

## Piano Man

Small paper squares litter the stage. Some lie crumpled on the floor, others are strewn across the top of the piano; each carries the name of a popular song. Tim sifts through the requests with his right hand, while his left hand runs the bass line to “Lady Madonna.” His legs are restless – one sits on the electric pedal at his feet, pumping up and down in rhythm with the song. The other moves in no sequential order, bouncing anxiously in preparation for his set. Tim shoots a glance around the room, then at the drummer to his left. He half smiles and turns his gaze towards the second baby grand across the stage. The song ends. The crowd applauds and whoops. The other player meets his eyes and leans in towards the mic.

“Alright, folks – Tim Cutting,” he says in introduction.

Tim half-smiles and drops his head. He looks at the scribbled requests one last time, then peeks out at the crowd and pounds the first, heavy chord.

Tim stands about five feet ten inches tall. He’s thirty years old with dark brown hair and eyes to match. His permanent five o’clock shadow fades into tight knit sideburns; his hair’s started thinning in a cropped swirl atop his head. Tim wears his everyday clothes to work – loose fit jeans, a t-shirt, and a pair of suede Puma Cabanas. Monaco Bay relaxes the dress code for its musicians; not so much for the rest of the staff, who work in black pants and collared shirts. The pianists are the mainstays, the venue’s attractions; a little personality in their outfits is good, and Tim’s outfit screams . . . well, nothing. On the street Tim is just another guy. But seated behind a piano he’s an expert, a virtuoso, an artist.

Seven years ago, Tim auditioned for a job at Monaco Bay Piano Bar and Grill as a dueling pianist. The pianists don’t really duel; they play requests and sing popular songs. Tim’s only issue was playing songs and singing simultaneously, that took some practice. After several weeks, however, Tim had become a staple of the show. He knew how to work the crowd, how to cater to their needs; he could get them singing and dancing to his cascading glissandos and fervent vocals.

“Tim is just so easy to talk to, to get along with,” said a waiter at Monaco Bay. “For me, I guess I’d say that Tim is the face of the bar, and now that he’s leaving,” the waiter paused, looked at Tim onstage, and shook his head. “Now that he’s leaving, we need to find that face again.”

Tim’s parents are professional pianists. He took up the instrument when he was seven years old.

“When I was a kid, I practiced six hours a day. I never did my homework,” Tim mused, “I just played piano.”

In high school, however, things began to sour; Tim had grown weary of the practiced repetition and called it quits. For an entire year, he didn’t touch a piano. Then, one afternoon while driving with his father, he heard Beethoven’s “Sonata Pathetique” on the radio. Tim was inspired – he realized he missed piano and resumed playing. After graduating high school, Tim joined Western Michigan’s music department and studied composition. He never finished his degree – after taking a semester off during his

sophomore year, Tim was forced to re-audition. He passed easily, and began studying choral arrangements. Soon enough, however, Tim took another break – this time, indefinitely. Monaco Bay was his next stop.

But Tim won't be an employee there much longer. In two weeks he's leaving for Chicago; he's got another job lined up as a dueling pianist for a larger restaurant chain, Howl at the Moon. After seven years in Kalamazoo on the same stage in the same bar, Tim is ready for a change.

"I'm lookin' forward to the Chicago scene 'cause it's part of the reason I'm going down there," Tim said. "It's the same kind of concept, but I'm gonna be the new guy. I'm gonna have to step up my game a little bit." His new job, however, is more or less the same as his current one. Similar setup, same popular songs – the setting is unmistakably familiar. Regardless, he's still the newbie – the little fish in the huge, metropolitan pond. For Tim, it's all about avoiding stagnation; he wants to be challenged.

Tim's top 5 favorite songs to play onstage are as follows: (1) *Possum Kingdom* – the Toadies, (2) *My Hero* – Foo Fighters, (3) *Ice Cream Man* – Van Halen, (4) *Africa* – Toto, and (5) *New Age Girl* – Dead Eye Dick. He said the order's different on different days. His least favorites are *Great Balls of Fire*, *Sweet Caroline*, *Piano Man*, *Don't Stop Believing*, and *Brown Eyed Girl*. They get requested every night; that's when things get stale.

Sometimes Tim will watch the Tigers game while he's playing a set. Other nights when he's waiting for a song to end, he stares out into empty space.

"I see a couple older guys doing this stuff, and they hate their lives," Tim frowns. "Sometimes I feel like I just can't connect with anybody in the crowd."

Despite these brief introspections, Tim rarely has an off night. Sickness, physical exhaustion, bad break-ups, and tired songs be damned – Tim packs his troubles up and gets onstage, ready to perform.

It's one o'clock in the morning on Tim's last night as a Monaco Bay pianist. It's also the weekend of Western's graduation, the only time Tim gets nervous for a show. The bar is packed, the college kids are out, and Tim is moving with the crowd, electrifying them, engaging them, inviting them to celebrate his final songs. Sweat glistens on his brow, his fingers glide through songs he's played a million times.

"I can promise you / You'll stay as beautiful / With dark hair / And soft skin . . . forever / Forever," Tim sings into the microphone. The Toadies' lyrics carry through the bar. He looks out at the crowd and rails out a few more chords before continuing the verse. In this moment, in this place, and although he'd modestly disagree, Tim is absolute. He is the face of Monaco Bay.