

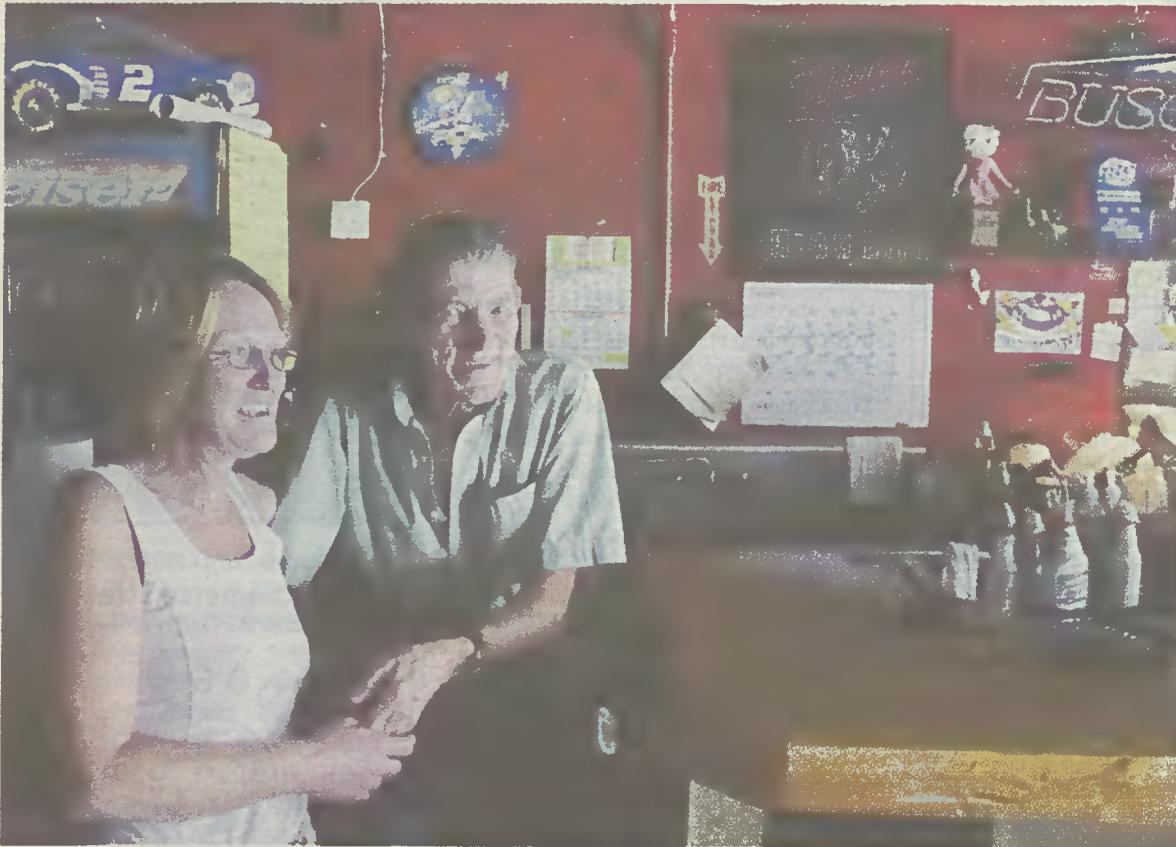
Arts & Features

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{THE BLUE BANNER}

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West Asheville venue overcomes bad reputation



Photos by Ian Hayes and Timothy Meinck

Betty and Ron Cook transformed a hole-in-the-wall bar into a punk rock-friendly concert space, which appeals to faithful regulars, as well.

Mike's Side Pocket now offers music, security and friendship

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Punk rock brings fresh faces to Mike's Side Pocket on Haywood Road and tears down an established bad reputation.

"This used to be a real rough place, and we've worked real hard to turn it around and make it a place for the young people to come do their music, and for the regulars to come have a few beers," said Betty Cook, co-owner and manager of Mike's Side Pocket.

Mike's has spent much of its life burdened by the shady reputation of its previous owner, Mike, according to Cook.

"He loved to fight; that's what got him killed. They found him down in the Swannanoa River after he got in a fight down at the Trophy Club over his girlfriend," she said.

Cook started working for the current

owner, Ron Cook, two years ago and married him shortly after. Then, she decided something had to be done about the atmosphere.

"I couldn't tolerate it. It was a constant fight and fussing and it got old after a while," she said. "We decided together to try and change it and get rid of the drug people and stuff like that."

That's when the live music started. "I've been working at this for two years with the music scene and trying to get bands in here and running off the people you don't want in here," 53-year-old Betty Cook said.

At first, just a couple country bands played on occasion without much success or change in the customers, she said.

"Then we had a girl come to work for us by the name of Mary. She was into punk rock and said she could get a lot of the punk rock bands to play up here," Betty Cook said. "We didn't have any idea what we were getting into, but we told her to

go ahead."

Now the bar features live music every night of the week, except for occasional nights when no one books, according to Cook, an Asheville native.

"At night you have a lot of the younger crowd, the punk rock crowd, and when it's blues, some of the older crowd stays," she said.

The venue hosts a lot of bands from out of state as well as local artists, Betty Cook said. One punk rock group came all the way from Italy.

"We do a lot of punk rock because nobody else will let the punk rockers play. But we book anybody. We have country, we have bluegrass, solo people and everything else," she said. "You hear something different every night."

Mike's received two citations for noise violations from the police department at the beginning, and then the owners decided to sound proof the building, according to Betty Cook. They now roll carpet over

the bottom of the doors during shows.

"I think we're doing a good job at dumping that reputation now," she said. "It's just getting better and better as we go along."

Black clothing and about a dozen tattoos, including one under each eye, distinguish the young bartender, Devon Bouverier, from the afternoon regulars like Terry Silver, who drank in the building 35 years ago and still frequents it today.

"We have a lot of punk shows," Bouverier said. "But shows like this don't make money like they used to, so we gotta sell a lot more beer."

The everyday regulars, Mike, Miles, Ray, Ron and D.C. help make that happen.

"There's a lot of different kind of people in here," said 56-year-old Mike Nichols in a slow Southern drawl. "There's a lot of the hippies and there's a lot of the rainbow

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