

Restaurant Adds Menu Of Mechanical Music

BY LINDA ZAVORAL

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SAN JOSE, Calif. — You'd be hard-pressed to find a San Francisco restaurant these days that doesn't keep its diners entertained with flat-screen TVs mounted in every corner.

Silicon Valley engineer-turned-entrepreneur Mark Williams has the amusement factor covered at his new restaurant too.

But his business concept is firmly rooted in the years from 1900 to 1925, so he's filled his Orchestra Palm Court in San Jose with a dozen of the mechanical music machines of that era — from player pianos to nickelodeon-style jukeboxes.

Just as the 1973 movie "The Sting" attracted a new generation to composer Scott Joplin's ragtime music, Williams hopes to ignite interest in these machines and the classic melodies, operettas, jazz, rags and novelty tunes they play.

"I want to reintroduce people to this great old music," he said. "I think there is a whole generation that doesn't know about this at all and will be excited."

Step into the vintage brick building and you'll find yourself transported into another time by several player pianos and what are known as orchestrions — machines with two instruments or more that are designed to sound like a band or orchestra — including a rare model nearly 10 feet tall with a full percussion section. Williams' favorite piece because it's the most technically intricate is the Violano-Virtuoso, a violin-playing machine that was advertised as the 8th Wonder of the World when it was invented a century ago. (Let's face it, the Great Pyramid of Giza just sits there. It doesn't play "Puttin' on the Ritz.")

The restaurant's first days have drawn preservationists and downtown residents curious about what had been going on behind the doors of 27 E. William St., near the San Jose Stage Company theater in the artsy South First Area district.

"It's great to have a place that is a tribute to old technology in a place where we worship new technology," said customer Barbara Goldstein, an arts consultant who formerly headed the city's public art program.

Sandy Swirsky, herself a collector of music machines, booked the Orchestra for a San Jose Woman's Club luncheon. "I think it has wonderful potential," she said. "There have been pizza parlors with pipe organs, but most of those are gone now."

Indeed, Williams believes his restaurant will win over anyone whose only contact with player piano music has been at an amusement park or pizza parlor where one tinkly tune played ad nauseam. He has more than 500 paper rolls of music and countless 78 RPM records for these beauties — and beauties they are, antiques crafted of mahogany or quarter-sawn "tiger oak," a wood-grain pattern that was "all the rage in the teens and twenties, then just fell out of fashion," he said. Many have their original stained-glass embellishments.

These machines were the technological marvels of the time, and — in the days before radio and amplified sound became common — any restaurant, bar or movie theater that couldn't afford to hire a house band had one, Williams said.

He's been amassing these behemoths — it takes four people to move each one — since the mid-1990s and meeting with other aficionados in the Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association, an international society founded in San Francisco.

A decade ago he came up with the restaurant plan and purchased this 1910 building that was originally an auto showroom. Earthquake retrofitting came next, then fleshing out his vision. The result is a music palace with an organic, locally sourced menu, a wine/beer/coffee bar, an antique peanut "toasting" machine and a soda fountain that serves vintage beverages like the Poppy Dew and the Arctic Phosphate.

Oh, and if you can't hear your cellphone call because one of the machines is playing, just step into the old wooden phone booth for some quiet and privacy — as San Jose Stage chief Kathleen King had to do during

her post-theater snack Friday night.

At a nearby table, Goldstein and her husband, John Pastier, an architecture critic, were dishing on dessert and nostalgia while a rendition of "Swanee" played on the piano near the front door.

"It's a nice curiosity" — and a good addition to the neighborhood, Pastier said. "I wonder if this is a sign that downtown San Jose is finally going to jell."

Then they hopped up to examine the Violano-Virtu-

oso and try to figure out what substituted for a violin bow. "It's like three little rotating elements are pulling the strings," Goldstein guessed.

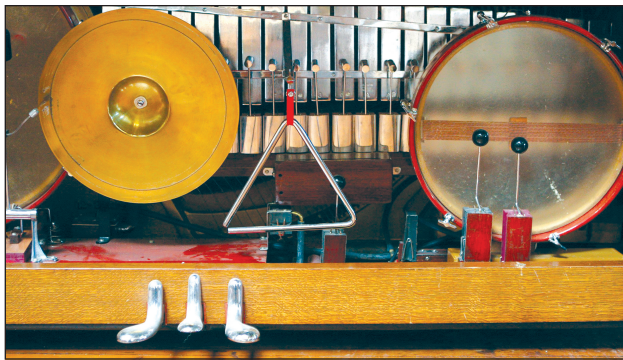
Williams later explained that the manufacturer, the Mills Novelty Co. of Chicago, invented a circular stack of celluloid pieces — revolutionary for its time — to emulate a bow. With the company still in business, he can purchase replacements whenever the faux bow wears out.

There's no problem getting new paper rolls of music either; any time old rolls are

found, someone recuts them, he said. And a Turlock company turns modern songs into player-piano versions.

But don't expect to hear Rihanna or Carly Rae issuing forth from the bellows of the machines at Orchestra Palm Court. Williams first has to introduce a whole new generation to Margie, Minnie, Lulu and a few other gals.

"You can bring Pearl, she's a darn nice girl, but don't bring Lulu. You can bring Rose, with the turned-up nose, but don't bring Lulu." (1925, by Billy Rose, Lew Brown, Ray Henderson.)



JIM GENSHEIMER/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP/MCT
Band instruments are revealed below the piano keyboard on the Coinola X at Orchestra Palm Court restaurant in San Jose on Friday, June 28, 2013. The restaurant hosts a collection of mechanical musical machines from the early 1900s.

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