



Bobby McKey's

Dueling Piano Bar Has Fought the Good Fight and Stayed Open

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

There's a great scene in "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" where gumshoe detective Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins) walks into a private nightclub in 1940s Los Angeles and quickly learns that it is a dueling piano bar. And the two musicians tickling the ivories are hurling insults at each other on stage? Rival animated fowl Daffy Duck of Warner Bros. cartoon fame and Disney's legendary Donald Duck.

"This is the last time I work with someone with a speech impediment!" Daffy famously cracked wise.

Bobby McKey's Dueling Piano Bar at the National Harbor in Oxon Hill, MD, isn't quite that kooky. But the entertainment value is certainly just as high. Marketing

Manager Beth Ketchum remarked during a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*, "This is a really unique concept. The name is just a little misleading. Our piano players don't really duel back and forth. It's more of an 'in synch' performance. We have at least two musicians on the stage

every night . . . two to four. And they are adept at all sorts of genres and decades of music. The repertoire is incredible. The show is all requests. There are napkins and pens on each table. So, throughout the night, people are writing up song requests that they want to hear. If our musicians



Bob and Kate Hansan

Owners

Bobby McKey's

don't know the tune, they'll try to play something from the same artist or in the same realm of music or ask for a different song. They get a lot of '80s hits. A lot of Elton John and Billy Joel. But they also know hip-hop, country, and most everything that is requested."

She continued, "The other cool thing is our shows have an ele-

ment of comedy. There's a lot of improvisational humor thrown in. They'll make jokes about the artist, about the time. We try to stay away from politics. Since we're in the D.C. suburbs, it can get really charged especially these last few years. We want to keep the atmosphere light."

The latest featured venue in our series of theme bars and restaurants, Bobby McKey's, accomplishes that mission night in and night out. Owner Robert "Bob" Hansan got the idea for Bobby McKey's after visiting Crocodile Rocks, a popular dueling piano bar in Myrtle Beach, S.C. He fell in love with the concept and was pretty sure nothing like it existed back in his home base of Maryland-D.C.-Northern Virginia.

"He knew our area could sustain it," Ketchum said. "And when National Harbor was coming about, the opportunity presented itself to open it there. He loves marketing, so there is definitely a lot of collaboration with him."

The name is a combination of two different inspirations. One, Hansan was called "Bobby" in high school. And, two, he loved the old Janis Joplin song, "Me and Bobby McGee," which has been a



**SHOW MORE
TO SELL MORE**

- ➔ Solid Shelves
- ➔ Maximum display
Edgeless Doors
- ➔ Maximum efficiency

3141 Frederick Ave. Baltimore MD | 410-945-7878 or 800-848-7748 | careysales.com



great piano bar song for years and years.

The fun extends to Bobby McKey's drink menu where the selections include such fun concoctions as the Almost Famous. Ketchum said, "The Almost Famous is a popular drink that's made with Stoli vodka, ginger ale, cranberry, and lemon. This one can also be bought as a tower in a 100-ounce shareable portion. Other popular drinks include the Bar Dancer and McKey's Tea made up of Sweet Tea Vodka, water and lemon squeeze. The trendy cocktails of the moment are our moonshine drinks. We use Ole Smoky Blackberry moonshine and have three unique cocktails. We also have a full bar that includes beer and wine. In terms of local Maryland brews, one of our drafts is Flying Dog and we have Loose Cannon IPA in bottles."

As for the clientele? Bobby McKey's draws both locals and guests who stay at the National Harbor for either leisure travel or conventions and trade shows. According to Ketchum, "We're trying to reach both locals and visitors. The convention traffic is actually more of a private event aspect of ours. In terms of local traffic, Maryland and Virginia are more our crowd than DC. Washington has so much more that is walkable and Metro-accessible. We get people everywhere from Fredericksburg to Woodbridge to Southern Maryland. People travel for us. We're a destination. And they come to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and bachelor and bachelorette parties. You can get the celebrant on stage and kind of embarrass him or her. But we'll

take care of you."

And Hansan takes care of his staff very well. Many of the musicians he employs fly in from other parts of the country to perform, and he has a condo at National Harbor that he puts them up in. Ketchum herself was a server at Bobby McKey's, but has a degree in Marketing and Business. Eventually, she worked up the courage to tell Hansan she was capable of much more. What she wanted was a sales and marketing position. "They had just filled a sales position, but Bob said, 'I have created a small business, so I can also create jobs. I want to keep you on!' And he did. That was 2013."

Nine years later, she and Hansan and the rest of the staff have been through a lot together. But being battle tested has left her with a positive view of the future, specifically 2022's second half. "I'm definitely optimistic," she concluded, "and it's because of all the hurdles we've gone through in the past two years. We were shut down so many times. We fought hard for the Save Our Stages grant money. We really needed it, but it was very hard to prove we were a live music venue. Fortunately, it ended up working out for us. I think we are on an upturn. People are wanting to get out again and have that human connection, which is what our venue is all about. We sit guests at tables of 10 to 15 people. So, you're not just sitting with the two or three friends or family you came with. By the end of the night, it's not uncommon to see people singing together with their arms around each other. People are craving that now!" ■

