

Steak and jazz, hold the politics



"Whatta ya gonna do?"

My wife, Yolanda, and I often voice our favorite line from "The Sopranos" when life takes

an unexpected turn, reminding ourselves we cannot control others' actions, only our response.

"The Majestic Restaurant and Jazz Club" in downtown Kansas City is housed in the historic Fitzpatrick's Saloon building in the old garment district. At one time, Kansas City's garment district was second only to New York City in production of coats and suits for women and was the town's largest employer.

But Fitzpatrick's Saloon, built in 1911 by James A. Fitzpatrick, was meant for drinking and other pursuits by men who had more in common with Tony Soprano than Giorgio Armani. Along with a brothel that occupied several upper levels, Fitzpatrick's godfather, "Boss Tom" Pendergast, kept an office and conducted business on the top floor. When Prohibition hit, the saloon became a speak-easy and moved to the basement, the "banning" of alcohol only adding to Fitzpatrick's and "Boss Tom's" wealth.

It also provided a place for jazz, the Kansas City sound coming into its own during those years. It's said that jazz was born in New Orleans, but grew up in Kansas City. Count Basie, Charlie Parker and Orin

"Hot Lips" Page graced Kansas City with their presence and that jazz tradition continues to this day.

With this history in mind, Yolanda and I always stop at "The Majestic" when we're in Kansas City. We reserve a table in the old basement speakeasy where the jazz band plays. Round tables with a single candle in the center are squeezed together, surrounded by white walls and dark wood trim. A small stage and classic old bar complete the scene. It's a step back in time. Historic and hip, the "Majestic" vibe envelopes most people — including Midwestern, middle-aged writers. One night, Yolanda and I slid into a table in the basement, a three-piece band — piano, coronet and guitar — in full swing. We clinked wine glasses, ordered the bone-in-rib-eye dinner for two, and settled in.

The lean-faced piano player smiled and nodded. His fingers fluttered across the keys as he surveyed the room, the upbeat music flowing from him like water from a fountain, smooth and clean. The coronet player grinned between blows, a Woody Allen type, short and bespectacled, eyebrows arching on high notes, he provided a relaxed counterpoint to the chubby, red-faced guitar player who looked like he might burst. They bopped through their set at a brisk pace, reveling in their solos. The piano spry and airy, the coronet exploding in staccato-bursts, the guitarist casting notes afar, drifting fur-

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ther and further from the melody before he reeled them in for the finale.

The musicians winked and grinned at each other, appreciative of those who applauded, unperturbed by those who did not, professionals relishing their craft. They'd play for free if push came to shove, the music as much a part of them as their arms and legs. With the set completed, they wandered off for food and drink.

It was then I heard her. A silver-haired, slim woman.

"They're all the same, of course," she intoned. "Seems it's always the lesser of two evils ..."

And she was off, talking politics. Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Socialist or Communist, does not matter, the woman was immune to the "Majestic" vibe.

Before I proceed, I must confess that I'm no angel when it

comes to political pontificating. In my sordid past, I enthusiastically engaged in such stuff. I blame heredity and environment, having grown up in an opinionated Scot-English household where supper-table political disputes occasionally exploded, usually initiated by my county board chairman father or my brother Tim, now a lawyer.

Go figure.

But about 10 years ago, like a drinker whose desire for booze diminishes after one too many hangovers (that'd be me, too), political fatigue set in. Not surprisingly, my epiphany occurred in a bar.

Drinking a beer with a close friend and his father, the dad made a political comment, and I pounced. The old man's eyes widened, and he flinched like he'd been struck. I felt horrible. What could be so important about politics that I offend friends?

From that point on, I've done my best to steer clear of political conversation. I've not abandoned my beliefs or failed to keep up with the issues of the day. I vote. I even wrote a letter to the editor recently in regard to a local sales tax referendum. But my political preaching days are over.

I was reminded why as I listened to the lady next to us holding forth on everything from Hillary's lying and Biden's choice to Trump's traveling road show. She must have been buying, because her two companions sat silent, allowing

her to drone on, her partisan patter growing more wearisome by the second.

And that's one of the major problems with political sermonizing. Beside the fact most people don't want to hear what we have to say about politics, it's boring. I'd rather sit in a macroeconomics class listening to a Chinese-speaking professor.

I mean, really, does anyone have any ground-breaking material on Jeb Bush or Hillary Clinton? Two-thirds of voting Americans are solid Republicans or Democrats, and they're going to vote for their party's nominee, regardless. Although a Sanders vs. Trump matchup might give even diehards pause before pulling the lever.

Sitting in the old speakeasy, sipping red wine, I imagined how Tony Soprano or "Boss Tom" might deal with the silver-haired blowhard, but scolded myself, Tony's "whack da broad" mentality bad karma.

Thankfully the jazz trio fired up and the rib-eye, au gratin potatoes and asparagus arrived. Yolanda and I glanced one last time at the bloviating lady, now drowned out by the band, before turning our attention to the food and jazz.

"Hey," I said to Yolanda, between bites, "whatta ya gonna do?"

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