

The home of the blues

Anonymous . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]30 Mar 2011: A.13.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT

The country or inner city joint serves as an emblem of foundational stories about peoplehood that you can also hear in the music: stories of African-Americans in motion from the agrarian Jim Crow South to the segregated urban industrial North, and before that from slavery to freedom, and before that from Africa to America.

FULL TEXT

I WAS FEELING homesick for Chicago music, so on a recent night I drove down to Chan's Fine Oriental Dining in Woonsocket, R.I., to hear bluesman Michael Burks. A full house of 125 or so patrons were eating, drinking, and mostly not talking as they attended closely to the music. Burks, a big man in his 50s, is a forceful singer, and he plays guitar in the dense, fluid, rock-tinged wailing style common among blues virtuosos of his generation.

Flanking the stage were two signs. One declared that USA Today named Chan's one of the top 10 places in the Western Hemisphere to celebrate the Year of the Rabbit, the other that the Blues Foundation has given Chan's its Keeping the Blues Alive Award. The latter distinction is the one to ponder. How did it come to pass that a Chinese restaurant in an old New England mill town qualifies as an official home of the blues?

You probably have a generic notion of what the home of the blues should look like - a juke joint in the Mississippi Delta, say. In my case, it's a tavern on the South Side of Chicago in which the air is thick with the nightlife bouquet of my youth: menthol cigarettes, Old Style beer, and hair care products made by the Johnson Products Company.

A tangle of assumptions about the larger historical and cultural significance of the blues tradition come attached to such places. The country or inner city joint serves as an emblem of foundational stories about peoplehood that you can also hear in the music: stories of African-Americans in motion from the agrarian Jim Crow South to the segregated urban industrial North, and before that from slavery to freedom, and before that from Africa to America.

But the story of the blues has taken further turns in the past half-century, and they lead to Chan's, of all places. Starting in the 1960s, the rise of blues-rooted genres of pop music like rock and R&B drew away some of the audience for the blues, and those baby boomers who did find their way to the blues often did so by way of these other, increasingly more popular forms. As more fans and musicians came to the blues via classic rock, rather than through first-hand training in Southern culture, influence flowed back the other way. There's some Jimmy Page in Michael Burks's guitar heroism.

The blues became both a respected musical ancestor and a junior commercial partner. The Blues Foundation gives out Keeping the Blues Alive awards because the blues doesn't compete well in the market and needs support from foundations, festivals, schools, tourism and cultural agencies, and other evangelizing and preservation-minded institutions.

John Chan tries to do his part. Born in Hong Kong and raised in New York City and Rhode Island, he discovered blues and jazz at Providence College in the '60s, eventually taking over his parents' restaurant and turning it into a venue for the music he loves. Chan says that the menu, not the music, pays the bills, and "every gig is a calculated risk" as he balances his own musical taste with the need to draw a good crowd. "I love country blues," he says, "but blues-rock is the most popular style." That makes sense, given the importance of Clapton, Hendrix, and company in recruiting blues fans. When Burks played at Chan's, the audience was composed mostly of white boomers. A lot of gray heads nodded along to the shuffle grooves.

Chan credits his patrons with knowing the music and appreciating the room's acoustics. "People come in here to listen. It's not a barroom. Musicians like playing for that kind of audience. There's good energy."

Between sets, Burks, who has played at Chan's before, took a moment from signing CDs to say, "John knows how to treat people; I wouldn't drive all the way out here if it wasn't such a great place." Burks's grandfather played country blues in Arkansas; Burks was born in Milwaukee; and his music has found a home away from home, a home of the blues, at Chan's.

Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

30rotella.ART

DETAILS

Subject:	Awards & honors; Restaurants; Blues music
Location:	Woonsocket Rhode Island
People:	Chan, John
Company / organization:	Name: Blues Foundation; NAICS: 813211
Publication title:	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
Pages:	A.13
Publication year:	2011
Publication date:	Mar 30, 2011
Section:	Opinion
Publisher:	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
Place of publication:	Boston, Mass.
Country of publication:	United States, Boston, Mass.

Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	07431791
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Commentary
ProQuest document ID:	859033284
Document URL:	https://proxy.bc.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F859033284%3Faccountid%3D9673
Copyright:	(c) The Boston Globe Mar 30, 2011
Last updated:	2017-11-18
Database:	Boston Globe

LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

Database copyright © 2018 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)