



I'll **Handle** the Music,

You Handle the **Bar**

AS a music lover in South Carolina, I find there are dang few good venues left — at least if you appreciate roots, folk, indie-rock or any other form of Americana, including straight-up rock-and-roll.

The Handlebar, a listening room in Greenville

DATELINE: Way back when. The good old days. Aficionados in Columbia still wax rhapsodic about Greenstreet's, the best nightclub Columbia, and one of the best this state, ever saw. Major blues acts like Johnny Winter, Lonnie Mack, even B.B. King made stops there. Acoustic shows like Doc Watson were regulars; and unorthodox guitar greats Richard Thompson and Leo Kottke also graced its stage, as did jazzmen like French pianist Claude Boling.

Places like Greenstreet's and Charleston's Music Farm were rarities. They were intimate in size, drew a comfortable clientele and brought terrific artists at reasonable prices.

Greenstreet's' lesser successor Rockafella's had great acts, too, it was just not as comfy. You had to stand unless you wanted to sit in the back or were



lucky enough to get one of the few tables on a raised platform that enabled you to see over the standing crowd.

But Columbia being the odd duck it is, a capital city with a major military installation and a large university that *still* can't keep one decent music club in business, Greenstreet's and Rockafella's fell to extinction in the early 1990s, and nothing has risen to take their place.

Nothing in Columbia, that is.

In Greenville, though, signs of cultural life were stirring. In 1994 the Handlebar reared its head in one of those former textile mills that had been renovated into a mall. I don't recall how I first became aware of the place, but I guess it was an artist I wanted to see, and I had to find the venue, which I did, bless the day.

The original Handlebar had a small outer room for the bar, all brick and wrought iron. It kind of reminded me of a jail, but a cozy one. Then you entered the music room. It, too, was small. I don't know the capacity, probably a couple of hundred at most, but again, it was cozy and welcoming, and you knew the people around you were like you – there for the music.

That's one big reason I like the place. The audiences know music, and are there to see the artists, not to use the performance as background music for moronic prattle. Handlebar audiences are respectful of the artists, and they show their appreciation loudly. The artists often reciprocate, and come out after the show to meet/greet/autograph stuff.

Among the giants I heard at the original Handlebar were Richard Thompson, blues rocker Marcia Ball and the subdudes, some of my all-time favorites.

Then, in 2001, the place moved to its present location on Stone Avenue. Good move for many reasons. It's on the southern edge of Greenville, so approaching from the Midlands you don't have to go all the way into town. It added a very nice restaurant, so you can make a night of it. Order something from the mostly American menu — soups, salads, hot and cold sandwiches, wraps and burgers (which are excellent; take it from a lifelong carnivore) — then walk a few paces and you're in the performance area.

The new room holds around 400, but its chairs are movable, so the number of seats can be fitted to the size of the show, thus the place always has room for



seats and plenty of room for standing in the back and on the sides. Designed with good sight lines in mind, there's really no bad seat or standing spot in the house. Its wide-but-not-deep dimensions mean you're never too far from the stage. So though there's more space at the new location, it's still as cozy and welcoming as the original.

The acoustics are great as well, so the joint really is ideal. Even if you go alone you feel as if you're in a room full of friends. What could be better than seeing your favorite artists up-close with a few hundred good buddies?

I met one of my best friends at the Handlebar. I'd seen Leonard at many shows in Columbia. His distinctive head of curly hair and beard were easy to spot. After noticing him a few times I realized he obviously had good taste in music, but I'd never met him. One night at a subdudes show, I'd had enough. I walked up to him and introduced myself. We've been tight ever since,

seeing many great shows together, both at the HB and other sites.

Co-owner/music booker John Jeter has brought some mighty artists to the HB over the years, and continues to do so. The roster of A-list musicians is a who's who of roots, Americana and rock-and-roll greats, though many others are cult figures or otherwise under the radar of most mainstream music fans. A sample includes Dave Alvin, Little Feat and Richard Thompson, the aforementioned songwriting genius who I consider the British Bob Dylan, only funnier. Also Cathy Mattea, Lonnie Mack, Johnny Winter and Jimmy Herring, the blazingly inventive guitar wizard who has played with the Dead, the Allman Brothers and Widespread Panic and who sears his way through everything from traditional blues to fusion jazz.

The musical fare has evolved as some acts have gotten too big or expensive, some too exclusive and up-and-comers more available. Recent acts include guitar-slingers Steve Morse, Chris Duarte and even former Allman Brother Dickey Betts; rootsy Son Volt, Saffire, the Uppity Blues Women; and rising Irish indie rockers Bell X1. Reggae and tribute bands are regulars too.

Now and then future stars can be seen, and Charleston's Crowfield may soon be among them. A recent show attracted representatives from the Sony record group.

Even the lesser known acts are terrific, and the place keeps a decent price tag (yet another plus!) on its shows (usually around 20 bucks, give or take a few), making more artists available to the fans. Another convenience is its Handle Pass, which costs \$100 and allows the purchaser to use it on any show. They just punch the cost of the show off the pass and you keep it until it's punched out. It's like an investment.

In these days of paying \$75-100 or more for the majors — your Bruces, your U2s, your Stones, your McCartneys, etc. — the Handlebar's a real bargain.

Verily, if I lived in Greenville, I'd go broke from being down at the HB. In his song "16 Tons," the great Merle Travis wrote "St. Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store." In my case, the Handlebar could substitute for that dreaded merchant. I guess 90 miles of separation does have its advantages, after all. ●

He's there for the music:

Columbia writer Tut Underwood fantasizes about touring with the Allman Brothers when he's not working as Director of Public Information at the South Carolina State Museum. Cindy Hosea is a photographer in Greenville.

