

This article is primarily about the jazz clubs in the Leimert Park area, including Babe's & Ricky's Inn. It is part of "reveLAtions," an urban journal written by Danny Feingold for the website losangeles.com.

Noise in the Hood

Maybe you've heard that L.A. finally has some street life going on. It's no rumor--the once-barren sidewalks of the city are starting to exhibit signs of urban vitality, and not a moment too soon. L.A.'s been the second most populous metropolis in the country for some time, but until recently it was hard to tell unless you were on the freeway or at the downtown courthouse during the O.J. trial.

Of course, much of the new foot traffic is concentrated in fairly sanitized--and increasingly corporatized--satellite cities like Santa Monica and Pasadena. These reinvigorated downtown districts are not without their charms, but more and more they suffer from overkill, whether it be the sheer numbers of pat rack patrons or the relentless incursion of upscale Italian eateries and five-star bagel shops. (Can you still get a plain bialy in this city, or does it invariably come with pesto-sundried tomato cream cheese and a double latté?)

Several hundred Angelenos got a taste of an entirely different scene last month courtesy of KLON's spring jazz caravan. This semi-regular event totes jazz denizens around town in buses for an evening, giving them a chance to sample the musical wares at a host of clubs as well as engage in some rare contact with perfect strangers.

This time 'round, the caravan afforded attendees an even more unusual opportunity--a nocturnal musical block party. Four of the eighteen participating venues happened to be located within two minutes' walk of each other, in the Crenshaw District's Leimert Park neighborhood, so one could simply roam happily from joint to joint.

Now if you don't know about Leimert Park, you better take note. This tiny enclave just off Crenshaw Boulevard has been percolating with a kaleidoscopic range of artistic expression for many years, and shows no sign of letting up. The renaissance of music, poetry, dance and art in this mostly black community has drawn the attention of the *New York Times*, which devoted a long feature to what ranks as one of the city's most significant cultural flowerings in memory. But natives, either unaware of the scene or loath to stray south of that undesignated racial dividing line called the 10 freeway, come down only in small numbers, especially after dark. (A couple of weekend arts festivals have drawn larger crowds in recent years.)

For one night, at least, Leimert Park was abuzz inside and out. Descending from buses onto Degnan Boulevard, caravan-goers crammed into the World Stage, the spare performance space founded by legendary drummer Billy Higgins. This room is one of the key breeding grounds for aspiring jazz musicians across the city, and, true to form, some young lions were strutting their stuff with panache.

Around the corner, on 43rd Place, Fifth Street Dick's--L.A.'s seminal jazz coffeehouse--was also bursting with humanity. Downstairs the coffee drinkers and conversationalists held forth, while overhead in the tiny, airless performance loft visitors were treated to a percussion fest led by the riveting conga player Kamu. For those who couldn't take the heat, there were the usual sidewalk chess games.

Just a stone's throw away, not a seat or patch of floor was to be had at the reincarnated Babe's and Ricky's Inn, of Central Avenue fame. Unsung local legend Mickey Champion was on hand, as was only fitting, and took her inimitable vocalizing right through the front door and onto Leimert Boulevard. Champion, a regular at this jewel of a blues club, knows how to testify, and anyone who heard her got the message loud and clear: Babe's and Ricky's is alive and well.

So, for that matter, is Leimert Park, jazz caravan or not. Do yourself a favor and check it out.