

## Mama Laura Celebrates 40 Years in the Blues Business

Under normal circumstances, the title, "Mama's Boy" wouldn't win you any respect. However, if you're a blues musician from Los Angeles, "Mama's Boy" signifies you've earned approval from one of the foremost authorities on the blues: "Mama Laura" Mae Gross of Babe & Ricky's Inn, L.A.'s oldest blues club, voted #3 in L.A. Magazine for Los Angeles' Best Bars.

As the 83-year old original owner/founder of Babe and Ricky's Inn, Mama Laura has built a fervent blues following that crosses international lines. It's the result of 40 plus years of club ownership and a love for the blues that helped sustain her business during hard times.

"What's most unique is her relationship with her musicians," says documentary filmmaker Russell Brown whose half-hour film, "Mama Laura's Boys" premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and was broadcast on KCET following director Martin Scorsese's acclaimed Blues tribute series. (Email: mamalaurasboys@aol.com).

"The musicians look up to her so much and love her. If you talk to the musicians who have gone through there, [they'll tell you that] she's been an inspiration to them. She gives them something they can't find anywhere else."

Brian Young (Brian Young and the Blues Station) is one of Mama's proteges. Although Mama refers to Young as her son, the two only met in 1991 when the guitar player showed up for a blues jam. "At that time, I had two jobs and had stopped playing guitar for 15 years," says Young. "She really helped motivate me and show me that I could do this. In 1999, Young's band won "Best Blues Band in Southern California at the Irvine Lake Battle of the Blues Bands.

"Mama knows the blues and she makes sure it's done the way it's supposed to be. I've seen her tell a lot of guys, 'That's not the blues, son. It don't go like that.' If it's too loud she'll tell you, 'You don't have to be loud to be the blues.'"

"She's a straight shooter," says Jonathan Hodges, the club's co-owner. "She's been watching the world come through her doors for some 40 years and



Photo: Michael Marlowe

that's been her life. She was born in 1920 and has seen most of the major blues performers cross her stage."

Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1920, Laura Mae Gross grew up around music. Her father was a minister and her brother, a drummer but since she couldn't carry a tune, she decided to have a club of her own when she was old enough."

In 1944, Laura and her late husband, Riley, moved to L.A. where the jazz scene was flourishing on Central Avenue. A barber by trade, Riley loved jazz while Mama preferred the blues. Their dreams ended suddenly in 1954 when Riley was robbed and killed on his way home from cashing his paycheck. Fifty years later, Laura still chokes up at the memory.

To survive, Laura began cooking her, now famous, southern fried chicken with a recipe she acquired from former employer Hazel Kaiser. In 1957, she opened her first business, "Laura's Bar-B-Q" in Watts and ran it for six years until drugs and crime forced her to close.

A year later, Laura opened her own blues club at 5259 Central Avenue which she later named Babe & Ricky's Inn - after her son and nephew. For 32 years, the club thrived at that location becoming the home

to many famous blues players.

Mama remembers, "All the guys: B.B., Albert King, Little Milton, T-Bone Walker, Bobby Blue Bland - all the big name bands would come to 'kick back' and hang out with me when they wasn't playing and they'd crash at my place. They knew I wasn't able to pay them but they still came to play."

The list of legendary musicians also included Duke Ellington, Big Mama Thornton, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Little Esther Phillips, Albert Collins, Eric Clapton, and John Lee Hooker, to name a few. Over the decades, Bill Clark and the Mighty Balls of Fire and singer Mickey Champion have kept the club's tradition alive but it's Laura who has made it all happen and everyone who walks through that door knows if you don't show her respect, you don't belong there.

"Laura's the one who encouraged me to stick with it and play," says Johnny Mastro of the namesake band, "Mama's Boys," voted "Best L.A. Blues Artist, 2003" by the L.A. Music Awards and "Best Southern California Unsigned Blues Band" by Doheny Blues Festival.

"You have to play a certain way to get approval; you can't just throw a lot of notes out there, you can't fake it. It's not about fancy licks - it's your approach, your attitude. Laura needs to hear the soul behind the music. If it moves her, you know you're doing okay. She's provided this training ground and she teaches you things about life, how to deal with band members and be on time. She's like a musical mother."

"What I tell them," says Laura, "is just work hard at it, just try hard and make good music. I teach them don't mess with dope, put your instruments ahead of every lady, and don't mess with the groupies."

While her love for the music has built a strong following, Mama's business has survived with the help of some very influential friends. In 1993, a snafu with ASCAP almost closed down the club when an audit determined she owned about \$25,000 in royalties for the songs played on her hand-penciled jukebox. When the news

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hit the papers, help came swiftly from the world famous, R & B songwriting team Lieber and Stoller. The dynamic duo not only settled the debt but have since paid Babe & Ricky's annual ASCAP dues of \$945.00. Mama notes with friendship with the two saying, "I've got two millionaires who slip me money and I have other business men who help me pay the players."

After overcoming that crisis, Mama Laura was forced to close down the club in 1996 when drugs, crime, and a rent increase hit hard in 1996. Hers was the last club to leave the Central Ave. music circuit. But just when it looked like the end, help came from one of her own: Jonathan Hodges, a part time musician and movie industry pro offered to become her partner and help her find a new location. A year later, Babe & Ricky's was reborn at its present

location: 4339 Leimert Boulevard in 1997. Just off the 110 Freeway (Martin Luther King Blvd. exit) or the 10 (Crenshaw exit), the new space more than doubled the space of the old club and is in a secure, African-American business section.

With her silent partner taking care of the fees and licensing and her influential friends helping with the bills, Mama continues to function as the club's manager appearing at the club from opening till closing. Though many have helped the club stay in business through the years, it's Mama's strength and personality that has ensured its survival.

Bluesman Deacon Jones (of John Lee Hooker/Freddie King/Curtis Mayfield fame) remembers the night Mama Laura saved a man's life at the old club in 1991 after two blues players got into an argument.

"This guy had been sitting

in with the band that night, a sax player, and somehow he got into an argument with another guy. Well he left but 15 minutes later, he was back and he came into the club, pulled out this revolver and said he was going to kill the other guy."

"Laura, she's got a lot of nerve. She jumped straight up and backed him out the door and said, 'You aren't going to shoot anybody in my club.'"

"I couldn't believe my eyes. It was like something out of a movie except it was real life. It got real quiet in the club, nobody moved. Everybody was shocked, stunned, you name it. We were all watching her. She stood right in front of that gun and everything he said, she had an answer to. She never hesitated with her words. Finally, he left and when it was over, we were all so grateful to Laura for doing that. Any one of us could have gotten shot."

Since opening at the new

location, Mama continues to maintain law and order at her club. She doesn't allow any disrespect toward herself or other patrons.

"I think, what Laura has done over the years is really important culturally for the Los Angeles area," notes Hodges. "The fact that she's not retired and still goes and does her thing, at age 83, is the best thing she could have done. She has a reason to get out of bed everyday. She's a living piece of history and her life has been of great significance to many people."

Babe & Ricky's Inn provides live blues music Thursday through Monday. Bill Clark & the Might Balls of Fire are the house band Fridays & Saturdays, Mama's Boys play every Thursday, and Mondays are jam night with the free chicken giveaway for a \$5.00 cover charge.