



# SWIMMING IN THE BARMUDA TRIANGLE

**A week (and change) in the downtown bar scene** BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

**F**or approximately eight hours out of the day, downtown Eugene isn't actually dead. It's just, to borrow a timeless phrase, mostly dead — and that's if you use a generous definition of "mostly." We lack shopping. We could use more restaurants. Cafés are cropping up, though, and there are good places to buy books. But what we have in abundance are bars. People underestimate bars, especially those that are hard to see into. Lord only knows what goes on in them, right? Well, after a week (give or take a few days) spent hopping from one bar to the next, I'm here to tell you: Downtown Eugene's nightlife is vibrant, varied, essential, welcoming and, in the just the right amounts, strange and charming. Downtown's bars are full of students, artists, musicians, writers, service industry folk, ordinary guys who just want a beer, barely legal drinkers celebrating birthdays and, as Chuck Adams' sidebar explains, a generous handful of booty-shakers. Don't be afraid. Just stroll past the kids on the sidewalk — the ones playing beat-up guitars and putting cigarettes in the mouth of that cute little bear sculpture — and head on in.

## FRIDAY

This particular evening, the magic hour seems to hit **Davis'** just as 11 pm rolls in. Before then, the place is more full than not, but slightly mellow; the music is fit for a quiet scene in a James Bond flick: a little sultry, a little mellow, priming for a seduction. We sit at the bar talking about food and watching the bartenders, licking our fingers to remove the dripping remnants of sugared rims. But as the hour changes over, the music shifts; aggressive beats and vocals drag the melodies into hip hop territory as the clientele thickens and the number of girls in black strappy tops is equaled by the number of young men in hoodies. **Davis'** does one of the best jobs of segueing into nighttime; at lunch, you'll see city employees, tattooed roller girls and, er, a pair of *EW* writers postponing deadlines with a bottle of wine, all sharing a space that feels, with the sun pouring in, like one spacious room. At night, the pockets of space — the corner with two cozy booths; the long, welcoming bar; the simple tables beneath hanging metal light fixtures — divide themselves more definitely, and a few people slip off to the relative quiet of the side room. You make a space for yourself here,



Sophie Navarro drawing at the bar at John Henry's



and how you fill it is up to you.

## SATURDAY

At the **Horsehead**, everything makes you laugh. In a good way. We order fried pickles, of course, and find they've changed the way they're made: slices instead of wedges. "Less pickle, more fry," my companion observes. Three girls with fashion-victim purses (gold straps, quilted sides) walk in and out of the pool room. Eventually, they stop nearby, and whenever I look at them, I see one laughing in mock shock, her hand over her mouth. I point this out to my fellow drinker, who tells me, "They're talking about discharge. That could account for that face." Later, a wall of middle-aged men stands between us and the pool table. We dub the group "Jonathan Wall-Ass" and wish fervently that they'd move.

The Horsehead boasts what might be Eugene's best indoor people watching. Girls in various gauges of fishnet tights teeter between the bar and the back smoking patio, which is newly enclosed by green shrubs rather than the old, weather-beaten fence. Men in tie-dye shoot pool with a girl a foot taller than any of them; she's got the kind of warm friendliness that makes her easy to joke around with even though we've never seen her before and probably never will again. A thirtysomething guy with long brown hair meanders slowly from one room to the next, and we rack

our brains trying to figure out why he looks familiar. "He looks like Dan from *Deadwood!*" I finally say. My companion shakes his head. He does look like *Deadwood* Dan, but he also works at a local guitar shop.

When *Deadwood* Dan adds his name to the pool list, we watch silently, then stare at each other as he chalks each letter. D — A — N.

## SUNDAY

Sunday is a day of rest. Also basketball. It's like religion. But different.

## MONDAY

We are terrible concertgoers. We make careful plans to arrive just on time to see whoever we want to see, and we always mess up. We walk into **John Henry's** to find Ingrid Michaelson already on stage — and the place packed. Last May, there were just enough people here for Michaelson's show to line the bar and the tables set up on the dance floor. We estimate there are at least four times as many people in the dark bar tonight. Up front, there are fans who know every word. At the bar, we discuss the importance of catchiness and watch artist Sophie Navarro draw in her sketchbook. In the back, there are people playing pool. There are always people playing pool in the back of John Henry's, enjoying the way the music mutes itself as it hits the fans by the bar and the tiered rows of booths. Once upon a time, John Henry's was open even when they didn't have events, the pinball table and frequently free pool creating a siren song in combination with the strong drinks and the perfect dive-bar atmosphere. Now, I'm only at John Henry's for a show now and then. I look at the angled ceiling, plastered with posters above the bar, and imagine I'm in the top of a giant warehouse in a city somewhere. I like this idea.

Michaelson finishes, and the headliner hasn't half her personality. We make an early exit and find, at home, that our clothes smell of smoke. It's that kind of bar. I like that kind of bar.

## TUESDAY

At 8-ish on a Tuesday, **Jameson's** is more empty than not, but they're playing the stereo to a fuller bar. It seems to be metal night: Metallica, songs I faintly remember from years past ... and Ugly Kid Joe? I'm pretty sure I've never heard this song in public before. My colleague Chuck has never heard it before, period. We're here after a Tuesday evening fencing class, desperate for sustenance. Around the perfectly-lit space, small groups stand and chatter in between turns at darts, hover outside on the patio for a smoke or lounge on the small group of couches by the door. Jameson's is dominated by its bar and, like most of the bars downtown, decorated heavily with red. It's hard to pay attention, though I know I ought to. I'm starving, and then, when a third colleague arrives, I'm distracted by talking about work. I'm at a bar for work, and I'm talking about work. I need to get out more.

## WEDNESDAY

G48 is my nemesis. I've made a total amateur bingo player's move: I've cleared my card before the potential winner has had her card checked. When she's off by a square, the first number the bingo calls is G48, which, naturally, is the number I needed to win. I curse mightily and rue the bingo gods.

Bingo Night at **Eugene City Brewery**