

AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 2010

13

A place
for friends

VENUE NOTES

WHAT: EZ5 LIVE HOUSE
WHERE: 211, Anhe Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市安和路二段211號).
 Tel: (02) 2738-3995
WHEN: Shows run daily from 9:45pm to 12:30am
ON THE NET: www.ez5.com.tw/new
ADMISSION: NT\$600 to NT\$850, includes two drinks

EZ5 Live House, which this year is celebrating its 20th anniversary, offers high-caliber music and a family atmosphere



PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

sister. And when Chiu had to leave his job as a waiter for military service, Hsu offered him a job as assistant manager when he returned, despite Chiu's youth and lack of experience.

"I was really honored to get that trust," said Chiu.

In a fiercely competitive business environment where small businesses rarely last more than a few years, it seems that Hsu, whose friends call him Hsiao Hu (小虎), or "Little Tiger," has competed by making friends instead of foes.

A lot has happened in 20 years, but Hsu says that relationships have always been the most important thing for his business.

Hsu, who was working as a customer service agent at a real estate company at the time, started the club with a group of friends when he was 20. The first two years were rough, and everyone backed out except for his sister.

The club started turning a profit in its third year, and by the sixth year the venture made enough money for Hsu to quit his day job. He saw the music scene change from an American-dominated affair to a more local, Taiwanese one. The club began to attract A-list performers with a hands-off policy, giving the artists complete license over what to play.

What began as a commercial relationship between EZ5 Live House and its performers grew personal. When Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), then mayor of Taipei, targeted live houses as part of the city's *saojuang* (掃黃), or "sweep yellow," effort to crack down on prostitution in 1995, EZ5 was shut down for four months. The house band supported the club financially, forgoing 20 percent of their earnings until they could reopen EZ5. When business returned, Hsu paid them back in full.

So what does it take to weather 20 years of tumultuous political and economic change?

A bond as strong as family.

For Hsu, EZ5's anniversary is significant for many reasons.

"The club is getting old, I'm getting old, my friends are getting old, but I hope the music never does," said Hsu. "I'm always looking ahead."



PHOTO: FRANK SHYONG

A live house takes on the personality of its owner. Hilly Kristal, the founder of CBGB in New York, was a renegade businessman, and his club helped give birth to punk rock. Henry Minton, a saxophonist and a union member, founded Minton's Playhouse, which became a haven for a group of broke musicians who eventually developed the bebop sound.

So who is Max Hsu (許理平), the 40-year-old owner of EZ5 live house?

"I like to make friends," said Hsu. "So that's what EZ5 does."

Although his philosophy may sound absurdly simplistic, its potency is undeniable. The venue has acquired a reputation as one of the most prestigious stops on the nightclub circuit and has launched the careers of a bevy of successful musicians and singers, including Tiger Huang (黃小琥) and Julia Peng (彭佳慧).

This year, EZ5 Live House is celebrating its 20th anniversary, the oldest club of its kind in Taipei by far.

Penny (潘瑋嫻), a regular performer at EZ5 and an 11-year veteran of the circuit, considers playing at the club one of the highlights of her career.

"There's so much tradition here," said Penny.

Though the club enjoys an elite status, its patrons enjoy an intimate, informal atmosphere. Audience members are often dragged onto the stage for comic interludes, where the performer cajoles them into kissing strangers by singing traditional Taiwanese love songs.

On a different night, you might see a guitarist playing the theme song to the film *Godfather* with his teeth. The music ranges from funk and pop to rock 'n' roll and covers, with the occasional traditional song thrown in



Liu Wei-zen. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



Tiger Huang. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



Shin Lung. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



Lai Ming-wei. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



Julia Peng. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

the mix — something for everyone.

Patrons, who run the gamut from young hipsters to older businessmen, often use the phrase *fengkai* (風開) to describe the place — open and relaxing.

"There's something very special and intimate about this place," said Sze-king Kan, an architect who hails from Hong Kong. "There's a really local flavor here."

Yuki Chun (陳術), a make-up artist who on a recent visit was celebrating her birthday at the club, admires the combination of musicianship and friendliness.

"The songs and the casual atmosphere

are the best in Taipei," said Chun.

Patrons and performers alike say there's something about the place that brings them together, an easy chemistry that creates camaraderie — and it's not just the alcohol.

Lai Ming-wei (賴銘偉), the winner of the second season of *One Million Star* (超級星光大道) and a regular at the club performed one night and found himself singing at a patron's wedding the next day.

"Performing is one thing, but this is

more personal," said Lai, who will perform tonight at 11:45pm.

A manager will hold your beer while you go to the bathroom. The bartender will mix you a strong drink. Other patrons might even buy you one.

"We're not just a business," said Lucas Chiu (裘品元), 22, an assistant manager at the club. "We're not just waiters and bartenders — we're friends."

The family atmosphere is more than a business strategy for Hsu. He's employed one bartender for 15 years and the same sound engineer for 18. He runs the business with his