

The LA Weekly named Babe's & Ricky's Inn the BEST BLUES CLUB in 1998. The following article was published along with that accolade.

**BABE'S AND RICKY'S INN** History is a big part of the blues, a music with roots that run deep into the Mississippi Delta of the 1920s. And blues is still alive and well as we head into the millennium, with younger musicians like Corey Harris, Keb' Mo' and Alvin Youngblood Hart carrying on what's now becoming a de facto success story. Blues can be heard on television commercials, movie soundtracks and even occasionally in fake juke joints on the tony Sunset Strip. B.B. King and Buddy Guy each have their own string of night-clubs, and there's even a generation of Blues Kids coming up, as the grown children of famed bluesmen find their own voices. Shemekia Copeland (daughter of Johnny), David Kimbrough (son of Junior), Zakiya Hooker (daughter of John Lee), James D. Lane (son of Jimmy Rogers), Lurrie Bell (son of Carey) and Bernard Allison (son of Luther) have all launched successful careers in the genre their parents pioneered.

Here in Los Angeles we boast a quiet legend, a historic landmark and a taste of 21st-century blues all rolled into one unobtrusive building in Leimert Park. Laura Mae Gross, nearing 80 years young and called "Mama" by everyone who walks in the door, has been running a down-home, comfortable blues club since 1963, when she took over the old Atlantic Club at 5259 Central Avenue and renamed it after her nephew and son. The club, already a landmark when she moved in, had gone from being a Central Avenue hot spot in the '40s to just another victim of the area's gradual disintegration. Gross worked hard to build the place up, and for a while things went well, as greats like B.B. King, Bobby Bland, T-Bone Walker, Lowell Fulson, Little Milton and Albert King were frequent drop-in guests. But times got tougher, the neighborhood got worse, and eventually even long-time regulars were getting nervous about the drug deals that were going down within sight of the front door. Meanwhile, the bills kept piling up, and in 1993, when ASCAP attached the club's bank account and threatened to close her down for \$9,000 in unpaid back royalties, the wolf was howling at the front door. Fortunately, the howls were heard by songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. They came to the rescue, paid off ASCAP, and kept the last Central Avenue blues club alive for a little longer. But it's not a perfect world, and when the landlord saw the publicity and smelled those rock & roll dollars, he tripled her rent overnight, and the club closed in April of 1996. Local bands who had cut their teeth on the music in the old days joined forces for a couple of fund-raising benefits, and City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas helped Gross and her new business partner, Jonathan Hodges, relocate to Leimert Park, where, since reopening in August 1997, they've become a part of that area's flourishing community cultural scene. The new place, while beautifully furnished, retains the flavor and authenticity that has made Babe's and Ricky's L.A.'s best blues club for over half a century. The walls are covered with old photos, posters and paintings, carefully brought from the original location. The jukebox at one end of the bar is the original, too, and probably one of the few still in action that plays 45s. There's an old street sign from her Central Avenue corner hanging on one wall, barbecue and brew are on tap in the kitchen, and the small stage still smokes every night, as the house band, led by sax veteran Bill Clark, keeps on keeping the blues tradition alive. Mama's at the door every night; stop by sometime and say hello (and thanks!) to a legend.

(Mary Katherine Aldin)