



Welcome to the Jungle

Eugene's new club draws big names and big crowds — BY EMMA JUHLIN

The air is thick with sweaty condensation and the girl behind me beats my head like a bongo drum. On this May night, it already feels like the high heat of summer. To my front stands a man as thick as he is wide who repeatedly whips and rings out his sweaty bandana in my face. But it takes a lot more

than that to bring down the mood at an Ozomatli concert, a band known as much for its vivacious onstage presence as its funky Latin licks flavored with hip hop.

Promoting the new album *Street Signs*, in stores June 22, the Los Angeles-based band brought its full-bodied, percussion-rich sound to the stage at Eugene's club The Jungle

Tuesday night. But this may be the first show I've been to where the venue upstaged the band.

With its giant boa constrictor coiled around a running waterfall, The Jungle cries out for attention more than any pampered musician — and it works. Nets dressed in leaves hang from the ceiling, giving the illusion of a tree canopy overhead. The straw and leaves lining the bar take me back to the Hawaiian hut where Tom Cruise juggled bottles making Piña Coladas in *Cocktail*. A dance pole stands on a small platform by the sound stage, beckoning young girls to shake what their mamas gave them. People of all ages pack their sweaty bodies together on the dance floor and manage to flail their arms in their one square foot of room. The Jungle's elaborate décor almost makes you forget to drink.

"We want to keep the emphasis away from power drinking and more toward socializing," says Doung Renner, co-owner of both The Jungle and Joe's Bar and Grill.

It wasn't long ago that the venue was the minors' club The Annex. Renner and his four equal partners decided to vamp up the club and change the name when they got their liquor license to convince people there was a bar.

"People were still under the impression it was an underage club," says Renner. Renner met his first partner, Alexandra Sianis, when he bartended at Joe's during college. Sianis's family owned Joe's and she was Renner's manager when he bartended there. The two became partners, managing Joe's and subleasing the space that is now The Jungle. After two failed attempts to get the venue going, Sianis and Renner opened The Annex in 2002, which was a quick success. They kept the venue underage for just over one year, and then closed for a month and a half to remodel.

The finished product accommodates all ages shows with a beer garden in the back like Portland's Crystal Ballroom, which Sianis says she used as a model. The bar area is a far cry, however, from the roped off, sticky-floored beer gardens of the Crystal Ballroom and its contemporaries. Red velour curved couches create circles for close conversation and glow in the dark stars adorn the ceiling.

The bar separating the dance floor from the beer gardens is out of service during all ages shows and a small bar opens in the back corner, but it reopens for 21 and over shows. The bar creates a gap in the crowd, providing an excellent view of the stage from the back.

Nights without a show happening are still exciting, says Sianis. Friday and Saturday nights showcase DJ George from Portland's Jammin 95.5, who was voted Portland's best DJ two years in a row. On those nights, more than 600 people (700 is capacity) come to dance and drink Renner's "secret recipe" of jungle juice.

Sianis says people often pop into Joe's to eat "Papa's soul food" and then head over to The Jungle. Some nights Papa, the chef at Joe's, will play some funk, soul and R&B with his band, Papa's Soul Kitchen. And every night, Renner, Sianis or one of their partners will be there.

"We're definitely hands-on owners," says Sianis, who sold tickets on Ozomatli night. "We're here every show."

It's not unusual for The Jungle to book well-known bands like Ozomatli, despite its size and new status. The reason is Jeff Gaulton of Jaguar Productions. Gaulton's experience as a promoter for more than 20 years helps him get bands coming up the I-5 corridor to stop in Eugene. He books shows for the 4th and B Theater in San Diego, and when bands head up to Portland and Seattle for Friday and Saturday night shows, he gets them to play weeknight shows at The Jungle. He says the people of Eugene crowd in for every show any night of the week.

"The response from the people has been incredible," says Gaulton, who met Sianis when he owned a small business in Springfield. When Sianis and Renner were trying to book shows for The Annex, Sianis asked him for advice, and he came on board as their promoter.

"It's an exciting time to be part of a venue," Gaulton says, "to build something; to mold something." He says the bands that play The Jungle love it and recommend it to other bands, like upcoming Toots and the Maytals with Steel Pulse.

"Ozomatli had a great time," says Gaulton. ew

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