



Patrons crowded The Palms on a recent weeknight to enjoy drinks and a concert

—Journal Photo

IN-SPOTS

Unfolding The Palms

By Divina Infusino
Special to The Journal

Who says Milwaukee lacks adventure and drama? Filmmakers don't know what they're missing in Beertown, the perfect site for one of those films that trace society's history through the changes in a public building — in this case, The Palms nightclub. With a little dialog, background music and set direction, The Palms' story could become a box-office hit.

Scene 1: Milwaukee, 1955. Location: State St. between 26th and 27th Sts. (the same throughout film).

Soundtrack: "Stompin' at the Savoy." Men decked out in their finest and women in flowing gowns stroll wistfully down State St. on their way to an evening of ballroom dancing at the Lonesome Club, a one-time theater transformed into a nightclub by Tom Harrington. About 1,000 people, most of them older than 30, crowd onto the spacious \$10,000 dance floor. Patrons' feet never tire as they glide and dip to the big-band music of Harrington and his orchestra.

Scene 2: Milwaukee, 1973. Soundtrack: "Hey Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?"

A tired, defeated old man stumbles into a small bar next door. Some cool dudes sashay down the street. But few enter what is now the Friendship Club, a new ballroom-dancing place started by Mike Bartoloni after Harrington retired.

Many of the old patrons have moved away from the neighborhood; some no longer consider it safe. Moreover, the price of heating oil has leaped from 15 cents to 35 cents a gallon. The place is cavernous and difficult to heat, especially with fewer bodies generating warmth or cash flow.

After two years, Bartoloni grows disenchanted.

Scene 3: Milwaukee, 1976. Soundtrack: "Cat Scratch Fever."

A roving police car slows down to eye the group of long-haired, disheveled youths crossing 27th St. against the light. The group is en route to the Electric Ballroom, the former dance hall that was turned into a rock club in the summer of 1975.

Neighbors and businesses in the area mistrust this new, rowdy clientele.

The ballroom's former elegance has given way to murals depicting dragons and gargoyles. Instead of mellow sounds, the large, impressive stage now showcases local and national hard-rock groups. The new format draws not only complaints from neighbors, but also hundreds of patrons — and the eye of a prospective new owner.

Scene 4: Milwaukee, July 1978. Soundtrack: "With a Little Help From My Friends."

Chuck Vecitis, owner of the rock club the Fox (now the Jabberwocky), drives by the Electric

Ballroom as hundreds line up to enter. That's it. His partner wants out of the rock club business anyway, so why not team up with Peter Sobotka, a real estate broker, and take over this club?

The tall, blond Vecitis forms a sort of Mutt and Jeff management team with the small, round Sobotka. Vecitis plays the earnest straight man, while Sobotka mumbles wisecracks.

"We wanted this place because of the location and the size," Vecitis says. "But really, the first year was pretty rough. We got the place in July of 1978 and called it the Ballroom. But we couldn't open until August because we had to fight to keep the liquor license."

"The place was poorly managed. Your feet stuck to the floor. It gained a bad reputation. The neighbors hated this place. The police hated it. Everybody hated it. And the building was in terrible shape."

"Plus we didn't know the booking business and how to deal with these national acts. We'd book somebody, and a few days before the show, they'd call and cancel on us."

Says Sobotka: "We did Todd Rundgren in October of 1978 and that got us going. But then Joe Balestrieri from David-Joseph advertising [also the marketing director for Alpine Valley Music Theater] stepped in and helped us out quite a bit."

"He took us under his wing and showed us how to do things. David-Joseph had exclusive rights to the club during part of 1979 and 1980. He [Balestrieri] knew the booking business. The national acts couldn't railroad him like they were doing to us. He was our saving grace."

In 1979 and 1980, the club, now renamed The Palms, brings in a variety of rising national acts — rock, new wave, blues — and many popular local bands. Many of the acts that appear at The Palms, such as the Police, become major stars. Yup, The Palms packs 'em in. And the place is a bit too packed, say city officials.

Scene 5: June 1, 1980. Soundtrack: "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

Midway through a Palms' concert by bluesman Johnny Winter, two Milwaukee building inspectors pay an unexpected visit.

"They came and put a capacity on us of 225 people. I can put 225 people in my hall," Vecitis says. "It was common knowledge that the Friendship Club had 1,000 in here on weekend nights, and when a place has been run like that for 25 years, you figure you can run the place the same way."

"But they said we didn't have enough bathrooms. It put a big hardship on us because we couldn't run national acts for six months."

Scene 6: Jan. 19, 1981. Soundtrack: "Too Hot to Handle."

New restrooms, enough for 850 people according to city code, put The Palms back in the national booking business. Vecitis and Sobotka also remodel the interior with Spanish stucco and brick. Stardate Productions has exclusive rights to the club and regularly brings in national names.

When big acts perform, patrons are frisked at the door by security men. It's annoying, but Vecitis and Sobotka say it keeps crowds under control and the police happy.

But an act called the Plasmatics, with Wendy O. Williams bumping and grinding on the stage, brings in another section of the Milwaukee Police Department — the vice squad. Soon after, fiddler Vassar Clements is forced to interrupt his show when Milwaukee police officers ticket his van and tow it away.

Does The Palms feel picked on? "Well, let's put it this way — The Palms made the Plasmatics," Sobotka says, laughing.

Vecitis says, "Generally, the police feel that we run a pretty tight ship here. No one leaves here with glasses and bottles. And patrons can't go in and out of the place, which people don't like, but it avoids a lot of trouble."

Scene 7: June 20, 1981. Soundtrack: "We're in the Money."

The Palms is drawing a steady crowd for one of its regular "Battle of the Bands" contests, sponsored by radio station WQFM. Patrons feel that they can come to the club and always find a top-quality local act on the stage for \$2 to \$3. They like the atmosphere, the clientele (mostly people in their mid-20s) and the spaciousness.

But many complain that the high-ceiling, wide-open room makes for poor sound quality. Vecitis says that a lot of local acts don't know how to gear their volume for the club.

The other complaint voiced by patrons is the drink prices — \$1 for tap beer and \$1.25 to \$2 for a mixed drink.

"After all, it's a nice place, but it's not a la-di-da club," a 24-year-old secretary says.

Yet the problems don't seem to deter many, as The Palms' reputation for consistently offering high-quality music keeps the place filled.

"We've installed new air conditioning, and we're finally getting into a financial position where we can plan on redoing the bar," Vecitis says. "We're also going to put in a small balcony for record label representatives who stop in to see an act. We're making The Palms into the rock showcase club of Milwaukee."

And so the story closes. Vecitis and Sobotka smile contently. The crowds pour in, and the police keep their distance, at least for now.

Coming soon: "The Palms Part II," or "You Just Never Know, You Just Never Know."

THE PALMS

2616 W. State St. 342-2130

Entertainment: Some of the hottest local and regional rock bands play most Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights for a cover charge of \$2 to \$4. International and national acts perform on varying days for varying prices (up to \$9). Doors open at 8 p.m. Music usually begins about 10 p.m.

July's Schedule: White Lie, Saturday; Squeeze (from England), July 24; Wally Cleavers and the Automatics,

July 25; Nighthawks (from Washington, D.C.), July 28; Take Me, July 31.

Atmosphere: Dark but pleasant, with ample seating at tables. Dress is casual.

Problems: For well-attended events, parking can be a problem. Sound quality is inconsistent. Patrons have complained that drinks are high priced. Expect to be frisked at the door for some national acts.