

# The Cave

YOUR LOCAL ROADIE JOINT, THE OLDEST BAR IN CHAPEL HILL

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If you were not looking for it, you would never notice the “452 1/2” sign on Franklin Street. It hangs over a small staircase descending into a subterranean paradise.

Welcome to The Cave, established in 1968.

The walls and ceilings are covered in textured concrete, and the windowless rooms are dimly lit, giving you the sense that you really are in a cave. A web of string lights dangles overhead. Music blares from the undiscovered band that’s setting up in the front room, a packed crowd taking everything in. It smells like beer and cigarettes. Past the bar, flooded with customers, is the back room, where people are mingling on vintage couches, watching a soccer match, playing pool, sipping their drinks. The floor is covered in a black and white zigzag print reminiscent of “Twin Peaks.” No two patrons look alike, from sorority girls to metalheads.

The bar has two entrances: the one on Franklin Street, tucked away between

Uniquities and The Story, and another around back hidden in a parking lot. That is the door regulars use, and to control the flow of traffic in the pandemic, it is now the main entrance. Masks and vaccination cards are required for entrance.

“We try to keep it a safe space for everyone,” bartender Danny Grewen said of The Cave. “It’s kind of divey, but just come as you are. And pretty much everyone is welcome, as long as you’re not a fucking dick.”

Fellow bartender Tre Acklen said that the staff is close, like a family. He

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Spencer said she and Swingle began working at The Cave when Mouse was the owner a decade ago. They could not let such a magical legacy come to an end so unceremoniously.

“All the local musicians have come through here,” Swingle said. “This is the first bar I played as a musician. This is the musician’s bar, everybody that works here is a musician.”

This place is special, and so are the people who run it.

Spencer and Swingle are not just business partners but also best friends. The care they have for each other and the community is evident in the way they run The Cave.

The Cave, like all bars, shut down from March until May in 2020. It has recently tightened up on face coverings and vaccination status due to the delta variant.

“We opened back up — we called it the elongated soft reopening — a few months ago,” Swingle said. “And now we’re making people wear masks, we’re trying to be safe,” she said. “For shows, we’re checking people’s proof of vaccination and just trying to proceed in as safe a way as possible so that people can come see music but are still protected, and we’re not going to be spreading the virus around.”

has been working at The Cave since it reopened under new ownership in the summer of 2018.

The bar closed unexpectedly in April 2018, just shy of its 50th anniversary. Bartenders Autumn Spencer and Melissa Swingle, who have frequented The Cave since they were old enough, scrambled to buy the bar themselves to keep it open.

“They’re both local longtime mainstays,” Acklen said. “Even though they’re the new owners, everybody knows them already.”

“This bar is the oldest bar in Chapel Hill, so it’s had a bunch of owners in the past,” Swingle said. She lists them off: Bo Porter, Meg Sorrell, a man known mysteriously as Mouse, and then Mark Connor, who decided to sell.

“That’s when Autumn and I decided we were going to save The Cave,” Swingle said. “We managed to scrape together enough money to come in and buy The Cave from Mark and keep it going.”



Because the vaccination rate in Chapel Hill is so high — approximately 79% of Orange County is fully vaccinated — and because everyone who enters The Cave must prove vaccination, the owners feel more confident that their regulars are safe.

“For busy shows, we’re having to turn away a few people that aren’t vaccinated, but hopefully that’ll encourage them to go get vaccinated,” Swingle said.

Spencer is proud to lead the charge in that way and hopes that other bars will follow suit.

“We’re just carrying on with the music,” Swingle said.

“And then we’re kind of happy that it’s a woman cave again,” she adds. “Because for a little while there, it was owned by men. Before Mouse and Mark, when I first

came here, back in the day, Meg owned The Cave, so it was a woman cave.”

“We try to make this a safe space for women to hang out,” Swingle said.

“And a safe space for anybody,” Spencer interjects.

“A safe space for everybody, regardless of gender or sexual preference,” Swingle amends.

They are trying to create a space where everyone feels welcome and can leave their worries at the door — and it seems like they are succeeding.

“My favorite thing is when the music is going and everybody seems to be having fun, people start dancing, and I’m like, ‘Wow, I helped make an atmosphere that people are having fun in, they’re forgetting their troubles for a little bit and enjoying the music,’” Swingle said.

“I think it’s really important for us human beings, especially after this pandemic, to reconnect with each other in a safe way,” she adds. “We need each other emotionally. Personally, I can be depressed, and I get up here and start talking to people and the depression goes away. It just really helps to talk to other people. It’s like therapy.”

Swingle’s favorite memory in her time at The Cave came just before the bar was forced to shut down due to the pandemic. A band called MINKA came all the way from Philadelphia to play.

“They were so good, I’m getting goosebumps right now,” she said.

“Looking back on it, I didn’t realize while they were playing that we were fixing to have to close down for a year.”

MINKA returned to The Cave on Sept. 22, bringing it all full circle.

“There have been all kinds of band stories like that,” Swingle said. “You haven’t heard them before, and they blow you away, and you’re like, ‘OK, well, next time they play, they’re playing the Cradle, and they’re only going to get better.’”

The Cave may be one of Chapel Hill’s best-kept secrets. If you have been looking for your local roadie joint, a bar with character — look no further. You have found it.

**“A SAFE SPACE FOR EVERYBODY, REGARDLESS OF GENDER OR SEXUAL PREFERENCE.”**

