B); Best Lyricist (Bun B); and Tastemaker Award (Pimp C).

Other locals up for statues include **Grit Boys** (Best Rap Group); **Trae** (Mixtape Monster, Pimp C Trillest Award); **Chamillionaire** (Best Mixtape, *Mixtape Messiah*; Best Video, "Hip Hop Police"); **TMI Boys** (Patiently Waiting); **Scarface** (Best Lyricist); and **Z-Ro** (Most Slept On Artist). See www.ozonemag.com for further - information.