

PORT CITY LIFE

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How local bar became a popular filming location

John Staton | Wilmington StarNews | USA TODAY NETWORK

On a chilly Sunday afternoon in January, five or six dozen people packed into venerable Wilmington dive bar The Rusty Nail for a weekly potluck that also featured a performance by local blues outfit The Rhythm Bones.

A crowd of mostly 50- and 60-somethings watched

the band attentively and a few people even danced, while others shot a game of pool or posted up at the bar to watch the NFL playoffs. It wasn't raining, but a leaky ceiling dripped into a strategically placed trash can. Above the front door, a bumper sticker read, "The meaning of life is to live it."

If you were new to Wilmington and happened across The Rusty Nail on South Fifth Avenue, chances

are your first thought wouldn't be, "Let's check that place out." Its boxy brick-and-cinderblock exterior isn't inviting, exactly, and the surrounding neighborhood, including the former National Linen Service building across the street, with its apocalyptic, busted-out facade, could be described, at best, as emerg-

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Bar

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ing.

But the bar, one of Wilmington's oldest, is beloved by its regulars and, more recently, by the film and television productions shooting here.

'George Jones' and 'Tammy Wynette' were here

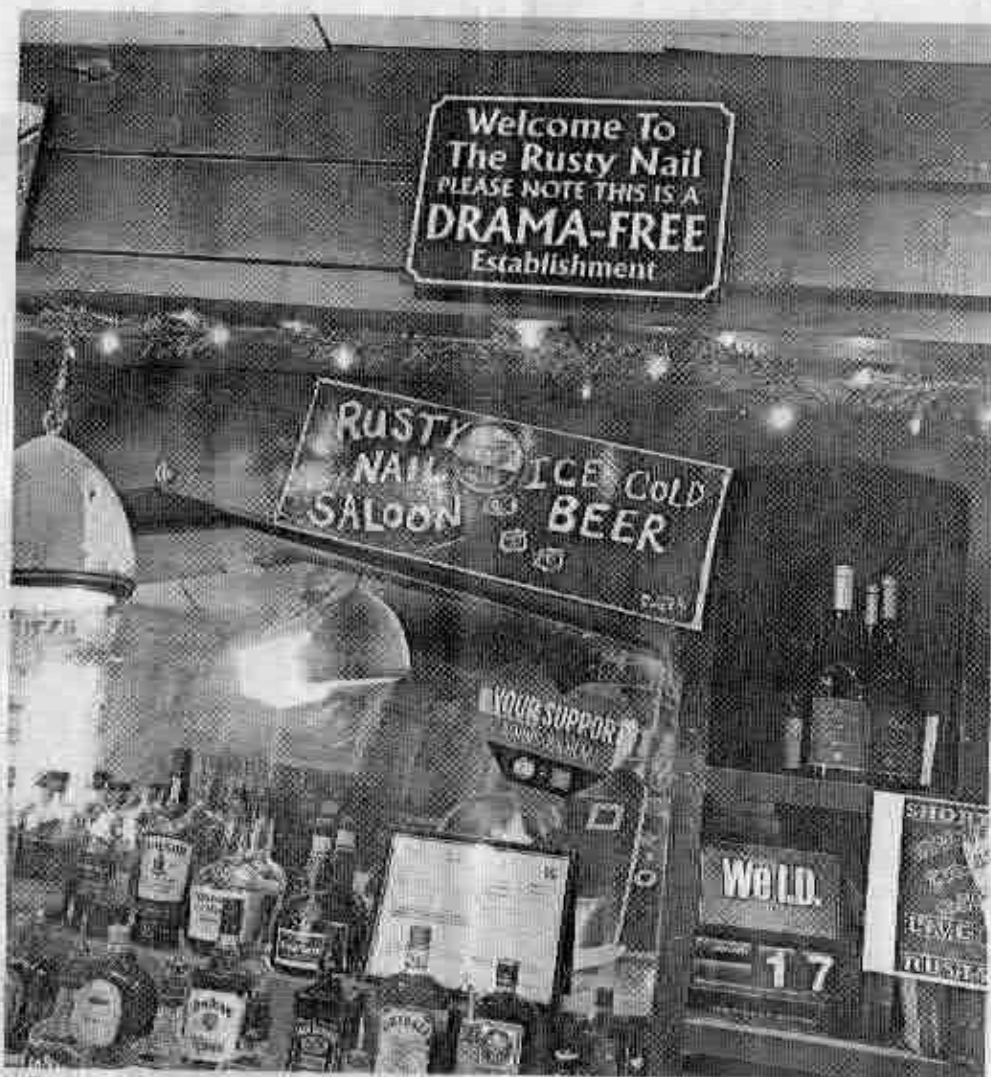
A few weeks ago, The Nail popped up in several extended scenes in Showtime mini-series "George & Tammy," about the volatile marriage between country music legends George Jones and Tammy Wynette.

In one scene, Jones, played by the intense, Oscar-nominated actor Michael Shannon, gets wasted at the Rusty Nail bar with friend and bandmate Peanut Montgomery (Walton Goggins). In another, he unspools a (possibly plagiarized) monologue about the dark side of fame to a bartender, and later he attacks the bar's corrugated tin wall with a pool cue in a drunken rage.

An attractive young woman emerges from the behind the pool tables to get Jones' attention in another scene. The Nail even turns into a honky tonk at one point, with Shannon emerging from a coffin ("Y'all thought I was dead, didn't ya!") and singing on the venue's cozy stage, later having a conversation there with Jessica Chastain, the Oscar-winning actress who plays Wynette.

Some neon lights from the "George & Tammy" shoot are now permanent fixtures.

'Halloween Kills' and what's to



Wilmington bar The Rusty Nail is a drama-free establishment. PHOTOS BY JOHN STATON/STARNEWS



WANT TO GO?

What: The Rusty Nail

When: Opens 1 p.m. weekdays, noon on weekends. Closed Mondays.

Where: 1310 S. Fifth Ave., Wilmington

Contact: 910-251-1888 or Facebook.com/RustyNailWilmington

SCHEDULE

Tuesdays: Cape Fear Blues Jam, 8 p.m.

Thursdays: Live music with the Butter duo, 6-8 p.m.

Sundays: Potluck with The Rhythm Bones, 3-6 p.m.

1956.) Before that, possibly even when it was a bar, it was Beatty & Gainey Appliances.

Williams bought the bar in 2000. It was known for hosting rock bands in the '90s, but she gradually turned The Nail's musical focus in a blues direction, and it's long been the home of the Cape Fear Blues Festival, which returns in June.

Williams said the bar's name changed to The Rusty Nail in 1990 when it was bought by a woman named Betty Bowles. Bowles died recently, Williams said, but Bowles gave her the name's origin story before she passed when she paid a random visit to the bar.

"She said the first time she set foot in the bar (looking to buy it) she stepped on a nail," Williams said. "She said, 'If I get this place, I'm gonna call it The Rusty Nail.'"

Of course, The Rusty Nail isn't the first Wilmington bar to score a starring role in a movie or TV show. The exterior of The Barbary Coast in downtown Wil-

Tammy" shoot are now permanent fixtures.

'Halloween Kills' and what's to come

In 2021, The Rusty Nail played a prominent role as "Mick's Bar" in horror film "Halloween Kills," which shot in Wilmington in 2019. The bar is shown at length both indoors and out, starting with a "talent show" on the bar's stage in the first part of the movie.

Later, iconic "Halloween" villain Michael Myers kills a dude in a car outside The Nail, which inspires Anthony Michael Hall ("The Breakfast Club," "Edward Scissorhands"), who plays Tommy Doyle, to organize a mob to track down Myers, exhorting the concerned citizens from The Rusty Nail's stage.

And there's more screen time to come. Last June, Starz show "Hightown" shot scenes for its upcoming third season at The Rusty Nail. (The bar was also featured in the second season of "Hightown.") Permits filed with the city of Wilmington indicate the scene features "characters at a funeral at a bar."

The Nail will also portray a strip club called The Silver Slipper in upcoming Disney/Searchlight film "The Supremes at Earl's All-You-Can-Eat," which shot around Wilmington late last year.

And while the recent flurry of film activity is the most the bar's seen in years, it has also appeared in TV dramas "Dawson's Creek," "One Tree Hill," "Revolution" and "Reprisal." The Nail was in 2001 HBO show "Going to California" and is also in upcoming Netflix show "Florida Man," among other credits.

What's behind the interest?

Craig Rogers, a longtime Wilmington film industry worker who's toiled in the



Sandy Williams has owned Wilmington bar The Rusty Nail since 2000.

locations department a time or two at the Rusty Nail, said the bar's appeal to filmmakers comes down, in part, to it looking and feeling like the real deal.

"The place looks great," Rogers said. "A classic American bar that directors love as soon as they walk in the door. There's definitely an authenticity to The Rusty Nail that's appealing to directors and producers and art directors, and ultimately the audience."

Plus, the bar's off-the-beaten-path location makes filming easier in terms of noise and traffic than it might be at, say, a bar in busy downtown Wilmington. There's plenty of nearby parking for the many trucks that accompany film productions, and being in a not-busy area "helps with the impact on adjacent businesses," Rogers said.

He added that Rusty Nail owner

Sandy Williams "reflects that same authenticity" possessed by the bar. "She's sweet, charming, a great host. When you walk in on a (locations) scout at two in the afternoon or whenever, she's there at the bar serving the regulars," who he termed "more the PBR crowd" than "twist-of-lemon types."

"It's never going to look new. I've embraced that," Williams said, working behind the bar as she got ready to open on a recent Tuesday. "It's a historical place."

Rusty's heritage and future

According to a StarNews story from 2003, the Rusty Nail has been a bar since 1957, when it was founded by Henry Beatty as Beatty's Tavern. (Williams said she's heard the opening date of

first Wilmington bar to score a starring role in a movie or TV show. The exterior of The Barbary Coast in downtown Wilmington appeared in David Lynch's 1986 film "Blue Velvet," and Dennis Hopper's signature line, "This Is It," still appears in neon over the Barbary's front door. More recently, downtown bar The Blue Post played Shabooms in the Danny McBride comedy series "Eastbound and Down" for HBO in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

These days, when they're not hosting a film or TV production, the Rusty Nail serves as a neighborhood bar with a heavy dose of live music. The Rhythm Bones play the community potluck every Sunday, and Tuesday night is the long-running Cape Fear Blues Society jam. Touring artists, from blues rockers to jazz players, regularly pass through to liven up the weekends.

When the weather's nice, a patio behind the bar hosts patrons as well as live bands, and much of the decor, inside and out, has been provided by Wilmington set designer Terry Collins, whose shop is nearby.

Williams has also kept some improvements made by the movie and TV productions that have shot there, including a wooden railing installed for "Halloween Kills." The income from filming has helped the bar bounce back from the pandemic, Williams said, when The Nail was closed for more than a year.

"That almost broke me," she said.

And while she loves the notoriety that comes with the bar's recent star turn, Williams said her main focus is always on the regulars, some of whom have been coming to the Rusty Nail since before she bought it nearly a quarter-century ago.

"It's their bar," Williams said. "They just let me pay the bills."