

THE EXPERIMENTAL IMPULSE
LA COUNTRY PUNK
1970s – 1980s

INTERVIEW WITH
ELIZABETH BALOGH

You managed Al's Bar in Downtown Los Angeles, what was it like in Downtown LA during the late 70s/early 80s? How did Al's Bar fit into that context? I actually started coming to Al's Bar in the mid to late 80's. It was really one of the few places I felt comfortable. (I really never felt comfortable in "bars". Als seemed much more than that. Downtown Los Angeles was rather desolate back then, it was edgy yes, and obviously artists flocked to downtown because of the large warehouses that could be converted to work spaces or recording studios or whatever creative people wanted to make it. Downtown was the Antithesis of what people thought Southern California was, it was gritty, and yes there was a bit of romance to it. I think the artists there wanted to converge in a way that was different from the light and space or finish fetish thing that was going on in Venice, and also trying to find a voice succinct from that of the New York imperative for lack of a better word. But most of all, corny as it seems, there was this sense of community, most of the artists and musicians knew each other, and events and collaborations seemed to happen organically.

Al's Bar was more than just a club for musicians to play at, it was also an art bar - what kind of art was shown and who were some of the artists that were exhibited? Well in fact, Mark Kreisel conceived Al's Bar to be among other things a "Money Pump", (a sort of comedic play on the work from Joseph Beuys entitled the "Honey Pump"). But only part of Marc's idea was in jest. He really conceived of Al's Bar as a social sculpture, which was the basis of the referenced Beuys piece. Marc was an artist, and back in the day there was a group of artists that he was associated with Coleen Steerit, Monique Sanford, Steven Seemeyer, Linda Burnham, James Croak, the performance artists, Bob and Bob who all lived and worked downtown. One of the things Al's bar was supposed to be was perhaps a gathering place, to discuss ideas, let off steam and just and get away from the studio. They did kooky things like at one point (before I came to the scene). Marc and his contemporaries were dubbed the "Young Turks" of that generation...SO Mark put together this event called the Young Turkey Awards which was a hilarious send up of both the Oscars and this insatiable quality of the art world to try to find something or someone "new" and "Fresh"...In the end you find that every movement has a precedent that the media seems to forget.

Marc also had a gallery attached to the bar, the American gallery that showed artists such as Raymond Pettibon, Al Rupersberg, June Wayne, Skip Arnold... are some of the artists whose names you might recognize immediately, along with others such as Colleen Steerit and James Croak mentioned above, Katy Crowe, Karen Goldblum, Robert Gero, Joe Potts, off the top of my head, all practicing artists today, many of them teach as well.

Al's Bar turned into a "multiplex" if you will of gritty grassroots creative engines fostering a music scene, an art gallery, and even a theatrical venue with its own repertoire of sorts. Groups like The Actors Gang often mounted plays there and later, Al's National Theater was housed at Al's Bar supporting new playwrights and focusing on the presentation of original works.

As an experimental place for musicians to play, what kind of bands did the bar attract? Well, every kind from Joe Ely, and Terry Allen, I remember seeing Dwight Yoakum there before I started booking bands, Candye Kane, Big Sandy and the Fly Right Trio, Mayo Thompson from Pere Ubu and later Red Krayola, Pop Defect were basically Al's House band, an up and coming band (back then) called Tool, Beck did his major label signing party/gig at Al's Bar, to my all time favorite gig, the performance of the band Pulnocz "Plastic People of the Universe" from Czechoslovakia, who were considered psychedelic and more performance art, but had a history of being literally singled out by their government at the time for incredible persecution and censorship. These people really suffered for their art in ways that we here in the U.S couldn't even fathom.

There seems to have been a crossover between punk and country music during the late 70s/early 80s - "cowpunk" - did this merge and mingling also happen at Al's? if so who were some of the bands that stood out? Well a lot of the above...Joe Ely, Terry Allen, they used to do yearly gigs at Al's, Dwight Yoakum has always stated that he started out playing in punk rock clubs...Candye Kane, The Killer Crows, fronted by Texas Terry, Tito and Tarantula had mixed country instrumentation such as fiddle, mandolin, etc. with a distinctly Mexican touch.

What do you think was the impulse for country musicians and punks to mix? Well the impulse was, I think, to mix everything up, perhaps because country music was associated at the time with a more conservative, right wing element; the idea perhaps was to subvert that form. But mostly, I think that a lot of people liked the sound of the chord changes, or slide guitar - and why not? There were a lot of crossovers from folk, country, zydeco, even polka was incorporated into the mix...