

# Nightlife in Salem

Written by Glen Hughes on April 7th, 2008

It seems that there is more competition in Salem for your night-out dollars. Many restaurants have added live music to their late night menu. And it's getting increasingly more common to see lines of people waiting to get in to places at 11pm Thursday through Saturday nights.

## Why is Salem a hot spot for nightlife?

Last year and beyond if you were looking for live music your choices were somewhat limited. Dodge Street offered up Rock music in a dive bar atmosphere, Rockafellas offered dance music in a bit more upscale atmosphere, Bangkok Paradise offered Jazz in a weird atmosphere (for jazz) and occasionally Edgewater, O'Neills and The Old Spot (formerly McSwiggins) would have live music. Sitting just outside the down town area, Bay Bridge was a staple of the Salem nightclub scene with local and national bands, karaoke and DJ's playing almost every night. Let's not forget the Lobster Shanty in the nice weather months.



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## Competition raises the bar.

As a reader of TheSalemInsider.com you probably know that due to a combination of sprinkler system legislation and non-payment of taxes the Bay Bridge is closed. There has been no movement on this property so it looks like it's gone for a long while. On the flip side, new establishments in Salem have made others stand up and take notice.

Gulu-Gulu Cafe brought with it a huge beer menu, interesting live music and a packed house of well-tattooed hipsters. A cascading effect of late night changes shortly ensued. Bangkok Paradise shifted their Friday and Saturday jazz to a 6-9 time slot allowing them to promote "rock" bands (rock, hip-hop, roots, metal and cover bands) in the 10-12 time slot. New comer Fresh Taste of Asia, saw an opening and decided to spin the wax with an ambient hip-hop groove catering to a young urban Asian set.

Established locales aren't impervious to the phenomenon either. The Lyceum has started a live music series on weekend nights, their acts are targeted to their existing clientele featuring more mellow music and the occasional 70's rocker. The Old Spot stepped up their bookings also, with live music 3 to 5 nights a week (unfortunately they still are having a hard time getting the word out - *get a website people*). O'Neills does the DJ thing and packs in a good college-type crowd.

In the “everything that’s old is new again” department, Spirits of 300 Derby (formerly Roosevelt’s of Salem) opened recently and has an entertainment license that allows for up to 5 musicians. We’ve seen some great guitar player/singers and Salem favorite, Preacher Jack. Look for changes to happen over at Spirits soon as they work out their menu and eventually open up the second floor. Dodge Street marches to their own drum beat and has been doing live music well before it got trendy.



It seems like musicians from all around are hip to the new explosion of Salem night life. Musicians contact us through [our Myspace page](#) asking about gigs or adding us to their guest list just so we can have a listen. Killer Boston bands like The Indefinite Article, Ichabod and the Love Dogs play gigs in Salem all the time. Plenty of local musicians ply their craft here in town also. With all the great venues and opportunities out there I wouldn’t be surprised to see Salem songstress Mary Lou Lord playing out somewhere soon.

### **If you build it they will come.**

Now that restaurants and bars are offering entertainment, where is everyone coming from? Many people are throwing around the phrase “Salem is the new Cambridge” and that just might be true. I personally know a bunch of people that used to live in Cambridge, Boston and Somerville that have recently moved to Salem. Salem offers a city feel, walkability, MBTA access, and rent at half the price of places in Boston and parking is slightly better.

While census stats for this exact information is unavailable it’s a safe bet to say that more young professionals, 20 and 30-somethings have been moving into Salem. You see them walking to the commuter rail in the morning or having a cup of coffee at any one of our coffee shops on the weekend.

An informal poll taken in January by TheSalemInsider.com showed many people are taking advantage of Salem’s night life live North of Boston (from Revere to Gloucester). When asked “why Salem” the answers were varied but revolved around bang for your buck, quality entertainment, safety and less hassle.



## What's next for Salem's scene?

Any insider can tell you that there is a yearly cycle that Salem goes through. Like many of its North Shore neighbors Salem sees a direct influx of people based on the weather. Spring finds more locals that have been hibernating in doors all winter out walking about and making their way to many of our local hang outs. Once June hits and schools close, tourists arrive taking full advantage of our waterfront, the Willows and off shore locations like the Salem Harbor Islands (i.e. [Baker's Island](#)). As the summer draws to a close and fall hits the second wave of tourists hits in full force for the Halloween season.

With spring right around the corner what will the face of Salem nightlife look like? If last year is any indication, outdoor seating will be all the rage. Like Newbury Street in Boston, anyone with a few feet of real estate in front of their place will plop down a table and start serving out side. Last year The Lobster Shanty, Salem Beerworks and Victoria Station had by far the largest patio seating with Rockafellas showing nicely for down town. This year the tide has changed, be on the lookout for Spirits to dominate summer outdoor space. If they book quality live music and are allowed to play outside, they could give the Shanty a run for their money.

Summer finds tourists and locals alike beating a path to Pickering Wharf. Finz and Victoria Station have nice on the water seating but Capt's open air second floor offers perhaps the best view on the wharf. If you want a more nautical dinner experience than just eating by the water, you can dine on the water at Salem's floating restaurant the Rockmore which is scheduled to open on May 23rd. The Rock is a perennial party pad pushing a plethora of pleasant pabulum and plenty of potable potions.



## Is Salem's art and music boom sustainable?

Twenty years ago when the Cambridge music and arts scene started to take off people said that venues like TT the Bear's and the Middle East would never survive across the river from Boston landmarks like the Rathskeller, Narcissus, The Boston T Party and M-80. If you look at the Boston/Cambridge scene today you'll find that two of the Boston clubs mentioned are now BU condos the other two are now Lyons Group clubs, changed names, had about 50 face lifts and just last month one (now Avalon) was sold to the House of Blues. In Cambridge, TT's and the Middle East are still packing people in every night of the week.

I don't think we will see the migration to Salem slow down for quite a while. New condo housing is being built and affordable rentals abound. More 20 and 30-somethings with disposable income, no kids or very young families are still flocking to Salem. With their arrival you find business that cater to them popping up. Prime examples are hip baby shops like Crunchy Granola Baby, hang outs like Front Street Coffee House and Gulu-Gulu Cafe and new businesses like the recently opened Hex and the soon to open Witch City Ink. When independent businesses open up focusing on a college/post college/young professional demographic it makes the city more appealing to that demographic.

With available retail space, new space coming shortly (Old Salem News building, and Courthouse area redevelopment) there is no question the night life scene in Salem can grow. One fear many people have is corporate establishments encroaching on down town. Salem's unique charm is in part due to it's independent businesses. When local pizza chain The Upper Crust moved into Salem last year there was plenty of talk regarding their "corporate" status. Will future restaurant/bar/nightclub owners in Salem keep an independent spirit alive? That remains to be seen.



## What is missing from Salem's scene?

One aspect lacking in Salem is a true "night club", one with great sound and lights that focuses on entertainment every night. While this type of place can't realistically exist in down town Salem, there are plenty of locations that would work.

Where is the Salem Art scene? In the summer, Klopp Alley is full of artists, sculptures, jewelry makers and musicians. Through out the year [The Salem Art Association](#) throws a few events promoting art and their artists in particular. The Art Corner, Front Street Coffeehouse and Gulu-Gulu Cafe always have something on exhibit but is this enough for our city? Often during Halloween

season the old Newmark Gallery on Essex Street is taken over by locals and puts on quite a show. This year that wont happen as it will house the Lizzie Borden Museum (why? I didn't know she was from Salem). There are plenty of local artists and the only galleries to be found in Salem are devoted to miniature ships and maritime paintings. With all the talent in our own backyard it's too bad there is no daily way to showcase it.

Salem could also benefit from a "local only" night. In some smaller cities you will find venues that promote from within, by featuring only local musicians and artists on a particular night (every Thursday for instance). Given the number of bands and artists that call Salem home this could be a successful concept for a mid-week night.

## **Last Call**

As more people come to Salem for their night out the venues need to keep up their great offerings while simultaneously ensuring client safety. By keeping patrons safe from harm (usually due to fisticuffs and/or over imbibing) the city licensing boards and police will allow a greater expansion of this city's night life. When people come to Salem and have fun, everybody wins.

Right now is a great time to live in Salem, Massachusetts. Night time fun is in style and choices are abundant. If you want to have a quiet bottle of wine with friends, see live rock music, dance to a hip-hop DJ, or sit in on a jazz set - Salem has it all. And it's only getting better. With the proliferation of patrons, establishments are seeing a bump in their bottom line which means they are more willing to offer you what you're looking for, a good time on a night out.