

NEWS

Chukker Nation returns: Event revives spirit of celebrated Tuscaloosa dive bar



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Tuscaloosa News

Published 4:03 a.m. CT Oct. 25, 2023 | Updated 11:51 a.m. CT Oct. 25, 2023

The Chukker wore many skins and facades in its time, opened to decades and generations, not all sharing the same intents or interests, but drawn by the late lamented dive's atmosphere of acceptance.

The legendary Tuscaloosa bar closed 20 years ago. Coming up Friday and Saturday at Druid City Brewing Co., the closest thing to that Chukker spirit around now, will be a celebration, two days of music, poetry, yoga, art, comedy and more: The Chukker Weekender.

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

Its driving forces are mostly drawing from latter years of the Chukker's run, for this two-day return. Among the movers and shakers:

Matt Patton. Currently playing bass with Drive-by Truckers, and running his Dial Back Sound studio in Water Valley, Mississippi, though the 20-years-ago types will remember him from scorching Tuscaloosa-born bands Model Citizen and the Dexateens, both of whom will play.

Frannie James. One of a team of four who bought and operated The Chukker from 1991. She'll be leading a chair yoga class, and in her function as treasurer, helped organize a GoFundMe page to help the Druid City Brewing Co. and others pay out-of-pocket expenses required to create the event.

Lori Watts. Watts, of This Ol' Thing Vintage Sales and Estate Services, has been corralling artists and other vendors for the Saturday market.

Bo Hicks. Owner-operator-raconteur of Druid City Brewing Co., he's obtained an event permit from the city, to allow expansion into the parking lot, adding a tented second stage, so bands/musicians can rotate on and off with little down time between.

Craig Gates, another hyphenate musician-artist, designed the graphics.

Jeremy Butler, TV and film professor emeritus at UA, and host of radio shows dating back to "Progressions" and to currently running "All Things Acoustic," has become archivist, populating www.thechukker.com with history, lore, photos, musician and other artist information, and more.

Rich Marcks. The artist who more than once painted The Chukker's Sixth Street facade has lovingly and painstakingly restored Tom Bradford's 16-panel "Re-creation of Man" — commonly known as "The Sistine Chukker" — and seen it installed on the ceiling at the Druid City Brewing Co., just in time for the Weekender.

Here are the lineups for the Chukker Weekender at Druid City Brewing Co., 700 14th St.:

The weekend kicks off Friday night with poetry, oration, and a number of reunited bands from the Chukker's 90s/early 2000s, including the Crying Jags, Instant Karma, the Irascibles, the Cunning Runts and Model Citizen.

The second day starts Saturday morning with an art market, chair yoga, poetry, comedy and bands including Henri's Notions and the DTs, all in the morning and afternoon.

Saturday night will feature Haunted Housecat, a band comprising musicians who played with the late D.C. Moon, and a flurry of bands and musicians, many of them reuniting and playing for the first time in many years, including Blip, Club Wig, Che Arthur and Adam Reach, Sweat Bee, the Penetrators, Hooper, and the Dexateens.

There's been some online debate — not unheard of for a Chukker crowd — about how this celebrates mainly one era of the club, that of its final decades, when it became renowned as not just a place of acceptance, but a venue for local and touring acts, including legends such as Sun Ra (with his Arkestra, he performed/held a three-day residency at The Chukker), the Replacements, Richard Thompson, Dick Dale, Sublime, Johnny Shines, the Indigo Girls, Southern Culture on the Skids, Ronnie Dawson, Little Queenie, R.L. Burnside, Larry Coryell and more.

More: Constantly-updating website for all things Chukker

But when it was founded in 1956, The Chukker opened at 2121 Sixth St. — roughly where Government Plaza meetings the parking deck now — as a candle-lit piano bar, with white tablecloth-covered tables, and waiters in white jackets serving steaks, seafood, chili, hamburgers and 25-cent beer.

It featured only only one half of those long tall halls, and served as a place of lively conversation for grad students, professors and other folks with open minds and tolerance for

a diversity of opinions.

Chukker owners and their eras

1956-1968: "Chukker Bill" Thompson opened The Chukker as a restaurant. Tuscaloosa County had voted to go dry in 1907, and stayed so until 1951, when it voted wet. The county went dry again in 1954, but settled on wet, finally, in 1956. Thompson named it after a favorite bar in San Francisco, itself named for the term for a period of play in polo.

1968-1972: Earl Hilyer; 1972-1974, Mark Lee Cobb. In his later years, Thompson apparently let standards slide, and the cafe-bar became more of a beer bar, a convening joint for the fringe. First Hilyer, then Cobb, took it on as the place some older patrons recall as the foundation of the Chukker Nation.

1974-1980: Bob Callahan and Lewis Fitts. Under their ownership, the Chukker doubled in size, and took on the built-in-museum art-mural look. This is when Bradford painted "The Re-Creation of Man," when Weston and Mike Dement crafted murals along the walls. Pool tables and pinball machines helped fill the spaces. Draft beer first became legal in Tuscaloosa in 1976 — before, beer had only been served in cans or bottles — and its widespread acceptance helped complete conversion of The Chukker from restaurant to bar.

1980-1989. Bruce Hopper and Ronnie Myers. With the able assistance of Vinyl Solutions record store owner George Hadjidakis, these new owners began establishing The Chukker as a live-gig stop for the Replacements, Fetch'n Bones, Salem 66, the Descendents, Eugene Chadbourne, and the Indigo Girls. The Chukker's openness to new and original music helped foster local bands such as Club Wig, Henri's Notions and Even Greenland, building a Tuscaloosa music scene unlike anything since the early '60s, when Johnny Townsend, Chuck Leavell, Eddie Hinton and Bill Connell played downtown YMCA gigs. Moving here from Chicago, Johnny Shines found a stage at The Chukker, as did Mobile's Will and the Bushmen, Birmingham's Jim Bob and the Leisure Suits, Nashville's Afrikan Dreamland, Athens, Georgia's Widespread Panic, along with many others. The performance space shifted from the original long room to the newer side, where it remained until closing.

1989-1991: "Mr. Bill" Gipson and Richard Lindsey. According to Butler's archives, this was a relatively fallow interlude.

1991-2001: Frannie James, Robert Huffman, Ludovic Goubet and Carlos Garcia. James and Goubet bought out silent partner Garcia, then Huffman. Goubet then bought out James, and David DeMoya managed the club through the late '90s. In '95, Rich Marcks

repainted the Sixth Street facade with the motto "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" (liberty, equality, fraternity.) The stage grew to include jazz artists such as Sun Ra, McCoy Tyner and others, while the Lyres, the Woggles, Sweat Bee, the Penetrators, Man or Astroman?, Model Citizen, D.C. Moon (and various bands; his was the last group to play the Halloween 2003 closing), the Crying Jags, Ultrababyfat, the Friggs, the Corvairs, Opus Dopus, the High Beams, the A-Bones, the Phoebes, the Dexateens and many more played. As plumbing and electrical issues mounted, The Chukker's reputation declined, as did its bottom line. Bands backed out of gigs on finding the sound system inadequate. Goubet closed shop in June 2001.

2002-2003: Brooks Cloud and Will Harris. The local publishers of the Strip and Business Ink magazines bought the business in foreclosure, then poured \$80,000 into renovations to bring The Chukker up to code. It re-opened May 8, 2002, in a show featuring Lunasect, the Forty Fives, the Penetrators, and the Moto-Litas. Marcks painted a new facade, with a coat of arms and an all-seeing eyeball on the exhaust fan. But the Tuscaloosa City Council's decisions to cut late-night hours on Friday – before 2003, there technically was no closing hour; many bands and patrons saw Saturday dawn from the Chukker courtyard – and post-midnight Sunday sales hammered the bar. The Chukker had become, in addition to the music and tolerance bar, the place where other servers went after closing their own establishments. The final nail was the city's intent to demolish a number of downtown buildings.

Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 2003: Club Wig, the Woggles, D.C. Moon and more patrons than had gathered there in many a night gathered, costumed, to say goodnight. Though the murals, painted into the walls, were not salvageable, Marcks and others saved Bradford's work. Others collected bricks, PBRs and other souvenir pieces of the Chukker, as keepsakes. That entire Sixth Street block was eventually razed, in October 2007.

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