

Coffee-shop musicians singing protest song

When a coffeehouse was busted for hosting live acoustic music without a license, singer/songwriters started singing a protest song to the city.

By [Chris Riemenschneider](#), Star Tribune

Last update: November 6, 2007 - 12:28 AM Don't mess with those folk musicians.

After a small coffee shop in south Minneapolis, Tillie's Bean, got a cease-and-desist order from the city for having live acoustic music, a group of folk singers raised their voices -- or rather, in a sign of the ever a-changing times, their e-mail accounts.

As a result, an ordinance was proposed at the Minneapolis City Council meeting Friday that would allow coffeehouses to host minimal acoustic music without an entertainment license.

Currently, a little coffee shop with a quietly strumming guitarist falls under the same city licensing requirement as a large bar hosting a 23-member rock band from Texas.

"Almost everyone agrees it's an archaic, outdated system but nobody was doing anything about it," said Leo Whitebird, one of the singer/songwriters who got vocal on the issue.

At \$410 annually, plus a one-time \$115 application fee, the license is an expense that small coffee shops cannot afford, said Tillie's Bean owner Maggie Turner. She recalled with a pained laugh the day she received the order from city licensing staff, Oct. 16, after almost three years in business.

The city acknowledged that the order was brought on by a sign she put up advertising a children's singer on National Kids Day outside her shop, at 38th Avenue S. and E. 28th Street in the Standish-Ericsson neighborhood.

"Otherwise, I never really advertised when we had music. People in the community just knew about it," said Turner, who claims she has never heard any complaints from neighbors over the music. "That's who it's for: the people in this neighborhood who want to get out at night but don't want to go to a bar."

Turner said she included live music in the business plan she submitted to the city three years ago but was never told she needed an entertainment license.

"I just paid another \$400 to get a license for outdoor seating, and all I have are eight seats out there," she said.

Ricardo Cervantes, the city's deputy director of licensing, said the letter to Tillie's Bean was the result of a routine inspection and "was more about educating businesses on how to operate in compliance." There was no penalty, he said.

Other shop owners are nonetheless nervous. "It's hard enough competing with the Starbucks and Caribous," said Jerry Nelson at Java Jack's in south Minneapolis, which doesn't have an entertainment license but has hosted a popular Friday night "unplugged" showcase, the Mad Ripple Hootenanny.

Diane Ingram, co-owner of the E.P. Atelier coffeehouse and book store in downtown Minneapolis, does get a license each year, but she said "it's a lot of money to swallow for a place like ours that doesn't really make any money off music."

Blues/folk singer Lonnie Knight hosts a Tuesday open-mic night there. "More and more people who grew up with our kind of music don't want to go to bars or nightclubs anymore," he said. "The city needs to understand the difference between those kinds of places and a little coffee shop that's not big enough to negatively impact a neighborhood."

Schiff takes up the cause

City Council Member Gary Schiff read the musicians' e-mails to council members and reacted with the so-called Coffee Unplugged Ordinance.

Coffee shops and restaurants that don't serve alcohol would not need an entertainment license if they host three musicians or fewer without amplifiers. Schiff expects about a dozen businesses to benefit right away from the ordinance, which he believes has solid support from other council members. The proposal will get a hearing by the Public Safety and Regulatory Services Committee on Nov. 28.

"The city should still regulate dance clubs that open in neighborhoods and the sound levels of amplified music," Schiff said, "but I don't think the city needs to worry about acoustic musicians in coffee shops."

Even the deputy director of licensing agrees. Exempting the smallest of coffee shops "could be an opportunity to better promote all the great musicians in this city," said Cervantes.

St. Paul has two of the Twin Cities' most popular musical coffeehouses, Ginkgo and the Dunn Bros. on Grand Avenue, but it does not seem to have the same problems. Entertainment licenses start at \$164 in the capital city and, said Ginkgo owner Kathy Sundberg, "it's all fairly standard and trouble-free."

Even if the trouble is eased in Minneapolis, folk musicians are not completely satisfied. They think the proposal's three-musician limit is arcane.

"What if there's an a cappella group with four members who are quieter than one guy with a guitar?" Whitebird asked.

But the folkies at least seem content that they can still make a difference.

"Maybe it's left over from the Vietnam era, but many of us acoustic musicians still have that rabble-rouser side," said Don Fitzwater, whose e-mail prompted Schiff to act. "I think it did some good in this case."

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