

Ethnography Field Notes of Little Rock White Water Tavern Field Notes

By Y. Hope Osborn

The address for White Water Tavern at 7th and Thayer is little help at all in finding this out of the way little place. I traveled up and down 7th a couple of times before a friend told me to take Coates off 7th to find Thayer. Lo and behold, there was this little street running between a growth-covered cinder block wall, which completely hid the bar, and an overgrown lot. When I turned down Thayer, I was finally able to see the dimly glowing sign for the White Water Tavern and Restaurant, the white Christmas lights strung along the roof line providing the only light to the area, and the gravel lot I supposed was used for parking. White Water Tavern is stuck in the middle of a residential area far away from the uninformed eye. The surroundings and look of the building did not elevate my expectations.

I went to the White Water Tavern on September 30, 2011, on a Friday night, arriving about 8:30pm. Upon entering the narrow, open doorways, I was aware of a low murmur of voices coming from the high, well-worn bar to my left and of the dim light cast by the Christmas lights that were also used to light the interior. Every one of the about seven unmatched and well-used bar stools were being used by several men of varying ages and casual dress while the tables and chairs lined up in the rest of the room were empty. When I sat down on an aluminum frame chair at one of the rickety, wooden tables, I noticed, next to the ceiling, in a corner, a television tuned to a sports program or channel to which nobody was paying any attention. Many ceiling fans were keeping up a constant flow of air between the front and back doors which were open. The walls were mostly covered by posters and flyers of what I supposed were bands, including a Van Zandt poster, but the décor also included a large campaign poster for Dwight David Honeycutt for Conway School Board, a pencil drawing of three men hunched over a bar, and a mirror with the Miller Lite logo blazoned across it. To one side, is a brightly colored and brilliantly lit up juke box. Floor to ceiling, the place is wood.

The finish, if there ever was any, is gone from the many, perhaps, thousands of people who have passed through here in the White Water Tavern's history. A smell that is hard to identify lingers in the air – stale and musty, like old, dirty laundry. A mix of country and classic rock music is playing.

I ordered a Merlot from the young man in black pants and t-shirt tending the bar, and it surprised a young lady who had come in by then that they even had wine. The wine actually came in a wine glass and was dispensed from a dubious looking box sitting on the counter. I was surprised to get the wine in a wine glass, because I had seen everyone drinking from little opaque plastic cups. Later when I uncertainly ordered a Bay Breeze, having seen juices being poured at the bar, the bartender did not know what it was. I told him it was half vodka and half pineapple and cranberry juice. He didn't have pineapple juice, but he had orange juice, so he made me a Sea Breeze instead. As the night wore on, people's plastic cups would turn more and more to beer bottles and glasses.

By 9pm, I was wondering if there was going to be any kind of turn out for the opening act that was supposed to be at 9:30 or for the main act of Bonnie Montgomery and Montgomery Trucking at 10pm. It wasn't exactly hopping with people. By then, my friend, Josh, who had given me directions earlier, had arrived, and by 9:30pm a band had started setting up on the stage set up in the corner consisting of a little raised area in the floor with an Arkansas flag for a backdrop. A friend of Josh's happened to show up with his girlfriend, and I was able to get a more informed idea of the place.

Josh's friend frequented the place, though this was the first time he had taken his girlfriend. He had come just to get out and listen to some music. Normally, he came with a bunch of guys, and they would "get drunk and dance around." He liked the atmosphere and the music. He said the "drinks are cheap and the atmosphere is good." He informed me that some big time bands had started here. He also said that the place is usually packed, and it was not unusual to see people drinking from pitchers. He said if I wanted to see some interesting, if

crude, artwork I should check out the fence outside. According to him, as he demonstrated with his hand, the smoke in here used to be so thick you could “cut it with a butter knife.”

As my friend, Josh, said, “Punctuality is not the band’s strong suit.” Bonnie and her band get started after 10:30pm, having well-fortified themselves with alcohol, and having made sure to have drinks on hand on the stage. Bonnie, wearing a plaid shirt tied at the waist over a short mutedly colored dress, has an acoustic guitar. The gentleman at her right is wearing a vest over a shirt and jeans and is playing an electric guitar. A bass player completes the band.

Bonnie starts off with an enthusiastic “Hello, White Water Tavern!” “I wish I was in the land of cotton... old times there I’ve forgotten” choruses the first song. True to the “Dixie Land” theme, the song has the old folksy, country sound of old country and western music. Bonnie’s voice is melodic and true, pleasing to my ear. The song, like most of the songs they play that night, has a quick pace. They are the sort of songs that make you want to get up and dance a country two- step. The songs, as country songs often do, speak of trouble with lovers. One, according to Bonnie, is a “song about an asshole.” Despite the crass description and subject, I am drawn by Bonnie’s poetic turn of phrasing – “standing there like a sailor lost at sea.”

Bonnie is inspired by things she has seen, such as crop-dusting over the stretch of interstate between Little Rock and Memphis, by people such as Dolly Parton from whose repertoire Bonnie borrows a song, and by places farther off, such as New York. Her song about New York is simple but effective in painting a picture... “went way up to New York, drank my wine and pulled out the cork...in winter they say that it snows, enough to make your nose cold...lots and lots of bars, all kinds of cars...bridges as high as the sky.”

By the time, Bonnie is several songs into the set, the crowd in the bar has grown, explaining why, earlier, the bartenders moved out tables and chairs. People are sitting at the tables and bar, but most people are standing, holding beer bottles and listening to the band. Many women position themselves close to the stage and are dancing and swaying. The applause doesn’t seem enthusiastic, but the bodily response belies the crowd’s attraction to the band.

When the song about New York is finished, Bonnie announces that the band Big Silver will be playing next. As much as I have, surprisingly, enjoyed the music, I have had my fill of country music for the night, it being a genre I don't usually particularly like. People continue to hang around as I close my tab and thread my way through the crowd to the door. It seems everyone else is prepared to make a late night of it, listening to music, cheered by liquor at the White Water Tavern.