

## LAST CALL AT THE CHUKKER



A jungle mural, painted by Bob Weston of Tuscaloosa, lines a wall behind the bar at The Chukker on Sixth Street in Tuscaloosa. On the ceiling is Tom Bradford's rendering of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam," known as the "Sistine Chukker."

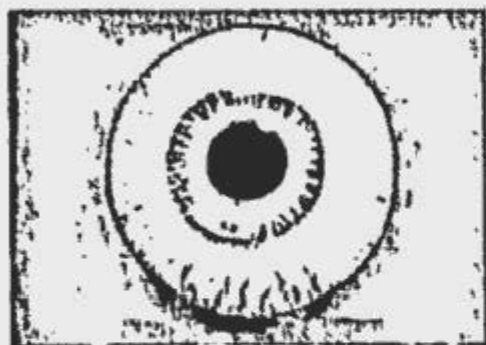
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By Mark Hughes Cobb  
Staff Writer



## THE CHUKKER PLEDGE

*"I pledge allegiance to The Chukker and why it was established — art, music, good times and alcohol. I promise to be on my best behavior and respect the ideals of my fellow humans. I will have fun and eat everything on my plate, for my Chukker ancestors are watching over me."*

TUSCALOOSA  
**W**hat is the sound of four walls falling? The Chukker Nation will soon know.

What is art? Peaceful aesthetics, 101 strings soothing the elevator ride up to a painting of big-eyed kids haunting a Holiday Inn bed?

Or does art sound a little more like this: A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop, a wop-ban-boom!

Depending on how you answer, you might mourn the passing tonight of the city's oldest bar. That gay bar. That biker bar. That hippie bar. That art bar, with the weird paintings, graf-

fiti, words carved into spare space.

Some are just not going to get it: Why cry in your beer over another bar going under?

They are not going to understand the loss, because The Chukker was nothing to them,

or only a half-understood joke.

Chances are, they never set foot inside the soon-to-be-barren walls.

In the earliest days, The Chukker was half the size it is now, a place to sit down and get a steak, maybe take a date.

The original owner was Bill Thompson, aka Chukker Bill. He borrowed the name from a bar he'd frequented in San

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## Going out in style

The Chukker's final day begins at 2 p.m. today with six bands scheduled.

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Francisco while serving in the Navy. A "chukker" is a period of play in polo.

Opened in 1956 at 2121 Sixth St., The Chukker featured a bar near the door and a kitchen in back, some tables with wipe-off cloths, nothing fancy, serving lunch and dinner.

"In '62, it was more college," said Marshal Hagler, a photographer whose photo of a biker and pals was blown up and painted onto a Chukker wall.

"All the guys wore coats and ties with their girls," he said. "The atmosphere was just as crazy, but in a collegiate sort of way."

The cooks served steaks, hamburgers, chili and other staples, running out the backdoor to a nearby grocery store to stock up.

"They had one guy down there named Brown who cooked in the evening time; boy he could whip it out," Hagler said.

Folks would gather just to hang out, in the days before pinball machine or pool table distraction.

"When you didn't have anything else to do, you'd go to The Chukker. There'd always be somebody there," said Hagler.

As the 1960s evolved from Eisenhower clean to get-clean-for-Gene (McCarthy), The Chukker clientele diversified.

Battle lines were being drawn. It was an era when police unleashed dogs on civil-rights marchers, body bags flew back from halfway around the world, and long hair could incite violence.

"It was that 'us vs. them' atmosphere that kept the long-haired 'subculture' types out of the scary redneck bars," said Fletcher Paul Hayes, a Tuscaloosa native who attended the University of Alabama in the 1970s. He lives in Chicago.

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"The one safe haven was The Chukker."

The doors swung wide for hippies, later for bikers. Another subculture — gays — frequented as well.

"Everybody mixed fairly quietly," Hagler said, adding that a burly biker chatting amiably with a gay man was not an uncommon sight.

And it wasn't just plain bar talk, said Hank Black, who met the love of his life, Jayne Morgado, there in 1966.

"My eyes clicked into hers, and I was lost," Black said, "from that moment until her death earlier this year." They were married for 34 years.

"We frequented The Chukker often and considered it home base for seeing friends, for the conversation of intellect and emotion and as the center of the angst, passion and humor of our generation," said Black, who works at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

## The ceiling

Artists gathered there, including Tom Bradford, who painted a wild-eyed Jehovah handing a beer to a laid-back Adam on ceiling tiles, a work forever after known on T-shirts and postcards as the "Sistine Chukker."

Murals flowed down the walls, like Bob Weston's jungle-scape, spanning the left-hand side of the original bar and featuring cameos by regulars.

And The Chukker began to exceed the walls themselves, as the spirit outgrew the building. Folks like Black and Hagler created The Chukker Nation, based on that feeling of belonging and community, borrowing a page from Woodstock Nation.

Chukker Nation reunions were held at private homes. Later parties grew so large they necessitated the club itself. Hagler's Chukker Nation newsletter started with about 30 names; it grew to 600 before he dropped it in the early 1980s.

## The music

Music added another artistic dimension.

Until the late 1970s, the bar served nothing but beer in cans and bottles, and the only musical choices came from an old jukebox that featured Hank Williams and Lou Reed.

It didn't even have a telephone, making it the perfect alibi for many a wayward person ("I would have called, but I was at The Chukker;" "Sorry you couldn't find me, I was at The Chukker").

A collector's item matchbook cover from the era has the name of the bar on one side and "Pool" "Beer" and "No Phone" on the other.

In 1979, then Alabama State Sen. Richard Shelby, now a Unit-



ed States senator who supports a plan to revitalize downtown by tearing down several blocks of buildings including The Chukker's home, pushed through a bill in the Alabama Legislature legalizing the sale of draft beer in Tuscaloosa.

Shortly after, owners Bruce Hopper and Ronnie Myers introduced mixed beverages to the fare and began featuring bands.

Thus The Chukker added another layer: Rock 'n' roll bar.

Legend has it that Jimi Hendrix, The Allman Brothers and The Rolling Stones all stopped in for post-concert libations, maybe even got up and jammed. Urban legend is more like it: No reliable source has come up with photos or first-hand tales.

What is known for sure is that The Replacements, Southern Culture on the Skids, Eugene Chadbourne, Richard Thompson, R.L. Burnside, Sublime, Morphine, Dick Dale and Ronnie

Dawson graced the stage, along with countless other lesser-known yet ferociously original musicians.

Sun Ra and his Arkestra famously did a three-day workshop/jam in 1992, under the stewardship of club owner Ludovic Goubet.

Goubet was at the helm when The Chukker began a financial decline in the '90s, ending with a 10-month shutdown from 2001 to 2002, before current owners Will Harris and Brooks Cloud reopened.

Musician Ken Adams first walked in about 20 years ago. He will go out tonight much as he did in those days — drumming for eclectic rock band Club Wig.

"I've played so many gigs, from transcendent to pathetic, on the stage and floor of this place that it seems to represent the sum total of my career as a musician," Adams said.

Dan Hall, drummer for garage-

rockers The Woggles — tonight's headliner — isn't old enough to remember the formation of the Nation, but he's been around long enough to absorb the history, the ethos.

"Beatniks, bikers, boozers, losers, foosers, rockers, rollers, doctors, lawyers, hippies, poets, musicians, educated derelicts, drag queens and just plain regular folks," said Hall.

"Imagine Tuscaloosa as Boston in the mid-1700s. The Chukker is where the founding fathers of these United States would've met to break bread, quaff a tankard of ale and cuss and discuss just what was to be done about the oppression from across the pond," he said.

There's more than a little frustration and anger from The Nation. Some of it is directed at current or past ownership, but some toward the Tuscaloosa City Council and its downtown demolition plans and changes in bar-

closing hours.

"It seems that Tuscaloosa has a long history of closing places and tearing stuff down," said Robert Huffman, who will play tonight with Club Wig.

"I can't even say how many people have remarked to me that 'if The Chukker were in my town, they'd never be able to close, and certainly never be able to tear the building down.'"

D.C. Moon will likely be the last musician to walk off stage tonight. Local bands like his, working to build a name at any level, will suffer from its loss.

"I'd like to think that Tuscaloosa isn't just some jerk-water backwards Alabama river town, and that we care about things like art and culture, but I guess that's just not the truth," Moon said. "I hope someone will try to capture some of the spirit of the place, and encourage original music at the club level here in T-Town, but there will never

be another Chukker."

It's hard to pin down just why The Chukker was so special: The decor? The music? The people? The unwritten "be nice" rule?

"You're not being examined when you walk in," Hagler said.

"I guess it's just the warmth, and the camaraderie. You could always find someone to talk to, play cards with."

Rich Marcks has painted both interiors and exteriors for The Chukker. He traveled the world for several years as a designer for nightclubs, returning home to paint, open a cafe and raise his children.

"Plenty of places had similar clientele or similar decor, but I've never found another one with that Chukker feeling," he said.

"It's the heart and core of the real Tuscaloosa, a beautiful example of unique local culture."

*Associate Editor Tommy Stevenson contributed to this report.*