

A great niche for blues lovers

Fans can
cozy up
to bands
at Great
Notch Inn

CLUB CRAWLING

The Great Notch Inn

When: Open nightly; live music every night except Monday and Wednesday

Music this week: Friday, Delusional Blues Band; Saturday, GW Toye and the Blues Generators; Sunday and Tuesday, John Monnecka; Thursday, Joe Taino and the Blue Flames

Where: Route 46 west, Little Falls

How much: Never a cover. Call 973-256-7742

BY LISA ROSE
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The Great Notch Inn is a mountain hideaway minus the mountain. A wooden cabin with a front porch and an unpaved parking lot, the Little Falls tavern looks more West Virginia than North Jersey, a rustic anomaly amongst Route 46's quick marts, drive-thru's and diners.

With all the body ink and leather, hair and Harleys, the Great Notch may seem intimidating from the outside. But once you step inside, you'll find it's less a hell-raising biker bar than a snug blues room that happens to draw two-wheel enthusiasts.

"The coolest thing about this place is they have these power trio blues bands," said John Lothrop, 38, a tattoo artist from Lyndhurst. "They're not big names, but they're the most a-- kicking bands. I like sometimes to just sit outside here, stare at the highway, and get my head together."

During the summer, the Great Notch is a chrome fantasia, as hundreds of motorcyclists gather there to talk shop, drink beer and hear blues. (A cautionary note: Don't rev up the Honda. They're frowned upon by the Harley-heavy crowd.)

Sometimes the parking lot is full even when the bar is closed. Riders often use the Great Notch as a meeting place for weekend excursions.

"It's a good place to meet before we go out," said Dan

Labonte, 36, a chemical engineer from Lyndhurst. "It's very nostalgic. It feels like I'm sitting in my living room. It used to be a nice, quiet, out-of-the-way bar. Now it's a little more than that."

The Great Notch isn't the sort of pub where conversation halts and eyes widen any time a non-regular walks in. There were Notch-ers of all sorts out last Saturday for a performance by Parsippa blues-rocker Son Lewis: leather jackets and



PHOTOS BY JOHN MUNSON/THE STAR LEDGER

More than just a biker bar, The Great Notch Inn attracts blues singers like John Monnecka, who performs on Sundays.

suit jackets, neighbors and out-of-towners, the long-locked and the Rogaine-aided. Around midnight, a convertible Jaguar roared up with a gray-haired blues hound and his blond, ponytailed date, who shook to the music in black threads that clung like shrink wrap.

"This is like every little piece of society in one small bar," observed my companion Matt.

The tiny night spot is nationally known. Nine years ago, jazz saxophonist Branford Marsalis shot the cover art for his "I Heard You Twice the First Time" album at the Great Notch.

"Branford's bass player lived in Wayne," said owner Rich Hempel, the third generation of his family to run the bar. "And they were looking for a Louisiana-style roadhouse, so the bassist recommended the Great Notch. The band came over here one day to shoot, and they played for me and my sister and my mom for four hours."

Mrs. T's Pierogies brought their cameras to the Great Notch in 1998 to shoot a TV commercial featuring wrestler Bam Bam Bigelow that is still airing. In the ad, Mrs. T's grandson Tim Twardzik brings a tray of the Polish treats to a biker bar, transforming the "Easy Rider" scene into a polka hoedown.

Brendan Murphy and Mike Slovik, business travelers from Chicago, made a pierogi pilgrimage to the Great Notch last Saturday.

"My friend told me about this place, that they filmed the commercial here and that it was a really good blues club, so we decided to check it out," Slovik said. "This is great. The best blues places are always this small."

Indeed, the Great Notch is a good spot to cozy up to bands. There is no stage, just a corner near the door, steps away from the bar. The musicians are so close to the fridge, they can reach for a cold one while they riff.

"I love playing here," said Son Lewis, who's been belting the blues at the Great Notch for 12 years. He produced a live CD there last year that is available at the bar or through www.silkcitycd.com. "I like the proximity to the people. There's tremendous interaction with your audience."

Hempel, 36, a former rock drummer, started bringing live tunes to the Notch after he took over for his grandfather in 1988.

"We try to make it an easy gig for them," Hempel said of the bands he books. "We do old-style music, and it's a niche we've been able to hit pretty effectively. We've got some of the better bands in the area per square foot."

Hempel's grandfather, Greg DiLeo, opened the Great Notch in 1939, after running the Green Chateau in Little Falls for 15 years. The bar is a wooden house that sat across the street from its current location. They raised it and rolled it on logs across Route 46, then a dirt road. DiLeo, who ran the bar until he died at the age of 88, was famed for his train whistle imitations.

"He grew eccentric with age," Hempel said. "He was a man of simple means, and this was like his house. It was his way or the highway. People would come in here knowing that they were going to get kicked out. It was the challenge of getting served at the Great Notch."

Club notes: Tequila Joe's in Newark celebrates its fifth anniversary Friday night with freebies and prizes for everyone and no cover for women. Call (973) 450-4636. ... Disco diva Tina Ann, who had a dance floor hit last year with "Don't Want Another Man," will perform at the Hunka Bunka Ballroom in Sayreville on Sunday at 1 a.m. Call (732) 254-6700. ... It's an open jam at Orphan Annie's in Stirling every Sunday, hosted by Joe Morrison John Listorti and members of B.B. and the Stingers. Call (908) 722-5526.



When the parking lot is full of Harleys, The Great Notch may seem intimidating from the outside, but inside, the Little Falls night spot makes performers and patrons feel like part of a shared experience.