

BREWING DREAMS

Ukuleles. Magic tricks. 'Somewhere My Love.' They're all part of the life at a Fort Worth coffeehouse that's also a theater, a gallery and a gathering place for artistic souls.

By Alyson Ward | Apr 9, 2006 | 3355 words, 0 images

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The night reaches its zenith when the uke players launch into *Beer Medley*, clearly one of their favorites. They get louder and more giddy, singing *Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun. Roll out the barrel, we've got the blues on the run.*

Dave puts down his bass, grinning.

"I don't think you could sing a depressing song on the ukulele if you tried."

John does try. He strums along and makes it up as he goes along. "Life is tough, it's really tough," he sings, plucking out a jaunty tune. "Lost my job today" He can't finish. He's laughing too hard.

Wednesday: Symphonic sounds, comedy clowns and magic abound

Schedules don't run like clockwork at Artistic Blends. Programs tend to start at 7-ish, 8-ish, whenever. But at straight up 7 p.m., Laura Cummings is seated primly at her Yamaha keyboard, launching into a wistful *Somewhere My Love*.

Laura, 62, is tiny, but you can't miss her in her leopard-print scarf and gold earrings, a white hat resting jauntily atop her red hair. ("My husband insisted I wear this hat. I don't normally wear a hat. But I found this one at an estate sale the other day for a dollar.")

The Wednesday-night crowd is sparse. It's not much more than a couple of regulars, including Franklin Smith, who comes by the coffeehouse every day it's open. He's not wearing it tonight, but on Wednesdays Franklin usually puts on a T-shirt he bought that says "Sounds of Laura." That's Laura's Web site, SoundsofLaura.com, and the phrase that's engraved on her keyboard's music stand.

The sounds of Laura sound like this: *Over the Rainbow*, *The Entertainer*, *La Vie en Rose*, *Whatever Will Be (Que Sera Sera)* and that haunting theme from *Somewhere in Time*. Her amp's not working tonight, which is causing her some distress, but everyone in the coffee shop can still hear her Yamaha just fine. "I played piano all my life, but I never played in public until I auditioned here," Laura says between sets, sifting through a pile of sheet music. A couple of years ago, she retired from teaching speech to college students, and at first she didn't know what she was going to do with herself. Then her husband dropped by Artistic Blends one day and saw a flier.

"He said, 'Laura, they're looking for entertainers,'" she says. Now she sets herself up on the little wooden stage every Wednesday night and plays for two hours straight.

"I feel," she says, sighing, "like for the first time in a long time, I have a place of belonging. You know -- a family."

In the live stage room in the back, things are louder and funnier. Well, sort of. It's Open Mike Night for amateur comedians, and a handful of them are lined up to give the small audience their best quips, one-

liners and impressions. Tonight they've waived the \$3 cover because the group's not big enough to offer a full-length show.

"Ladies! I know you'll be honest. How many of your husbands, how many of your boyfriends have trouble asking for directions?"

That's Peter Wolf, the comedian who organizes the monthly show. He's also a church counselor with two seminary degrees, but he and his clean comedy can be booked for corporate retreats and church fellowships.

"I do -- I have trouble asking for directions," Peter continues. "... But I solved the problem. I got married. Now I send my wife in for directions."

Gentle laughter rises from the crowd.

Peter's son Alex bounds onto the stage next. Alex has his own business card: "Alex Wolf. Comedian." Alex is 12.

He strolls up to the microphone and whispers into it: "Please laugh."

They do.

"Thank you."

Then Alex launches into a routine about the trials of being 12.

"I need an Xbox," he says. "But my parents are so old-school, it took forever to get one. They thought it was something pornographic."

Later: "Guys ... guys ... want to know a secret about girls?"

Beat.

"Me, too."

As comedy night wraps up, Daniel Rosales is hanging out near the counter in the lobby. He's a magician who performs here one Saturday a month, and he has a few paintings hanging in the gallery. A couple of the paintings -- get this -- do magic tricks. A polished showman, Daniel ushers a small group toward the gallery to see the trick paintings.

Here's one. David Blaine, the master illusionist who froze himself into a block of ice in Times Square a few years ago, peers out of the painting. He's holding a real playing card.

Daniel tells 16-year-old Sara Lehr to pick a card, any card. She ends up with the three of diamonds.

"OK, look at David Blaine in the eyes and think about the card you chose," he says. "He's looking at your eyes and he's going to figure this out. Now. I want you to reach up to the picture and take the card off."

Sara does. It's the three of diamonds. She gasps and starts to giggle. "That's really creepy."

It is. Seriously. How did he do that?

"I didn't do it -- David Blaine did it," Daniel tells the open-mouthed group before him. "And for \$150, someone can find out how. Yes, folks, this magic-trick painting is for *sale*."

Thursday: Penny Lane and the meaning of life

On the bill tonight: Cai Olsen, 11. She's a Fort Worth fifth-grader who plays a mean Beatles tune on the piano.

In a bright green Beatles T-shirt and jeans, her blond hair tied back neatly in two braids, Cai starts

things off with a crowd-pleaser.

"This is *Let It Be* by the Beatles," she mumbles sweetly into the microphone, then launches into the song, singing softly as her fingers stretch for the right keys.

Next up is a Lichner sonatina, followed by *Come Together* -- "joo joo eyeball" and all -- *Greensleeves*, *Yesterday* and an arrangement of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

"I was going to play *Get Back* on my guitar," Cai tells the smattering of coffee drinkers in the shop. "But I forgot my guitar at home."

She makes up for it by ending her set with a verse of *Let It Be*. In Portuguese.

Cai's been taking piano lessons for about four years.

"She cracks me up," Kenneth Brown says. When Cai submitted an online form asking to perform at Artistic Blends, Kenneth set her application aside in a pile of potentials. But about a week later, she sent him an e-mail asking for an audition. Cai was not going to be ignored. So he let her come in and play.

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