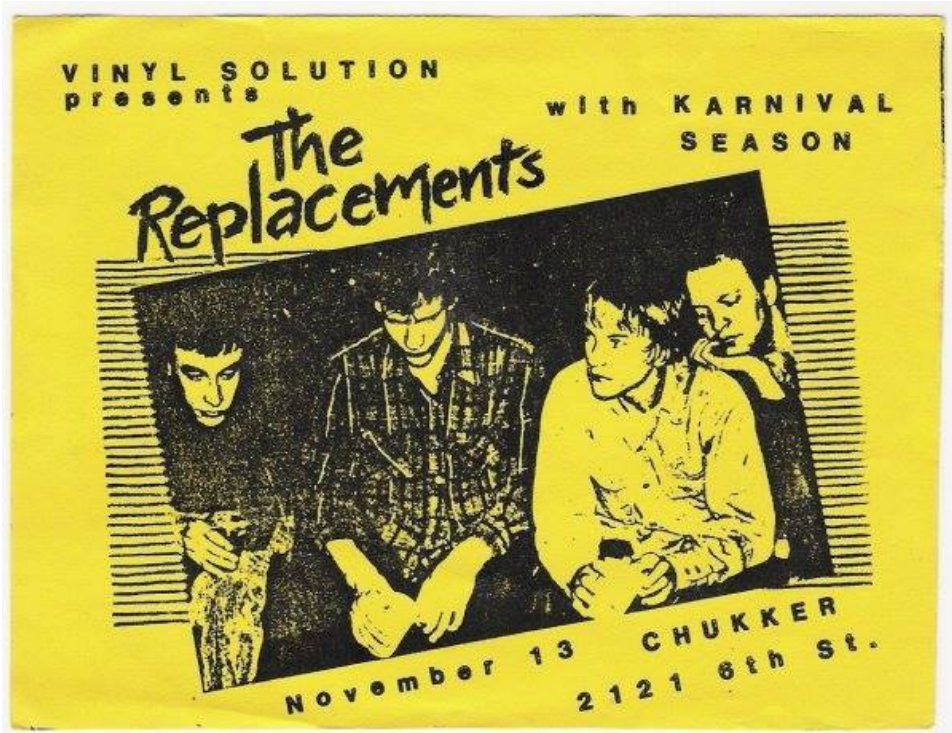


Alabama

# The Chukker: Alabama bar was '80s, '90s music hot spot, oasis of open-mindedness



A ticket for a The Replacements show at Tuscaloosa bar The Chukker during the '80s. (Courtesy photo)



By **Matt Wake** | [mwake@al.com](mailto:mwake@al.com)

[Email the author](#) | [Follow on Twitter](#)

on October 06, 2016 at 10:42 AM, updated October 08, 2016 at 2:57 PM

It cost about 300 bucks to book The Replacements the first time they played at The Chukker. Five hundred the second time. This was around 1983 and 1984. Although this boozy Minneapolis group would become a major influence on iconic '90s rockers like Kurt Cobain, Billie Joe Armstrong and Jeff Tweedy, The Replacements were still a bar-band back then. And happy to pick up a gig in Tuscaloosa, on the way to whatever larger Southeastern city they were performing at next.

George Hadjidakis, owner of Tuscaloosa record store Vinyl Solution, booked The Replacements at The Chukker. He says getting the band to play there "wasn't difficult at all. If they were playing in New Orleans or Nashville or Atlanta they were playing the bigger clubs but they had no problem playing at a place like The Chukker. And those were some killer shows."

During the '80s and '90s there were plenty of killer shows at The Chukker. Reggae-rockers Sublime. Free-jazz legend Sun Ra. Moody alternative band Morphine. Surf-guitar guru Dick Dale. California punks Decedents. Bluesman R.L. Burnside. Indie heroes Guided By Voices. Folk guitar ace Richard Thompson. Southern rockers Drive-By Truckers. And many more.

By the 1980s, The Chukker had already lived many lives. It had been a workingman's bar. A restaurant serving steaks. A biker bar. Gay bar. Hippie bar.

The Chukker had hosted live music infrequently, mostly Tuscaloosa cover bands, Hadjidakis says, before Ronnie Myers, one of the many people to own or co-own the bar since it first opened in 1956, brought in improvisational musician Eugene Chadbourne. "It was packed," Hadjidakis recalls now. He's in the music room of his Northport home when reached for this phone interview. "It was a great night. Weird music that was very interesting and it just kind of grew from there." After Myers sold-out to partner Bruce Hooper, Hadjidakis recalls a return to more local-centric bookings. Still the record store owner thought since Tuscaloosa was right in the crosshairs of Southeastern touring routes, The Chukker could easily book rising regional acts too.

"I remember the first time I approached Bruce about it, it was a chance to book R.E.M.," Hadjidakis says. "I think they'd had a single out but that was just about it. I knew they were popular because I sold a lot of their records, so I approached him about it and that's when he told me, 'They're out of state and I don't want to mess with that.' I just kind of kept talking to him about it and then I finally just said, 'Look, I'll pay for the band if you just provide the Chukker as a place for them to play.'" Jangly, Boston band Salem 66 was the first band Hadjidakis can remember booking at The Chukker. Garage-rock combos like The Del Fuegos and The Lyres would follow.

While the frat houses, other Tuscaloosa bars like Lee's Tomb and even University of Alabama events on the quad were hosting bands playing Boston and Bruce Springsteen covers, The Chukker became the local place in Tuscaloosa to see compelling (and often edgy) original music. "I really didn't know what I was doing," Hadjidakis says. "If I liked the band and it was selling pretty well then I'd try to book them. I was also trying to promote the store, so if I could get a reputation for the place that was bringing in good bands, that helped out. But I've always been a lover of rock and roll and that was my main impetus. *I wanted to see the band.*"

Hopper had first heard about The Chukker in 1967, when during UA freshman orientation a counselor told him the spot was "one of the few places you might be able to get a drink without an ID." Later on, living about six blocks away, Hopper was a Chukker patron throughout the '70s. He was also a musician, playing bass in local bands like The Rubber Band. The gig money helped augment his meager income as a Bryce Hospital social worker. He got involved with buying The Chukker as a safety net in case the gigs dried up, to help support his young family.

"By the time Ronnie and I had bought it out," Hopper says, "they had changed the ruling about how close to campus you could sell alcoholic beverages and the Strip opened up. So, it went from having to compete with two or three bars to having to compete with 10 bars for the student crowd. The Strip, everybody could just walk to the bars. I had to have something to attract them downtown and that was live music."

Hadjidakis opened Vinyl Solution in 1980, starting with his personal record collection of about 400 albums as stock, in a walk-in-closet-sized space on 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The store moved a couple doors down on 13<sup>th</sup> to a bigger location. Then to 1207 University Blvd. in 1986 and expanding their stock to thousands of records. Vinyl Solution was one of those wonderful record stores where young music fans got turned-on to awesome, less-obvious artists like Velvet Underground and Gram Parsons. After Vinyl closed in May 2004, Hadjidakis sold records online. He's now retired and enjoys chasing down obscure garage-rock singles by groups like The Wig. Growing up in Huntsville, Hadjidakis' first record was The Beatles' "She Loves You," but it was the 1972 compilation "Nuggets" that steered his listening tastes toward the obscure.

Hopper was a Vinyl Solution customer and Hadjidakis was a Chukker customer, so teaming up for live music came about naturally, Hopper says. One night, to coincide with a 1985 R.E.M. concert at Foster Auditorium, the Chukker booked another Athens, Ga. band, Dreams So Real, whose debut album was produced by R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck. After R.E.M. announced from the Foster stage they were headed to see Dreams So Real at The Chukker afterward, 300 or so fans crammed into the 125-person capacity club. "So we had R.E.M.'s tour bus outside," Hopper says, "10,000 Maniacs, their opening act's tour bus outside and half of Tuscaloosa trying to get in the place. [Laughs] It was probably the biggest night The Chukker ever had."

Hadjidakis booked some bands at The Chukker for about a year. Hopper continued to bring in live music, including Jamaican reggae acts like the Twinkle Brothers and The Gladiators. He used to get now-iconic jam-band Widespread Panic for a \$250 guarantee versus the door. The happy hour crowd continued to be strong too. An eclectic mixture of mechanics, lawyers, accountants, painters and carpenters. Still, Hopper says the business live music brought in "allowed us to keep the doors open. The Chukker wouldn't have survived if we hadn't done that."

After the Chukker started bringing in original bands, other local bars, looking to draw similar crowds (and their money), began to do the same. A fleet of young Tuscaloosa bands sprang up. Club Wig. Storm Orphans. Even Greenland. Jous. The Hitchcocks. The Newsboys. Instant Karma. Eric Landis & The Squires. Ghost Ranch. Their sounds ranged from power-pop to folk-rock to experimental. College radio station WVUA 90.7 FM issued the 1987 compilation album "No Idols Allowed" featuring many of the above Tuscaloosa groups. Between The Chukker, Vinyl Solution and WVUA, local bands now had key ingredients to help them flourish: a place to perform, a place to sell their music and a place to get their songs on the radio.



### 'Almost famous' Alabama bands of the '90s, their untold stories: Storm Orphans

Brett Tannehill played drums in some Tuscaloosa bands, including jangle-pop combo Kilgore Trout and punk-tinged Sweat Bee. He was also one of the hosts of "The Tuscaloosa Musician," a local music show on WVUA. Tannehill says The Chukker "really was an oasis of art and culture in the middle of a football-crazed town. The bands I was in, it was a place we could actually make money to go into the studio and put out tapes and CDs and things like that."

Tannehill – currently general manager at Huntsville public radio station WLRH 89.3 FM - began dating his now-wife Traci Harrod Tannehill while she was managing The Chukker from around 1995 to 2001. Their first kiss was in the bar's courtyard out back. "I've worked in bars for 20 years but that place was beyond special," Traci says. "You'd have blacks and gays and bikers and hippies and rednecks and everybody is respectful of everybody else. The whole time I managed it I never saw one fight. It was a very inclusive environment."

There's a plastic file box filled with Chukker memorabilia on a shelf in the Tannehills' home, next to some books and CDs. The box contains old menus (featuring "Bob's Go To Hell Hormel Chili") and old publicity photos for Chukker performers like bluesman Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown and rockabilly act Ronnie Dawson. There's also a stainless steel bottle opener engraved with "Traci," a gift from a fellow Chukker bartender named Sandra, who's since passed away.

"Bartending there was easier than anywhere I ever worked," Traci says. "The patrons there would take care of you. If someone had too much to drink they'd go removed pieces of their car so they were not able to drive away. Everybody looked out for everybody else. The hardest part was trying to get people out of the bar. It's seven o'clock in the morning and you really, really want to go home. Once all the other bars closed that's when we would get really busy. When somebody's tipping you \$40 to stay open, you're not going anywhere, you know?"

In terms of a physical structure, the Chukker was basically two long hallways running parallel, like a shotgun. The establishment was located at 2121 6<sup>th</sup> St. and French national motto "Liberte Egalite Fraternite" (translation: liberty, equality, fraternity) was emblazoned on the exterior. Upon entering, on the left there was pool, pinball and other games and then a bar. On the right side, an audience area with tables and chairs and an elevated stage.

Frannie James co-owned The Chukker from about '91 to '95 with then-husband Ludovic Goubet, a Frenchman she met in Spain while travelling abroad, and friend/musician Robert Huffman, who played in a slew of local combos including Club Wig, Irascibles and Opus Dopus. James had been going to The Chukker since 1983. Back then she was an 18-year-old UA student and she went

to the bar for the first time to see Nashville-based reggae band African Dreamland. "I walked in there and it was unlike anything I'd seen probably since I was a kid growing up in Southern California," James says. "People I didn't even know existed in Tuscaloosa at the time. People who didn't look like everybody else. And there was this great live music too."

James was going to graduate school when they bought The Chukker. The initial plan was for her to focus on school and raising her and Goubet's two young daughters. But after the bar struggled early on, she was pretty much there full time. Bartending. Managing. Keeping books. "All the stuff that isn't the fun part," she says with a laugh. "Ludovic was booking the bands and I was pretty much doing everything else."

James still lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches global studies at UA. During her time co-owning The Chukker, she considers the run of shows Sun Ra played in spring 1992 to be the musical highlight. "It was packed," James recalls. "People came out of the woodwork - people that didn't usually come to The Chukker. People came from Birmingham, all over the state. Sun Ra had this big ensemble onstage maybe 10, maybe 15. Incredibly talented musicians just playing this insane avant-garde jazz for hours, three nights in a row."

James doesn't have many mementos from her Chukker days, but she does have a wonderful photo of Sun Ra with James' daughter Michelle, then about 3-years-old, sitting on his lap. James has held onto many treasured Chukker memories though. Not the least of which: artist Bob Weston painting the vibrantly colored jungle mural that adorned the left wall once you walked inside The Chukker. "I had known Bob for years before we owned The Chukker but it was really cool getting to know him that way, as he was getting sober after these years of being a hard drinker and he's painting this amazing mural."

There was also some signature artwork on the Chukker ceiling. Tom Bradford's far-out, 16-panel Michelangelo-inspired painting, known as "Sistine Chukker." A Rick Marcks' coat-of-arms like mural - depicting items including guitars, beer glass, motorcycle, peace pipe, billiard table and shot glasses - eventually replaced the "Liberte Egalite Fraternite" on the Chukker's front exterior.

James got out as an owner after she and Goubet divorced, but their split was amicable enough she continued going to the bar as a patron. "It was still a magical place to hang out."

Fewer than 10 people were in the audience when a California ska-punk trio called Sublime played The Chukker, after the release of the band's 1992 debut album "40oz. to Freedom." Wade Ollis was one of those people. Ollis, then around 22, was a fan of early Police records, and had heard Sublime had a similar sound.

"I think it was on a Monday or a Tuesday, that's usually when the out-of-town bands came through," recalls Ollis, now 45 and working in sports medicine in Birmingham. "At the time they were just another name on the calendar and I was lucky enough to be there for that night. And they were spectacular. Brad (Nowell) as a frontman was so kind and loose and made everybody feel like we were hanging out at a party at their house. It was probably one of my top five shows of all-time, just because it was so much fun." Ollis, who would later play bass with Tuscaloosa surf-rock band The Penetrators, thinks he paid a cover of \$3 to see Sublime at The Chukker that night.

Just a few years later, Sublime would break big with a self-titled third LP featuring songs like "Santeria," "Wrong Way" and the massive hit "What I Got." However, Nowell died of a drug overdose a few months before the album was released.

A few songs into Sublime's Chukker show, Ollis says the small crowd began yelling out requests for punk covers and the band happily obliged them: "They were such good musicians they could pull it off." At the end of their show Sublime announced to the sparse crowd they needed a place to crash that night. Ollis volunteered his place. They hopped in Sublime's touring van, with Nowell at the wheel. Mattresses covered the floor in the back of the van. After a brief tour of the UA campus at the band's request, they headed to Ollis' house off 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Nowell went to sleep soon after, but bassist Eric Wilson, drummer Bud Gaugh and Ollis stayed up till 4 a.m. drinking and watching "Saturday Night Live" episodes he'd recorded on VHS tapes. Sublime left Tuscaloosa the next day after giving their host 10 copies of "40oz. to Freedom."

Robert Huffman was 30 years old when he took out a loan of, he thinks, \$15,000 to help Frannie and Ludovic buy the Chukker. "Everybody else who had owned The Chukker, although they were really nice people, they were always older," Huffman says now, "and I wanted somebody from my generation to own The Chukker, because I just felt it would be a perfect place for them to bring a lot of music. And they really did. Ludovic was fantastic at booking shows." Eventually, Ludovic asked Huffman to sell him and Frannie his stake in The Chukker after they'd paid off the loan. Huffman still got to keep his keys to the place though, and his bands would practice there on Sundays, when the bar was closed.

On a recent afternoon, Drive-By Truckers bassist Matt Patton is in a downtown Toronto hotel room, thinking back to the many times he performed at The Chukker. It started off with open-mic nights, when he was 19 years old. "I really wasn't a drinker back then," Patton says. "But coming out of Jasper, Alabama, I really just needed a place to come and meet with people in a non-judgmental environment and an environment that wasn't just an extension of the university." Later on, Patton's garage rock bands Model Citizen and Dexateens played The Chukker probably 100 times or more, he estimates. "It was an extremely fun, rowdy crowd," Patton says. "They were ready to get down and dirty, spit some beer, spill some beer, raise fists in the air. That's really the time you would see the students closer to my age at the Chukker, the rock and roll shows."

Patton also attended many shows at Chukker as a fan over the years, including a performance by Drive-By Truckers, who were touring behind their 2001 "Southern Rock Opera" double-LP. New member Jason Isbell was on guitar. "They walked up there and meant business," Patton says of the Truckers' Chukker show. "They were just professionally a cut above a lot of the rock and roll acts I was coming in there to see." Patton joined Drive-By Truckers in 2012. Since then, he says he and DBT singer/guitarist Patterson Hood have talked about the Truckers' Chukker gig a few times. "I think their check bounced that night," Patton says, "and that's what he unfortunately remembers about that show. [Laughs]" (*Brooks Cloud, who co-owned The Chukker with Will Harris during this period, has a different account of this story. Cloud says the Truckers started packing up after their first set because the show, and the bar refused to pay the band the other half of the guarantee until they finished the show.*)

Frannie James says toward the end of the '90s, the Chukker "started really tanking." The challenges then-owner Ludovic Goubet faced included Tuscaloosa Municipal Courthouse construction, which greatly reduced nearby parking for the bar. The bar closed under Goubet's ownership. He was able to sell The Chukker, and the bar reopened under new ownership, Cloud and Harris, in 2001. According to a 2003 Tuscaloosa News report, the former late-night bar lost 70 percent of its sales after Tuscaloosa City Council voted to "curb alcohol sales at 1:45 a.m. each except Saturday morning." According to Cloud, the reason he and Harris ultimately had to close The Chukker permanently Nov. 1, 2003 was because the city condemned the property to make way for a federal court building. Patton and Model Citizen were among the many bands that performed at The Chukker, the bar's last night open, Halloween 2003. He recalls Sweat Bee, Henri's Notions and The Woggles also playing the show. Patton remembers the Chukker's finale as being a combination of catharsis, celebration and sadness.

"I was there from the first note to the last note," Patton says. "Danced. Cried. I don't remember if our performance was any good or not. I just got up there and tried to get through our performance as best as I could. I think I left at close to 10 in the morning when they were just like, 'You have to leave.'" Patton would later write a song about that experience called "10 O'Clock," which appears on the 2006 Model Citizens album "Save It For The Campfire." Asked if there's anything he learned from all his Chukker gigs, Patton says. "You have to accept people for what they are. I think many people from many generations would agree that's the reason they were there."

Bruce Hopper, who was 31 when he became a part-owner of the Chukker, is now 67. He still thinks about the Chukker almost every day, partially because he has a piece by "Sistine Chukker" artist Tom Bradford hanging above the fireplace in his Lake Tuscaloosa home. He also owns the Chukker's dragon-head-shaped front-door handle, which he picked up at a silent auction before the building was demolished in 2007. The Chukker lives on digitally. There's an active, private Facebook group called Chukker Nation, and a detailed history of the bar's long and winding road at [thechukker.com](http://thechukker.com).

Besides that crazy night after R.E.M.'s 1985 Foster Auditorium show, Hopper says the Chukker Nation reunion parties, held between Christmas and New Year's Eve each year, were also some of the biggest nights the bar had, as well as being "the one time

I ever got busted for overcrowding." Huffman remembers these reunion parties as being "outstanding. Old bikers and old homosexuals and old workingmen." Huffman, who currently resides in Birmingham and works for FedEx, says what Tuscaloosa lost when the city lost The Chukker was, "a tradition of tolerance. It's too bad. There needs to be someplace like that every place."

---

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our **User Agreement** and **Privacy Policy**

© 2016 Alabama Media Group. All rights reserved (**About Us**).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Alabama Media Group.

**Community Rules** apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

[▶ Ad Choices](#)