

features

Hobbit Hoagie features amateur musicians

By John Drescher

He ambles up to the small stage with a peculiar gait, plops down in a chair in front of a microphone and strums a few chords on his guitar.

"Hi, I'm Archie Durham. You know who you are," he says with obvious delight. Moments later he jumps into a few Jimmy Bueffett tunes, songs about Sunday morning radio preachers ("Jesus Saves, but Lonnie Green Invests") and his own dirty melodies ("The Castration Blues"). The audience joins in, singing and clapping along merrily and stomping their feet on the floor.

Unusual? No. Outdated? Maybe. There was a time back in the late '60s and early '70s when places where musicians could gather to play were abundant. They were coffeehouses, and musicians and audiences came to play and appreciate music.

Somewhere after Vietnam, but before disco, these places went the way of hip-hugging jeans and 30-cents-a-gallon gasoline. Even in Chapel Hill, the self-proclaimed cultural and musical capital of the state, there were no places where musicians could gather to play in front of a non-paying audience. Sure, if you were lucky you could catch Mike Cross playing on the sidewalk near the bus station, but the coffeehouses had died.

Jay Schwantes misses those informal jam sessions. So as owner of the Hobbit Hoagie Factory he has done something about it. Each Saturday night from 9 p.m. until 1 a.m., local musicians gather at the Hobbit to play, drink beer and have fun.

Schwantes came up from Florida six months ago to open the Hobbit. He had been told what a great town Chapel Hill was for music lovers, but when he got here he "looked around, and there wasn't a damn thing going on," he said.

There were only a couple of places that had live music and those charged admission, he said. It was not what he had expected.

"I had been told that there were a lot of places here with the coffeehouse atmosphere, but there were none," he said.

Business at the Hoagie Factory was slow when he first opened up. Then one day, while talking with friends David Hicks and Patrick Tupua, up popped the idea of starting informal jam sessions.

In the past three months, musician and audience attendance at the open-mike sessions has increased rapidly. Whereas it used to be that any musician could drop by on Saturday nights and play, now Schwantes has put a 10-person limit on the number who can play, and a 20-minute limit on how long they can play. When everyone has



Photo by Jack Mohr

Hobbit Hoagie caters to lunchtime crowd ... musicians perform each Saturday

finished performing, the musicians join together in a final song.

Attendance has increased, so that it is difficult to get a seat after 9:30, Schwantes said.

The musicians, in Schwantes' estimation, all have been good. "People tend to excuse little mistakes. It's like a big party. Everyone's just having fun."

In three months, Schwantes had had everything from gospel singers to French horn players, but most, he said, have been aspiring professionals.

The first performer this Saturday night is just that. At 26, Nick Barrett has been writing and performing since his teenage days in upstate in New York. He takes the stage a little late, about 9:15.

"Is the mike O.K.?" asks a voice from the background. "Yeah," says Barrett. "Just hand me my beer."

The lights dim, the crowd quiets. Barrett immediately

pulls the audience into his songs. About halfway through a song, he begins to whistle.

"Pretend this whistle is a sax," he says, and everybody does. Barrett shoots out as many one-liners as he does songs, and captivates the audience with his self-written tunes including, "I Don't Care How You Look, But If You Can Love and You Can Cook You're the One For Me."

After 20 minutes, Barrett yields to a guy with about 15 harmonicas and another with a guitar.

"Hi," says the guitar player. "We're Billy and Bobby and we're going to try to play some music for you while we consume massive quantities of beer."

During the Billy and Bobby Show, Barrett pulls up a chair next to me. We begin as he says, to chew the musical fat.

Barrett is a veteran of the Station and Cat's Cradle. He is a writer who, by his own accord, has just about reached the end of the line. He talks of the past, paying dues and how he was up for three major recording contracts. He talks of the future, getting breaks and how he may have to move to where the musicians are. Most of all, he talks of a love for music, of many people who play it and the places they play it.

"This is where people get their feet wet," he says. "If you don't get it (experience) here, where are you going to get it? This is the kind of place I got started in."

He has been around, and like any good songwriter he has some stories to tell. You see some weird things in places like this, Barrett says.

Nothing too strange happened this Saturday, although Schwantes recalls with a chuckle the time a man sitting in a corner jumped up, screamed, "I know that one!" and leaped toward the stage to sing along.

"We hadn't seen him before that and we haven't seen him since," Schwantes said.

Billy and Bobby finish; Meg, on guitar, and Dan, on the mandolin, begin.

"Does anyone have a pick?" Meg asks. Someone does, of course, and she begins playing.

Some of the musicians are well-known in Chapel Hill. Others choose to remain anonymous, as did the guitar player who took the stage and introduced himself as Johnny B. Goode. The musicians form a mutual admiration society. They all have one thing in common: they love music.

With a little help from his friends, Jay Schwantes has made what he calls an effort to revive the local music scene in Chapel Hill. At the Hobbit on Saturday nights, the coffeehouse is alive and well.

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