

GLAM NIGHTS AT BEAUTY BAR

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Publication Date: April 13, 2006 Page: 08 Section: XLEnt Edition: Final

After parking on 10th Street, I turned toward Red River and started walking. Radiohead was playing on the Stubb's speakers, and the streets were laden with people coming and going to shows, chatting, bustling, ambling away.

I hung a left on Seventh Street and passed the Side Bar and the new club, Red 7, where a couple of guys tried to persuade me to come in. I declined and kept walking, stopping only when I reached the wide open space with the small iron railing between Red 7 and an Asian restaurant.

My friend Matt was already there, drinking free beer, much to his delight. It was the grand opening for the Austin location of the multicity chain of Beauty Bars, and for the first hour or so that we were there, the beer and vodka were free.

We propped ourselves on the beauty-parlor chairs along one wall, though we didn't lower the '60s-style-wash-and-set hair dryers. The young waitress replaced our empties with full drinks, which we promptly slid on the ledge behind the chairs, and resumed watching people arrive and stride across the checked linoleum floor.

Matt recognized one of the guys from the local band Small Stars and the crowd itself seemed to veer toward rock star chic: lots of bedhead and carefully chosen T-shirts mixed with the glam insouciance of twenty- and thirtysomething energy. The dim lights, the mirror ball and the energy relaxed us into intimate conversation — the kind possible between friends of 15 years sipping free beer.

We stumbled onto a kind of photo shoot a few nights later in the sunken living room section of Beauty Bar, and 30 or so people celebrating someone's birthday (big yummy-looking cake included). Matt, wearing a hip cowboy shirt with pearl buttons the bartender admired, and I (geeked out in big glasses and my English teacher garb) pondered how the bar kept seeming to get empty and full, then empty and full. It wasn't till we were leaving that we realized the bar's population wasn't actually waxing and waning; rather many folks were just stepping out to the front area to smoke.

Austinites might know the spanking-new Beauty Bar from its recent SXSW parties or from visits to Beauty Bars in other cities (including New York City, San Francisco, Las Vegas and San Diego). Or perhaps from its Austin location's new MySpace profile: "Gender: Female; Status: Swinger; Age: 100; Sign: Pisces; Who I'd like to meet: thirsty people in need of a manicure and their friends who like to watch."

Yes, you can procure manicures at the Beauty Bar. On that opening night, just a few feet away from the hair dryer chairs, a woman filed, buffed and polished interested customers. (Manicures are available between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m. for \$5; for \$10, you earn a manicure

and a specialty martini). Or you can listen to DJs: Opening night we heard a tremendous one whose name is completely unprintable here.

Despite the hip music, few people were dancing. Rather, most stood around, talking and watching — the bar sports lots of wide open space right now, while it waits for some new furniture to be completed at the upholsterer's. But we landed early and reserved seats. The sunken living room seats about 25; a dozen stools at the bar and a half-dozen salon-and-hair-dryer chairs along one wall pretty much sum the rest of the seating. But the bar felt more like a place to mingle. Chat. Slide and slip perhaps.

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