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# Steve Duin: Dancing in the dark of Portland's Old Town entertainment district

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Dania Maxwell, The Oregonian (<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/maxwell-d/photos.html>)

PORTLAND, OREGON -- July 2, 2011 -- Begona Hernandez, (far left), Tyler Szekely, second from the left, Kristin Johnson, second from the right, and Jim Costa, right, dance at Dixie Tavern in Old Town. Szekely

Just past midnight, six police cruisers and a half-dozen pedal cabs are pooled at Northwest Third and Couch, and at least 15 bouncers and security guards keep thick-necked watch at the bar-room doors.

At Dirty, four mini-Kardashians convulse on the stripper poles. The lines are 75 deep waiting to join the Minnesota Timberwolves' Kevin Love inside the Barrel Room. If any of the 1,200 twentysomethings throwing back Grey Goose at the three corner bars are still sober, it ain't by design.

It is, in other words, not just another Saturday night at ground zero of

and Costa come to experience the nightlife of Old Town about two times a month. Dania Maxwell/The Oregonian

**Portland's Old Town entertainment district**  
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Portland's "entertainment district."

Portland entertains Sgt. District Steinbronn, who heads the Portland Police Bureau's entertainment detail. "Half of what it usually is."

Since Chris Lenahan opened Dirty Nightlife four years ago, this frenetic

intersection has evolved into the party central heart for the cocktail crowd from the 'burbs. It's street fair and dance stage, college town and high-school reunion, cruising paradise and girls' night out.

"On your 21st birthday," says Angie Corah Allick, the bar manager who has a cucumber-spiked martini named after her -- "Poolside with Angie" -- up at Candy Ultra Lounge on Ninth, "this is where you land."

In a tight skirt and four-inch Steve Madden heels, more often than not.

If the first impression is chaos with the bass turned up, the mayhem is carefully controlled, as Steinbronn & Co. prove when a Dixie bouncer blocks entry to a guy who has chugged too many Michelobs and the drunk's brother goes Jim Carrey on him.

In less than four minutes, both brothers are handcuffed and lodged in separate police cruisers, one bound for the Justice Center, the other for detox.

"It's an interesting mix down here," Steinbronn says. "You have street kids, transients, the college crowd, out-of-towners, alcohol, too many people. Tempers flare. It starts with a shoulder bump. People get brave when they're a little intoxicated.

"When people see us get rid of the problem, it calms things down. If we let them walk away with a warning, it doesn't solve the problem. They get in a cab, the cab throws 'em out in two blocks because they're too drunk, and you're suddenly dealing with another problem two blocks away."

As it is, the brothers grim disappear so quickly that the party doesn't miss a beat. For a crowd that's not ready for live music and Irish whiskey, there's a bar scene that fits every mood.

Dixie is country rock and Coyote Ugly, girls dancing atop the bar. The Barrel Room has dueling pianos at one end of the building and an outdoor frat party at the other. Dirty also has two main rooms, techno mixes and strobe lights in the back, those faux stripper poles and elevated dance platforms up front in its Third Avenue showcase.

"Girls don't want to dance where guys can grope them," Lenahan says. The poles are there for show, the R-rated moves they inspire generally intended to impress the girlfriends in the crowd,

not the gangly voyeurs looking up their skirts. "Portland," Lenahan insists, "really isn't a meat market like LA. If you go out in Los Angeles, the girls are half naked."

Lenahan attended college in Portland and returned when his Tempe, Ariz., bar was an early victim of the recession. He spent \$350,000 opening Dirty in 2007, then brought Candy and the Barrel Room online in successive years. Given the 120 people on his payroll, he thinks he deserves a little more help from the city, such as keeping the MAX lines open until after the bars close so that a few more of his customers have safe passage home.

"Who else would put a responsible building down here in the middle of 14 social service agencies?" Lenahan asked. "I'm right next to the Union Gospel Mission. You think you're going to get Nike down here? We're making something happen in what would otherwise be a dead zone."

Lenahan -- who says he quit drinking 24 years ago, at age 17 -- won't pretend the alcohol that flows doesn't cause problems, or ones that end when bartenders etch an "X" on the hand that's reaching for one tequila shooter too many.

"A lot of the girls who come in here are on depression medication," he notes as we tour what he calls the "drunk tank" at Dirty, a room outfitted with a small couch, plastic buckets and bottled water. "This is Oregon. There are a lot of depressed people. And you can't combine alcohol and prescription drugs."

But if you can't toast Sunday morning without a drink in your hand, Steinbronn and Lenahan are ensuring the mood remains civil.

Steinbronn has nine to 11 officers on hand, and Couch Street closed between Second and Fourth to slow down the motorized traffic. Lenahan has 22 security guards working Dirty and the Barrel Room until their 2 a.m. closing.

At that hour, a dozen cabs are backed up on Third and the pedal cabs are on the move. As young lovers disappear into the shadows of the Park Blocks, the lines are already 10 deep at the food carts at Southwest Oak.

And the homeless souls rolled up in blankets in the doorways of the River District finally nod off, wistful for the days when no one had reason to venture downtown at night.

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