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THURSDAY, JULY 06, 2006 12:00 AM

A Lowcountry institution, Windjammer still stands strong

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The Post and Courier

The ingredients for a beach bar are simple: sand, ocean, bar. But toss in a grill, volleyball courts, bikinis and live music and that simple beach bar has the ability to become ... legendary.

The Windjammer has done just that.

It has become an institution not only on Isle of Palms, but also on the East Coast. The club's subtle evolution from neighborhood hangout to music hot spot has been embraced by its patrons. It has introduced garage bands, kick-started rock stars, delivered headliners and reunited has-beens. Bikini styles have come a full circle and a half. And volleyball has always been served up in the backyard.

In the past three decades, hurricanes, tides and erosion have threatened. The structure has been destroyed and rebuilt. Customers, bands and employees have come; few have left. The business has gotten harder. The neighborhood has developed and changed. But The Windjammer has stayed true to its famed slogan, "Always a Jam Good Time!"

Brothers Malcolm and James Burgis opened the beachfront bar in 1972. James sold his share to Bill Kulseth in 1974 for the cost of a motorcycle. Times were more simple then.

In 1977, Timi Kennedy was hired to put three coats of paint on The Windjammer's new walk-in cooler.

"Just as I finished the last coat, Malcolm threw me a new shirt, told me to get cleaned up and get behind the bar," says Kennedy, a manager at The Windjammer. "That's how I started."

Kennedy remembers the '70s as an easier time.

"It wasn't as built up. With the naval base there was a lot of military presence," says Kennedy. "Basically, customers were locals and service people mixed in with tourists in the summer time."

Just as today, the dress code was, whatever.

Beach volleyball consisted of some truck tires, poles and a net. They called it jungle ball.

"There were no rules, you just hit the ball back and forth," says Kennedy. "There was a guy from California, Shawn Bonnywell, who had experience playing two-man volleyball. He got some guys who were more athletic, taught them how to play, and it's evolved since then."

That was around 1978. Also the year of pre-bikini contests, aka wet T-shirt contests.

"We had the contests for two summers before one got out of hand. We stopped doing them and reintroduced them as bikini contests in the early '80s."

Enter Bobby Ross, a name synonymous with The Windjammer.

"A lot of people think I'm the owner, but Malcolm is the glue and has been these last 30 plus years," says Ross, general manager. "I make the money and Malcolm spends it."

It was 1980 and Ross had recently quit his first job. He was a regular at the bar and had no idea that his future career was staring him right in the face. Nor that his future transportation to and from work would be a golf cart.

"I had a \$700 bar tab and had to start bartending here to pay it off," says Ross. He had business experience and before long moved to a manager position, which was basically a head bartender.

"Back then it was a local hangout, no live entertainment," says Ross. "Over the years business picked up, but everything else picked up, too, including expenses."

Live music started in 1982. It's debated whether Asylum or RUI was the first band Ross hired. Both claim to be.

"In the beginning we built these three platforms," says Ross. "We had to have the drummer from The Blanks use our shuffleboard table as his platform."

"In the '80s and '90s, the music business was more laidback. It was before big contracts. We had door contracts and handshakes."

Ross remembers all the bands he hired. His favorites include the Cruise-O-Matics, The Daves, Drivin' & Cryin', The Killer Whales, Swimming Pool Q's, Sister Hazel, The Blue Dogs, Hootie & the Blowfish, Edwin McCain and Cowboy Mouth. "There's just no way to mention everyone who should be mentioned," says Ross.

"Rob Thomas played here with his old band Tabitha's Secret. He left to go on his own, made it big with Matchbox Twenty, and the former members (of Tabitha's Secret) started a band called Don't Play with Matches," says Ross with a laugh.

"Creed played April 11, 1997, opening for Big Stoner Creek." He remembers Edwin McCain playing during the O.J. chase. "Actually he was supposed to play during the chase, but instead we stayed up in this office and watched TV."

Tucked away in the club upstairs is Ross' randomly organized office. If a record is not stored in his computer, it's in a drawer. If it's not in a drawer or file, it's in his head. If it's not in his head, it was destroyed during Hurricane Hugo.

Ross doesn't like to talk about Hugo.

The hurricane closed the doors of The Windjammer for nine months. The whole building and its structure changed. But opening day brings back fond memories.

"We opened the doors and it was like cattle coming in," remembers Ross. "I remember being shocked at how busy we were and kept thinking, we need more people. We couldn't keep up with orders for Jammer burgers. The first weekend we were open, we didn't do less than \$10,000 days, which is good now, let alone the '90s. It was an institution, and everyone wanted to come in to congratulate us. "

Ross' mind finds its way back to the music.

"Hootie was the first band that took that next step. The Killer Whales could have taken off, so could The Daves," says Ross.

"With Hootie it was basically like watching your kids grow up. I remember the day we realized they wouldn't play here anymore. I sat on the back deck and cried with Mark about it," says Ross.

Ross admits the '90s was his favorite era.

"We used to be able to develop bands, but now it's harder to get people to come watch an underdeveloped band. We have to get the already-developed bands. And they are bigger bands with bigger contracts. You've got to pay more to have them play, therefore the fans have to pay more for tickets.

These guys have already made it. To me it's gotten harder. It doesn't get any easier, it gets harder. That's the nature of the business."

Jammer Jabber

"I used to hang around The Windjammer when I was a young beach bum, checking out the bikini contests, lurking around the volleyball courts and, occasionally, peeking my head inside to hear some live music. Now that I'm an older beach bum with a band, The Windjammer is a real favorite. Sol Driven Train had our CD Release Party there in 2002, and Bobby Ross has been very supportive over the years. It's always an honor to play on that stage, where so many great national and local acts have performed over, and you can't beat the salty atmosphere. The cracked cymbals and band memorabilia decorating the walls give the place a depth and history that cannot be faked. To me it's a shame what front beach IOP has become in the past 15 years, but The Windjammer is an institution that lends grit and authenticity to the district's new vinyl facade. May rock 'n' roll never die at the Jammer!"

- Joel Timmons, Sol Driven Train

"I don't think a lot of bands would have made it out of the Southeast if not for Bobby Ross and The Windjammer and that stage to hone our chops and to get to play for our hometown crowd. I look forward to that gig every single year. All the bartenders are so kind and all the people we've known for years ... I can't say better things about The Windjammer and everyone there who have been looking out for us for years and years."

- Edwin McCain

"Let me just say that not only is The Windjammer one of my favorite venues, but it should pride itself on having the best bartenders year-round. They have to run a close second on the best burger in the tri-county area, as well.

Bobby Ross is also one of the main reasons that the Jammer has been so successful. He is well-respected among both local and national bands as a promoter who is fair and looks out for the interest of the artists who frequent the Windjammer. The fact that national bands such as Hootie & the Blowfish, Cowboy Mouth, Big Head Todd and the Monsters, Cracker and, yes, Blue Dogs, to name a few, play at least two to three dates a year at the Jammer is a testament to Bobby and Windjammer's staff. Viva La Jammer !"

- Hank Futch, The Blue Dogs

"Right before Katrina devastated our home base of New Orleans, we were set to take some time off of the road. When everything went down in New Orleans, Bobby was one of the first to call wondering where he could send supplies to help those in need down there. He then set up a four-day stint for Cowboy Mouth at The Windjammer with openers such as Edwin McCain, Hootie & the Blowfish, Sister Hazel, and The Blue Dogs ... all simply because we needed a hand up. We could not return to New Orleans for the much-needed break we were to take when the city was on lockdown and were left adrift out on the road not knowing what the future of our band or home was. For five days, Bobby and everyone at the Jammer and in Charleston and the island gave us a home at the exact time we needed one and a place to play in order to do what we do. They helped us heal, grieve, laugh and cry for the life we knew and to prepare for an uncertain future. For that, and for so many other thousands of things, we all always be grateful.

When I die, I don't want to go to heaven, I want to go to The Windjammer."

- Fred LeBlanc, Cowboy Mouth

"We've been playing in Charleston since the late '80s and started playing at the Jammer pretty late. The first time was around '96. After playing there 10 years, we now consider the place home base for us. We come back there and are welcomed with open arms. I have probably lost several years of my life thanks to the Windjammer. Seriously, if you do two days in a row there as a customer, it will affect you. You have to

do a steam bath and run, yoga and pray to get over it!

The bartender formerly known as Blade, and all of the staff treat you like a king.

Bands around the country are envious that we get to play there three or four times a year. The atmosphere, the closeness of it, it's sweaty, but great. Then you walk outside and there's the beach."

- Bobby Houck, The Blue Dogs

"If you're attempting to rap on stage with a bluegrass band and the whole power goes out on IOP, do you take that as a sign to give up and never rap again, or continue rapping?"

- Greg Walker, The Blue Dogs

This article was printed via the web on 7/9/2006 11:19:31 AM . This article appeared in The Post and Courier and updated online at Charleston.net on Thursday, July 06, 2006.