

Culture-High & Low

This is an interview with Rusty Andrews at McGonigel's Mucky Duck in Houston, February 27, 2006. The interviewers are Joe Pratt and Steve Brown.



Rusty Andrews moved to Houston as a child. He graduated from Smiley High School in northeast Houston. In the 1980s he worked for his father-in-law at the Red Lion Inn, where he introduced live music. After his father-in-law retired, he found a vacant building near Kirby and I-59 and created a new live music venue, McGonigel's Mucky Duck. With good singer/songwriters playing in an intimate setting, "The Duck" has become an important part of Houston's live music scene. In our interview, Rusty recounts some of his experiences in creating a great place to eat, drink, and listen to live music.



Panoramic view of stage and inside of club.

My first job in the hospitality industry was managing the Red Lion Restaurant for my father-in-law, George Crowder. The Red Lion was renowned for serving the finest prime rib and during its heyday its proximity to the famed Shamrock Hilton Hotel made it the place to see and be seen for the many movie stars who stayed in this Houston landmark. I had the opportunity to meet many famous folks, from John Travolta to Tom Jones. Pete Rose and Joe Torres were frequent guests of the Red Lion.



I first began working at the Red Lion in 1977, the year our son was born. The first several years I was there I was busy learning the many lessons that George was able to teach me about how to run a restaurant, and then sometime during the following decade I became interested in ways to expand the Churchill Pub, the club located on the second level of the restaurant. We started having interesting happy hours with “buy the beer keep the glass nights” (something we continue to this day) hat nights and lively music. My son’s teacher had a brother who was a musician and he agreed to play during happy hour. Happy hours turned into weekend gigs and it progressed from there. Soon, as it often does in this business, the word spread and we had many local musicians checking the place out as a cool new place to play.

We had to overcome many obstacles to make the music scene work upstairs in the Churchill Pub—mainly the

sight lines and the sound. The pub was a series of small rooms and no more than twenty people could actually fit into the room where the performers were playing. But somehow we made it work and we had some pretty exciting nights up there. Shake Russell, Dana Cooper, Lisa, Marie and Kim, Trout Fishing in America and Ezra Charles were regular performers in the Pub. Clint Black and Lucinda Williams also played the Churchill Pub.

As the 90’s approached, it became clear that my father-in-law wanted to



retire and our choice was to try and make the Red Lion our “own” or to find a location that would be more suited to our needs. We decided to strike out on our own and find our “Mucky Duck.” I had already selected the name because I had liked the sound of the name when I had overheard it on a trip to England. It stayed in the back of my mind and only moved forward once we began looking for a location.

The Duck “hunt” began in earnest in January 1989. We spent months driving the streets of Houston looking for our location. Just when we began to

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doubt that we would ever find the right place we happened upon this sturdy little building on Norfolk Street. As luck would have it, we found our Mucky Duck on St. Patrick’s Day.

What seemed perfect to us caused many of our friends to wonder what we were thinking! How did we think we could make a go of a place so far off the beaten path? No matter, we loved everything about it, especially the part that it was “off the beaten path.”

We had six weeks to get the Duck up and running. We did not have enough money to dawdle over designs, colors or anything else. We had to hit the ground running. With the help of many friends, even the doubters, we got the walls down, miles of telephone cable pulled out (our building had previously housed a gambling joint, The Red Man’s Lodge, hence the phone cable) and beer taps installed.

We had a “hard hat” opening on

May 25, 1990 when our friend Dr. Joe brought his U.T. Medical School graduation party to the Duck. The stain on the walls was still wet, but the party was great and most of those young docs still return to the Duck. In fact, Dr. Joe’s oldest son William just finished his first summer job here.

The paint dried in time for our official grand opening on June 1, 1990. Shake Russell, Dana Cooper and Jack Saunders played for the opening night. They were a wildly popular group and we were packed to the rafters. However, when it came time to pay

the band, they were no where to be found. I asked Rhonda, the woman who booked the gig: “Where did they go? I need to pay them.” She told me that they had left and that they wanted us to use the money to get off to a good start. The memory of their generosity still brings a lump to my throat.

At first, our mainstay was bands from Houston and Austin, but as the years progressed our calendar began to fill with many touring acts from places as far away as Madagascar. Today, we still enjoy being a part of the local music scene, especially with our Open Mic night every Monday and our Irish Session every Wednesday which features traditional Irish players, tunes and dances; however, many of our weekend shows are touring acts from the region and the world. We have had some pretty famous faces over the years. One particularly exciting night Lyle Lovett dropped in to see Terry Allen and Guy Clark. The few times that Lyle has visited here we have noticed that his habit is to slip in quietly and sit far in the back—so we were all thrilled when Guy Clark beckoned Lyle to the stage to sing a few songs. When Lyle began to sing, there wasn’t a sound to be heard, not one. Seriously, you could have heard a pin drop. That was a magical night. Another favorite memory was a band named Tarika from Madagascar. Two sisters sang vocals with a five piece band behind them. Many of the instruments were handmade and the sounds were

intriguing. By the end of the night, the entire room was standing—not screaming, not shouting nor clapping—they were just standing and swaying to the music. It was another of those magical moments, a time that you never forget. It is the kind of thing, you want to call up your friends and say, “You should be here.” Of course, you know that moment is gone. Even if they lived only five minutes away, by the time they drove over here, the moment would be gone. There have been a few of those outstanding moments through the years.

We did not have the great advantage of the internet when we began. The only way that we were able to reach the public was through direct mail and print media. Both were far too costly for our small budget. We were fortunate that the local newspapers looked kindly upon our endeavor and regularly ran stories about the acts that played the Duck. Back then we had not only the *Houston Chronicle*, but also the *Houston Post* and the *Public News*. It was a rare week that one or more of the bands that played the Duck were not mentioned. Also, KPFT, our local Pacifica station would feature the artists that would play here. KPFT also ran a regular weekly radio show from our stage called the “New Wood Showcase.” The local media has been significant source of our ability to thrive in what has traditionally shown to be a

difficult business to survive. Today, we have the internet and it, coupled with e-mail, has proven to be a god-send to our small business. I send out the calendars and notices for special events. One day I wrote a little story about my day and was overwhelmed by people telling me how much they enjoyed my story. The response has been so warm that I now send out a story once a month or so. It helps to connect us in a personal way to the people who enjoy visiting our pub.

My perception is that we hold a unique place in the Houston music scene. We are not hot and trendy. We never have been. We are as comfortable as an old shoe and this may just be our strength. The people who come here know what to expect. They may not be familiar with the artist who is playing but they know that evening will be interesting, the food will be homemade and delicious and that my wife and I will be sitting outside in our rocking chairs, with our dogs at our feet, waiting to welcome them. ☆



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