

The Mile High Club



Elijah and Alberta Thornton opened Eli's Mile High Club at 3629 Martin Luther King Jr. Way in 1974 to showcase the West Coast blues in a building that had once been a creamery¹. The name was picked by Alberta. The club hosted notable local blues musicians such as Mississippi Johnny Waters, Cool Papa and J.J. Malone². Tragically, Eli was shot to death while tending bar in the club in 1979 by his jealous mistress Frankie³, a blues singer and former waitress at the club, whom Eli had been living with next door since Alberta filed for divorce in December 1978. Frankie Williams, the mother of seven children, was known for her violent temper, once attempting to run over a musician and his girlfriend on the sidewalk in front of the club, following an argument⁴. Ms. Williams was convicted of murder in 1982⁵.

¹ http://www.sonomatunes.com/weblog/archives/2002/12/mos_musings_121.html

² Hildebrand, Lee, "The Ballad of Frankie and Eli", *East Bay Express*, June 1, 1979.

³ The *Oakland Tribune* of May 19, 1979 elaborates "An Oakland nightclub singer was arrested on suspicion of murder early today after the club owner was shot to death and a woman customer wounded during an argument. Police said Frankie S. Williams, who has been singing at Eli's Mile High Club on Grove Street for five years, began arguing with customer Juanita Allen at the club shortly after 1 a.m. Williams suddenly produced a gun and began firing, police said, causing customers to dive for cover. Allen was grazed on the chin and shot through the left hand. Club owner Elijah Thornton, 40, who was standing nearby, was shot at least once in the chest and died at the hospital three hours later. Williams fled the club, but was arrested a short time later after police searched the neighborhood."

⁴ Hildebrand, op. cit. Eli was born in 1938 in Moreville, LA.

⁵ Frankie's first trial ended in a deadlocked jury. She subsequently turned down a plea bargain that would have cost her four years in jail. Instead, she was convicted in 1982 and sentenced to

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Previously, the Jersey Milk, Cream and Butter Company had conducted business at that location⁶. Subsequently, the property had opened as an ice cream confectioner's, "Arnold Cow Bell Dairy," in 1935⁷. By 1946 it was known as "Ruth's Cow Bell," still selling ice cream⁸. Then, in 1949 it became Peterson's Vogue Ice Cream with the Cow Bell restaurant sharing the space. In 1949, it became simply "The Cow Bell."⁹ By the late 1950's, however, purchase of land for, and construction of, both the Grove-Shafter freeway and State Route 17 (now I-580) were commencing, removing many local patrons of businesses in the area. Around 1961 the Cow Bell closed¹⁰. In late 1965 Eleanor's Barbecue opened at the site¹¹.



Following Eli Thornton's death, his widow, Alberta, did not want to assume the responsibility of running the club¹², so in 1979 the club was purchased by Troyce Key, a musician who had played there. Born in Newellton, Louisiana the son of sharecroppers, Mr. Key was no stranger to hard times: he lived part of his childhood in a boxcar when his father worked on the railroad¹³, and had a lung removed at age 16 due to tuberculosis. Mr. Key grew up in Fresno. The new owner brought the venue national renown as "The Home of the West Coast Blues"¹⁴ by booking acts like



17 years to life. A release on parole, granted in 1992, was overturned and she remains in jail to this day. Angela Woodall, Oakland Tribune, February 1, 2010, p. 1.

⁶ Per a handwritten note in the Oakland History Room's Thomas Bros Block Book of Oakland, Vol. 3, 1923. History Room staff state that the handwritten notes were present in the book when they acquired it.

⁷ Polk's Oakland City Directory, 1935, lists Kenneth Arnold as the owner. It is not listed in the same directory for 1934. Kelt's Reverse Directory, 1936, identifies the business as Arnold Cow Bell Dairy.

⁸ See the phone books for 1946 and 1948.

⁹ Per the 1949 phone book. Ronnie Stewart, Executive Director of the Bay Area Blues Society, recalls that the Cow Bell hosted such acts as Lowell Fulson.

¹⁰ The Oakland Street Address Directory for 1961 lists it, but not the phone book. Ronnie Stewart, however, recalled in a phone conversation on September 16, 2008 visiting the club in 1968 just before he joined the Marines, when L. C. "Rockin'" Robinson was playing.

¹¹ The 1966 phone book contains a listing for Eleanor's Barbecue, as does the 1965 Oakland Street Address Directory, but the 1965 phone book does not.

¹² Hildebrand, op. cit.

¹³ <http://bluestown.blogspot.com/2008/06/various-artists-west-coast-guitar.html>

¹⁴ This moniker is vigorously contested by Ronnie Stewart, who points out that the West Coast Blues was well established and mature before Eli's ever opened. He believes it would be more accurate to state of Eli's, "in the '70's and '80's [Eli's] established itself as one of the most popular blues clubs on the west coast." (phone conversation of 9/16/08)

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Jimmy McCracklin, Sonny Rhodes, B.B. King, Etta James and Lowell Fulson¹⁵. Mr. Key was one of the first blues/rock artists to sign with Warner Brothers in the 1950's¹⁶ as a member of the Rhythm Rockers, with J.J. Malone, and performed on American Bandstand and the Alan Freed Show¹⁷. He toured Europe in the 1980's and was a board member of the Oakland Festival of the Arts. Troyce was known as a flashy dresser, frequently donning a white suit and a wide-brimmed, white hat with a black band. His signature line was "I sho' do love the blues." With the draw of nationally known acts, the club became a big success, and was visited by celebrities like James Brown, Whoopi Goldberg, Ted Danson, Chuck Berry and Will Smith¹⁸. The house band was the seven-member Troyce Key Blues Band.

Troyce Key died of leukemia in 1992 at age 55, and the club lost its luster under the management of his wife Margaret¹⁹. The nightclub reportedly changed hands seven times between 2000 and 2005²⁰. Linda Lowrance²¹ obtained a permit to run it in February, 1998²²; additional conditions of operation were imposed due to noise complaints from neighbors in 2001²³. Ms. Lowrance²⁴ closed the club in January 2002²⁵. Mike McDonald and Ron Kriss purchased the club from Ms. Lowrance that year²⁶, intending to tear it down and build live/work lofts²⁷. Once Mr. McDonald learned about the club's history, he leased it to Frank Klein, former manager of San Francisco's Biscuits & Blues club. The club reopened on June 6, 2003 with a performance by Joe Louis Walker, and Mayor Jerry Brown in attendance²⁸. Mr. Klein's effort, however, could not overcome the declining interest in blues music and the club's out-of-the-way location. Plus, the Alameda County Health Department shut the club down temporarily nine days after it reopened²⁹.

¹⁵ <http://blues.about.com/b/2008/05/12/historic-elis-blues-club-closed-in-oakland.htm>.

¹⁶ Watterworth, Susan, *Bluesletter*, July 2003, Washington Blues Society (quoting Paul Green). Mr. Green says RCA but Mr. Key's discography reveals it was Warner Brothers.

¹⁷ *Oakland Tribune*, November 10, 1992.

¹⁸ *Oakland Tribune*, 11/10/92, op. cit.

¹⁹ Troyce met Margaret at the Mile High Club and proposed to her there. *Oakland Tribune*, 11/10/92, op. cit.

²⁰ According to <http://blues.about.com/b/2008/05/12/historic-elis-blues-club-closed-in-oakland.htm>. However, this seems unlikely, because from 1998 to 2002 the club was owned by Linda Lowrance and from 2002 to 2005 it was owned by Mike McDonald.

²¹ Ms. Lowrance was a JAMMI resident, living at 664 41st St.

²² A hearing was held on October 5, 2001, that determined the club had major noise nuisances needing abatement. One condition imposed was closure at 10 pm on Sundays.

²³ Memo from Larry Carroll, Hearing Officer, to Linda Lowrance, October 18, 2001.

²⁴ Linda Lowrance also booked acts for the Sweet's On Broadway club in the late 1990's, and currently is President and COO of Transformer, Inc., responsible for the Mega Star Search 2008 Talent Competition. St. Clair, Katy, *East Bay Express*, September 17, 2003; Athitakis, Mark, *Riff Raff*, in *SF Weekly*, April 14, 1999; transformerentertainment.com.

²⁵ According to Vanessa Hua in the San Francisco Chronicle, April 4, 2003, Ms. Lowrance was tired of street crime—car break-ins and muggings—that deterred her customers, and of noise complaints from neighbors.

²⁶ Gowan, Michael, *East Bay Express*, June 18, 2003.

²⁷ Carnig, Jennifer, *Oakland Tribune*, June 13, 2003.

²⁸ Carnig, op. cit.

²⁹ Harvilla, Rob, *East Bay Express*, July 16, 2003.

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In June of 2004, Mr. McDonald teamed with former schoolteacher Lisa Nola, abandoning the blues and introducing indie rock to the neighborhood. Four-course meals were offered, a burlesque show occurred weekly, and bands like the Lovemakers, Dealership, the Peeks and Comets on Fire played. The partners invested personal savings into refurbishing the club, preserving its original appearance inside. In six months there were 30 sold-out shows, but the pressure was too much and the partners sold the business for a quarter of what they had invested³⁰, keeping the land.

The buyer was Sam Marshall, a musician himself with the Marshall Law Band. Mr. McDonald and Mr. Kriss halved the rent to give him time to make the club profitable. Mr. Marshall worked a full-time day job while running the business in the evenings³¹. In 2008, the two owners suggested Mr. Marshall either run the club full-time and make it work, or find someone who could and pay full rent. Mr. Marshall, tired of sinking time and funds into the venture, closed the club on May 1, 2008³².

In July, 2008, the club re-opened under new management. Geoffrey Melville applied for a cabaret permit. In the interim, the club resumed sales of food and alcoholic beverages.

³⁰ Sarkar, Pia, San Francisco Chronicle, March 11, 2005, p. C-1.

³¹ Ironically, Eli Thornton had also worked a day job while running the club in the evenings. Mr. Thornton was an orderly at nearby Kaiser Hospital. Hildebrand, op. cit.

³² Woodall, Angela, Oakland Tribune, May 9, 2008.