

MARK TOWNS AT HILTON AMERICAS 1/20/10

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Sitting in a lobby chair next to a smallish stage, [Mark Towns](#) looks pretty ordinary.

He's medium-built, maybe six feet tall, with his lean legs tucked underneath his chair. His grayish hair, a little longer than shoulder length, is a bit frazzled and pulled back hastily into an unflattering ponytail. His all-black outfit gives him a certain "I had to come here straight from my shift as a bartender" vibe. It's hardly an impressive image.

But put a guitar in his hands, and that same lobby chair on that same smallish stage, and Holy Christ, Mark Towns is otherworldly.

Towns is performing at the new Skyline Comedy and Jazz Suite, a weekly Wednesday-night event on the 24th floor of downtown's [Hilton Americas Hotel](#) (1600 Lamar) that combines live music — not always jazz — with live comedy.

The event was put together by All. D. Freeman, a veteran [Houston](#) comedian who has worked with [Steve Harvey](#), [Chris Rock](#) and [George Lopez](#), among others.

"There's no other pairing like this in the city, world-class music with world-class comedy," says Freeman, who hopes the combination will catch on in Houston like it did up north.

"I was at [renowned jazz club] Blue Note in New York and saw comedy mixed with jazz and really liked it," continues Freeman. "The two are very similar, with the improvisation and the type of crowd that they bring out. I want to bring that to Houston."

Skyline has had a few test runs thus far, but tonight is the venue's first official show. As such, Towns sits facing a small crowd. No matter; he plays his guitar like 20,000 people are at his feet. He struts and strums and plucks his guitar with measured aplomb.

The downtown skyline is at his back, and a spotlight is at his face. Now his black button-up shirt might as well be a superhero cape, and his ponytail is magnificent. Five minutes ago, he was [Antonio Banderas](#) in *Spy Kids*, but he's become the same actor in *Desperado*.

The change is palpable. Or, at least to the crowd it is.

"I don't feel any different onstage than I do off," says Towns between sets, when asked if he feels more confident and in control with a guitar in his hands. "I was getting paid to do gigs as a kid. After a while, it becomes what you do."

For the duration of his Latin-tinged time onstage, Towns dictates the ebb and flow of the room without saying a word. Very slyly, he uses a looping machine to make it intermittently sound like he's playing two separate parts at once.

His style of jazz is smooth and unfettered, and the guitarist just sort of lets the music come into its own, but it never seems languid or insincere. His set is the highlight of the evening.

"I enjoyed Mark's music a lot," says Pat Pullins, a social worker and frequenter of places like **Legends Jazz Cafe** (1004 N. San Jacinto). "This is a beautiful room. I love being able to overlook the city. I think this could be around for a really long time."

Two things about that quote:

First, Pullins may have been influenced a bit by Towns's playing when calling it a "beautiful room." The space is pretty standard hotel fare, mostly low ceilings, overly patterned carpet and cocktail tables.

But the "overlooking the city" is dead-on. There's an unexpected feeling of superiority you get from being up higher than everyone else. The exterior windows of the Skyline room are almost entirely floor-to-ceiling, so you get a clear view of just about everything north of I-45.

Looking down, you can't help but think things like "I wonder what the peasants are up to tonight." It's probably the same way people who hang out at **The Drake** (1902 Washington) feel when they put on a new pair of [Armani Exchange](#) jeans with a giant eagle stitched on the side. Or how anyone feels when they watch [Jersey Shore](#).

But even if Skyline took place on ground level somewhere, it does feel like it could have a proper shelf life. Because even if you end up thinking the entertainment stinks, it's still better than what you would have been doing on Wednesday night otherwise.