

Excavation:
Exploring Stories of Practice from Chapel Hill's Oldest Bar

So a guy walks into a bar. What comes next?

Well, that depends. Let's say he finds himself at the Cave, Chapel Hill's oldest tavern. How should he act—and interact—with the people inside? His punchline may follow a setup, but that does not mean he enters a vacuum. The culture of the Cave holds him accountable to an informal standard of practice, one whose primary expectation is authenticity. This standard is not codified; it is not defined by any individual or governing board, but by all who haunt its halls. And it is the practice of leaving judgment at the door to explore depths in good company that both forms and informs the archetypical Cave-diver.

One could be forgiven for assuming an irony—if not outright contradiction—within these parameters. How can this guy who walks into a bar be judged by the criterion of his lack of judgment? Of course, the answer is complicated. Let us begin considering it by considering the bar itself.

The Cave sits at 452½ West Franklin Street in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The ½ is because it's ostensibly a basement at the bottom of a stairway, between an upscale wine bar and a mid-scale boutique. The bar opened in 1968, briefly operated as the gay club Pegasus in the early 1970s, and served exclusively beer until harder spirits hit its shelves in the 2000s. A soft red glow dimly lights its beige walls, playfully painted with men hunting bison and discovering PBR.¹ Now-iconic graffiti plaster the bathrooms, which thus haven't been repainted in many years.² Taller patrons may need to duck a bit—not only for the low ceiling, but also the even-lower stalactites.³ It all frequently elicits the description of “dank.”

Cavernites parse the bar's history into epochs of ownership, with Bo's being the oldest most can remember. He eventually shared the Cave with Meg Sorrell, who then took the reins in the late '80s and helmed its transition into a proper music venue. She sold it in 2000 to the then-current bartender Mouse Mock. Mouse cemented the bar's status as a landmark local stage whose tales can throw down with the best of them. But in 2010, a statewide indoor-smoking ban

¹ That is, Pabst Blue Ribbon; the unofficial Cave beer.

² I initially supposed that the oldest graffiti was tagged about 30 years ago, as each owner I asked about the last paint job told me to ask the owner previous. When I finally got to Meg, she informed me that she was involved with painting the *bar* walls in the late '80s, but not the *bathroom* walls. So I just kind of took it for fact that they've been the way they are since the late '80s. But after reading an earlier draft of this paper, Meg clarified that they were actually repainted sometime in the '00s, and that Mouse probably just forgot having done it. He also forgot about one of the TV shows he produced when I brought it up, and Groves, who was tending bar at the time of the interview, had to remind him by singing the theme song. So this explanation seems pretty likely. And I was serious about the graffiti being iconic. The most famous example is the result of two individual graffiti overlapping to beget “Ryan Adams is a flying Dracula that jacks off on you.” A wall-accurate transfer was once printed on tee-shirts, which sold out immediately.

³ Which are almost always referred to as “plaster and chicken-wire”, but Meg says are actually made from concrete and expanded metal—and have, in one case, impeded a fire from destroying the entire building.

hit the Cave particularly hard, and business suffered. Despite planning to sell that year, Mouse held onto the Cave in an attempt to right the ship. He finally sold it in 2012 to Mark Connor, an owner of Slim's in Raleigh, whose Cave years bore features and festivals now fixtures of the local scene. But financial hardship and leasing issues led to the Cave shutting its doors in 2018. This closure would have been permanent—and was widely regarded as apocalyptic at the time—if not for the community support behind the lovely new owners Autumn and Melissa.

The Cave is a *third place*, one of the spaces beyond the home (first place) and work (second place) which form “the core settings of informal public life.” These are the spaces which “host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenberg, 16). Stocked with beer, wine, and spirits, the “talking/drinking synergism” is “unquestionably at the foundation of the third place tavern” (167). But it is the talking more than the drinking which earns such taverns the distinction of “third place.” Generally, “regular patrons do not go there primarily to drink” (168), but rather, go there and drink primarily *to talk*. In other words, “The café is not a place a man goes to for a drink but a place he goes to in order to drink in company” (qtd. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 183).

But who talks at the Cave, and in what company? Surely, if a guy walks into a bar, he should know whom he may find. Former Cave bartender and current professor of history at UNC-Asheville Alvis Dunn explained that “the Cave always welcomed the rough around the edges folk to the place,” adding that “Chapel Hill had enough drop-outs to have some pretty intellectual carpenters and house painters and plumbers after all.” Mouse, the former owner, expanded upon this demographic:

This was a bar that you could actually turn to anybody and say, *hi*, and get into conversation with them. I mean, *everything* was dropped at the door. You walked in here and you were just another person. And it would be fun, because you could be sitting next to a professor, talking about pop culture; you could be sitting here talking to—you have *no idea* who you are sitting next to when you're in here!

The practice of *leveling*, in which actors check their “worldly status claims ... at the door in order that all within may be equal,” (Oldenberg, 25) is a key characteristic of third places. Leveling is a social *practice*. It is allowed for by an actor's intuition for a space's required *habitus*, or the “principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules,” all “collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor” (Bourdieu, *Outline*, 72). The habitus is understood within the actor, but it is expressed and understood in its applicability to a field. One's habitus imposes informal restrictions, but it also enforces a “conditional and conditioned freedom” (Bourdieu, *Outline*, 95). In short, it's not the formal “rules” of the game, but rather an intuited “feel” for it.

One may be tempted to regard the habitus of the Cave-goers in terms of the bar's history; to consider its owners and bartenders as formal governors of the "game's feel." But this structure is too formal, too codified; it deals too heavily with the "game's rules." We must not forego the Smiling Spelunker, who is "not just someone who enjoys eating and drinking," but "someone capable of entering into the generous and familiar—that is, both simple and free—relationship that is encouraged and symbolized by eating and drinking together, in a conviviality which sweeps away restraints and reticence" (Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 179).

Former owner Meg offered a more nuanced model in one of her monthly Cave newsletters, writing "Cave owners never really own that basement called the Cave. She is more independent than that, letting her freak flag fly through whatever group of owners, keepers, and tenders occupy that mental and physical space at any given time." Here, the Cave is not a product of its staff alone, but rather a space with her own personality. In a personal interview, Meg expanded, "I think it's more defined by the people on *this* side [the drinking side] of the bar than *that* side [the pouring side] of the bar. But every single bartender has their own way of being, and it all feeds into the same thing. So it's a little bit hard to separate which one it is; it's hard to know."

The Cave's identity is constructed in collaboration. All her actors are agents, and each of their habituses enforce the standard of practice within the Cave. The staff may regulate the "rules," but not the "feel." The "feel" is informal, dynamic, and built between barstools and bartop. But if this culture is defined by all Cavernites, then what is its definition?

To find it, let's get back to that guy who walks into a bar. What happens if he fails to level upon descent into the Cave? What if the structures of his environment taught him a "feel" for a different "game"? I spoke with Kathy Giuffre, a former Cave bartender and current sociology professor at Colorado College.⁴ She told me:

All sorts of people go to the place and never go in again. They had a beer in a plastic cup,⁵ and the floor's really grubby, and it's too dark, and the music's too loud, or the music's not good enough, and they never go back. Those people just don't become part of it. One of my professors from the sociology department said, *oh, I'll come down and see you*, and he brought another professor with him, and Leonard, one of the regulars, was sitting at the bar—it was three o'clock in the afternoon, so he'd had, probably, seven beers by then—but turned to them and said, *y'all wanna play some darts?* And I could see them move as far away from him as they could move without getting up off their stools. They just didn't get it. And they were never going to have the experience of

⁴ She also wrote *The Drunken Spelunker's Guide to Plato*, a novel that uses the Cave as an allegory for Plato's allegory of the cave, and is absolutely worth reading.

⁵ Back when the Cave didn't have glassware, or mixed drinks, or ice, or limes, or... really, anything other than beer and cigarettes. Indeed, the bar's flyers often featured the proclamation "no ice, no limes, beer," until they got both, at which point the flyers started reading something along the lines of "ice, limes, beer" or "nice beer, limes."

playing darts with Leonard, and learning what an incredibly warm, generous, open-hearted person this seemingly falling-down-drunk dude is. (Kathy Giuffre)

Virginia Sloop, a longtime regular, told a similar tale:

Some kinda, like, douchey guy with a nice watch was just coming in for a drink or something kinda recently, and Dex⁶ was over there playing—you know, Dex is part of the Cave, but he's also kind of a rock star—playing the piano, and being Dex, just being weird, and the guy's like, *how long is this gonna go on?* And I'm like, *not long enough.* Like, *you're lucky to have this, you weirdo. If you don't appreciate this, man, you might be in the wrong spot.*

These professors and “douchey guy with a nice watch,” whose statuses may impress beyond the third place's threshold, failed entirely to “check it at the door.” They couldn't level with Leonard, or dig Dex's performance.

But notice Virginia's distinction between “weird” (ie., Dex being Dex) and “weirdo” (ie., guy with nice watch who can't appreciate Dex). It's a telling, if ironic, use of words. Virginia equates “Dex being weird” with the complimentary equivalent, “Dex being Dex.” In her usage, she positively correlates “weirdness” with “authenticity,” and her “weirdo” is he who negatively regards Dex's authenticity as “weird.” This distinction illustrates the very same failure to level that prohibits the professors from understanding the authentic weirdness of Leonard and his darts.

If a guy walks into a bar, and that bar is the Cave, he must level with those around him. He must open himself up to the authenticity of others, strange as that authenticity may appear. This practice is essential in establishing the tavernous third-place as a venue without pretense.

Mouse put the importance of leveling in service of authenticity in terms of the venue's stage. During the '90s and '00s, he booked and organized many of the Cave's shows. He even produced a three-season public access local music showcase there called *Live @ the Cave*.⁷ But Mouse admits he was never really a music nerd, and it shows in how he booked:

When I was here, I was like, *no, the Cave is supposed to be the first place you play in Chapel Hill.* That's what I said. *Nope, doesn't matter, bring your friends and family out;*

⁶ As in Dexter Romweber, of Flat Duo Jets and other projects. He is really, *really* good. The Flat Duo Jets played Letterman once, and it was awesome. Dex also had a lasting impact on Jack White of the White Stripes, as well as Cat Power, which is pretty rad. He can still be found at the Cave every now and then, and has a quasi-residency piano set most Monday nights.

⁷ Which he did with Craig Zearfoss, who donated tons of his raw and published materials to Wilson Library's Southern Folklife Collection. That call number can be found in this bibliography, and I can not recommend exploring it highly enough. The two (Craig and Mouse) also filmed the music trivia game show *Bandelirium* at the Cave, which I managed to procure a few episodes of. It's delightfully odd, as I'm sure you could have guessed.

it's your basement, it's your home, and don't worry about it. I had this one guy, who brought his first show out, and he sucked. He suucked. And I told him, keep going. Whatever you do, don't stop. You still got a gig here. As long as you put people in the house, you still got a gig here. And he's great now!

Stephen Judge, owner of Schoolkids Records, highlighted how unique this booking style really was. He situated the Cave in a context of contemporaneous venues:

It's always been a place that's been known for being supportive of artistic endeavors; you know, artistic people. Mouse used to have a sign up that said *NO COVERS*. And I loved that. I thought that was awesome. Because, especially in the '90s, it seemed like all the bars were having cover bands. It's like, *aww jeez...* You go to the Cave, and it's like: *NO COVERS*.

Mouse shed a humorous light on his iconic “no covers” rule:

I had folks thanking me because I had an all-original music policy. I did not allow covers because I didn't want to pay ASCAP and BMI and SESAC.⁸ And I had folks coming in here, telling me, *thank you, because you got me started writing again*. And I'm like, *Alright! Good!*

Stories persist of Mouse pulling the sound when a band started strumming familiar chords. The policy may have been rooted in avoiding publishing fees, but it also reflected an ideology. The way the Cave treated its stage emblemizes how Cave-dwellers treat the Cave as a stage. This can be taken literally, as the Cave's own stage is unelevated, and really just a carpeted corner in the main room. Or the “artistic endeavors, artistic people” which the Cave has “always been known for supporting” can be explored more poetically, as Kathy did with me:

The people that would hang out there are artists in many different ways, not all of them paint-and-canvas or even music. But they are artists in the way they live their lives. And I think the thing about being an artist is: you can be an artist and be full of shit, but you can't be a *good* artist and be full of shit. In a way, the people in the Cave ask you—by the way they live their own lives—to be the best version of yourself. And I don't mean *best* as in *most polished* or *most presentable* or anything like that. I think they ask you to be the best version of yourself in that it's the most true and authentic to you. I can be as big an asshole as anyone else, but I don't think I could be an asshole in front of Meg or

⁸ American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers; Broadcast Music, Inc.; and Society of European Stage Authors and Composers, respectively. Basically, organizations which protect the rights of publishers by charging bars a lot of money (or by fining them even more money).

Mouse or Dexter, because the honesty and the courage that they use with their own lives would shame someone who tried to be a weasel. As a matter of course, when there's a culture where people are done with pretense, it brings out the best in everyone.

This culture is the essence of the Cave. It's the answer to the ironic quandary of how one can be judged on the basis of not judging. It's the "feel" of the place. There, respect is earned when one's practice is honest (even if it's "weird,") and when one's practice respects the honesty of others (even if they're "weird.") One doesn't build esteem by performing someone else's music, or by wearing the "nice watch," but rather by singing their own song (even if it "suuucks.") At the Cave, one's best self is not the "most polished" or "most presentable" but the "most true and authentic."

Because once this guy walks into a bar—specifically the Cave—he must level upon descent. He must accept that he doesn't really know, at least not yet, who sits to his left or his right. He must leave behind all his pretenses and judgements and everything except his own "art;" his own punchline; the punchline he thinks is the most funny and honest and true to himself, whatever it may be.

Works Cited

Bourdieu, Pierre. *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge UP, 1977.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Harvard UP, 1984.

Dunn, Alvis. Personal email correspondence. 22 October-8 November, 2019.

Giuffre, Kathy. Personal phone interview. 3 October, 2019.

Judge, Stephen. Personal interview at OCSC. 15 October, 2019.

Mock, Mouse. Personal interview at the Cave. 17 November, 2019.

Oldenberg, Ray. *The Great Good Place*. 1989. Da Capo Press, 1999.

Sloop, Virginia. Personal interview at the Cave. 17 October, 2019.

Sorrell, Meg. Excerpts from Cave Newsletters. cu. 2019.

Sorrell, Meg. Personal interview at the Cave. 20 November, 2019.

Annotated Bibliography

Bourdieu, Pierre. *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge UP, 1977.

Originally published in French, 1972, this work explores a theory of practice, investigating sociological motivations behind the things that we do. I draw most heavily upon Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, which is a guiding force throughout this paper.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, 1984.

Originally published in French, 1979, *Distinction* is a sociological text which defines "taste" with regard to class distinctions. In cited passages, he examines café practices and the habituses of those who enact them.

Connor, Mark. Interview at OCSC. 21 November, 2019.

Interview with Mark, owner of the Cave from 2012-2018. This conversation was special to me because Mark was the owner when I first fell in love with the place. We talk mostly about the space as a venue, as his primary bar-owning experience comes from owning and booking at Slim's.

Craig Zearfoss Collection #20509, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Collection of artist and archivist Craig Zearfoss, who (along with Mouse Mock) produced the Cave TV shows *Bandelirium* and *Live @ the Cave*, and even further back, the totally cool film *Sleazefest! 94*. Materials range from raw footage to newspaper clippings and personal correspondences, but there's really no telling what *isn't* in those boxes.

Dunn, Alvis. Email correspondence. 22 October-8 November, 2019.

A handful of emails with Dr. Alvis Dunn, former bartender of the Cave (as well as OCSC, Dead Mule Club, and the now-defunct Hardback Cafe). He offered contextualization to the Cave as instrumental in a larger scene of townies and bartenders, as well as a ton of super cool archived materials I didn't get to use but thoroughly enjoyed exploring (he is, after all, a historian.)

Giuffre, Kathy. *The Drunken Spelunker's Guide to Plato*. John F. Blair Publisher, 2015. Print.

Novel set at (and around) the Cave in the early '90s, which is framed within references to Plato's Allegory of the Cave as well as Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. It looks beyond the Cave's music stage and deals more primarily with a sense of community and family emerging from the watering-hole of earnest odd-balls.

Giuffre, Kathy. Phone interview. 3 October, 2019.

Personal interview with the author of *The Drunken Spelunker's Guide to Plato* as well as a former Cave bartender. We discuss her novel, Chapel Hill in the '90s, music, Greek mythology and philosophy and its application to dive bars, and the lack of pretension which defines the Cave.

Judge, Stephen. Interview at OCSC. 15 October, 2019.

Interview with current owner of Schoolkids Records as well as long-time affiliate with local labels Redeye and Yep Roc. I obtained a great retelling of the time (most of) R.E.M. played a secret show at the Cave, as well as some general thoughts on the Chapel Hill music scene as it has progressed through the years through the eyes of someone closely tied to it. Other topics of conversation included his personal history as well as musicians on the Cave's status as an institution.

Mock, Mouse. Interview at the Cave. 17 November, 2019.

Interview with former Cave owner (2000-2012), who was behind *Bandelirium, Live @ the Cave*, and the early (like, really early) Cave live streaming. Mouse is super thoughtful and articulate, and has a really poetic way of talking about pretty much anything. This was my longest interview by far and it touches on many topics. Wonderfully, bartender Groves Willer adds quips and comments to our conversation throughout.

Oldenberg, Ray. *The Great Good Place*. 1989. Da Capo Press, 1999.

A sociological text which deals with the places we spend time and live publicly beyond the home and the workplace. It has a good chapter on taverns as so-called "third spaces", which forms a focusing lens to this paper and has been explicitly referred to by Alvis Dunn and Kathy Giuffre.

Sloop, Virginia. Interview at the Cave. 17 October, 2019.

Conversation with early '00s regular. We spoke about how dives like the Cave walk the line between party-spots and family, as well as the day-to-day life and interactions of bar regulars and staff across town.

Sorrell, Meg. Excerpts from Cave Newsletters. cu. 2019.

Touching and hilarious recollections of the Cave from former owner Meg Sorrell, these undated e-newsletters fall closely in line with the reflective *Drunken Spelunker* in their attempt to record memories of the Cave. Each is a ~1 page anecdote containing allusions to different periods in the bar's history.

Sorrell, Meg. Interview at the Cave. 20 November, 2019.

Wonderful interview with Meg, who owned the bar from the late '80s to 2000. I can't state enough how cool she is. We cover pretty much everything in this interview, and no annotation would do any of it justice. It was just the most informative and interesting thing one could have had in exploring the Cave.

Willer, Groves. Interview at the Cave. 27 October, 2019.

Interview with the longtime bartender at the Cave, member of local bands Shark Quest, Evil Weiner, Phatlynx, and general stand-up dude. We talked about general Cave lore and history, particularly as it relates to the space as a music venue. He was remarkably helpful with my research, and now I can't go to the bar on Sundays without being bestowed a copy of a film shot in Chapel Hill or a local CD. Seriously, Groves is the man.