

Poisoned Ivories

Our reporter braves the boos as he plays piano man at Pete's Dueling Piano Bar

The wrong chord and I are on intimate terms. It's not often that I strike it so literally, however, or publicly.

I'm tonight's special guest at the recently opened Pete's Dueling Piano Bar at Town Square, and my dueling partner has just issued the first salvo I'm supposed to return in the song "Dueling Banjos."

Matt Newbold has introduced me as one of the world's most accomplished

Corey Levitan

FEAR AND LOAFING

pianists, incidentally. He even got a chant going for me, the guy who taught him everything he knows: "Co-rey! Co-rey!"

Newbold happens to be one of the best ivory-ticklers I've ever heard, bashing into

► SEE LOAFING PAGE 4J
Fancy footwork pays off



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The R-J's Corey Levitan prepares for a display of talent that few witnesses will forget. See the video yourself at lvj.com/piano.

► **LOAFING:** *Fancy footwork gets crowd back on reporter's side*

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submission his Slam Grand electric keyboard during "Brown Eyed Girl," "Build Me Up Buttercup" and "Help Me, Rhonda" before my vaulted entrance. He estimates that 45,000 hours of practice got him to this point.

Between us, that makes 45,000 hours and 20 minutes. (Newbold conducted a crash course in the basics this afternoon.)

Long pauses and hand-stretching are my friend. I used them to prolong the inevitable part where 300 paying customers get to actually hear how I sound. Until two minutes ago, I was a superstar worthy of his introduction and his outfit (Elton John cross-bred with Liberace and Kramer from "Seinfeld").

"It's not simply about playing piano," Newbold said earlier. "In a dueling piano bar, we're the percussion, the rhythm and the bass all in one. And you have to be funny, have a good personality and know a lot of songs."

Newbold knows 2,000 of them, only a tiny fraction of which he has time to rip through (along with Christine Cochrane, Joel Henry and

Dean Edwards, in rotating pairs) six hours a night, five days a week.

The dueling-piano concept — hatched in 1986 at a Dallas drinkery called Alley Cats — pits pianists and, more often, audience halves, against one another (left vs. right, male vs. female, country vs. rock). This pumps energy and interactivity into the process of spectating.

Newbold, 33, didn't learn piano himself until age 17 — to accompany some jokey rap songs he composed. A year later, he enrolled at Bowling Green State University in Ohio with a concentration in communication, only to find himself concentrating more on the Steinway in the music room.

"That's all I did," the Toledo native said. "I would just go in there and learn Billy Joel's 'New York State of Mind' and 'She's Got a Way.' And I would write my own stuff."

Instead of graduating, Newbold moved to Nashville with a friend to start a songwriting career that became more of a table-waiting career. But he did meet Amy-Jayne McCabe there. She hired him as her personal Paul Shaffer for a USO tour.

The booing already has begun.

We worked this out in



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Matt Newbold, left, inquires whether the 300-strong crowd is ready to hear from the mentor who taught him everything he knows.

rehearsal: I answer Newbold correctly on three "Dueling Banjos" volleys. On the fourth, he goes boogie-woogie bonkers and I do my best to keep up.

What I didn't plan on is forgetting the sequence of notes from the very first volley.

Newbold blushes for me. Instead of continuing as though musical catastrophe hasn't struck, I simply restart, offering no explanation.

A cruise-ship gig was where Newbold learned the art of dueling piano. He took it to bars in Portland, Seattle and Reno before, four years ago,

some friends recommended Las Vegas.

"They were like, 'We're making money hand over fist here,'" he said. (A good dueling pianist on the Strip can make \$800 per night — in tips alone.)

Newbold had played at Harrah's, New York-New York and Planet Hollywood Resort by the time he heard that Pete's — a Lone Star State institution since 1992 — was opening its first foreign (to Texas anyway) franchise. To audition, he did a four-week tour of Pete's bars in Fort Worth and Addison, Texas.

"Pete's has the best reputation in the business,"

Newbold said.

That was before tonight.

By the fourth volley, after Newbold unleashes some barrelhouse furious enough to rouse Eubie Blake from his grave, I raise my right leg for some shoe-plinking atonal enough to send Jerry Lee Lewis to his.

Something unexpected, and fairly ridiculous, is happening, however. The booing is loud, but it's all coming from one male. The other 299 patrons, it seems, are cheering me.

Newbold appears shocked — and probably a little disappointed that his talent isn't as necessary as he thought it was.

Setting me up as so great worked like "The Emperor's New Clothes," he guesses later, to the extent that what the audience actually heard couldn't even unentrench it.

"They were like, 'Wow, that must be good!'" Newbold says. "Maybe he's playing 50 notes at once or something."

Or maybe the explanation is simpler ...

Tonight, Pete's sold \$14,000 worth of alcohol.

See the video at www.lvrvj.com/piano. Fear and Loafing runs the first Sunday of every month in the Living section. If you have a Fear and Loafing idea, e-mail devitan@reviewjournal.com or call (702) 383-0456.