

Divided Sky keeps the beat alive in Meyers



The New Thoreaus play at Divided Sky on June 8.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

MEYERS – They say music is the universal language.

If that's indeed true, then Divided Sky would be understood by many to be a unifying business in the Tahoe region. The restaurant-bar located above the Downtown Café west of South Lake Tahoe has brought in several musical acts during the 10-plus years it has been open, and it shows no signs of slowing down.

“We have not survived off our music, but people associate us with music,” owner Brian Levy told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Every year we feel a little busier. Fortunately, people took to it right off the bat.”

Levy admits milestones in years one, three and then 10 prompted him to evaluate the business, which began with three staffers. Now eight people work there.

“We thought: Well, we made it to one year, then three. Then, we felt established at 10 years,” he said.

But there's no letting the guard down. He believes in "keeping the game up."

The customer base on a given weekend night may range significantly from 20 to 100 people for the after-dinner bands, which often take the small stage around 9 or 10pm. (Hint: get there at a decent hour to be assured a seat. Or, stand in the middle of the room and sway with others.)

Small, nightclub lights are strung around the room. By the time a band takes the stage, dinner tables are moved to make room for those who want to dance or stand. A curtain is hung behind the band to give it that cozy look – and keep the neon lights from being a distraction.

The bar is busy and some of the conversations in the booths are so focused the music serves as background for a locals' gathering. The place has Meyers written all over it.

The locals' joint has developed such a reputation that bands seek it out to play there. Levy will get at least a few emails a week from prospective bands looking to simply cash in on the small bar cover at the door. It averages \$5 to \$10. It appears the venue is small enough for startup bands with no fan base.



Divided Sky owner Brian Levy mixes music, food and drinks into a successful business in Meyers.

These bands now have other venues to play in around town like Lakeview Commons on Thursday night. And, Levy notes this.

“Now we have the luxury of sorting through them. The bands will play for the door – enough to pay for their gas,” Levy said. One band went quasi professional. ALO – known to cater to the hippie-beatnik circuit – got its start at Divided Sky and now plays larger arenas.

“We’re waiting for the day Bob Dylan comes in to play,” Levy joked.

Stranger things have happened. Legendary singer-songwriter Van Morrison spent years popping in to small pubs in San Francisco.

“These aren’t the bands making a living of this, but it’s what they love to do,” Levy said.

Indeed, this is how guitar-banjo player Ian Patton may characterize his band that played there this month.

The New Thoreaus, as in writer Henry David, consist of a group of special education teachers from Oakland who play music when they’re out of school for the summer. As English majors, the band of five members values reading. There’s one philosophy major.

A barefoot Patton, who leads the indie-folk band with a bluegrass twist, returned to the South Shore with his wife, stand-up bass player Lauren Hernig. While they played into the hours of the night, their daughter, 2-year-old Izola, was being babysat by his father who still lives in Tahoe.

Levy could relate. His parents were in town to witness his baby (the business) thriving.

Patton told *Lake Tahoe News* he fondly recalls going to Divided Sky when he lived here seven years ago. He and his wife enjoyed seeing Victor Barnes Insurgent Bluegrass. A year

later, his band formed in Oakland. Now, bluegrass has experienced a resurgence – with “Mumford and Sons” and “Lumineers” leading the airwaves.

“It’s great to hear that type of music on the radio. Now you can hear bluegrass on four different stations (in the Bay Area),” he said. Still, he admits the band aims for an original sound, with a chance to make its own path.

Like Levy, Patton and the rest of the New Thoreaus are enjoying relative success these days. The band has a debut album, “Neon Americana”, just released this year.

“When we started, I didn’t think we’d get this far,” Patton said.

In the meantime, the band seeks to remember its roots. To Patton, that means coming back to Tahoe, where he met his wife and developed a love of music.

“(Divided Sky) has a sentimental place in my heart. It’s where I always wanted to play,” Patton said.

The music venue’s success has not gone unnoticed. The Meyers Community Alliance, which is responsible for a genuine revival of the western South Shore enclave, has gotten in on the act.

“There are many ways to build a community. The easiest way is through music,” said Josh Welch of the Alliance.

Apparently, the strategy has worked for Divided Sky, according to longtime Tahoe resident Julie Threewit.

“The Divided Sky is one of the reasons we are lucky to call Meyers home. It is one of my favorite places to see live music,” Threewit said, also mentioning local bands that have either gotten their start there or made it part of their concert circuit. They are Blue Turtle Seduction – a Tahoe favorite, Huckle, Wisebirds, Trespassers, Delta Nove and more recently Birds of Chicago. “As we travel, we look for the

local bar that feels like the Divided Sky; the place where locals meet to visit, eat and hear great music – where visitors feel comfortable and welcome. Brian (Levy) told us if we did that, we'd always feel like we were home.”

And more events are on tap for all to experience those homespun values.

Divided Sky is hosting a mountain bike festival on Aug. 18 – with demonstrations, a shuttle, beer garden and a stage where bands can play.