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McMahan share
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8 Great ESTEBAN Cooks

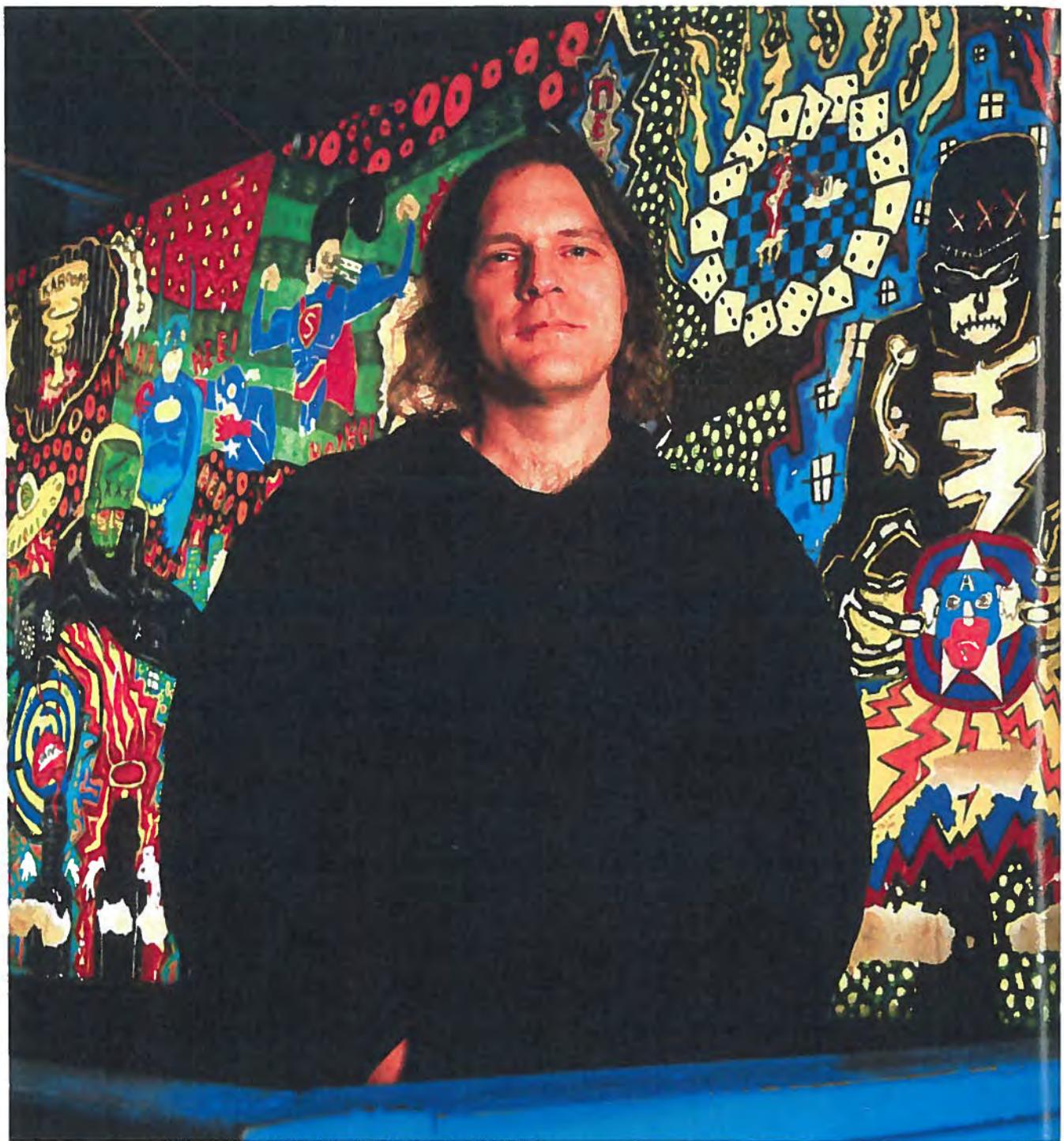
Inside, a few
of our 'at-home'
four-star chefs

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Owner **Frank Heath** has been the driving force behind the Cradle's success over the past 20 years.

On the Right



Tracks

Cat's Cradle rode the wave of the Southern music explosion

By Randy B. Young | Photography by John Ripley

If you've never heard of the bands playing this week at Cat's Cradle, wait a month. Next weekend it might be your favorite group on the bill.

"You don't know what you might luck into," says owner Frank Heath, the force behind the Cradle's success over the past 20 years. The venue is tucked into the ArtsCenter plaza near the railroad tracks in downtown Carrboro.

"It's a combination of music that you have heard of and music that you will hear," says Derek Powers, the club's general manager since the early 1990s.

A frequent performer at the Cradle, both as a solo artist and with bands including the now-defunct Brown Mountain Lights, Jeff Hart says the Carrboro institution rode the wave of the Southern music explosion.

"In the wake of R.E.M., there were more bands than there had ever been," Hart says. "You'd see legendary people at the Cradle."

While Heath credits the success of Cat's Cradle to the collective vision of numerous live music fans since the late 1960s, he bought the club in the mid-1980s and took over booking responsibilities almost immediately.

"That wasn't the plan," he says, "but I seemed to be the best at it just because I knew all of the bands." Before buying the club, Heath, a graduate of Chapel Hill High

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School, had been a regular at the erstwhile Cradle and other local music venues for years.

Heath's respect for industry legends and innovators has brought to the Carrboro stage the best of both worlds — those who have gone platinum and those about to. Pop folk-singer fans at heart, however, both Heath and Powers admit to having been awed by several memorable performers.

"For me, it was probably the first time I heard Ben Folds [a singer-songwriter from Winston-Salem]," Powers says, "and maybe Ryan Adams when Whiskeytown used to play here."

"Also, Roger McGuinn," Heath says of the co-founder of the Byrds, "and Graham Parker."

For all the greatness that has graced its stage, however, the Cradle remains utilitarian. The space is dark and musty; daylight creeps in only reluctantly.

"It is what it is," Heath says, smiling. "I heard about CBGB [the legendary underground music club in New York City] from some of the bands that had played there, and they'd just walk in there, and they were like, 'This is it?' I thought, well, if the famous place in New York can have that kind of atmosphere, then we can, too."

Focusing on a single brand of talent isn't enough, Powers says.

"You have to present a pretty eclectic presentation of music," he says. "So, on one night you have a bunch of minivans out front dropping off kids to see the Bouncing Souls, and the next night it's the same minivans in the parking lot with the parents coming to see [country-folk singer] Iris Dement."

"They've certainly made [Carrboro] a landmark," says Scott

Conary, who also books music at his Open Eye Café in Carrboro. "Touring artists who contact me aren't stopping in Greenville, South Carolina — they're stopping here. This is now just as established a music tour stop as Washington, D.C., or Atlanta."

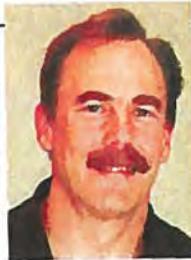
Powers receives about 200 e-mails a week from musicians wanting to add the Cradle to their resume. Heath and Powers say picking winners has less to do with playing the odds, however, than keeping an ear to the "tracks."

"There are people I keep in contact with that stay on top of things," Heath explains. "We've got some really good sources in town — Merge Records, and Schoolkids [Records]."

"They can tell you what's flying off the shelves before a band even tours," Powers says.

"Really, by the time Derek and I know about them, they're probably no longer [popular]," Heath says, chuckling.

Still, Heath and Powers have been winning the battle for the bands locally for years and likely will for years to come. Check out an act at the Cat's Cradle and join in the chorus months down the road: "Hey, I saw them at the Cradle...." **CHM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randy B. Young is a media specialist at UNC and a writer living in Chapel Hill. He and his wife, Kelly, have performed folk/pop music at various local coffeehouses and festivals.

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