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#### CARBONDALE NIGHT LIFE

Last weekend, a white stretch limo cruised the streets before pulling up in front of a local nightspot. A few young heads popped out of the window to inspect the action. Satisfied it was sufficiently happening, the group hopped out of the car to join the party and check out the live tunes.

Nothing so unusual, had the scene taken place in the Aspen of 15 years ago, or even three years ago.

But the limo in question was prowling downtown Carbondale, and the music was coming from Steve's Guitars, the tiny gem of a listening room that has distinguished itself over nearly three years as one of the valley's finest music venues.

Had the limo been searching for nightlife in Aspen last week, the occupants would likely have ended up disappointed - downing drinks at a lonely bar. Or in their hotel room.

Aspen nights aren't what they once were. And neither are Carbondale's.

#### Nadir for Aspen nightlife

Folks of a certain generation like to point to the '70s as the high point of Aspen nightlife. It was a time when the Eagles and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band had lengthy residencies in town, and places like Paddy Bugati's, the Blue Moose and the legendary Gallery were constantly packed.

But one need not even go back that far to find a time when Aspen worked hard to earn its annual distinction as every ski magazine's capital of high country nightlife. Ten years ago, the Double Diamond ranked as the most prestigious music club above 7,500 feet, able to attract the Eagles, Jimmy Buffett and Sheryl Crow for special occasions, while the Funky Meters, Maceo Parker and the New Orleans Radiators regularly packed the club. As recently as three years ago, Hannibal Brown's and the Grottos existed side by side with the Double D, giving night crawlers an abundance of music choices.

Things have changed, dramatically and quickly. Last fall came the news that the Double D, which sputtered in its last years and seemed to live a season-to-season existence, was finally giving up the ghost. The Grottos - which stumbled badly last winter as Cabo's and the Golden Horn before re-emerging as the Grottos - is closed, its musical future uncertain. Whiskey Rocks, which plugged some holes last winter by booking a smattering of touring bands and instituting its hugely popular Open-Mike Nights, abruptly announced this spring that the reconstruction of the St. Regis Aspen hotel would cause it to close for good.

Those shutterings hardly leave Aspen without music, and certainly not lacking in cultural offerings. The Wheeler Opera House remains an exquisite sit-down concert venue. Jazz Aspen Snowmass' June Festival and Labor Day Festival, bookends to the summer season, bring the biggest names imaginable for two extended weekends of music and partying. Aficionados of higher culture are never left wanting, thanks to the Aspen Music Festival. And with the summer nearly upon us, popular music fans might temporarily forget this past winter's shortage as the Free Snowmass Summer of Music Series, the Bluegrass Sundays on Aspen Mountain and the Freestyle Fridays at Aspen Highlands fill the mountaintops and slopesides with music and cheer.

But those options don't quite add up to night life. Technically, almost all of those offerings take place in the daytime or early evening. They don't lead to the sort of freewheeling vitality that comes from a group of hopping nightclubs in close proximity. They don't add up to a scene.

When summer ends, and the music dwindles to the occasional dates at the Wheeler, and the few concerts scattered here and there, it will be clearer than ever how badly Aspen lacks for a music scene.

"It's gone," said Josh Behrman, a local concert promoter since 1996, of the music club scene. "We have literally none whatsoever. Name one bar that a band will be playing at. I don't know of one night situation at any bar. I don't see anything in Aspen."

#### Up-and-coming Carbondale

In the mid-'90s, on her infrequent free nights from Fly Me to the Moon, the Telluride music club she co-owns, Amy Kimberly used to take road trips to the Double Diamond to partake of her favorite bands: Wolfstone, Little Women. So when she moved to the Roaring Fork Valley two-and-a-half years ago, Kimberly expected to continue looking to Aspen to fix her considerable music jones.

Quickly she realized she arrived too late.

"Since I've lived in the valley, I've been surprised at what goes on here," said Kimberly, the development director at KDNK and the new director of Carbondale Mountain Fair. "I didn't find as much spirit for live music. The Double Diamond was somewhat gasping for breath. It's vastly different than it was in the '90s. There hasn't been that place that people love to go to."

Kimberly's new hometown of Carbondale wasn't exactly filling the nightlife gap either. "The first year down here," she said, "I never went out. There was nowhere to go."

That, too, has changed. The uptick in Carbondale's nightlife scene has been as dramatic as Aspen's downturn.

Just as Kimberly settled into the Carbondale quiet, Steve Standiford decided to turn his occasional concerts into a weekly series at his music shop, Steve's Guitars. The going was slow at first: The tiny room is ill-suited for amplified rock bands; Steve's has no liquor license.

But Standiford has been resolute; his latest e-mail missive points out that when local pickers Frank Martin and Randy Utterback play this week, it will be the 133rd consecutive Friday night that Steve's has hosted live music. The room has developed a reputation among acoustic players, and Steve's has drawn acts that long ago left the tiny, out-of-the-way rooms behind.

Two weeks ago, when the rising Colorado bluegrass combo Hit & Run made its Steve's debut, not only was the room packed, but several dozen fans crowded at the open door to listen and peek in.

Steve's next-door neighbor, the Black Nugget, has joined in the fun, and now books regular weekend gigs. Across Main Street, the Ship of Fools has gotten into the act as well, and has become known for punk shows, featuring local acts like EOS, Antibuse and the occasional touring band that pack the room with headbangers. (The Ship can also claim the valley's most notable music hoax of recent years; last winter, rumors of a Widespread Panic show earned a firm denial on the band's Web site. Aspen bars would probably kill for that kind of publicity.) The three bars have formed what Carbondale night-lifers call the "Bar-muda Triangle."

"It feels like things are going on here. Definitely. Big time," said Standiford. "There are nights when we have a band and the Ship has something going and the Black Nugget has a band and there are people wandering back and forth from one to another. That didn't happen when I first opened up."

In fact, when Standiford first came to the valley in the early '80s, the idea of driving from his home in Woody Creek to Carbondale for a taste of nightlife was absurd. "Carbondale was like the moon," he said of those days. "Taking that two-laner all the way to Carbondale and back - you just wouldn't do that. There was no reason to."

#### Can-do spirit

While Aspen's once-revered nightlife has come apart strand by strand, Carbondale's rise has been a community affair, marked by a can-do spirit. At a meeting this week at Town Hall, representatives from KDNK, the town of Carbondale, the Carbondale Council on Arts and Humanities and various bars gathered to discuss this summer's heavy lineup of events, from the Performances in the Park to Steve's Mountain Music Fair.

At last year's Music Fair - an event which features "every local band that will play for free," according to Standiford - the police were about to enforce the curfew on the event. But when they saw how good the vibe was, the cops let the party roll on.

"There are all these factions that come together to create a live-music scene," said Kimberly.

Among those helping to pull the load are CCAH, which has put on a series of popular, youth-oriented Busk concerts; the Basalt Battle of the Bands, which has instilled in local kids an appreciation for live music; and even Carbondale recreation director Jeff Jackel who, says Kimberly, "believes that music is as much a part of recreation as soccer fields."

Whether or not Carbondale can sustain its surge is anybody's guess. In a scene as small as Carbondale's, all it takes is one bar closing, or one bar owner deciding he's had enough of the headaches, and the live-music vibe can unravel. (The opposite also is true: If a deal, in the works but far from done, to reopen and improve the Double Diamond space comes to fruition, Aspen could rock once again.)

But for the moment, even as upvalley residents shake their heads at the sorry state of Aspen nightlife, there is a buzz in Carbondale.

And if you want to heighten that buzz, bring up the subject of dining, as most everyone in Carbondale does these days. With Phat Thai, Russet's, Six89 and Zocalito spicing up the scene, Carbondale is as dynamic a place for foodies as it is for music fans.

"I think this is our heyday," said Standiford.