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Tale of two performing arts centers

Informal WOW Hall vs. staid Hult Center

By Cort Fernald

The corner of Lincoln St. and Eighth Ave. is dark and almost deserted. Cars occasionally cruise slowly past. A mangy yellow dog lies on the curb, his leather leash tied to the dull silver Volkswagon van parked at a strange sideways angle in front of the Woodmen of the World Hall.

It's Friday night and the hall, better known as WOW Hall, is having a concert with the Eugene bands Mithrandir and Tattoo.

The doors won't be opened until 9 p.m. and only a few people wait outside. A pair of punks suck incessantly on cigarettes and talk in tones that sound more like a moaning drawl. A babyfaced young woman with shoulder length brown hair set in large ringlets, wearing a bulky black-and-white sweater, red pants and red high-top sneakers, waits on the steps leading to the hall. A man and woman lean against the fender of a beat-up Ford. The man points to the sky. In the distance a searchlight shoots a column of white light that bumps along the blue-grey underside of the clouds.

He comments to her that the searchlight is for the "gala opening" of the Hult Center for the Performing Arts (formerly the Eugene Performing Arts Center) that same night. They laugh about the "gala opening."

The 50-year old WOW Hall is a squat sandy-colored stucco structure built in early National Guard Armory style. Jon Pincus, co-coordinator of WOW Hall activities, says the present hall was built on the site of another hall built in 1883. The now defunct Woodmen of the World labor organization took over the hall in 1906. Pincus says "ever since it has been the WOW Hall there have been dances."

According to Pincus, when the hall was run by the WOW, it was more of a community center with groups such as the Boy Scouts regularly using the facilities.



Photo by Mark Pynes

WOW Hall people consider themselves a complement to the Hult Center.

That emphasis on community use became a tradition at the WOW Hall.

"Democratically community controlled" is how Pincus describes the WOW Hall. Community members are encouraged to attend the periodic board of directors meetings.

Any group can rent the hall, says Pincus, any competent group. The week before the Mithrandir and Tattoo dance concert the Los Angeles "punk" band FEAR played at WOW Hall. The FEAR concert was sponsored by Modern Productions, a group independent of the WOW Hall board.

The resident dance troupe, Mary Oslund and Company, is among other dance groups such as the Wallflower Order performing there frequently. Though the WOW Hall is best known for concerts, Pincus says it holds more dance shows than concerts.

WOW Hall has even staged such events as a healing celebration and a solstice festival.

The doors open and the few people waiting outside leisurely climb the steps. In the ballroom the Mithrandir drummer warms up with short choppy riffs, while the guitar

player tunes his instrument.

A WOW Hall crowd is a mixture of Eugene lifestyles, from born-again hippies through the polyester crowd to the New Wave. Pincus says "what happens at WOW Hall is classless."

"Going to EPAC is a more formalized experience," Pincus says.

This Friday night crowd sharply contrasts the one attending the Hult Center opening. The satin tuxedos and sequined evening gowns there are different from the India shirts, denim jeans, and hoop skirts here. The ballroom doesn't reek of Chanel No. 5 and bay rum — it smells of petulie oil and strawberry incense.

Pincus is philosophical about the Hult Center and its claim of being a community center. "I think it's the most developed facility we've ever seen," he says. "EPAC is clearly a performance facility, clearly for the audience, clearly for the show."

He cites what he calls "the feeling of access" community members and groups have for WOW Hall as a major difference

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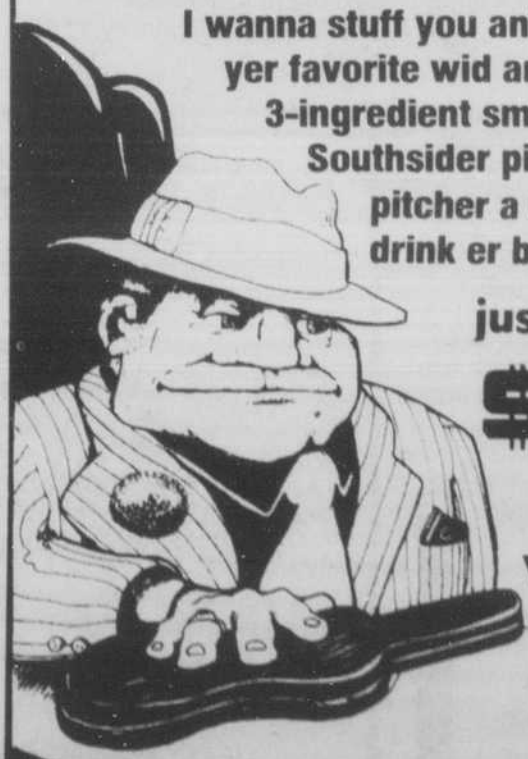
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