

When the Sanctions Battled the Precedents

BY NATHAN CARLILE

It's clear on this night that the popular destination on 18th Street is Madam's Organ Restaurant & Bar. Adams Morgan sidewalk traffic slows outside, with passers-by trying to catch a glimpse through the door or look up to the bar's overflowing second-floor patio.

Inside, the sounds of Led Zeppelin boom from a small stage. It's not exactly the Zep's hypnotic harmonies, but the crowd is eager, and a woman's voice makes a passable imitation of Robert Plant's falsetto wail.

It's all part of Banding Together 2006: the Battle of the Law Firm Bands. Earlier this month eight D.C. law firm bands competed for the title of top law firm band in the name of raising money for charity.

At the front door, Carol Weiser is beaming. As president of Gifts for the Homeless, a charitable organization founded about 20 years ago by associates at Arnold & Porter, she has good reason. This is the group's big event—the third annual battle of the bands—and this night, which will stretch into the early-morning hours, will bring in more than \$40,000 that's about double last year's take-and amount that was raised the first year. The organization works strictly with D.C. area firms and donates only to D.C.

area poor. The night's total comes from firm donations, the \$10 door fee participants pay to see the live music, and the "voting" dollars stuffed into ballot boxes for each band, which also serve to crown the battle's winner.

The music is almost as diverse and creative as the names of the groups. Some are garage bands that practice occasionally; others have regular gigs and have put out their own CDs. There are King Cadillac (with Miller & Chevalier), Fired (Crowell & Moring), the Precedents (McDermott, Will & Emery), the Sanctions (Greenberg Traurig), Big Sur (Sidley Austin Brown & Wood), Waterson (Sutherland Asbill & Brennan), Beats Workin' (a joint venture between Alston & Bird and Hogan & Hartson), and On Kilter (Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner). All of the bands have at least one member working at the law firm.

The Precedents, first to compete, offers up a variety of cover songs. "Going first is about right," says Michael House, a partner at McDermott and a keyboard player. The six-member group, made up of all lawyers, plays songs by the Black Crowes, Fountains of Wayne, Foo Fighters, Sheryl Crow, and Michelle Branch.

King Cadillac offers bluegrass and rockabilly songs in a half-hour set. The three-

member group, whose lone legal connection is partner Shane Hamilton, gets steady business in weekend and occasional week-night gigs in Washington and Richmond, Va. The barn-raising stumps include Stevie Ray Vaughn, Jerry Lee Lewis, "Great Balls of Fire," and the ubiquitous Johnny Cash and his "Ring of Fire."

The tightly packed crowd moves in concert to the group. Most seem to thoroughly enjoy the moment. A few have no choice but to go with the flow. "Honestly, I wasn't expecting any of the bands to be this good," says a young woman in the crowd.

The night's winner is determined with "Chicago-style" voting, which is a cheeky nod to the Chicagoan way of voting early and often. The band that receives the most donations at the end of the night is the champ. Upstairs, patrons drop fistfuls of dollars into buckets marked with each band's name. Cadillac Kings wins, defending its title, with more than \$2,300. The band also gave the charity \$1,400.

A pack supporting Crowell & Moring's band, Fired, wear homemade T-shirts, marked with glitter and supportive slogans (one shirt announces Fired's world tour, which happens to coincide with cities where the firm has offices), while cheerily catcalling their friends onstage.

"It's great that these guys put them-

selves out there for a good cause even though they know it isn't the best music," says a young woman in the crowd.

"We really pushed firms to make contributions, and they came through in a big way," says Weiser. Law firms that give more than \$2,000 are awarded "sponsor" status. This year four made the gesture: Alston & Bird, Kirkland & Ellis, Environ International Corp., and Ajilon Legal. A longer list made \$1,000 and \$500 donations. "We tell the firms this is great for summer associates and for the younger people in the law firm," says Weiser of a crowd that is mostly twentysomethings. "Word seems to have gotten out."

The talent is wide-ranging and so too the music, with a little something from each decade, stretching back half a century. The contest's eclectic compilation meanders through '60s hard rock, '70s psychedelic tunes, '80s power ballads, and '90s alternative grunge, with enough pop songs sprinkled in to keep the crowd guessing.

Crowell's Fired pulls out what must be an unprecedented set, moving from AC/DC's "You Shook Me" to Britney Spears' "Oops . . . I Did It Again." The crowd responds as much to the hilarity as to the quality.

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