

Bar, Bath and Beyond at Donn's

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The next time I go to Donn's Depot, I'm just going to hang out in the bathroom. My waitress said that if I decided to camp out there, she'd stop by and see if my drink needed refilling. The bathroom, in case you were wondering, is that cool.

Here's the story: The building that houses Donn's Depot was transported, via train tracks, from McNeil, Texas, to Fifth Street at West Lynn Street about 30 years ago. It used to be a train station. Now, it's a bar.

The owners added on to the building, so it's a big but cozy place -- there's the dance floor, the piano room and the sitting area where people watch sports on a large-screen TV. Lots of choices, but the open floor plan guarantees you can see just about everywhere from just about anywhere. The office next door is an old railcar, which doubles as a wall for the bar. The women's bathroom, on the other hand, is an actual caboose, a fabulous red shag caboose. There, you'll find red striped wallpaper and handmade little red curtains covering the windows. Three small stalls take up half the caboose; the other half consists of a run of seats, a broken-in leather couch and red shag carpeting -- which feels like Raggedy Ann's hair and creeps up walls and over the tops of cupboards and various and sundry places. It's beyond fabulous. The low, built-in cupboards, the ones that held "coal" and "buckets" and, unaccountably, "dope," have red shag on the top that looks like it would be plenty comfortable to sit on, though I haven't tried that particular seat myself. Of course, there's more to Donn's than the bathroom, though a waitress informed me that women come from far and near just to run in and use the facilities. (The men's, by the way, is reported to be very ordinary, although it does have carpet, which seems like a bad, bad idea.) Donn's has live music most nights and theme evenings such as " '50s Night," which is coming up Feb. 3. And there's always dancing. Most of the folks on the floor are people who were dancing back when every night was '50s Night. Donn's crowd tends to be older; it's one of the few bars in Austin with a healthy proportion of silver hair. People in their 40s, 50s, 60s and even 70s often dominate the dance floor, while the youngsters in their 20s and 30s look on in admiration. (We don't know how to dance like that . . .)

One Friday night, watching couples spin around -- the women all decked out, some wearing corsages -- reminded me of what I'd always imagined an Elks Lodge dance would be like. I've never been to an Elks Lodge -- I don't even know if the Elks have dances -- but my grandfather was an Elk, and Donn's looks like the place I always pictured him going, the kind of place he'd very occasionally take my grandmother in her wonderful lemon-yellow taffeta and crinoline dress (which is now in my closet). Plus, on my most recent trip to Donn's, a Crockpot on a fold-up table and a plastic tub full of Goldfish trail mix were open to all hungry takers. Matt Adelman, owner Donn Adelman's son, says that sometimes folks just like to bring a covered dish to share -- queso or chili or the like. Which is very unpretentious and small-town friendly of them -- and almost enough reason to abandon the bathroom for the bar.

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Donn's Depot Piano Bar & Saloon: 1600 W. Fifth St., 478-0336.

Hours: Monday-Friday 2 p.m.-2 a.m.; Saturday 6 p.m.-2 a.m.; closed Sunday.