

Ray Bailey And The Los Angeles Blues Scene

By Scott M. Bock



Ray Bailey, guitar; Franklin Bell, drums; James Thomas, bass: at Bell's Blues Workshop in Los Angeles, 2012. Photo: Scott M. Bock.

Guitarist Ray Bailey was literally born into music. His mother sang professionally. His grandfather played sax. His uncle was Ray Charles' music director, and his neighbour was the iconic bandleader, Johnny Otis. Bailey grew up with Otis' guitar slinging son, Shuggie. As Bailey tells it, sax great Big Jay McNeely, along with a host of other musical characters, would drop by his house in the Watts section of Los Angeles to share meals.

Bailey started out early on piano but the guitar grabbed him and has never let go. His father bought him a cheap acoustic from a drug store and Bailey began to woodshed day and night. He honed his stinging, jazz-influenced chops first listening to his father's blues records and then to Jimi Hendrix and Wes Montgomery. Soon, Bailey was playing with acid jazz musicians who lived in Los Angeles or came through town.

It was a chance meeting with 'Babe's and Ricky's Inn' proprietor Mama Laura Mae Gross that pulled the fourteen-year-old Bailey into deep blues – for good. As the oldest blues club in Los Angeles, local and national artists including B.B. King and Albert King played there or dropped in to hear other artists. It was Lowell Fulson that first brought Bailey into his band – a gig that lasted on and off for nearly twenty years.

"I walked by Babe's and Ricky's and I heard the blues coming out of this club. And, not just any old blues, but a really great guitar player named Ray Brooks. He had a sound that was kind of like blues, mixed with gospel and jazz. He had George Benson kind of chops".

"I'd been playing guitar maybe two years. They had a jam night on Mondays and the next week I came down and asked Mama Gross if I

could play. And, she was like, "You're not even old enough to come in here". But, she said: "Alright, come on. But, you've got to sit with me". She would sit there and coach me. I knew by the time I was able to make her smile with my guitar playing, that we were all good."

Bailey learned his craft at Babe's and Ricky's and was on the road from the age of eighteen to 25 but he mostly remained a local player –



Southside Slim with unknown band at the Barnyard, Los Angeles, 2012. Photo: Scott M. Bock.



Tony Ibarra, guitar, with unknown band. Franklin Bell in the cap, dancing. Bell's Blues Workshop, 2012. Photo Scott M. Bock.

working with Phillip Walker, Smokey Wilson, Z.Z. Hill, as well as bands like The Coasters and Drifters. But, jazz paid better so he picked up gigs with Jimmy McGriff, Johnny 'Hammond' Smith and Richard 'Groove' Holmes. Bailey says about this period of his life: "I was in the right place at the right time".

He eventually began to work day jobs so he had a steady income. He also began to write his own songs. Soon, he started a gig with a local organist, Jimmy Caravan, who often included inventive guitarist, Guitar Shorty in his band. Caravan got Bailey to sing by telling him, that if Caravan could sing, so could Bailey.

Years working as a session player behind everyone from Nina Simone to bassist Larry Davis followed. Eventually, Bailey cut and released the moody, jazz-inflected, 'Satan's Horn' which pushed him hard into the spotlight with accolades from reviewers who loved the clean guitar playing and original songs. Bailey began to tour hard both nationally and internationally. "Before 'Satan's Horn', I didn't have a recording under my name. I used to sit around sometimes with some friends of mine, and we'd just be sitting in the studio, in between takes. Some guy walked up and said: "How would you like to do a blues album"? And, I did 'Satan's Horn' for \$300.00, but he gave me \$600.00. We recorded it in nine hours."

Too soon – Bailey was gone – first taking care of ill family members and then struggling with drug use. In danger of becoming a musical footnote with one tantalizing release, Bailey re-emerged a decade later with the aptly titled, 'Resurrection' and 2012's, 'Cruisin' For A Bluesin'".

Today, Bailey is gigging around Los Angeles, is a central figure in a new film, Babe's And Ricky's Inn, and is touring again. "So far, nobody's heard my best work. I'm glad I'm back out there," says Ray.

Recommended Listening: Satan's Horn, 1993, Zoo Entertainment/ Bohemia Music 72445-11082-2; Resurrection, 2009, Tonedef Records, Self released; Cruisin' For A Bluesin', 2012, Tonedef Records, Self released.

THE BARNYARD AND BELLS BLUES WORKSHOP

Images of movie stars in expensive sunglasses and the giant, white, Hollywood sign standing high in the hills help create the lasting image of Los Angeles, California as a playground for the wealthy. And, there are many sprawling mansions behind looming gates, decadent shopping in Beverly Hills, and chic nightclubs. This version of Los Angeles is contradicted daily, however, by working people making their way through diverse neighbourhoods, news stories about tough rival gangs, and vivid memories of the Rodney King beating in the early 1990s. It is therefore not hard to figure out that the second most populated city in the U.S.A. is not simply a privileged paradise.

Though there are fewer African-Americans in Los Angeles than Whites, Asians, or Hispanics, Los Angeles has a long, rich history of groundbreaking black music that features blues, r&b, and jazz. Among the recorded blues artists who grew up or were based in Los Angeles for long stretches are Big Jay McNeely, Johnny Otis, Larry Davis, Smokey Wilson, Mickey Champion, Lowell Fulson, Keb Mo, Guitar Shorty, Arthur Adams, Roy Gaines, and Ray Bailey.

An untold number of local blues clubs, spread out around the city, have come and gone over the years. Now, with the closure of the fifty year

plus blues venue, Babe's and Ricky's Inn, there are fewer opportunities to hear local live blues in the area.

Two nightspots are so far off the beaten path you have to find out about them from local musicians or locals who discovered them through word of mouth. Both are throwbacks to an earlier era and routinely feature music and an ambiance you could have found decades ago in Mississippi or Chicago.

The Barnyard is a large open space at the corner of 97th and South Main 9627 South Main – not far off Interstate 110 in literally a sprawling junkyard that opens up on weekend nights for music. Blues is played at one end of the yard in a partially painted plywood structure surrounded by scrapped bathtubs, old tables, and iron pipe. At the back of the stage, a large plastic coated print of the ocean offers a jarring contrast to this industrial setting. Patrons who choose to dance can do it in front of the stage or may fan out into the yard.

If the weather is cool, large standing oil barrels are loaded with wood and lit on fire, adding to the unique ambiance. A pool table, highlighted under long yellowing fluorescent bulbs, is set off to the side and is always in use. Southside Slim may work as the bartender and then get up on stage and display his rapid-fire guitar skills and his ever present jewellery. Jamie Powell, Bernie Pearl, Ray Bailey, and others who live locally enjoy the venue and come by to play or to see friends and listen to the music.

It is a tough neighbourhood, but once you are inside the gate, the music serves as a common bond among locals and visitors. Joe Harris is the owner. If you are in Los Angeles call 323-404-3124 to make sure that the Barnyard is open.

Another place is Bell's Blues Workshop. Franklin Bell is a drummer, originally from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He owned a full-service gas station for years and after retiring began to play with Harmonica Fats, Phillip Walker, and many others.

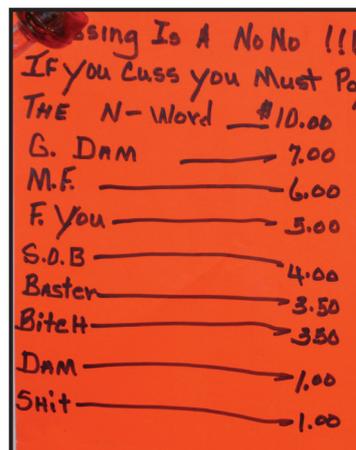


Franklin Bell at the drums. Bell's Blues Workshop, 2012. Photo: Scott M. Bock

Franklin expanded the garage behind his home at 632 East Colden Avenue – not far from the Barnyard – into a juke joint that offers music and home-made food to his guests on Sundays from 4-9pm. A handwritten sign made by Mrs. Bell sets out the fines for people who swear inside the venue. Pictures of touring and local bluesmen and women and random plastic musical notes line the walls.

The path to the juke takes visitors by a late 1930s Buick that serves as storage for drums. Tables and chairs sit inside and out of the venue. A thick blue tarp is hung along a fence to help separate the music from the nearest neighbour. And, the entrance takes fans through thick, clear plastic strips designed to keep the room warm and further dampen the noise. A tarp allows for smoking outside no matter the weather.

For a small donation, guests can catch bluesmen including Curtis Jack Griffin, Tony Ibarra, Lucky Lloyd, James Thomas, or Bobby Blake. A southern-style homemade dinner is included. Call Mrs. Bell at 323-754-5564 to find out who is playing.



No cussing sign at Bells. Photo: Scott M. Bock.