

This article was originally published in the May/June 1999 issue of *Westways*, the magazine published by the Automobile Association of America.

Blues Night Special - All the world's a stage at this culturally diverse neighborhood club

By Matthew W. Roth

It's easy to find Babe's and Ricky's Inn in Leimert Park (just south of downtown L.A.) if you arrive after 9 p.m., when the first set begins. Turn east from Crenshaw onto Leimert Boulevard, pass the park, and listen for the music. You can look for the sign too: a small illuminated rectangle with an eight ball on it, a piece of the club's former home on Central Avenue in South-Central L.A. Since moving to Leimert Park in 1997, proprietor Laura Mae Gross has continued to nurture her own crossroads of music and cultures.

That's Mama Laura sitting at a table just inside the door. Having spent 40 of her 78 years running a blues club, she can make both first-timers and regulars equally feel at home with her combination of attentive service and barbed wit. After greeting first-time visitors, Mama Laura will often summon her helper, Shirley — "Can I get a waitress?" — to escort them to a red-leather booth or a table close by the stage.

A space this small has no bad seats. Black-and-white photographs of performers, many autographed to Laura Mae, hang on the red walls. A blue lamé curtain sets off the stage in the corner of the L-shape room. Most nights the clientele is eclectic — limo drivers and the limo-driven, every national heritage and ethnic group, old and young. All gather to hear the blues, those 12 bars that take a few minutes to learn and a lifetime to master.

One such lifetime's worth of experience can be heard in the tenor sax of Bill Clark, who leads the house band Thursday through Monday evenings. Clark has played behind a Hall of Fame of blues artists: Big Joe Turner, Big Mama Thornton, Pee Wee Crayton, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Roy Brown. He has worked club dates with these luminaries, toured Europe and Japan with them, and made some recordings as well. (Between sets, play 125 on the jukebox and hear him backing J.J. Davis on a new cut.) With four children to raise, Clark had to take a day job as an inspector at an aircraft-parts plant, concentrating on his music career during evenings and weekends. Retired now, he can devote his time to perfecting the crystalline solos he injects into ballads and the powerful counterlines that drive such up-tempo R&B grooves as "Caldonia."

Clark assembles musicians as diverse as the audience. Guitarist Steve Guillory takes the lead on New Orleans riffs such as the Meters's "Something You Got." Regular bassist Lindsay Redmond credits his training at Locke High on East 111th Street for sparking his career, which has included European tours with Smokey Wilson and Sidney Ellis. Drummer Tom Saito came from his native Tokyo to play the blues in its country of origin, and he is not the only Japanese musician to work this room. Clark also has showcased a young guitarist from Japan, who spoke scant English but, as Clark says, "That guy could play. I miss him to this day."

A Japanese-African-American blues band? Yes, and even more diverse because each night a changing cast of singers and soloists takes the stage. Doc Semko croons in the soulful style of Johnnie Taylor and Bobby "Blue" Bland. Ray Bailey plays the blues canon ("Sweet Little Angel," "Love Her With a Feeling") on his Gibson with a bite reminiscent of Freddie King and Buddy Guy, but all Ray in the end.

Gross, Clark, and their friends and coworkers do not trade on nostalgia. Babe's and Ricky's is a neighborhood bar for the whole world, where the blues is a vital art form interpreted anew each night.