

100 Bars in 100 Days

Hops MacBarley's 2012
Key West Bar Boondoggle
"The Peace, Love, and I.P.A. Tour"

BAR 78:

Sloppy Joe's bar

www.sloppyjoes.com

201 Duval Street

Thursday 10/4, 7:30 pm

Yuengling (draft) \$5.25

Ahhh, Sloppy Joe's, the iconic bar of Key West. With its prominent location at the start of the 200 block, its cannot-miss-it sign, and its boast of being Ernest Hemingway's favorite bar, SJB has to be the most-visited tourist bar on the island. It's certainly not way down at #78 on that list.

[Reminder, please, that the *Peace, Love and IPA Tour* has nothing to do with ranking, rating, or reviewing; I'm just tellin' y'all 'bout my stop-in and what it triggered in me odd li'l 'ead.]

Similar to Margaritaville, it's not a place where you will typically find a real lot of locals. They have their regulars, and semi-regulars, but the place is mainly fueled by tourist ching. But that's kind of an assumption, anyway. I mean, since I rarely go there, how the heck am I gonna know if that guy over there comes here regularly, or if that dude gets his mail delivered here. But there are always some patrons who seem to know the barkeeps very

well, and I'm sure the keeps have plenty of friends who stop in a lot.



I like Sloppy's atmosphere. On a hot summer day, it's cool and dark in here. It's a big room with high ceilings and the breeze through all the open doors swirls around pretty good. It has really big fish on the walls and a lot of cool old



framed photos, many of which are autographed by the famous people that they portray.

When I first came here, back in the vangabond winter of '93, there was a large ship's bell dangling from the ceiling on a long rope. When a barkeep got a good tip, they gave the rope a mighty swing and that bell went crashing against the ceiling with great clamor. The wide planks of thick and battered plywood that had been installed overhead gave testament to the force of the repeated blows. Somewhere along the line, that practice was discontinued. Doesn't take a genius to reason why.



I haven't bought the official Sloppy Joe sandwich for a few years. Price went up, portion size went down, you know how that goes. 'Twas tasty though, Joe.

The kinda-bogusness about the Ernie claim doesn't really bug me. Captain Tony's, around the corner on Greene, is clearly bothered by it, though. They make it a major point on their sign, reminding passers-by that the famed author actually did his saucing in *their* edifice, which was, at the time, inhabited by the business known as Sloppy Joe's. When SJ relocated to the more eminent location, they took the Ernie Drank Here legend with them. It's kinda like Jackie Robinson playing for Brooklyn, but the now *Los Angeles* Dodgers retain the claim of breaking the color barrier – except, well, not quite as significant. I did say it was *kinda* like that. Anyway, to me, they are both right, so WTF, Chuck.

Sloppy's does avidly keep the Hemingway tradition running strong, though, with their annual late-July Hemingway Days events. It freaked me out the first time I saw two dozen robust, white-bearded dudes, attired in all-white

with red berets and kerchiefs milling about on Green Street. And that was before I even saw the cardboard bulls that they were “running” with.

I’ve never attended the Arm-Wrestling Tournament, nor the famed Lookalike Competition, but they get a great turnout every year. When I first moved to the Keys, I hired a high school senior named Andy to work part-time at the Leisure Club, cutting grass, restaurant help, whatever. He was KWHS’ top student and best runner, and was heading off to NYU in August. Mainly because of the running thing, we hit it off just fine, and I tried to pass along some skills to help him climb the ladder of success (see photo).



It turns out that Andy also had similar facial bone structure to Hemingway, and a year or so before had tried to enter the famed contest as a lookalike of Hemingway as a teenager. I don’t recall if he had found a photo of a much younger Ernie somewhere, or if he was just using a reverse-time-in-your-imagination approach, but the poohbahs of the famed contest chuckled and said, “Pooh” and “Bah” to his request. Pretty clever, though, Andy.

These days, it seems the only time I stop in is to see Pete & Wayne. They crack me up. Back in the day, Pete was one of the guitarists in Crisspy Critters, the kickassingest bar band I’ve ever had the pleasure of. They lit up Barefoot Bob’s night after night with high energy Grateful Dead remakes and had the packed club dancing like cats on fire. Even the sidewalk would be three-deep with people moving and bouncing along.

Wayne is ubiquitous in the KW music scene, playing with just about everyone at some point. I used to see him several years ago at Willy T’s thrumming his bass with George Victory, playing most excellent versions of *Purple Rain* and *Papa Was A Rolling Stone*, among others.



Together, P&W are a two-man comedy troupe, doing many off-color covers and some noteworthy originals, my favorite of which is *You Can’t Drink A Beer Onstage But You Can Fuck A Moose*, a song

which recounts the band's plight at a gig in Maine. I guess you have to hear the song to understand the title.

Some older Conchs lament that Key West is trending towards Disneyland South, with the softening of the town's scruffy edges as we lure the more mainstream dollar. But, though Pete & Wayne often play in the Happy Hour time slot, they will never be accused of such pandering (as the song title above should indicate). Families with grade school children will come in for a drink and a bite, and P&W just stride right on with songs about big breasted women and jokes that you wouldn't even hear on late-night TV. In one of their many verbal interludes, Pete references the likely embarrassment of the mommies and daddies, and suggests that the kids' tell them: *Hey, you're the ones who brought me to a damn BAR!*

So, on the Bar 78 visit, the place was peak-of-Hurricane-season slow. I couldn't tell if it was half-full or half-empty – kinda like I can't tell whether it's partly cloudy or mostly sunny – so I'll sidestep that whole conundrum, take the hotelier's approach, and say that the bar was "at 50% occupancy."

The bar seats were pretty much taken, but plenty of table seating was open. A table just would not do. I mean, some server would come over with a menu and all that malarkey. Humbug. I found an available stool at the bar over by the side doors and settled in for some P&W.

The young woman barkeep was on the shorter side; at first I thought she'd have difficulty reaching the taps. But she handled it just fine and poured me my brew. I had my five-dollar bill extended as she set down the plastic cup. Hmm, plastic? No glass for a seated guest? Not exactly packed in here tonight. I didn't get to dwell on that very long, though, because she was saying, "That's \$5.25, please." Huh? She *had* to mean \$4.25. This was Yeungling, not Dogfish Head. Even \$4.25 would be a push for a Ying.

"\$5.25," she smiled. And I think she expected a smile back. She'd have to be happy with a sarcastic smirk. Dayumm. I allllmost left the 75¢ as her tip, but the former keep in me smacked me on the back of the head – *hey, it's not her fault, douchebag, part with the fucking quarter* – so I pocketed the meter food and dropped a dollar on the bar for her. "Thank you," she smiled, and bounced her attention away to another customer.

Pete and Wayne were not at their most inspired this night. What crowd that was there was all gathered around the big front bar and the satellite bar by the front doors. Hardly anyone had ventured into the table area in front of the stage, giving the entertainers the *We are not here to see YOU* impression. Without audience energy, they were kinda going through the

motions. They were still good, but when the crowd is hooting and cheering along, they can't help but get in the mood. Just like athletes get adrenalin from competition, entertainers get juiced from the entertained.

Pete told me exactly that one night, many years ago, just after their final encore of a crazier-than-crazy night at Barefoot's. *You guys were ROCKIN!* I said, punctuating it with a fist pump. He was sweaty and almost out of breath, *Mannn, when all you guys start going insane like that, we can't help but catch fire.*

Nobody was on fire tonight, though, including yours truly. The legendary Sloppy Joe's had been toured, number 78 if you're scoring at home, any random number if you're not.

