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FINAL SEB REPUBLIC CITY

Arizona Southern stretches 'country' on Toolies stage

By STEVE WEBB
Special to The Republic

The sign above the bandstand at Toolies Country reads: "Toolies' Saloon and Dance Hall." The operative words are "dance hall."

The west Phoenix nightspot has mixed national and local booking to become a focal point in the Valley's country-pop scene, and much of its success has to do with the ability to dance to its house band's music.

Arizona Southern, a septet that has existed in various forms since the summer of 1984, plays some contemporary country to be sure. It also plays a little Western swing in the Bob Wills-Asleep at the Wheel mode and can stretch that genre a step by throwing in the odd bit of Ellington.

But some of the group's repertoire isn't country at all. *It's All Over Now*, which followed Guy Clark's *She's Crazy for Leaving* in a recent weeknight set, was written by rhythm 'n' gospel singer Bobby Womack — but it's best known as an early Rolling Stones hit. Bits of even more contemporary pop creep into the set as well.

"We play everything from Bob Wills to Miami Sound Machine," guitarist/singer John Hellman said

between sets. "A lot of us fell into the 'top 40 country' category by chance, and we mostly keep our ears open to hits of any kind."

"The important thing is that you dance to it," said fiddle player Jack Evans. "I don't even like the term 'top 40 country.' We're a dance band playing in a country nightclub."

Hellman and harmonica player-vocalist Tony Watson formed the group, the house band at Toolies since August 1985, and its membership fluctuates. For instance, bassist Shawn Jamison has played in the group for just a month.

Generally, the group's core is a rhythm section of Hellman, Jamison, drummer Bobby Duckworth and keyboardist Doug Eckroth. The four play a very rock-influenced, electrified honky-tonk style. The other three — Evans, Watson and steel guitarist Ivan Greathouse — then supply whatever extra color or texture a song requires. On the swing numbers, Greathouse's steel parts remind the listener of horns in a big band. It's a classic role for the instrument and one that coordinates well with Evans' fiddle.

Watson's role is harder to gauge.



Tim Rogers/The Arizona Republic

Members of the versatile band Arizona Southern are, from left, Doug Eckroth, piano; Shawn Jamison, bass; John Hellman, lead guitar and

vocals; Tony Watson, vocals and harmonica; Bobby Duckworth, drums; Jack Evans, fiddle; and Ivan Greathouse, steel guitar.

Everything but his most dominant lead lines on harmonica seem dwarfed by the rest of the instruments, a sound-mix problem. When he can be heard, Watson seems able to voice harmonica blues lines, and

he is a competent singer as well.

Hellman handles much of the lead-vocal load in a gregarious manner. Watson's singing seems to have more of an edge to it. Greathouse offers a nasal but

winning rendition of *House of Blue Lights*.

The club, located at 4231 W. Thomas Road, actually sports more affection than the group. Toolies is packed with Wild West nightlife

props, including murals, a wagon-wheel railing around the dance floor and an assortment of manikins in *Guns* smoke garb.

But music remains the main attraction at Toolies.

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