

## A NIGHT AT THE CAVE

If you haven't been to The Cave, you might have trouble finding it. Frequently, a sign out front will point you in the right direction. Afterwards, you'll turn into a narrow alley and stumble down a flight of stairs before shoving your way through the front door. The alley is so narrow, in fact, that it doesn't even necessitate a full street number. At 452 ½ West Franklin St., just under Uniquities, Chapel Hill's oldest bar is tucked away, and for those who haven't been, it may be the town's best-kept secrets.

Through the front door is a bar that looks like, well, a cave. The walls are thick and textured to look like eroded rock and the ceiling is low. Paintings of primitive men and beer logos adorn the walls and strings of Christmas lights along are the primary source of illumination and keep the room bathed in a dim glow. Sometimes, the air can get a bit stuffy as there is but one small, lone window behind the bar.

An old upright piano sits against the wall to the left of the entrance, which, along with some speakers, marks the area of the bar used as a stage for live music most nights. To the right stretches the bar itself, long, old and wooden. There's seating along the wall opposite of the bar for a more intimate conversation or a better view of the band.

The back room of The Cave opens to the road behind it and is where artists can load in their gear. This slightly more spacious room also holds pool tables and a jukebox.

The staff of the Cave has a saying: If you think you've been to The Cave, you're wrong because if you've been here, you would know it.

Bands start loading in their gear between 6:30-7:30 p.m., depending on how many acts are playing that night. Tonight there are three bands, who start arriving just after 7 p.m.

Owner and bar manager Mark Connor is behind the bar. He directs the bands while playing music over the speakers and serving drinks to the few people inside prior to the show.

Connor and a couple of friends bought The Cave just over three years ago. Along with being the oldest bar in Chapel Hill (it's been in continuous operation since 1968), the appeal of The Cave was obvious for Connor.

“I was a touring musician for a little while in my life,” he says. “We would be in a town and not really know what to do before we could load into the club, and we would look at somebody and be like, ‘Look at us. Where should we hang out?’ And this was the kind of place I would have hoped someone would have said, ‘You guys belong at The Cave.’”

Connor is also the manager at Slim’s in Raleigh, which is where he was approached by “Mouse” about buying The Cave. It took about six months for Connor and his friends to be prepared to make such an investment, but by that point, Mouse had circled back around to them and the deal was made.

When he acquired The Cave, Connor says one of the questions he was asked most often was what he would change about the bar. His response was always, “Not much.” The character of The Cave is in the graffitied walls and childhood photos of bartenders past and present that line the ledge behind the bar, and that was not something Connor was looking to lose.

One of the few changes he did make was putting plumbing behind the bar. Prior to the most recent ownership, all drinks at The Cave were served out of plastic. Now they can serve in glass. In terms of beer, Connor chooses a rotating selection of North Carolina brews to maintain the local vibe.

Connor also made some improvements to the sound system. He says, “If we’re going to be about people seeing live music, we’ve got to present it a little better.”

To further facilitate the bar as a live music venue, the new ownership also removed some of the booths closest to the stage to give fans a better view. Some of the pieces, which were built in the bar had to be destroyed because they couldn’t fit through any of the doors, but Connor said, “We saved the table tops because they have like 45 years of people carving into them. That’s kinda cool.”

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Most of the bands that play The Cave aren’t big enough to necessitate a road crew, so the guys and gals hauling amps and instruments back and forth are usually the bands themselves, although few might be lucky enough to have some friends help out.

Food isn't served at The Cave, but it's not impossible to find someone eating there. Musicians waiting to play will sometimes get carry out from one of the nearby restaurants to munch while waiting to perform.

The Cave attracts a variety of bands from a variety of locations. If a band from out of town books a gig there, Connor tries to pair them up with a local band to help get them in front of a larger crowd.

"We try to do a lot of different kinds of music," Connor says. "As far as style or genre, we don't really try to exclude anything. We want it to be good for what it is, like a good example of punk rock music, or a good example of metal or a good example of folk. If I'm going to put something on that stage and ask someone to pay a little bit of money to see it, I want to be able to tell them it's at least good."

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Tonight's lineup is perhaps the loudest of any of the groups this week. The rest of the weekly roster includes a cello duo, a folk group and a country band.

"The one thing that's pretty common to the type of band we talk to, is they're representing themselves," says Connor. "We don't work with a lot of booking agencies, mostly it's a band that's like, 'Hey, we're trying to book a date in Chapel Hill, I'm the bass player, it's *my* band.' That's who we're talking to most often."

Most of the gigs at The Cave are booked via submissions from the bands themselves, although if one of the owners really likes a band, and they are touring similar sized venues, they will reach out to those acts.

People have the idea that Connor must hear a lot of awful music while booking artists, but he says that is not the case. "I think that's kind of exciting because that means that these bands that are trying to get out there and do stuff, most of them are really good."

For many bands playing The Cave, the goal is to earn enough money to make it to the next town. Then, if people tell their friends about the show, or they manage to sell some shirts, the next time they're in Chapel Hill, they'll be able to play a bigger venue.

Connor is also enthusiastic about the music scene in Chapel Hill. Bands can start out playing The Cave and Night Light, move on to Local 506 and the Cat's Cradle Back Room and finally graduate to Cat's Cradle's Large Room. "Most towns with only 30,000 people who are actual residents don't have those things," he says.

Because of this, Connor is conscious of the size of the artist he books. "I try not to steal from other venues," he says, "but you play the small venue and build your fanbase until you play the larger ones to larger crowds."

Connor says occasionally bands may overestimate their popularity. "Sometimes it will happen that [a band will have] an okay show at another venue in town, maybe not the attendance they had hoped for, and they'll come in here and be like, 'It would've made more sense to play to 40 people here than it did [somewhere else].'"

For those bands he says, "Write me next time."

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Tonight's first band is The Blue Roses, based in Durham. For most of the band, it's their first time playing at The Cave. With a bandana tied around his head and clutching a coffee mug, singer T.J. Volgare walks back and forth through the bar, looking things over, trying to get a feel for the space.

The headliners, The Pinkerton Raid, also based out of Durham, are friends of Connor's. When singer and guitarist Jesse DeConto asks Connor if they have a keyboard stand, Connor replies in the affirmative, and asks if the stand could have been Jesse's all along.

Connor himself is no stranger to music, having spent some time as a touring musician and at one point playing in as many as seven bands at once.

Originally from Upstate, New York, Connor moved down south when he decided he couldn't handle any more sub-zero days. Currently, Connor works at Slim's and The Cave and plays guitar in the band Soon. Along with guitar, he also plays bass and "a bit of keys." His most recent musical obsession is guitar effects pedals.

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As the night goes on, more people find their way into The Cave: friends of the bands, fans, locals looking for something to do that night, students reviewing the show for a music

class. The Cave has a maximum capacity of less than 75, but the seating is even scarcer than that. While there couldn't be more than 40 people in the room, the bar stools quickly fill up, leaving a few fans with standing room only.

The Blue Roses are due to be on at 8 p.m. and start their soundcheck shortly before that. Without a road crew, the bands do the soundcheck themselves.

There is little fanfare about the starting of the show, Connor simply turns off the house music and the band is free to perform.

The Blue Roses are originally from Southern California, built out of the friendship between Volgare and guitarist Dave Staples. They rounded out their rhythm section after relocating to Durham and tonight even feature some brass.

The band play impassioned rock 'n roll, with broad influences of folk, blues and country. Their songs tell stories of love and loss and the end of the world. Volgare spends the time between tunes introducing the songs or making jokes at his band members' expense. The Roses are joined by friend Paul Golightly, who sings guest vocals on one of their closing tracks. The Blue Roses close their set by announcing that they're not terribly fond of their band name and offering to buy anyone a drink who can come up with something better.

Time between acts at The Cave is short, and soon after the Blue Roses leave the stage, the next band is ready to perform. Automagik are from Cincinnati, Ohio and play aggressive indie pop with the showmanship of a group playing to a much larger crowd. The intimacy of the venue does, however, allow the band to personally introduce themselves to everyone in attendance mid set, singer Zachary Evans pointing around the room and having everyone call out their names.

In contrast to the other two bands, Automagik are touring full time. Members of the Blue Roses and The Pinkerton Raid all have day jobs, complete with a carpool from Durham into Raleigh. They even joke amongst themselves that this is the first gig that they've played in a long time.

Self-described sibling rivalry act The Pinkerton Raid are the last to take the stage. Comprised of siblings Jesse, Kate and Steven DeConto, along with a rotating cast of friends,

they play bright and lively indie pop. Jesse and Kate trade vocals while Steven, who also played with the Blue Roses, fills in on guitar.

Sometime between acts, Connor abandons the bar and gives the reigns to one of The Cave's other bartenders. Even though not on duty Connor can be seen sitting at the back of the bar, sticking around to see the rest of the bands.

The Cave provides a case of PBR for the performing musicians and the bands are keen to stick around after the show and finish it. At The Cave, the bands that just finished playing aren't the only musicians you'll find. Frequently, artists will head to The Cave after finishing a set at Local 506 a few blocks over. In fact, Connor says, more often than not, the staff of 506 are the ones bringing them along.

As the night carries on, people begin to filter out, either off to other bars or back home. The bands pack up their gear, collect their money and say goodbye.

A night at The Cave ends the same way a night does at most bars, the lights go on and whatever stragglers remain are signaled that it's time to leave. For those who visited The Cave for the first time, it will surely be a night, or at least a bar, that they won't soon forget.