

## Carolinas keeps it turned up

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faced with challenges and the changing wants and desires of their clientele.

"Trends change and they always will," Smith says. "A person with a strong business mind will watch those trends and either hop on the bus or not."

Smith says that some gay bar owners can become victims of a "mindset of complacency" — succumbing to the idea that "because we are a gay bar, people will come to us." The bad news for some gay bar owners is that the old paradigm might be shifting as gay trends move from the gay ghetto into mainstream America.

### Moving into the mainstream?

Dan Mauney, one of the original founders of Charlotte's "Takeover Friday," says more and more people are "crossing over" from exclusively "gay bars" to more popular, mainstream establishments that label themselves neither straight nor gay.

"As we strive to gain more mainstream acceptance and we cross over, we don't have to go to A, B or C anymore," he says. "We can go to A, B, C, D, E and F, and it's definitely because of the strides our gay advocates have made."

Takeover, which started more than four years ago with a small group of friends, turns out countless gay and lesbian customers to restaurants, bars and other nightlife establishments that aren't necessarily known as "gay" places. In fact, many of the mainstream establishments they visit have never labeled or marketed themselves as exclusively or even partly "gay." In fact, some of them are known for their affluent, mostly heterosexual crowd.

Some LGBT community members have said the Takeover events steal away business from traditionally gay and gay-owned establishments — that they introduce new bars and clubs to gay customers who eventually abandon the tried and true establishments of old.

"I usually laugh when people say that, because ... we support the gay bars as often as we support anything else," Mauney says. "We might have criticism that we are competing with others' Friday night drinking time, but usually our crowd ends up at those places anyway."

But what if the criticisms of Takeover have some merit? Where does the responsibility lie? Are Takeover organizers to blame, or does it lie with gay clubs and their owners? Isn't responding to changing trends supposed to be a part of the business? If the clientele keep missing what they're looking for in older gay bars, doesn't it make legitimate business sense for them to take their money elsewhere? Whether we like it or not, that's kind of the rule of the game in a capitalist society.

Leland Garrett, a 24-year-old college student living in Durham, says that his favorite nighttime hangout, the Pinhook, isn't a gay bar, even though it is extremely gay friendly.

"They sometimes have gay-themed events, but it is also a low-key place," he says. "It isn't strictly a gay bar and it is a place where you can talk with your friends and be able to hear them."

Garrett says he avoids clubs as much as possible — much like me, he's not a club per-

son. But he also says he's always disappointed in the lack of variety the gay clubs offer. "I hate the gay clubs in North Carolina; they are all basically the same — loud techno music, smoking, drinking and people hooking up in the bathrooms."

He says he wishes there was a club that wasn't so "stereotypical."

But Smith isn't so sure about all the "mainstreaming" some folks say are happening inside gay nightlife circles. If gay people are "moving Uptown," he asks, what about all the straight people coming out to the gay bars? "I'd venture to say that if you walk into Scorpio, or clubs like Scorpio, it's not 100 percent gay."

Still, it's pretty clear, at least to the folks I talked to, that many "non-gay," yet gay-friendly establishments — like Petra's Piano Bar in Charlotte's Plaza-Midwood neighborhood and the Garden & Gun Club at the N.C. Music Factory — are becoming popular with LGBT clientele.

### Supporting what we've got

Smith says he thinks it is important for the LGBT community to continue to support the businesses that have supported them.

"There is something to say for those folks who have lived through the battles of gay bars even existing and keeping them open, providing a safe haven for people to come," he says. "We need to continue to support those businesses before they fade away."

He adds, "There is a need for gay bars. It is important to be able to 'come home' for a little bit."

Despite his aversion to Carolinas gay clubs and bars, Garrett at least admits that having them available is good for the community. "I think it is good we have a place to go and be ourselves, whether you are more straight acting or a flaming queen. You can go to a gay bar and not have to deal with the judgment and people staring at you and the crap you get from people."

Bambi Weavil, publisher of the Wilmington, N.C.-based online LGBT publication OutImpact.com, also thinks community support of "family"-owned businesses is important.

"It is important to support the gay establishments," she says. "I think it can be a give and take both ways [frequenting gay and non-gay clubs and bars], but it is important to support gay establishments or they are definitely going to go under."

### Keeping it fresh

If gay bar owners want to keep their cash flow moving in a positive direction, they'll have to keep surprising their customers with fresh and new ideas.

Takeover's Mauney says the freshness of his events and venues means people stay interested and return to future events. "I think people come to Takeover because of the different venues we go to," he says. "We keep changing it up. One venue might be dressy, another more casual. We try to venture into new places that maybe people haven't been to yet. I think it keeps it fresh."

Mauney adds that welcoming fresh ideas and staying current with the trends can be half the battle. "Unfortunately, the 'build it

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