



Flora-Bama Lounge & Package owners Joe Gilchrist, left, and Pat McClellan outside their establishment that is currently being renovated.
 BEN TWINGLEY/BTWINGLEY@PNJ.COM

Flora-Bama rebound

Tarps come off as famous state-line bar unveils new look

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Today is Joe Gilchrist's 69th birthday and the 33rd anniversary of his ownership of the legendary Flora-Bama Lounge & Package on Perdido Key. And he's marking the occasions with a bold declaration: "I'm back."

After enduring a series of misfortunes — including hurricanes, bankruptcy and the impact of last year's BP oil spill — Gilchrist is busy putting his bar and his life back together.

This weekend, he's unveiling a newly rebuilt music stage, the first phase of a major rehab of the famous roadhouse, destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

In two weeks, Gilchrist and business partner Pat McClellan will host the annual Mullet Toss, a charitable event that typically draws hundreds of participants and thousands of customers.

And, barring any more natural or manmade disasters, Gilchrist expects 2011's sales to be among the Flora-Bama's strongest in decades.

Gilchrist's comeback

and the Flora-Bama's long-awaited recovery are driven by a simple — and very personal — business philosophy.

"It's always been important to me to bring people together from all walks of life and every social strata and offer them an opportunity to meet other people and to enjoy themselves," he said.

JOE GILCHRIST

» **Age:** 69

» **Education:** Pensacola High School, Auburn University, '65.

» **Before he owned the Flora-Bama:** Taught chemistry at Pensacola High and civics and economics in California. He later ran food and beverage operations at the Townhouse, a motel and lounge at Cervantes and Palafox streets in Pensacola.

» **Family:** One daughter, Marjorie Gilchrist Kussin; two grandchildren, Hannah and Olivia.

» **Favorite musician/songwriter:** Ken Lambert and Jimmy Louis, early supporters of the Frank Brown International Songwriters Festival; the late Mickey Newbury, Hank Cochran and Larry John Wilson.

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BUSINESS

Gilchrist

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One of Gilchrist's longtime employees, Connie Blum, said Gilchrist's love of people and desire to bring them together lie at the heart of the Flora-Bama's success and its renown.

"Joe really is a charming guy," Blum said. "He's fun and really tries to be nice to everybody." "He truly wants people to be aware of the important things in life, like friendship, having fun and people socializing in a relaxed setting."

West and back

Born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1942, Gilchrist grew up in Pensacola and attended Pensacola High, following in the footsteps of his brothers, David and Lane. David is a Birmingham, Ala., resident; Lane Gilchrist died in 2009 while serving as mayor of Gulf Breeze.

After graduating from Auburn University in 1965, he taught chemistry at PHS for a few years, then headed west with some U.S. Marine Corps buddies to Southern California, where he continued teaching.

"I was young and single and enjoying life," Gilchrist recalled. "And California in the 1960s was a pretty good place to be doing that."

After several years of the good life in California, Gilchrist returned to Pensacola and ran into an old friend who had just bought the Townhouse, a motel and lounge on the corner of Palafox and Cervantes streets.

Gilchrist was hired to run the food and beverage end of the motel.

"I did that from 1970 to 1972 and I learned a lot about how to manage a restaurant and bar," he said. "But I decided I no longer wanted to run a place that someone else owned."

His search for a place of his own finally led him to the Flora-Bama, then owned by Ted Tampary.

"I kept trying to work out a deal with him, but I had to get approval to buy the liquor license before he would agree to lease the bar to me," Gilchrist said.

Eventually, he secured the license with some help from a Pensacola lobbyist. He took over the Flora-Bama on April 17, 1978, his 36th birthday.

To get the Flora-Bama revved up and making money, Gilchrist had to pour himself into job.

"I worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week for the first year," he said. "I remember taking one day off during that time to go fishing. I was so tired I fell asleep on the boat."

Bringing the sound

When Gilchrist took over the Flora-Bama, it already



Flora-Bama Lounge & Package co-owner Joe Gilchrist, left, and construction foreman Nick Swan discuss progress Wednesday at the "Bama-Dome" portion of the establishment that is currently being renovated. BEN TWINGLEY/BTWINGLEY@PNJ.COM

had a loyal clientele of locals who patronized the bar and package store that lies just inside the Florida state line. Only a few feet of the western edge of the property is actually in Alabama.

Many of the roadhouse's customers were — and still are — from the Orange Beach-Gulf Shores area, where the sale of alcoholic beverages on Sunday was prohibited.

While that element of the Flora-Bama's business was a steady source of sales, Gilchrist had a larger vision for the place.

It was his deep and abiding love of music that inspired him to start the Frank Brown International Songwriters Festival, named after a beloved employee and friend.

The festival, which started in 1984, has attracted a "Who's Who" of national and international songwriters and performers.

Held every November at various venues on Perdido Key and in Orange Beach, the festival has featured Grammy Award-winning songwriters and musicians from all over the world.

Last year's 11-day festival took place in 26 different venues and featured 190 songwriters.

More than any other event, the songwriters festival has put the beach bar on the map and earned it a reputation as "the last great roadhouse in America."

"Joe has been an incredible friend to musicians over the years," Blum said.

Singer and Silver Moon Cafe featured performer Chris Newbury, son of the late Mickey Newbury, a critically

acclaimed recording artist and songwriter, said Gilchrist is tireless in his support of musicians.

"His generosity to musicians is just unending," Newbury said. "He's been a great friend to my family and has a heart as big as can be."

Business partner McClellan said Gilchrist's affinity for musicians, both successful and struggling, is at the very heart of the Flora-Bama's appeal.

"That's one of the things Joe taught me about this business, to respect the musicians," McClellan said. "Joe really tries to instill in everybody who comes in the door a real appreciation of the music."

"I'd like to think this is a place where you can hear some of the best music anywhere in the country," Gilchrist said.

'Great visionary'

Beyond the music, friends and associates say working for Gilchrist say something of a challenge.

"He's interesting, lots of fun and there's also the good and the bad like with all employers," Blum said. "But Joe is a great visionary and he loves his community."

McClellan describes his relationship with Gilchrist in another way.

"We've been business partners for 25 years and it's kind of like that of a husband and wife," McClellan said. "He'll say one thing and I'll say something completely different, and we'll talk all around each other, but eventually we wind up in a place where we can agree."

Longtime friend and Perdido Key Realtor Alison Davenport describes Gilchrist as "an incredibly intelligent person."

"He's so smart that he's almost on level that sometimes you just can't get," she said. "I love him to pieces, and I'd do anything for him."

"He's the kind of guy who's somehow managed to live a life that has allowed him to never completely grow up, and I don't say that in a derogatory way at all."

Low-key and soft-spoken most of the time, Gilchrist is a stickler for details, patrolling the grounds for anything that might keep a patron from enjoying the Flora-Bama experience.

When he finds time to step away from his beloved roadhouse, Gilchrist loves to travel. Recent travels have taken him to Capetown, South Africa, Japan and Namibia.

"I love people and one of my great pleasures is meeting people who are not like me, who come from a completely different culture," he said. "One of my most memorable trips was in Africa a sitting in a mud hut just talking to the people in that village."

Bankruptcy woes

While Gilchrist works to restore the Flora-Bama to its former self, he's also

dealing with the aftermath of his bankruptcy.

In the 2010 Chapter 11 filing, he listed more than \$37.8 million in liabilities with assets of some \$11 million.

He said at the time that his bankruptcy filing mainly resulted from his investment in condominium and development property.

The Flora-Bama property was not included in the bankruptcy, but Gilchrist's Perdido Key home and Silver Moon Cafe, directly across from the Flora-Bama were.

Gilchrist said he is working on a plan with another private investor to keep the cafe out of bankruptcy and under his control and management.

The bankruptcy has left Gilchrist with bitter feelings toward certain Escambia County officials and the media. But he said his relationship with the county has improved over the past year.

"I made a mistake investing in Escambia County and its property and its real estate," Gilchrist said at the time of the bankruptcy. "The county

has done little to encourage people to come and build here. It's just primarily that most people who have invested in America have been let down by their leadership in government in all levels from local, state and federal."

Pressed about the specifics of his complaints, Gilchrist cited a litany of county codes and regulations that for years have held up the Flora-Bama's rebuilding.

As a counter to his bankruptcy, Gilchrist notes that over the past 33 years he and the Flora-Bama have paid more than \$60 million in taxes to state and federal governments and donated more than \$2 million to local charities, including the Boys & Girls Clubs and Secret Santa and to Hurricane Ivan first responders.

"We've always worked to be good citizens of this community," he said. "I've had some frustrating times, but we are doing our best to stay alive and be a contributing member of the community."

"We are clawing our way back."

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