

THE GANG'S ALL HERE AT PETE'S PIANO BAR
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Here, by some miracle, the war
of troubled passions calls a truce;
here we poor, too, receive our share of riches,
which is the fragrance of the lemons.

I woke up thinking about Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale's "The Lemons." It's about beauty, class, cities -- so many things. But I thought only of the respite of the lemons. My birthday is in December, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I often find myself reflective this time of the year; I'm a year older, I'm seeing people I see only at the holidays, the New Year is coming. I think about what have I done, what I want still to do, and what has value.

This year has been one of silliness for me -- wig nights and cape nights and day trips and dominoes and adventures with extraordinary people. If the people you're with are right, everything is fun.

I was watching the crowd at Pete's Dueling Piano Bar on Sixth Street the other night. Some looked like conventioners and some looked like they were on dates and some I couldn't figure out at all, but they all looked like they were enjoying themselves and the company they were keeping.

Two pianists kibitz, sing and play off and with each other on a stage with two baby grands. Patrons write song names on cocktail napkins, proffer tips to the pianists to play their tunes. (Singalong favorites such as "Sweet Home Alabama," for example, or "Chantilly Lace" seemed to dominate -- stuff everyone can sing, too.) Sometimes a battle ensues, with people adding money to get their song played (I witnessed a battle between "Chantilly Lace" and "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard" -- \$8 for "Me and Julio," then \$11 for "Chantilly" and so on). I have it on good authority (read: hearsay) that there have been serious competitions, like between the UT and A&M fight songs, that left the patrons several hundred dollars poorer.

Of course, the important part of all this is that people are singing together. There's something fun about being with a good group of folks, ordering a few cocktails, and singing foolishly, loudly and off-key. People in ties, people in jeans, people waiting for drinks -- they looked like they were having a good time. And the piano players, with their patter and quips, kept the energy level up.

Pete's has been around in one form or another since 1992 (and has since branched out to other Texas cities) and the long hall that houses it is big enough to accommodate groups and small enough to provide a sense of community. It's kinda like a wedding reception hall -- the singalongs actually feel akin to a number of wedding receptions I've been to, minus the patter. (And the food and the bride.) The seats are stationed around the stage,

and it's possible, if you get there a little late, that the only place to sit will be a table with an excellent view of a pianist's back. Fortunately, that doesn't impede the sound.

I went to Pete's that night with good people. It was late, we were tired, and really I would have been just as happy to go home to bed. But some of my friends were there to keep me company as I worked on this column. They were funny and charming, supportive and easy to be with. I laughed a lot. They were -- are -- all of them, my lemons.

(box)

Pete's Dueling Piano Bar. 421 E. Sixth St. 472-7383.