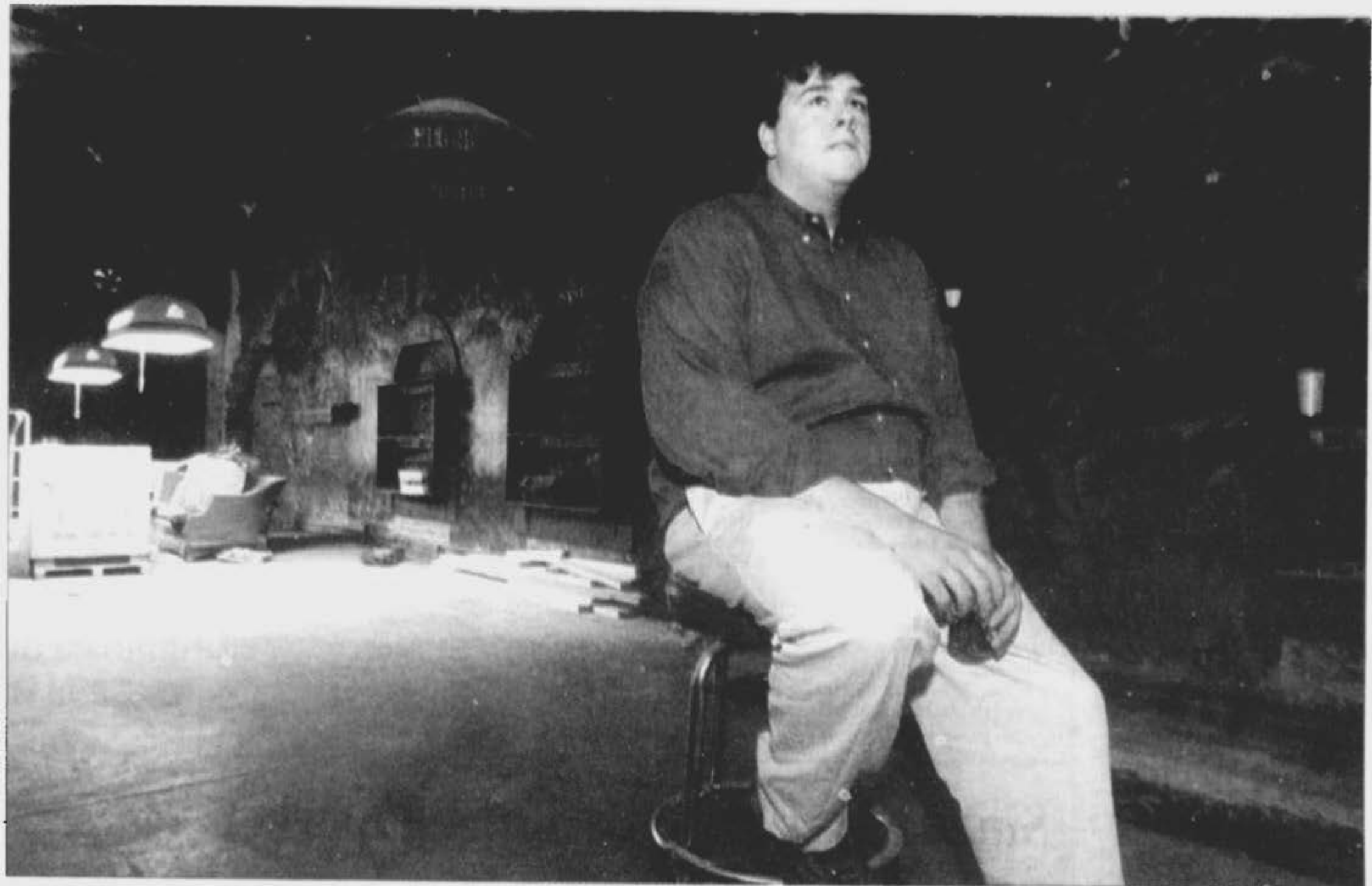


# Rebirth of an old bar



Brooks Cloud is one of the new co-owners of The Chukker. The Chukker, which closed in June 2001 after nearly half a century of continuous operation in its location on Sixth Street, once again offer rock 'n' roll when it reopens Friday under the joint ownership of Cloud and his partner, Will Harris.

STAFF PHOTO, ROBERT SUTTON

## New owners reopen Chukker, give bar a face lift

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By Katherine Lee  
Business Editor

TUSCALOOSA | Once upon a time, it was the site of many a celebrity viewing: Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, Sublime, some of them apocryphal, all of them in keeping.

"REM didn't play there, but they did play at [Foster Auditorium]," said Brooks Cloud, co-owner of The Chukker bar in Tuscaloosa.

"There's a story that after the show, they said, 'We don't know where you guys are going, but we're going to The Chukker.'"

The Chukker, which closed in June 2001 after nearly half a century of continuous operation in its location on Sixth Street, once again will be a place to enjoy rock 'n' roll when it reopens Friday under the joint ownership of Cloud and his partner, Will Harris.

The reopening event will include music by The Penetrators and The Forty-Fives.

The bar's ownership has changed hands numerous times since Bill Thompson opened it in 1956, naming the place after his favorite bar in San Francisco; Cloud and Harris bought the bar after its previous owner, Ludovic Goubet, closed it in June 2001.



STAFF PHOTO | PUBLISHED SOURCE

This is a photograph taken of The Chukker last July. New co-owner Brooks Cloud has recommissioned local artist Richard Marcks to paint the mural on the outside wall.

Goubet has owned the bar since 1991, first with partners and then as the sole owner until this March, when the building was sold to Harris and Cloud.

Cloud is publisher of *The Strip* and *Business Ink* magazines in Tuscaloosa. Harris is advertising director of both publications, which the two own jointly with editor Lisa Eno.

Harris and Cloud purchased the building and have spent nearly \$80,000 to date on renovations to bring the building up to code.

The bar had a myriad of problems ranging from bad drainage to faulty wiring, Cloud said.

"The main sewer line was backing up. All the plumbing had to be upgraded. The plumbing was 80 years old," he said. The bar itself was ripped out to get to the drain.

The Chukker now will have a new electrical system, handicapped-accessible restrooms and heating and air conditioning.

In addition, the courtyard behind the building will be revamped and the roof fixed. The bar's signature artwork will be repainted, although Cloud said a leaky roof badly damaged the ceiling's leaky roof badly damaged the ceiling's Sistine Chukker and will take some effort to fix.

"We're not going to throw it away.

We're going to try to save it, as much as we can," Cloud said.

Cloud said local artist Richard Marcks has been recommissioned to paint the mural on the outside wall.

The sound system, which had fallen apart to such an extent that performers Sally Taylor and A.J. Croce canceled their shows at The Chukker last year, has been replaced as well.

"It'll be newer but not different," Cloud said. "It's not gonna be a martini bar, not going to be a cigar bar. It's a rock-and-roll bar.

"The philosophy of the bar is that it was always a place to go for people who felt they had no place to go. It had a very inclusive atmosphere."

It was also a destination spot for bands of national or about-to-be national renown, Cloud said.

"[Music] industry people think of the Chukker when they think of Tuscaloosa."

## Days past

The purchase of the bar, which Harris had been negotiating with Goubet for at least two years, was held up by various factors, including Goubet's bankruptcy filing and his move to South Carolina.

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Cloud said negotiations on the purchase price strained talks with Goubet.

"He had closed the bar, and we were in negotiations over an inability to come to terms with his asking price," Harris said. He and Cloud purchased the bar for about \$100,000.

Rumors have long floated among Chukker faithful that the bar began losing business because bands and Goubet had trouble negotiating business deals.

However, Goubet said he closed the bar because it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. He said business began to slide after the city began work on its new municipal courthouse building, a process that eliminated the majority of nearby parking spaces.

"We lost almost 80 percent of our business on weekends," he said. Previously, the bar brought in about \$250,000 a year, and Goubet estimated he lost two-thirds of his profits when he lost the parking spaces.

"So I closed [the bar] because I didn't live there anymore, and I couldn't appoint someone to run it," he said.

Goubet also said he thought the bar's time had come and

gone. The atmosphere of the town had changed to the point where The Chukker was no longer the draw it once was. It was Goubet, in the earlier days of his ownership, who booked such sold-out acts as Sun Ra and Richard Thompson.

"When most of those bands came, downtown revitalized," he said. "And a few people invested a lot of money in those downtown bars you see now. In the space of three years, we had twice the number of bars we used to."

The newer bars drew the crowds away from The Chukker, Goubet said, leaving only a few faithful.

"T-town became higher class," he said. "You've seen the people at The Chukker. The Chukker is bikers and drag queens and people from the dark side of the moon."

"After all those bars opened, a lot of people left."

## The Chukker, Inc.

Harris had wanted to own the bar for several years and brought Cloud in as his partner. The two formed a corporation, The Chukker, Inc., to deal exclusively with the bar.

"Brooks and I are the only officers," Harris said, "But it has nothing to do with The Strip. They're totally separate."

"Naturally, there are opportunities for promoting entertainment when you own a publication

and an entertainment venue, so there will be some relation there, but as far as structure, they're two separate corporations. We're not going to abuse the privilege of owning a newspaper editorially."

The Chukker, however, will not benefit unduly from its association with the magazines, Cloud said. The bar will pay for ads at the same rate as other advertisers in the publications.

Harris said feature stories in The Strip on bands that appear at The Chukker will be limited to larger acts, and that editor Eno will determine editorial content.

The two maintain that they will not seek to change what drew them to The Chukker in the first place: its atmosphere.

"I've always liked the place, I liked its potential," Harris said. "It's different from any other bar I've been aware of. I've always thought it should be returned to its status on the entertainment scene."

Goubet said he believes The Chukker can be a success if the new owners bring back what made it popular in the first place: the music.

"You're not going to make money off atmosphere," he said. "I hope it's not going to be just a curiosity; The Chukker was more than that."

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