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SOUTHERN LIGHTS: Raise a glass and say a toast, Chukker Nation

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Published 11:01 p.m. CT Feb. 9, 2013 | Updated 5:20 p.m. CT Feb. 9, 2013

Some day, someone will write the definitive book about The Chukker on Sixth Street in Tuscaloosa.

It closed in the fall of 2003 and subsequently was demolished, but memories remain strong in The Chukker Nation.

Technically, The Chukker was a bar — a seedy-looking, dive bar, at that — but it also served as a restaurant, a meeting place, a melting pot, a music paradise, a romantic rendezvous; and to believers, sacred ground.

Before its destruction, I attended a silent auction of Chukker memorabilia. The joint was packed; everyone wanted a piece of it for the memories.

And well they might. Behind its shoddy facade at 2121 Sixth St., The Chukker arguably was one of the most exotic places in Tuscaloosa.

Long before racial integration was legal, blacks and whites mingled there. It also drew gays, bikers, construction workers, misfits, students, hippies — all kinds of people.

Many a love affair was launched there, many a deep conversation held. Many an argument raged, many a deal was made, many a beer was quaffed in The Chukker.

Lots of the activity took place under the incredible piece still fondly referred to as “The Sistine Chukker.” Based on the work of Michelangelo, the 16-panel painting by Tom Bradford, which had hung in The Chukker since 1974, was preserved later.

The Chukker served as a home away from home for me during my bachelor-drinking years. Friends met there, and it appealed to my bohemian interests.

Often, I would finish work at the newspaper late at night and walk down the street (we were just a block away from each other then) to bring The Chukker owner at the time an edition of

The Tuscaloosa News, literally hot off the presses.

The owners were as wildly diverse as the clientele. The one thing that united most of them was a love of music and The Chukker was a pioneer in presenting live music in a local bar.

Still, the owners had eclectic tastes. One offered concerts by alternative rock bands like The Indigo Girls, The Replacements, Lil' Queenie, Sublime. Bluesmen R.L. Burnside and Johnny Shines, among others, played there. Reggae got a tryout, too, with Yabby You, Africa Dreamland, The Twinkle Brothers, and the great white boy Blue Riddim Band.

According to legend, Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones was filmed playing pool at The Chukker, and REM's Michael Stipe gave the place a shout-out during his band's concert at the University of Alabama.

But it was Ludovic Goubet, now a photographer of comely young women in France, who brought oodles of jazz to The Chukker. A dedicated fan, he booked jazz musicians ranging from guitarist Larry Coryell to the great Sun Ra, whose memorable three-night stand was a high point in The Chukker's history.

One of The Chukker relics that I have in my home office is a photograph from the summer of 1993. Under the watchful eye of a portrait of Sun Ra, a quintet takes The Chukker stage. At their center is a pudgy man, wearing a T-shirt and playing trumpet. His story is as exotic as that of The Chukker.

His name was Red Rodney. At least, that was his nom-de-jazz. Originally, he was Robert Roland Chudnik. Born in 1927, he hailed from a Jewish family in Philadelphia.

His family, immigrants to this country, aspired to become respectable Americans, but Rodney didn't stay respectable for very long. Bright, precocious and red-haired, but considered a juvenile delinquent, he dropped out of school and became a professional musician at age 15.

Rodney was a great player. He was heard with most of the great white bands of his day. However, he gave up his big-band career when he fell under the spell of Charlie Parker, the legendary African-American alto saxophonist.

Rodney thought "Bird" (as Parker was known) was God. He served for years as Parker's flunkie, roadie, drug connection and musical foil. Rodney learned to play hard bop as well as Miles Davis did when Miles was Parker's understudy.

Miles, perpetually in shadow of the saxophonist's brilliance, used to quit Parker's small combo every night, only to rejoin the next day. Parker used to fire Rodney every night, only to rehire

him the next day.

Although Rodney, who followed Davis into the Parker band, was little more than an adolescent, he quickly became Bird's right-hand man.

Like Miles, Rodney tried to emulate the brilliant Bird. And like Miles, he wound up with a heroin habit that was to plague him for years.

In 1950, Parker's manager booked the combo for some dates in the Deep South. It was a dangerous time for a racially mixed band to perform in public in this part of the country, or even to travel the highways together.

Parker's solution was to claim that Rodney was really black. He called him "Albino Red" throughout the tour, and the Jewish boy from Philadelphia passed for African-American. The combo, in which Rodney was the only white person, played everywhere in the South except Mississippi, even doing a date in Birmingham.

Rodney's appearance at The Chukker came less than a year before his death, but sometimes I think it was the first time since that tour that he had performed in the Deep South. Certainly he was one of only a few white men who had passed for black in the region.

As I say, he was an exotic figure from an exotic family.

His father spent his childhood in a ghetto in Moscow. One night, his father's parents were killed by some drunken Cossacks who entered the ghetto. Rodney's father, who was then 13, sought out one of the killers and stabbed him to death. It was a scene right out of "The Godfather."

After that, Rodney's father couldn't stay in Russia, so he walked across Europe and eventually settled in England.

When World War I started, he joined a Jewish battalion and was dispatched to Palestine, where he was wounded in fighting.

He was to be sent back to England, but because of confusion involving two hospital ships in port at the same time, he wound up in New York.

There he remained and eventually married. His bar mitzvah present to his son was the youngster's first trumpet.

Rodney, who left Parker in 1958, gave up music and became a professional thief to support his drug habit. Ultimately, he was arrested and spent 27 months in prison.

Later, he was jailed for drug offenses in Kentucky. There, he gave music lessons to guitarist Wayne Kramer of the MC 5.

Rodney subsequently suffered a stroke. Faced with mounting medical costs, he returned to jazz — with a vengeance.

He played a beautiful set at The Chukker, including a lot of bebop, as fiery as his red hair, that he learned originally from Parker. It was an awesome experience.

After the concert, I gave an acquaintance a ride home. I asked him how he liked Rodney.

He twisted in the car seat.

“It was ... well, real good lounge music,” he said.

I couldn't believe it.

Yet it reminded me of something I'd read, about when a young rock musician was asked what he thought of Parker. The musician said the playing was great — but boring.

Once upon a time, this music had shaken the world. This night, I just had to shake my head.

Oh, well, rest assured, Red Rodney was great.

Just another story from The Chukker.

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