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A Hefty Serving of Blues -

Babe's & Ricky's Inn brings the in crowd out to Leimert Park

by Donna Mungen, Special to the Times

Needing, yearning, or itching for a down-home blues fix that doesn't involve catching a bus or hopping a plane?

Good news: You don't have to go that far.

Going down-home is as close as taking a short excursion to the Crenshaw District and onto Leimert Boulevard, and plopping into a seat at Babe's and Ricky's Inn.

Once the music starts, you'll be traveling back in time into the undiluted riches of the deep ancestral roots that comprise the tapestry of African-American music.

From the moment the music starts, one will be settling in for an evening of vibrating blues, with an occasional popular R&B tune thrown in for good measure. The stellar house band, Bill Clark and the Might Balls of Fire, includes Clark and Eddie Harris on saxophones, Tom Santo on drums, Steve Gullioro on guitar, and Lindsay Redman on bass. Six nights a week, Babe's and Ricky's Inn rocks with a steady diet of such classics as "The Thrill Is Gone," "You've Got Me Running, You've Got Me Hiding," "Going to Kansas City" and "Down Home Blues."

Guest performers include such internationally known blues singers as Lady G G. At a recent show, she glided up and down the scale, matching the band's riffs with a deep soulful wail, as she shook her tail feather in a shimmering white flapper dress and coiffured blond wig.

A later set highlighted Sonny "The Mean Machine" Green, a compact former gospel singer from Louisiana whose powerful renditions made the glasses rattle. Green heatedly belched out numbers like a furnace and pranced about the stage in a style reminiscent of the old call and response. He wiped the sweat from his face with a terry cloth rag that matched his tailored red suit with flashing rhinestone buttons.

During another set, Green was joined by a parade of blues celebrities including Ray Brewster, who bellowed in a rich bass similar to Barry White; Ginger, a relative newcomer decked out in 1960's Tina Turner-ish outfit, who roared in a lusty tone; and Harmonica Man, a skillful accompanist. Green also performed duets with Ollie Ray, a former R&B singer with the Platters, and another notable blues performer called the Duke of Earl.

Other days, Mickey Champion, King Ernest, Deacon Jones and the King Brothers might be on hand -- all for a modest cover of \$5. However, with someone as well known as Harmonica Fats, the price can rise to \$25.

After 34 years on central Avenue -- and having a hard time in the early- to mid-90's -- Babe's & Ricky's Inn moved to Leimert Park 18 months ago. The relocation has been a good move, and much like the old days, the club has become a community gathering point.

The club's driving force is the clairvoyant vision of 79-year-old Laura Mae Gross, or "Mom" as she is affectionately called by her blues family and mélange of regulars. Stationed at the front door in a colorful hat and a white corsage, Gross warmly greets

every visitor, gesturing them to take a seat in a room that comfortably holds about 110. One gets a good view of the stage from just about any angle, but a favorite spot is the bar that features pictures of blues legends tacked to the mirror. Once you're seated, friendly waitresses take orders for wine, beer and soft drinks that range in price from \$3 to \$5.

For those interested in a complete down-home experience, there are reasonably priced, home-cooked chicken and fish dinners, and side dishes of black-eyed peas, potato salad and greens.

But Babe's and Ricky's true specialty is a steady diet of blues.