

Plans to Set The Bar High On H Street NE

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IF YOU'VE been out and about on the Washington bar scene over the past 15 years, chances are you've been to one of Joe Englert's bars: An incomplete list includes the Big Hunt, Planet Fred (which eventually became Lucky Bar), 15 Mins., Strangeways, Politiki (later the Penn Ave. Pour House, now just the Pour House), the Insect Club, Capitol Lounge (gutted by fire a couple of days ago), the Andalusian Dog, the Rock and DC9.

Maybe Englert hasn't been the frontman every time -- even veteran scenesters don't instantly associate him with the hip-hop-meets-the-proletariat State of the Union or biker-friendly Crow Bar -- but he's been there.

Now Englert and an assortment of partners are embarking on his biggest-ever venture: transforming three blocks of H Street NE from a row of mainly vacant buildings and carryout shops into a hip, happening destination neighborhood. Over the next year, Englert and his associates plan to open seven bars and clubs on a three-block stretch of H near the revitalized Atlas Theater. These include the Pug, a boxing-themed sports bar; the Red and Black, a rock club Englert describes as "like DC9, but here"; the Rock N Roll Hotel, with live music and "private rooms" for parties; the Bee Hive, a Mexican restaurant; the Olympic, a sports bar with pool tables; Dr. Granville Moore's Brickyard, a more traditional tavern with a variety of European beers; and the Showbar, where Englert plans to showcase burlesque dancers, sword-swallowers and other nontraditional live entertainment.

"What I figure is, think of any worthwhile destination for music and food," Englert says. "It usually has three to five places. So why not make it exciting for people?"

Back in the early '90s, Englert was the godfather of U Street, opening a string of bars with eccentric themes and outlandish decor. Among his ventures: the Salvador Dali-inspired Andalusian Dog; State of the Union, with a huge Lenin towering over U Street; retro coffeehouse Zig Zag; and the bug-themed Insect Club, where worms were on the walls and on the menu. They drew funky, fun-seeking crowds to the neighborhood before landmarks such as Republic Gardens, the 9:30 club and the Black Cat arrived on the scene. (It's fair to note, however, that Englert's quirky nightspots had much shorter shelf lives than their more conventional neighbors.)

As he prepares to try to re-create that edgy vibe, Englert explains he's always had a taste for buildings in developing neighborhoods. "They're cheap. I'm poor," he says with a hearty laugh. (This explains several other projects, including Temperance, a restaurant and bar coming to Petworth, and the new Trusty's Full Service at 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue SE, which we'll come back to in a bit.) Englert says "a young woman who's a friend of mine is in real estate," and she tipped him off to the number of vacant buildings in the area -- and the incentives that the District was offering for

businesses willing to help rebuild H Street's commercial corridor. H Street was one of the city's largest shopping districts in the mid-20th century but was decimated by riots after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and never recovered.

The first in this wave of bars, the Argonaut opened two weeks ago near the bustling crossroads where Florida Avenue, Maryland Avenue, Benning Road and Bladensburg Road collide with 15th and H streets. A new coat of lime-green paint makes the place tough to miss on the otherwise drab strip. Inside, it's just as eccentric: Drawing inspiration from a classic English pub, the two-room building features a pressed-tin ceiling, a jumble-store collection of tables and chairs, tall windows and a collection of nautical knickknacks, including model ships and a large diving helmet. Overhead, lamps fashioned from old metal globes provide light.

Keeping with the theme, rum is the beverage of choice -- there's a nice selection with Seafarer, Appleton, Plantation, Pyrat and Sailor Jerry -- and the cocktail list features fruity tropical drinks such as the Pacific Punch. The kitchen sends out catfish sandwiches, Italian sausages, burgers and delicious sweet potato fries.

This oddly shaped building -- it's built on a triangular plot between Florida and H -- represents a coming together of two of Washington's biggest nightlife entrepreneurs. Englert's partner is Geoff Dawson, who runs Buffalo Billiards, Carpool, Atomic Billiards and Mackey's Public House, among other ventures.

Until recently, it was the Ledbetter Steak and Crab House, but "I thought this [building] was very key to our whole thing," Englert explains. "It's right here on an important corner."

Eager to make it the focal point of his redevelopment, Englert laughs, "I talked to Geoff and said, 'Let's go spend money! Let's do something together!' We came down here and had a pork chop, and we bought the place. Mr. Ledbetter was happy to sell."

The jukebox plays Patsy Cline, Prince and Shaggy; classic rock and classic soul. At the bar and around the pool table, older residents sit shoulder to shoulder with younger folks who seem positively giddy about buying into the neighborhood, all talking to the bartenders and watching baseball on a 60-inch flat-screen television.

"We've hired most of the old cooks," Englert says, as a way of maintaining some continuity with the community.

Some nearby residents aren't thrilled with the concentration of new bars -- the liquor license application for Showbar, with its reference to burlesque performances, convinced some that Englert wanted to open a nude-dancing club -- and posts on neighborhood listservs worried that H Street would become a new Adams Morgan, with public drinking and related crimes.

Englert brushes off such worries. "For every one negative person, there are 100 that are

positive," he says. "They're just out there and vocal." Besides, he stresses, his ultimate goal is revitalization beyond his own establishments -- the strip will become more of a destination when more like-minded businesses arrive, including clothing shops and restaurants. "I've tried to recruit people to do this," he says, though he didn't want to name names. "I've brought them down here and walked them around, and they say, 'You jump in first and tell me how it is.' " H Street has one handicap that U Street and the Hill never did: a lack of transportation. The Argonaut is about a mile from both the Union Station and New York Avenue Metro stops, safe street parking isn't that common and taxis are nonexistent in the evening. "We'll have a shuttle bus from Union Station soon," Englert promises. "I'm trying to get a cab stand over here and open some parking lots."

Now, the Argonaut is a cool little bar that H Street can be proud to call its own, but it's hardly a destination by itself. Once the next few places open -- longtime Capitol Lounge bartender Tony Tomelden, who will run the Pug, thinks he'll have the Pug open in two to three months, and the Red and Black may be ready by early 2006 -- then more people will check out the scene. It will be slow going at first, Englert says, but "what's the worst that could happen? You have to wash some dishes? You have to go back to the bank? I firmly believe that you cannot fail if you work hard and deliver a good product."