

Realities of life can't stop the party at S&T Lounge on North and Weld

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When you arrive at the S&T Lounge on North and Weld streets, you'll be greeted by a sizable mural featuring the legendary jazz figure Cab Calloway observing you as you enter.

Crafted in 2022 by Sydney G. James, this expansive piece of art portrays Calloway, born in Rochester in 1907, in his element. The mural depicts him in dapper attire, accompanied by the silhouette of a dancing woman and a man playing the trumpet in the background.

The image captures a bygone era, preserving the essence of a past African-American club scene culture. Stepping into the S&T Lounge brings you closer to that moment.

During a chilly Sunday afternoon in early winter, the resonant sound of The Gap Band fills the air within the dimly lit night spot, whose decor appears untouched from several decades ago.

A woman standing by the front door holds a roll of raffle tickets.

"Well, why are you just standing there," she asked. "You came to drink, eat, party?"

There's a bit of everything going on at S&T.

The venue is bustling for two primary reasons. Firstly, on this day it is hosting a holiday party, and secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the Bills are engaged in a must-win football game.

When encountering a young man, the woman overseeing the raffle displays a warranted curiosity.

A sign at the front door of the lounge is clear: No men under 35 and no women under 30 are allowed inside.

The clientele and music on that football Sunday adhere to those



Amanda Ryan pours drinks at the S&T Lounge. ROBERT BELL/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



norms. Everyone at the bar and tables inside appears to be well into their 40s and 50s, some even older. The mandate seems odd, but those who frequent the lounge don't mind; instead, they prefer it.

Customers speculate that the imposition of the age restriction may be attributed to the surge of violence that has afflicted the nearby Weld Street in recent times. Last summer, three people lost their lives to gun violence on Weld Street, while another five sustained gunshot injuries and survived.

In August, a 16-year-old girl Jakarah Lopez-Moore, disappeared from her residence on Weld Street, only to be found dead seven weeks later across the city. Reign Tapiato, 27, was charged with her murder in February.

Despite the neighborhood's reputation for violence, stepping into S&T doesn't evoke a sense of insecurity. It could be attributed to the metal detector at the entrance or the

cheerful atmosphere and welcoming faces in the Bills Mafia section of the bar.

Regardless, it takes little time to sense that the S&T Lounge is a distinct world of its own.

"It's a good vibe," said Tachara Ashford, 34, who frequents the lounge. "You'll see somebody from the past who keeps the fun times alive."

"Alive" falls short of describing the resounding roar as James Cook of the Bills catches an 18-yard pass, propelling the team to a 14-0 lead.

High-fives circulate, and drinks are poured.

At halftime, the Bills lead 21-3, and their Dallas opponent has little chance of making a comeback. At this juncture, the Christmas party seamlessly blends with the football festivities. Conversations about a playoff run and exorcising the demons from Buffalo's Super Bowl history with the Cowboys become prevalent.

Now is the ideal moment to savor S&T's renowned fried chicken wings. The local buzz attests to their quality; for many, these wings alone are the primary incentive to pay a visit.

"The food is incredible," Ashford said.

The only hitch is that the kitchen has closed for the day. The cook has been bombarded with orders, and the combined demands of the holiday party have exhausted him for now. What a bummer.

When the game ends, the Bills have thrashed the Cowboys. All that remains is to relax and enjoy the old-school tunes.

"The entertainment is always there," Ashford says. "Music, dancing; they know how to get you out of your seat."

The hazards around Weld Street linger outside, but within these walls, it's a celebration. The essence of Cab Calloway is vibrant and thriving.