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## Nightwatch: When pianos attack

Surrounded by big bars and even bigger dance clubs, the Shout! House has found another way to pack them in.

Tom Horgen

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When you think about it, there isn't much of a difference in the places we party at in downtown Minneapolis. It's either the glitzy nightclubs with their \$150 bottles and booty grinding, or the binge-drinking bars with lots of beer.



At Shout! House, dueling pianists Kevin Rotty and Allen Fischer serenaded Amber Peltier, who turned 22. "The atmosphere is really fun," Peltier said of her first outing to Shout! House.

Richard Tsong- Taatarii, Star Tribune

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Then there's the Shout! House.

No dance floor, no VIP seating, no keg stands here. The main attraction?

Dueling pianos. Wild, crazy dueling pianos. (The place serves drinks, too.)

Tucked away on the first floor of Block E is this ball of fire, where young and old mix for a show like none other in downtown.

Piano music might seem tame when compared to the gyrating, beer-swilling madness of downtown's other party houses. But this isn't regular piano music.

The dueling-piano concept is not a concert and it isn't a contest

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between the two players. Rather, the two work as a team, creating a request-driven, loud, sometimes raunchy experience where the crowd is as much a part of the show as the guys hitting the keys.

The audience, which goes from looking as if they just ate at Applebee's to a much sexier crowd by the end of the night, is one uninhibited bunch, too. When the place is rolling, every mouth in the house can be seen shouting "Jeremiah was a bullfrog!"

But maybe '60s and '70s sing-a-longs aren't your cup of tea. Don't fret. These guys watch MTV too. Imagine Kanye West's "Gold Digger" and the Black Eyed Peas' "My Humps" on dueling pianos.

It's nutty.

### The piano men

The Shout! House, which opened in October 2004, is the sister club to a bar in San Diego's Gaslamp District. It could be the start of a chain, said Joe Woods, owner of the Minneapolis bar.

A few other clubs around the country also offer dueling pianos, which were pioneered in the mid-1980s by a New Orleans bar, Pat O'Brien's. The concept once drew big crowds to Minneapolis' Riverplace, across from downtown, in the early 1990s before its entertainment complex went belly-up. Lt'l Ditty's in the Mall of America also was popular before its demise. The Axel's Bonfire chain is the only other place you can see dueling pianos in the Twin Cities.

At the Shout! House, which looks sort of like a French Quarter transplant, the piano players take requests all night, often creating bits from the songs that people submit.

On a recent Saturday night, the guys got wind of a couple's recent engagement. After they were brought on stage, the lovebirds were taught the intricacies of performing "Joy to the World" with sign language -- sexually suggestive sign language.

Later, some poor woman named Amanda got a birthday song centered around her boyfriend, "Oscar Mayer Weiner."

For many repeat customers, watching these scene of utter humiliation is what keeps them coming back.

"I really can't wait 'til my birthday," said Nikki Lundgren, 25, who comes every weekend. "I haven't gone up yet, and I can't wait to get embarrassed."

While those bits lit up this particular Saturday night, nothing

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compared to the midnight solo by 34-year-old piano player Allen Fisher. (His partner was too busy bringing ladies up on stage.) A dueling-piano vet, Fisher knows more than 1,000 songs. So what brought everybody to their feet?

There's nothing like seeing a short, white, former high-school music teacher rock Kanye's "Gold Digger." And rock it convincingly.

"You can go up to Escape and hear 'Gold Digger' any night, so we have to put a show into it," explained fellow piano player Nick Milleson, 21, earlier in the night.

People dancing on stage, at their tables and singing along -- this was definitely a show.

"If you ain't no punk, holla 'We want prenup,' " Fisher rapped to a crowd that just an hour before had clamored for "Jessie's Girl."

"WE WANT PRENUP!" they screamed.

**Hours:** 5 p.m.-2 a.m. Fri.-Sat., 7 p.m.-1 a.m. Tue.-Thu.

**Where:** 600 Hennepin Av. S., Suite 160, Mpls.

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