

HOWDY, KEVIN!

In the Claim Jumper Saloon in Ennis, Montana, the crowd takes its Friday nights seriously. Ranchers, cowboys, fishing guides and hangers-on, wearing Stetsons or soiled ball caps (bills forward only), some with small silk scarves tight around their necks, are getting hammered. By 6:30 p.m. there is no conversation, only shouting and yelling. Everyone knows everyone else and everyone is a friend.

No-nonsense female bartenders dodge each other deftly behind the "U"-shaped counter, pulling Moose Drool and Fat Tire Ale taps.

In the quietest corner of the tavern, Montana's premier jazz combo, The Woods Project, is warming up. Above them, a black and white TV flickers with Tom Selleck's "Quigley Down Under". The same movie is showing, in color, on the other side of the bar. When a jazz solo turns tedious, our attention shifts upward. Can Selleck actually make that shot with his long rifle?

A large (think mature Brando or Welles), black man leans on an equally massive, chrome-based pool table which has been tipped against the wall to provide floor space for the band and dancers. Kevin Mahogany, arguably America's top male jazz vocalist, is assaying The Woods Project, who will play backup for him at this weekend's Madison River Music Festival.

Through the din we ask him, "Do you play often in places like this?"
"No!" He is emphatic.

Close to midnight, and after repeated urging, Mahogany takes the mike and purrs through "My Romance". Our patience is rewarded.

The Festival continues Saturday afternoon in the gym with high school choruses playing games of hot potato with a chalkboard eraser. Urged on by guitarist Craig Hall, the catcher improvises scat bars, followed by the full choruses' repeat.

That evening in the gym, the choruses perform, followed by pianist Bob Nell and Portland bassist Mike Bisio. The Woods Project warms-up and then introduces Mahogany, who strides across the basketball court in a sharp brown suit. A likeable, audience-friendly singer, he runs his rich voice through a selection of jazz and blues standards. He trades bars with the instrumental soloists, challenging them to match his vocal riffs. Not satisfied at first with drummer Brad Edward's echoes, Mahogany keeps at him. When Edwards finally matches him, the crowd explodes.

It ends too soon, of course, and we return to the Claim Jumper. Patrons, who now appreciate who Mahogany is, plead with him to sing. He finally takes the floor and fills the bar with his warmth.

As he launches a raucous blues, a young woman moves to the floor and begins a solo dance, directly in front of him. Longish blond hair, low-cut white top, bare midriff, and tight jeans. Something says she's "not from around here" and didn't learn to dance like this at Ennis High School. She guards her place in front of the mike. Mahogany, a true professional, keeps at his song. A lesser man would drop the mike and run off into the night with her.

At midnight, Mahogany and the Woods Project head out the door. We're ready to call it a night when someone reports, "Kevin's going up to the Long Branch". We reverse course and follow.

On our way we sample the free popcorn in the Silver Dollar and check out the Fire Ants, billed as Wyoming's top zydeco band.

In the Long Branch, the Rhythm Rockers, led by guitarist Bill Clinton and fronted by vocalist Frances Stewart, are in full stride. Stewart has beautiful teeth, a radiant smile and knows her way around a bar tune. Middle-aged ranchers dance with their wives.

Mahogany leans against the bar and enjoys. He's met Stewart, who is engaged to his pianist of the evening, Bob Nell. The crowd coaxes Mahogany to sing. When he takes a mike, Stewart leads him into a raunchy blues.

"If you want a ride, come see me."

Mahogany answers in kind, but adlibs a caution about "not wanting to get in trouble with Bob". They trade choruses. The crowded dancers roar. Again, we are left wanting more.

At breakfast the next morning, the dancing woman sits down at the next table. Before we can summon the courage to compliment her dancing, a man joins her. He doesn't seem the type who punches cattle on a regular basis and we don't recall him from the bar. Would mention of her dancing be appropriate now? She takes off her dark glasses and holds his hand.

We start to pay our cafe bill, and find it's been taken care of by an Ennis friend across the room.

"Did you enjoy the Festival?"

"It was wonderful!"

"They do such a wonderful job putting it together."

We turn to leave. The dancer and her friend are gone.

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