

# Wize

THE LONGEST RUNNING  
WEEKLY ON SOUTH BEACH

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## THE SWIRL BUNCH





Photo by Cubby

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# SWIRL CELEBRATES IT'S ANNIVERSARY.

Digby Liebovitz, Swirl's most genteel owner, and I, lounged around in the front room, sipping cocktails and talking about South Beach, the meaning of life, and a couple of other topics in between. This is one of the few bar/clubs on the Beach where absolutely no attitude is present. This is a direct result of Digby's charm, and makes it a perfect "local" (in Australia, a local is the pub you go to all the time, in your neighborhood, and the other patrons are all your mates. If someone walks in you don't know, within an hour they become a mate, too) for those of us who call SoBe home.

By Melanie Morningstar

**Q. How old are you?**

A. 31.

**Q. And where are you from originally?**

A. Not that I admit it, but I'm from L.A. When I was about 22, I moved to New York and I was there for 15 years.

**Q. How long have you been on the Beach?**

A. I've been here about a year and a half.

**Q. Did you come here with the idea of opening a place?**

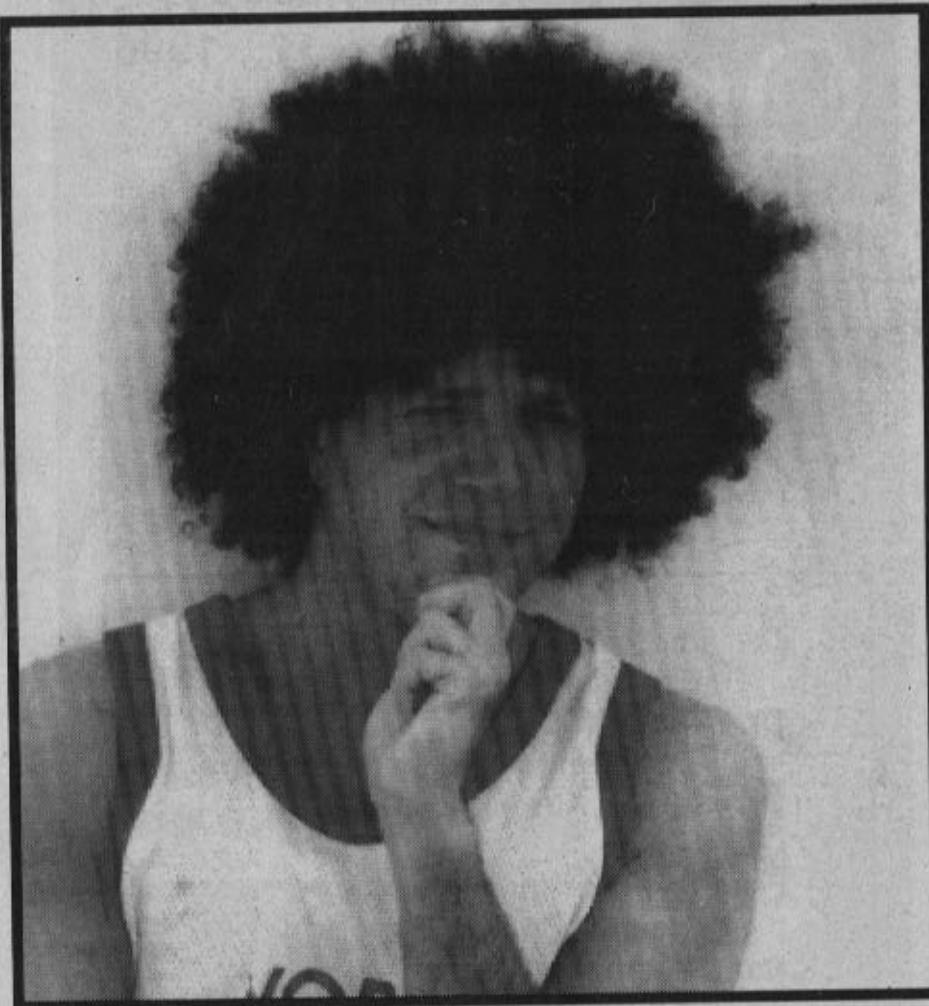
A. No, I came down here on vacation with my business partner and it just looked like we had a Thelma and Louise weekend, lots of extra-curricular activity, lots of fun, and we came down here and it looked like a thriving economy, little did I know (laughs), and we wanted to do a show and it looked like there was a lot of openings for people. There was a lot being offered, but not what I wanted, I wanted to offer something unique.

**Q. Why did you choose this location?**

A. Well, this location chose me. We were going to be opening on the 900 block of Washington (next to Hombre). We were going to have a 4,000 sq. ft. kind of super version of this, where the themes change every month. Kind of like Area (in New York) which was my inspiration, a club that changed all the time. The venture capital for that fell through and I always wanted to do this, so thanks to my dad, and Tony Robbins. I kept asking better questions and then I found this place. It was going out of business, it was Bicycle Beach Cafe, which was not doing very well, we were able to come in here and get it for very cheap. We did some renovations, not huge, but minor, and opened it up very quickly.

**Q. I refused to go into the Bicycle Beach Cafe, because I was so pissed-off that it wasn't Bario any more. Those drag shows were so much fun a couple of years ago. Have you found other people who won't come in because of that?**

A. I think a lot of people have, kind of like, Barios was the old part of the Beach, and people are very beholden to it. A lot of people who worked at the old Bario have come in, and said we've really done credit. We never tried to be Bario, we never wanted to be that, we wanted to be something different. But we put the character back in it. If Bario had one thing, it was a dive, it was a character place, it was fun, it was a little dirty but that was fun, and so we brought that back to South Beach a little bit, cause I think everyone on the beach is so glitz and uncomfortable, and here we're one of the few places that has couches on the beach. You think the beach is so casual they should have couches, but it doesn't. To that extent we put the comfortability back, and I think most of the people who went to Bario are still coming here and love it. We do things differently, we've altered the space a lot which makes it a lot more fun. We're developing our own niche in the market, which is very different, we're just a bar. We're not doing food. We tried food, and that didn't



**Q. Is the cow on the roof going to go?**

A. He might, this room is our toughest room, we'll have to wait and see. We wanted to put in French Doors, but the city of Miami Beach wouldn't allow it. The bar will stay the same, its kind of like a staple now. People love the water bar, and we won't change that it's fun and interactive. It is a club, with a new sound system, and new lights, but it's an anti-club. Where else can you dance outside in the city, which is great, and listen to good music, have good drinks, and be around good people.

**Q. So, where do you think this place will be in five years?**

A. I see myself being on the beach in five year's time. I'd like to think this bar is going

**Q. Why was that?**

A. Not too many people ate here, it's probably why they all look so great. We're focusing on making people happy at night now, and we're getting into after-hours.

**Q. How late are you open?**

A. We're open till 4 during the week, through the week it's very flexible, we stay open if business necessitates it, it can be 4 or 5, we can serve liquor till 5, and 5 on the week-ends. Now I'm looking at doing after hours business.

**Q. We were staggering around on Monday night after Caffe Torino's anniversary, it was about 5a.m. and the only place that was open was Hombre, and they demanded \$5 to get in. When I asked what it was for, he said "this is the only place that's open". This town really needs another after-hours bar badly.**

A. After hours is a touchy subject. It's illegal to do after hours now so the people who are doing it now are doing it illegally and there's a certain amount of risk there. We haven't wanted to take that risk, and we're working on a way to do it legally.

**Q. What is your best night?**

A. Every night. We give something to everyone at different times, and we're constantly changing it. Our late shows, a kind of drag tv show called "Late Show" that we started a couple of weeks ago, on Monday nights, is doing really well. That's a lot of fun. Our biggest night is Tuesday night, Bingo with Marvella. And now we're really happy to have JoJo (Odyssey) on Friday nights, it's really great. We had celebrities last week. Madonna's brother, Christopher, as well as the artist Kenny Scharf. It's starting to get really well respected.

**Q. I believe I read about that in Tara's (Solomon) column.**

A. Did you? And you know we're working with a great publicist (Victoria Rose) to get more celebrities, the model scene and the entertainment scene don't know about us. We're locally known, but, you know, how Bash is known for that, we want to be known for that, too. Thursday is a rock night with Shannon, again, giving something that no-one on the beach has thought about. Kind of like the Squeeze Box in New York, it's going to be rock 'n roll, with Harleys parked in front, the whole bit. Saturdays we're doing more of a, although we're always bi-sexual, but we really like the mix on Saturdays. Fridays has a more gay flavor to it, but everyone's welcome, where as Saturday has a more straight kind of feel. Again, everybody's welcome, we're calling that "Party Sessions". We think people coming in and not paying a cover, is essential, and cheap drinks, our prices are very cheap. The staff is great, there's no attitude. On the other side of the counter we really don't let attitude in. We get so many compliments, people on Washington are always telling me, "we don't go out to bars, but we go to Swirl". We're kind of like an anti-bar, which is kind of cool. And I know the big boys are copying us. As soon as I put in an ad saying "no attitude", three other bars included that in their next ads.

**Q. How did the name "Swirl" come about?**

A. We actually got the name of Swirl from Twist. My business partner and I were in Twist. And he said, "they don't really twist at Twist, they more kind of swirl".

**Q. You mentioned you want to be constantly changing. What changes are in the hopper?**

A. In the coming months these rooms will change completely to give them a different look. We're going to be opening up our upstairs, it's going to be the "anti VIP Room" with an additional bar and bathrooms. We have 800 sq. ft. upstairs.

**Q. As I look around, I see David Rohn's work.**

A. We change the art every three or four weeks. The Swirl Gallery's mission is to give a place where artists can exhibit for free, we don't charge to exhibit, and we don't take a commission on it, which is very rare in this place. My dad was in the art business, so I have an art background. It gives the artist exposure, and gives our patrons something new to look at. We've been able to sell the art, and it also gives people a different way to look at it, when they're more relaxed. We're putting in better gallery lighting next week, which I'm really pleased about.

to still be here. Look at Twist, it seems to have been here for ever, but it's only 2 years.

**Q. Years on South Beach are counted as dog years.**

A. This is a tough town. We're now having our seven and a half month anniversary, we're Swirl, so we don't have to do a 6-month. We'd like to see bar-hopping like they do in Europe and I know they do in Australia. We get a lot of that from Twist, and we'd love people to go to 821, and then to us. We feel they're our sister bar, because we both offer something unique on the beach.

**Q. Let's change the subject for a moment. I know that you've become "civilly active", let's talk about that.**

A. I joined the South Beach Business Guild when I got here, after looking around to see which organizations were the strongest. I'm now on the Board of Directors, in charge of Community Relations and parties and special events for them. And I joined South Beach After Dark and I'm doing the same thing there. I invite anyone to come to the meetings. They are the last Thursday of every month, and they're free (the next one is at Mezzaluna, 834 Ocean Drive - 9:30am). Next year we're going to have a huge gay carnival, and I hope to be putting on the first Gay Pride down here. We haven't had something like that before. I like the fact that South Beach Business Guild is kind of in the position to play a leadership role in the gay community. I was a Political Science major in college, so I like the politics of it. As a bar owner and someone who's making money off the community, it's my duty to help. I think we have a better dialog with the police now, because of South Beach After Dark, they have a better idea of who we are, although they've hurt us a lot, I think it was very good for everyone to go through, because we're a stronger community now. I think next season is going to be a great season.

**Q. What changes could you make, within your sphere? What changes do you want to make, and what changes do you think you'll be able to make.**

A. I think a couple of years ago there wasn't "a community". The beach has grown up, and with that, you get a community with a face. And with the face comes a voice. Our city government is not representative of its people, and they need to learn and understand that we brought this beach back, that we're responsible for that.

**Q. They thought they did that.**

A. I know that, but it's evident, and we have proof that we did it, they have to understand, even if they want to take half the credit, which I don't mind, they have to realize that we're a very strong powerful voice here. The raid taught us one important thing, we could have galvanized a little more than we did, and we realized that that there's not one person who's a leader. You can't point to one person in this town, not the mayor of South Beach, that's Louis' (Canales) title, somebody who's a real civic leader. And people stepped up to the plate, and did a good job, but it wasn't an organized effort. It helped get an organized effort. What I hope to do now, we were just asked to get involved with the park effort. The boys in the park are a result of the clubs being closed down. We told the commission that. They're interested in doing what they can to prevent it, rather than these raids. Now you know you can't do drugs in the clubs anymore. That's changed everything. If I want to leave my mark here, it's that we really have a chance to start a community. I personally think that South Beach should be its own community, away from Miami Beach.

**Q. Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

A. We want to invite everyone on Thursday (May 30) to our anniversary party. I'd also like to thank my manager KC who's been with me from the beginning and shared my dream, my entire staff, they're the best. Kirstin, Andy and Nicky - my bartenders, Tom, my barback, and all my drag queens of course, Taffy, Bridgitte, Marvella, Adora, Shelley Novak, and everyone who's helped to make us so successful. And of course to all my customers as well. Thank you all very much and we'll see you Thursday.

Melanie Morningstar is Contributing Editor for *Wire*