

LOUNGE WIZARDS



"WE PUT ACID IN THE BUBBLES," JOKES AL DENTE ABOUT VANILLA POP'S BUBBLE MACHINE. "AND NOT THE GOOD KIND OF ACID. SULFURIC ACID."



GREG THUM, AS LESTER MOORE, RIGHT, BACKS UP AL DENTE'S CROONING WITH AN IMPOSSIBLY HIGH FALSETTO AND FUNKY GUITAR WORK.

Story by DAN MAYFIELD
Photographs by JIM THOMPSON

Of the Journal

One looks like a Taos ski bum. The other, a Jackson Pollock knockoff.

Together, they set up the Vanilla Pop bandstand at the Martini Grille every Wednesday night. Greg Thum in a ski cap and long-underwear shirt, and Alan Vetter, chain-smoking in all black, tune the guitars, set up synthesizers and hang the Vanilla Pop marquee.

They look like a couple of roadies. Then, out come the suitcases. Gold lamé and animal-print slacks fall out. Furry coats, sequins and enough rings to make a jealous Liberace tinkle on the floor.

It's the beginning of the transition, when Thum and Vetter become Lester Moore and Alphonse Dentenofski — or better yet, Al Dente — better known as Vanilla Pop, purveyors of a part karaoke, part lounge act show full of Top-40 hits from the '40s to the '90s.

Once they glue on chest hair and don their wigs, gold-by-the-foot-from-the-mall necklaces and grease pencil mustaches they become Dente and Moore.

At first, the show sounds cheeseyrific. Two synthesizers pump out standard bum-bum-ba-bap drum beats, while Dente croons through the crowd, chain-smoking and sipping martinis all night.

But it's a lot more than that. The pair, despite appearances, are talented musicians having fun singing and playing songs everyone in the audience knows the words to, like "I Want You Back" and "Maneater."

Though it may sound like karaoke gone awry, Vetter preprogrammed all the songs into the synthesizers and can veer off course at any moment, loungeifying any song — from "Mack the Knife" to "Beat It."

He ad libs when he can, adding hilarious extra lines to the theme from "Love Boat," ("Something for everyone, like gonorrhoea!") or "Livin' la Vida Loca" ("She can't tell a joke-a, she only likes the whites, not the yolk-a").

Thum strums along with his bass or an electric guitar, funkifying even the funkier of songs, whether it's "Give it to Me Baby" or "That's Amore." His Bee-Gees-esque falsetto harmonizes perfectly with Vetter's lounge pseudo-baritone.

Vetter as Dente works the crowd while Moore lays down funky bass beats or high-flying guitar chords from a stool on stage.

And that stage. Vanilla Pop travels with a backdrop with a giant plywood, glitter and foam-core Vanilla Pop sign set in a sea of fluttering streamers. Along for the ride is a bubble machine that Dente loves to turn on at inappropriate moments.

"We put acid in the bubbles to make the show more fun for us," Dente tells the crowd.

But as soon as people run up to pop the bubbles, he said "And not the good kind of acid. Sulfuric acid."

"It never gets old, I tell ya."

And for Vanilla Pop, neither does the show.

"We have a blast doing what we love. It came out of a need for what most people wanted to hear," Vetter said. "Everybody takes themselves so ... seriously."

The music choices set the act apart from other cover bands.

"No 'Mustang Sally.' Ever," Thum said.

"Every time you see a cover band, you get the same choices."

Though the crowds sing along with all the '60s, '70s, and '80s hits, Vetter also branches out to croon '40s and '50s Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra tunes.

Both, despite their, well, cultivated appearances, have significant experience with music and acting.

Vetter went to New York City's High School for the Performing Arts, where he learned how to dance, sing and play music.

"I was in the movie 'Fame' my junior year," he said. "I just got another residual check for 58 bucks. I had to wait 20 years to put that education to use."

Really, it's more like 25, but hey, who's counting?

Thum, meanwhile, was bumming around Atlanta playing music in various bands.

He came to Taos after his girlfriend wanted a break from "Hotlanta."

Vetter ended up in Taos because, "That's where I ran out of money," he said.

The duo met in the spring of 2002, and started goofing around with their Al Dente and Lester Moore personas, playing open-mike gigs when they could in Taos.

Eventually, they got a gig at Eske's in Taos, where the act went over well enough that they saw a future in it.

Now, Vanilla Pop performs across the state, from Taos to Santa Fe all the way to Denver, where the duo plays the Tom Tom Room regularly.

Now, Vanilla Pop is the pair's regular job, though it's more of a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. gig.

"It's our business," Vetter said. "We quit the day jobs," Thum said. "It's every musician's dream."

VANILLA POP

WHEN: Every Wednesday, from 9 p.m.-midnight

WHERE: Martini Grille, 4200 Central SE

HOW MUCH: Free. Visit www.VanillaPop.com for a complete lists of shows

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just plain

FUN