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Best of Cincinnati for September 11, 2008

## Studio 54, Where Are You?

Cincinnati searches for its next downtown scene

**WebExclusive** — [- Swizzle online Bar Guide](#)

By **CHRISTOPHER TOMLIN**

As a steadily increasing number of party-seekers are foregoing their old haunts in Over-the-Rhine in lieu of greener, admittedly safer-feeling pastures, there's a rumble downtown.

Following the lead of Fountain Square's ongoing facelift, the downtown basin has begun to see a slow but steady influx of new bars, clubs and restaurants returning to the so-called mean streets. And the result could spell a renaissance of sorts for those who've long since sworn off heading downtown for a night out.

"Downtown is catching a lot of flack for not being a great place to go these days," says Janine Just, head of marketing for East Coast Saloons, which recently opened the sports pub Sully's at Seventh and Race streets. "But we see it as being up and coming again."

Much of the downtown nightlife's recent downswing has come, bar owners say, because of a growing perception that the Over-the-Rhine area is more dangerous than fun.

Tony Cafeo, whose Jefferson Hall was once a Main Street staple, opted last year to move the venue across the river to Newport on the Levee, citing slower business in the bar's previous neighborhood.

"We were beginning to notice that a lot of our good customers just didn't want to come downtown anymore," Cafeo says. "One of the reasons we moved was because of the notion that Main Street just isn't seen as that safe these days."

The past 10 years has seen the Main Street area rise to become a younger-skewed scene, with bohemian dot-com startups and franchise clubs like Have a Nice Day Café attracting crowds in the late '90s, only to lose the same crowd in the early-to-mid 2000s due to accusations that the city failed to keep the area safe enough.

Statistically, the Over-the-Rhine Main Street District is getting safer. There's been a decrease in violent crimes (murder, rape, aggravated assault and robbery) over the past three years. The number of such crimes has dropped one-third from a reported 641 in 2004 to 415 in 2006, yet public perceptions have still conspired to portray the area as a risky one to head toward after dark.

Even as the Main Street area struggles, it should be noted that a few blocks away a new scene seems to be on the horizon.

## Greener pastures on Fourth Street

Josh Heuser and Nick Grammas, co-owners of the upcoming Bang nightclub (they developed Club Clau and The Exchange, respectively), see the Fourth Street area as a potentially new location for Cincinnati to develop a solid entertainment district.

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Photo By Joe Lamb

**The old Redfish has a new lease on life as the Irish pub Sully's**

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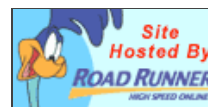
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"I think a rejuvenation is happening here," Heuser says among the steel beams and unfinished wood of Bang's current construction. "We just hope that the community and the city will help get behind it. We're not asking for tax dollars or promotion. All we're asking for is communication and support."



Support appears to be forthcoming, both on Fourth Street and in other downtown locations. The owners of Hyde Park's Beluga are eyeing the area as a possible site for a new restaurant, Tommy Flynn of McFadden's reportedly has a club-style venue opening mid-year and elsewhere downtown developers are recognizing the need for legitimate and bankable nightlife options.

Greg Leffel, owner of the recently opened Whiskey Dick's in Longworth Hall, believes the downtown scene to be cyclical, rising and falling based on the choices available.

"If downtown once again has something significant to offer," Leffel says, "I firmly believe we'll begin to see the traffic coming back to downtown."

"People seem to think of Cincinnati as a small city, but it's similar in size and demographic to a city like Portland, which has an absolutely thriving nightlife," says Roula Davis of the ultra-lounge Vinyl. "People just need to believe in it."

With smaller strips like Covington's MainStrasse, Clifton's Gaslight District and Mount Adams maintaining stable bar scenes, Greater Cincinnati has a lot going for it.

Heuser believes that Cincinnati simply emulating cities with greater nightlife reputations isn't the best tactic to take when building a new nightlife scene. He believes a scene is only as unique as the city and people that spawn it.



Photo By Joe Lamb

**Heather Hack (left) and Molly Muechel enjoy good times at the new Jefferson Hall.**

"We just want to see something distinctly Cincinnati around here," Heuser says. "The city deserves it."

## **New kids on the block downtown** **Sully's**

700 Race St., Downtown

513-381-4302

**Status:** Open now

When Cincinnati standard Redfish pulled out of its Race Street home earlier this year, New York City-based East Coast Saloons saw an opportunity to corner the entertainment market for Cincy sports fans. Their response? Sully's, a large, upscale sports bar which hopes to quickly become home base for Reds and Bengals fans. With 18 big-screen TVs, a full pub-grub menu from lunch to dinner and themed events like toga and keg parties, Sully's clearly aims itself at a twentysomething crowd who loved college but inevitably had to get real jobs. DJs spin from Thursday to Saturday nights and a full selection of top-shelf liquors and beers can be perused at the over 100-foot bar (which they claim is the largest in Cincinnati). Think of it as the city's coolest, fanciest dorm room. And, yes, that's a good thing.



Photo By Joe Lamb

**Jenna Roberts and Jason Rogers soak up the swank at Vinyl**

## **Jefferson Hall**

Newport On the Levee, Newport

859-491-6200

**Status:** Open now

You remember Jefferson Hall. Little juke joint on Main Street, good local music, super-cold beer? Well, it moved. Across the river to Newport. And it's bigger than ever. In a true tale of homegrown-favorite-makes-it-big-time, J-Hall transplanted itself to a large space at the Levee, over two-and-a-half times the size it had been. With live music six nights a week (and a DJ on the seventh), J-Hall maintains itself as an area staple for those who want to just hang but don't want the club crowd bumping into them all night. A cozy, indie feel (truly unique for a Levee establishment) helps to set the scene for some of the city's best local bands and the occasional touring act.



Photo By Joe Lamb

**Amy Kelly (left) and Laura Huesing join the party at Whiskey Dicks**

### Whiskey Dick's

700 Pete Rose Way, Longworth Hall

513-421-6200

**Status:** Open now

Owner Greg Leffel was forward-thinking when he opened Whiskey Dick's in Longworth Hall last November: If people have stopped coming downtown to hang out, give them a reason to do so. So far, it seems to be working. Whiskey Dick's happy hour is rapidly becoming a premiere after-work locale, and an adjoining concert hall featuring touring Rock and Blues acts is steadily breathing life into the stadium district once again. Though the establishment has yet to enjoy the warm summer nights that keep patios hopping, Whiskey Dick's plans to keep delivering reasons with weekly "bike nights" for motorcycle enthusiasts as well as pet-themed patio events where patrons can stop in with their four-legged drinking buddies. Easy parking access, a warm environment and a quick jaunt from Great American or Paul Brown combine to make Whiskey Dick's prime real estate for an evening downtown.

### Bang

314 W. Fourth St., Downtown

**Status:** Opening soon

Partners Josh Heuser and Nick Grammas are combining talents to create Bang, an upscale nightclub opening soon on Fourth Street. The pair are opting not to build on successful establishments in other cities but rather to build an atmosphere that's uniquely Cincinnati's own. From bold reds and yellows to private TV-laden booths, Bang is positioning itself to become a hotspot that is as friendly and approachable as it is trendy and beautiful. Removing itself from the red velvet rope culture, Bang is striving to do away with the pretensions that often come with elite club crowds and establish its own distinct personality. Though the bar has no "official" dance floor, in-residence DJs and top-shelf cocktails should lend themselves to plenty of impromptu parties, and Bang's plush, exquisite décor should have no trouble finding its own crowd. Nestled in the quieter, more residential Fourth Street district, Bang hopes to bring something long missing back to the neighborhood. Heuser says it best: "We want this to be a place where people can say, 'This is why I moved downtown.' "



By Geoff Raker

**New Bars, new energy downtown**

### Vinyl

1203 Sycamore St., Over-the-Rhine

513-898-1536

**Status:** Open now

Roula Davis, one of the creative minds behind the sleek, hip diner Vinyl, believes that if Cincinnati is a large city it should start behaving like one. "In major cities," she says, "music and dining always go hand in hand." Such is the basis behind Vinyl, where DJs pump house and lounge music into the background as patrons enjoy classic American pub food with a unique culinary upgrade. Bringing such distinct sensibilities together (visiting DJs from Europe, upscale twists on the standard menu and a crisp, organic style) has so far paid off for Vinyl, which often

hosts wine-tasting events for networking businesswomen and created a buzz last summer with its well-attended Twelfth Street block parties. Davis is also the genius behind Vinyl's top-of-the-line cocktail menu, which is retooled regularly with seasonal fruits, and the club's Vinyl Elixir, which allows guests to create their own cocktail based on a selection of liqueurs and fruits. By night, a dining atmosphere gives way to a club atmosphere as DJs change up playlists and the restaurant becomes one of the neighborhood's swangiest, swankiest joints. A true getaway experience. ©

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