

Waukegan back in the saddle

A popular country-western dance hall is restoring some giddyap to the suburb's step

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Leaning against a barstool, Brett Theissing adjusts his cowboy hat while he and his pal check out the pretty suburban cowgirls line-dancing in perfect unison.

It's Ladies' Night at the Sundance Saloon in Waukegan, where Toby Keith songs and the Texas two-step rule.

"I was kind of surprised the Sundance picked Waukegan," said Theissing, 51, about his favorite nightspot, which relocated from Mundelein in March. "I thought they'd move a little farther west."

When Sundance's original building went up for sale, its owner decided to head east to a bigger space in more urban Waukegan, whose story of lost jobs and dashed opportunities could be plucked from a hard-luck country song.

Sundance owner Art Lake bills the 32,000-square-foot club as the largest country-western dance hall in Illinois. But fans say the club's appeal has nothing to do with its size.

"This is one of the few places where you can find people of all ages together," said Cara Lahti of Third Lake. "You see young girls dancing with bald men and having fun."

Lake, 58, has owned the Sundance, which has been around for 35 years, since the early 1990s.

"Our young est customers are 21 and our oldest is 92," he said.

Carl Hagerup, 82, makes the 45-minute drive from his home in McHenry to indulge in his footloose fancy a couple of times a week. He said he still has plenty in common with the club's 21-year-olds.

"They've got to be at least that age for me to dance with them," said a laughing Hagerup, who on this evening was dressed all in black, a la Johnny Cash. "I love doing the two-step with all the pretty girls. And a lot of the younger girls say, 'Hey, dance with my mother.'"

Though the popularity of country music has risen in recent years, Sundance regulars say the number of such clubs in the Chicago area has declined. Old favorites such as Julie's Country Club in Lincolnshire and Nashville North in Bensenville have either closed or changed genres.

"Everyone who comes here can relate to a song," said Theissing, of Gurnee, a rodeo buff who sports a longhorn steer tattoo on his shoulder. "Whether it's a sad song or a happy song, whether you've broken a heart or had your heart broken."

Many Sundance patrons like its sprawling maple wood dance floor, where they can scoot their boots alone during free line-dance lessons or glide across the floor with a partner in a two-step--their feet stepping quickly twice, then slowly one time before pausing and starting the movement all over again.

Waukegan officials believe that the saloon on Lakehurst Road is giving their town, which since the 1960s has watched industry and people roll out, a new claim to fame.

"I've been there twice to watch them line-dance and everything," said Mayor Richard Hyde, 78, who plans to take a two-step class.

In its new digs, the Sundance, located between the busy thoroughfares of Interstate Highway 94 and U.S. Highway 41, also is beginning to attract a new clientele, employees said.

"I see more and more people coming in and seeing that country music isn't what everyone thinks," longtime bartender Dawn Schumacher said. "A lot of people still think the music is boring. They think that in all the songs, it's your dog left, your wife left, your kids all left. But if you play the record backward, they all come back.

"A lot of people just don't have enough of an idea of what country music is all about. It's fun."

Beginning with Garth Brooks in the early 1990s and extending to Gretchen Wilson today, the crossover success of country-western stars has helped broaden the age range of fans, Schumacher said.

So much so that she now finds flavored martinis as popular with some of the cowboy crowd as a traditional shot and beer.

With its honky-tonk tunes, big belt buckles and down-home atmosphere, the Sundance experience is difficult to duplicate, die-hard fans say.

"If you're old, young, who cares? Everyone's all together," said Cindy Skvarec of Waukegan, who visited Sundance on Ladies' Night with her daughter, Carly, 27. Mom wore cowboy boots, the daughter a trendy pair of open-toe sandals.

While taking a break from the dance floor, Lindsey Urry, 22, of Lake Zurich said, "Even if it's your first time here, people treat you like it's your home."

Tricia Neely, a Gurnee mother and country-western club veteran, shared Urry's sentiments.

"Going to the Sundance is like going to a pig roast," she said. "Real down-home. It's country."

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