

# Who goes to a gay bar at 7 a.m.? S.A.'s Buttercup band.

Buttercup, the Cobalt Club are happy to oblige

By Hector Saldana, San Antonio Express-News Oct 2, 2015

San Antonians often wonder about the virtually windowless dive at the corner of East Ashby Place and McCullough Avenue. The Cobalt Club is a black hole, a mysterious seedy joint whose reputation as a gay hookup is more apocryphal than reality. No light enters, none escapes.

From the street, the Cobalt isn't exactly beckoning. Its gray stucco exterior is broken up by an ominous blue door, blue trim and a banner that reads "Open 7 a.m."

But its gravitational pull was especially strong Friday morning because of blaring rock 'n' roll.

Buttercup — the San Antonio art-pop band of Erik Sanden, Joe Reyes, Odie, Emilio Navaira IV and his brother, Diego Navaira, known for its offbeat shows — pulled off its kookiest gig yet Friday morning at the Cobalt Club, the gay bar that opens daily at 7 a.m.

A standing-room crowd of about 75 — graveyard shift regulars, first-timers and rabid Buttercup fans — turned up for doughnuts, bloody marys, beer and tequila shots, exceeding the capacity limits of the tiny place.

The Cobalt is often pretty sedate — day or night. But don't tell that to Kati McAllister, a first-timer who Friday danced atop bar stools the whole time. By the time it was over, she was dripping with sweat.

Owner Mike Patton — who on Friday was shocked he had to park two blocks away because of the overflow crowd — established the Cobalt Club in 1999 as a gay bar but welcoming to a straight crowd, too.

Before that, it was a risqué drag queen bar called Gracies Bopping Robin, GBR for short. Its history dates back 30 years when it was the Union Jack, and later a succession of bars lost to history, such as the Pump House and Club 2000.

General manager Rod Michalek is the one who instituted the 7 a.m. daily opening time some 14 years ago when he moved from Dallas to run the club. "There was a market that wasn't being filled," Michalek said.

Inside, it takes a couple of minutes for one's eyes to adjust to its black-panel interior. The small bar — which is shaped like a draftsman's tool — is in the center. A red-felt pool table next to a skyline painting occupies one end; on the other side, a disco-worthy wall of glass and wood is the only festive attraction.

The only rule for the digital jukebox: Play happy music. The one rule for the drinks: Serve 'em fast and cheap.

As one bartender put it jokingly, "What happens at the Cobalt stays on Facebook. I swear."

Michalek said he'd never seen the bar so packed as it was with Buttercup. "I totally didn't expect it," he said. "I didn't know what to expect. Usually it's pretty sedate."

Graphic artist Michael Karshis celebrated his 54th birthday at the show. "I'm totally hijacking this for my party," he said.

But that would be to sell short the appeal of Buttercup, and especially frontman Sanden. There was no hijacking the spotlight from the quirky band, which sounded especially rocked up thanks to the Navaira Brothers. For his part, Sanden downed tequila shots and danced and crawled on the bar.

Guitarist Frank Karpienski of Los #3 Dinners was among the early birds. "I've never been in here," he said. "But I figured, no excuses."

Buttercup's bassist, Odie, admitted he hadn't been to bed. The Navairas had been up all night, too.

"I'm groggy and delirious," said Odie, who showed up in a kimono and flip-flops. "It's like the frickin' 'Twilight Zone,'" said Diego Navaira about the scene.

Ricky Bozarth, a Cobalt Club regular, explained that "it's a more relaxed vibe in the morning." It's not such an ungodly hour for those that work overnight.

"It's a neighborhood bar," said Darryl Mitchell, a regular. "It's our version of Cheers."

On Friday, it felt more like the Mix or the Limelight clubs on the St. Mary's Strip at closing time.

"Close that door. I want it to be 1:30 in the morning," said Sanden as dawn's early light sometimes filtered in. "We are the warriors of rock."

Some fans even sat under the bar at the foot of the band during the one-hour show. Angie Martindale swayed to the beat in a corner. "This is the best way to start the day ever," said Martindale.

"Who's going to work?" Sanden asked moments before singing the Kinks' "Alcohol." Moments later the singer was doing pushups on the bar and singing the original "Henry B. Gonzalez." Obviously, the effects of demon alcohol.

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