

Mickey's Magic at Babe's & Ricky's

By Ray Hanna

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I walked into Babe's & Ricky's Inn in Leimert Park, an older, predominantly black, neighborhood adjacent to Baldwin Hills, also known as the "Black Beverly Hills." A city-issue, dark blue "Central Ave" street sign hangs in a prominent place, a proud reminder of the club's original location. The vibe for Monday Night Blues Jam is friendly and supportive. Tony Ibarra leads the house trio that accompanies the performers. After two sets, "Mama" Laura Gross serves to all patrons and musicians a southern soul food buffet, complete with fried chicken, hush puppies and greens. Babe's & Ricky's is the only blues bar officially in the L>A> city limits, a living link to swinging "Central Avenue," the legendary heart of the thriving music scene that flourished from the 1940's through the '60's. More importantly, like all great bars, Babe's & Ricky's imparts memories that are at once musical, fuzzy, and warm. There is a friendly and genuine quality to the Inn's regulars that is refreshing.

Two nights later, I'm back to hear the legendary Miss Mickey Champion. I'm greeted at the door by a voice that fills the room without a mike, a voice reminiscent of Dinah Washington or Esther Phillips at their wildest. Once known as the "Singing Waitress of Central Avenue," Mickey Champion sings and works the room, her un-amplified voice competing favorably with the band's volume level. It's just another night with your standard living legend. Miss Mickey Champion is, without doubt, a major talent. At 70-something years of age, the fire still burns.

As always with Mickey Champion, there is the possibility of magic. One just never knows what she will do. Working without a set list, Mickey never does a song the same way twice. She talks to patrons during her songs, often delivering the material to them from their own booth, and she apparently enjoys throwing me into a flop-sweat flashback by calling me up to sing with her band. It's flattering, yes, but also a little nerve wracking as her game musicians cope with the considerable limitations of my range and repertoire. Thus far, we've been mostly successful in mangling our way through some blues standards. It's delightful and not very difficult to be part of Mickey's extended family. She is in every sense a "local legend" and just how does that happen?

Creating a time-line is a challenge in the sometimes non-linear world of Mickey Champion. Her recollections can be cloudy, but the clouds regularly part and there are glimpses of astonishing clarity. Always with Mickey, there is also a fearless trust, and a sense of graciousness encountered often around show business veterans secure in their age and talent. Born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, young Mickey grew up in Los Angeles, and as a child, formed an all-girl trio with some schoolmates, in which she sang and also tap-danced. She also belonged to another singing trio in church. Her church was located across the street from the childhood home of Charles Mingus.

Young Mickey Champion's first gig outside of church or school turned out to be at Jack's Basket Room on Central Avenue, owned by Jack Jackson, who also ran an after-hours club to which she later found her way. Her talents put her in demand and soon she was gigging locally and traveling with Roy Milton, James Moody, and Johnny Otis. With Big Jay McNeely. Mickey recalls, "Until Little Esther could travel with the band, I traveled with Johnny and everybody thought I was Little Esther."

By the late '60's, Mickey stopped traveling in order to have a family. She remembers, "Johnny would call me, and I'd go to places like Phoenix for the weekend, but I really didn't travel all that much anymore." What she did was regular, local gigs like the Veteran's Hall, which she packed out for years. Mickey recollects a frequent after-hours gig that featured the talented Leon Haywood on keyboards. She also ran a gambling house on Gage between Main & Broadway, where all the blues players would hang out. She worked on the road again briefly in the early '70's with Roy Milton, she recalls, "I've just stayed right here. I decided I was going to stop singing and get a job. I didn't know nothin' but singin', but this lady said, 'know where you can get a job.' She took me to the Unified School District office. I cooked for them for 21 years. I stayed, raised my kids and sang when I wanted to."

Since the late '80's, Mickey has performed regularly at Babe's & Rickey's. She can also be found Sundays at The Living Room in Los Angeles and Cozy's in Sherman Oaks, where she takes pride in cooking jambalaya and gumbo for the patrons. Somehow, she has made only one recording, a CD called *I'm Your Living Legend*, released in 1999. Recorded live at Babe's & Rickey's, the album was produced by the club's co-owner and longtime Mickey Champion supporter Jonathan Hodges. For young singers, Mickey advises, "I never tried to sound like anybody." Well-grounded and humble to a fault, Miss Mickey Champion shares one more charming revelation, "I don't like people to make a big fuss about me... 'she's a great singer' and all that. I always try and let them know we're all the same."

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