



Staff/Mark Lent

Cliff McClure (left) and Ludovic Goubet play in a recent Monday night jam session at the Chukker.

# Chukker still kicking

**Under new ownership venerable bar to keep (almost) same face**

By MARK HUGHES COBB

Life Writer

**W**hen the Chukker Nation holds its 15th annual reunion later this month, they'll be looking up — to the Michaelangelo-on-LSD Sistine Chukker and biker/fantasy wall murals that have decorated the downtown Tuscaloosa bar since its halcyon days in the mid-'70s.

Although the bar opened sometime in the '50s, the beer joint with a heart gained renown during the waning days of the '60s and early '70s. The eclectic crew that hung out there, remembering the Woodstock Nation, christened themselves the Chukker Nation. In the past it was renowned as a gay bar, a biker bar and, at times, a dangerous place.

The truth was that the Chukker has been all these things to some degree. It was a beer joint for people who didn't feel comfortable in plush velvet lounges.

In the '80s, the focus turned more to the local music scene. And new owners Robert Huffman and Ludovic Please see CHUKKER Page 8C



Staff/Mark Lent

The Sistine Chukker and other "atmosphere" will remain, the new owners assure.

# CHUKKER

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and Frannie Goubet hope to expand on the music while recapturing the old Chukker, "a place where people come to meet and hang out, not just to drink, but to have a sense of place," Huffman said.

Huffman, a veteran of several years on the local original music scene, works at Mound State Park during the day. Ludovic Goubet, who met his wife Frannie, a Tuscaloosan, while he was running a jazz club in Spain and playing his saxophone on the street, left his native France for Alabama more than three years ago, with the dream of owning a club here.

"It's a project I've had for a long time," Goubet said.

In the meantime, Goubet formed the Indoor Samba Picnic, an ethnic jazz band that specializes in original compositions.

Huffman and the Goubet's plan to emphasize their backgrounds in strengthening the music. Since taking over the club in November, they've hired blues, folk, rock, and jazz from Marlee MacLeod (tonight) to Johnny Shines (Saturday), Kokomo Blues Band to Contamin Mortalis (Friday), Storm Orphans to 15 Minutes.

"We're going to change things slightly to begin with, mostly to enhance the music and culture scene," Huffman said. "We're going to have more shows, more aggressively publicized — sort of a return to older days."

Physically, they have a few changes in mind, mainly to facilitate use of the stage. Video and pinball games have been moved and

tables made available.

"We'll make it easier for a big crowd to see the stage," Goubet said.

Already they've built a new stage and purchased a house P.A. system, whereas previously bands were responsible for their own P.A., yielding widely varied results. In addition to being deeper and sturdier, the new stage also has a trapdoor near the back to allow easier ingress and egress for musicians.

"We'll have facilities for getting really good quality recordings of what's going on onstage, basically with a good mixer and DAT (digital audio tape) machine," Huffman said.

Other future plans for the facility include restroom improvements and additional use for the back porch. But those additions will have to wait.

"More immediately, we're going to emphasize the performances — not just music, but poetry readings, drama presentations, open stage/open mike nights," Huffman said.

"I think if we do it right, people will want to come in just to see what's going on," he said. "Say you're not a big fan of bluegrass or whatever, you might come down to the Chukker and give it a chance just because it's a cool joint."

Currently, regular jam sessions are held at the Chukker on Monday nights beginning at 10 p.m. Poetry readings have been held, and some small theater presentations are planned for the beginning of the new year. Dart tournaments are held Tuesdays at 8 p.m., with cash prizes awarded. And of course, there's the 15th Annual Chukker Nation Reunion, set for Friday Dec. 27th.

"We're not going to mess around with the traditions," Huffman said. "We're not going to mess with the artwork — we might add to it, especially if we have an exposition."

"We're trying to get back the old Chukker feeling, while making it even more comfortable than it is."