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MUSIC

Playing after hours

Portland gay pianist meets your standards—and then some

BY ANDY SIMON



PHOTOS BY OSCAR HUNTER



Matthew Kern plays Hobo's every Tuesday evening

It would be too much to say that a hush falls over Hobo's when Matthew Kern starts to play the restaurant's white baby grand piano. But the applause that grows as he moves through the set shows that people are paying attention.

There is no applause at Nordstrom, where Kern plays a black baby grand, but even there listeners respond: A seasoned shopper takes a break, sits on one of the nearby cushioned benches, closes her eyes and basks in the music; a big, burly guy ascends the adjacent escalator, waving his hand gracefully in time to the beat.

For the past four years people have been listening to Kern all over town: at Nordstrom, at Hobo's, on board the Portland Spirit, at other hotels and restaurants, at fund-raising events and private parties. Now, thanks to his newly released CD, *afterhours*, they can hear his music at home, too.

Kern admits he'd like to play more often in settings where people have come—and even paid good money—specifically to hear his music. But he has no regrets about playing in venues where his music is a backdrop for other activities.

For one thing, playing in public places is anything but invisible and anonymous. He has lots of fans who come to hear him regularly. They often encourage him, offer advice, give him feedback. The CD is a direct result of ongoing urging by his fans.

For another thing, Kern can think of worse things to do than to make a living by beautifying the environment in which people live. He strives to set a mood that serves as an antidote to the harshness and frenzy so prevalent in today's world. "If you have a gift that brings people pleasure, that's its own reward," he says simply.

And, finally, doing the sort of regular work he does enables him to make a living solely through music. Kern's day job is house pianist at Nordstrom. He recognizes how fortunate he is.

Though Kern enjoys that day job and is grateful for the opportunity the store provides him, his favorite place is Hobo's. Partly, he just likes the place itself. He finds it welcoming and physically beautiful.

And playing there is rewarding as well. People appreciate the style, the era he draws from, the tone he tries to set. "Sometimes sitting at that wonderful white piano," he says, "I feel like I'm in a 1940s movie or in an old-fashioned supper club."

Kern started playing piano at 3 years old when his parents enrolled him in a group course for young children. Neither Mom nor Dad are musicians themselves, so he is especially grateful they noticed his talent and started him on private lessons when he was 6.

"My parents were a big influence; they always encouraged me, but they also listened to a lot of music." He describes their taste as retro: "When I was growing up [the 1980s], they were

listening to Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald and Oscar Peterson." The music from that era, which Kern calls standards, "has always felt like home to me." And it is the backbone of his repertoire.

But he draws on many influences and many eras, as evidenced by the selection on *afterhours*. He describes his style of music as gentle, sensual jazz, mentioning Shirley Horn and Bill Evans as major piano influences. But he is also drawn to the music of Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder and Elton John.

Kern is pleased with how *afterhours* turned out, although his original goal was to make a disk of "makeout" music. "OK, romantic dinner music," he revises. "It wound up moodier—a little darker. It moved from the romantic to the intimate."

The CD has been getting airplay on KMHD-FM and KINK-FM and is available in record stores. (Nordstrom, naturally, has been selling quite a few copies.)

When Kern thinks about his future as a musician, it includes more recording and performing with others, maybe putting together a trio, doing more concert performances. He'd also like to work some on incorporating his singing into more of his appearances.

For now, though, he's satisfied.

Kern especially likes playing at private parties celebrating 50th or 60th wedding anniversaries, enjoying the response he gets from people who heard the songs he's playing now—his standards—for the first time when they were new, when they were first being played on the radio.

That's probably a major factor in Kern's success as a musician: He respects his audience. He reaches out to them. He wants to please them. He usually succeeds. **JO**

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