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Chukker's doors were open to all

Avoid was cut into the night the day The Chukker died. It was as infamous a place as you could get in a town of this size, despite the general lack of punishable crime.

Various people who'd never set foot inside whispered of it as that biker bar, that gay bar, that freak bar. The truth is, it was all those and more. It was open, in other words, to everyone.

The Chukker was what more flighty writers might term a sympathetic space.

Sure, the plumbing rattled like something out of the 19th century. OK, so the air-conditioning sometimes failed — although the 30-foot ceilings

though the 30-foot ceilings might have just sucked all the good air to the top. All right, so the sound system sometimes made it more painful than pleasurable to hear the wild music.

What the Chukker had was heart, a seemingly indefatigable, willful, colorful, loving heart, with expansive room for all God's chilluns: black, white, gay, straight, artist, musician, dancer, foosballer, pool shark, biker, Toyota-driver, punk, freak, hippie, hip-hopper, Bruce Hopper, Hedda Hopper.

Maybe not Hedda Hopper.

The good news is, it looks like the long-awaited resurrection is happening. Although I wrote a story last summer that quoted would-be owner Will Harris saying he hoped to have it back by August, Harris and his associates have persevered, and it looks like the heart massage is kicking in.

Ads touting The Chukker's revival are printed in The Strip, for which Harris works as advertising manager. If you click on the old Web site address (www.thechukker.com), instead of a 404 error message, you get a white page with the promise: Coming Soon.

But in the meantime, where have all the flowers gone? Where do those who don't like sports — or at least don't want to be assaulted by it at their watering holes — or who view life through tinted, warped or rear-view glasses go for their spot?

There's no dearth of bars in

There's no dearth of bars in Tuscaloosa. There are old favorites and revamped clubs on The Strip, and downtown has blossomed in an almost unprecedented way. A couple of blocks from the fallow Chukker are The Black Orchid, Catch-22, Innisfree, Boo Radley's, the Downtown Pub, 4th and 23rd, Wilhagan's, Voodoo Lounge, Coppertop, Dionysus and more.

Some of those are bar bars, places to drink, talk and listen to the juke. Others put on regular music, from solo acoustic to full-fledged bands.

4th and 23rd gained quick renown for its lofty ceilings (the better to absorb the smoke), sweet dark bar and more adult mix of jazz and blues artists.

Coppertop drew a frat-party crowd with cover and acoustic groups. Boo Radley's puts on some rock 'n' roll. Innisfree likes acoustic, and sometimes even programs Irish music in accordance with its theme.

One of the more interesting new developments is the shotgun Dionysus, about midway in the University Boulevard block between DePalma's and the AmSouth building.

It's another joint that recognizes aesthetic appeal, with the old jewelry store restored to its 14-foot pressed-tin ceilings. Although the bar hasn't the heft of places like 4th and 23rd and Wilhagan's, it's nonetheless one of the best-stocked around, with an emphasis on good wines (hence the name).

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More than that, though, Dionysus has pushed local musicians and artists, much as The Chukker did in its best days.

This Saturday there's a punk show with D.C. Moon and Red Giant, Martha (former members of Lowfat Chocolate Milk), Nursery School and long-time Birmingham gang Nowhere Squares.

There's a back patio looking toward the Temerson Square bars, and music's out there if the weather is good. If not, they'll slide a pool table to one side. Mondays, Dionysus does poetry readings with music.

It's a kind of sympathetic space.