

Downtown Chicago Biker Bar Blues

By Kenn Hartmann

Tafoya's Lost Boyzz play the House of Blues on Dearborn Thursday night and from jump-street there's a problem parking my motorcycle. This is Marina Towers where Steve McQueen crashed a bad machine out a parking stall 19 stories into the Chicago River below. As I pull up to the House panic ensues; attendants are shaking their heads, 'no, no, no.' I play the idiot, the devil's advocate, the badass biker in glorious regalia and this is Sweet Home and I'm not moving. But I'm polite and eloquent and test each attendant's level of expertise. They're just doing their freaking job. Within a minute security arrives, a young black kid I swear is a high school senior, but everyone under thirty looks like high school to me. 'You can park anywhere but here - no motorcycles allowed,' he says meekly and directs me to a non-existent garage across the street. When I ask why no bikes, he says 'it scares the tourists.'



The downtown world's topsy-turvy where locals are shunned and conventioners embraced. Although HOB's a cool venue with hot musical stage, it's also a pathetically corporate - selling an image but God forbid the real deal shows up. Listen, I've been to the corner of Napoleon and Tchoupitoulas in the Crescent City. I've watched sunset over the Mighty Mississippi in a swelter of dust, humid and gritty. I slammed double shots at Tipitina's uptown and in the French Quarter with a blonde bombshell that'd make a sailor's eyes water. I've been to the spiritual home of Professor Longhair, Dr John and Fats Domino. I ate beignets for breakfast, shrimp etouffee for lunch and for dinner crawfish jambalaya and turkey bone gumbo. I've seen Uptown Indians roam and Voodoo Queens make romance. I've seen Saints go marching home and Yella Pocahontas dance. I've had no fears in old Algiers, met angels on the levee and seen Bourbon Street waifs shed tears. Not everyone is hard-wired to believe. So when I pull up and say 'freakin' f'n A, rock and roll is here to stay' of course, I'm asked to leave.

A block away on Clark, a parking attendant cuts a half-price deal and has me drive down the sidewalk to park next to his shack. I remove all gear from my bike - remember, this is Chicago. When I get back to the alley behind the House of Blues, each security guard apologizes 'sorry man, but nice bike, what year is it?' All the way through the front door and even inside picking up my back-stage pass and free ticket, no one

seriously checks my saddlebag for contraband. They're all humble and perhaps don't really want to know what's in my rolled up leather jacket. It's nice to know that my brief encounter was noteworthy. I can only imagine the chatter on their walkie-talkies.

Tafoya's Lost Boyzz opens for Eddie Money. Before the show, I hand out FRP's to anyone who looks like a biker, Harley t-shirts, chains. Turns out to be more difficult than expected. 'Hey, I already got that issue,' was a common response. That's one for you Preacher, downtown Chicago, House of F'n Blues and nine out of ten bikers already have the latest Free Riders Press. When the curtain opens Tafoya's Lost Boyzz dominate the stage and even Eddie Money wears a Lost Boyzz t-shirt.

Tafoya plays urban, L-train screaming through the concrete glass canyonlands of Chicago heartland rock and roll. I mentioned Tipitina's in New Orleans because the House of Blues patterned their franchise upon it. I'll tell you true, Tafoya could go to Vierre Carre and jam with the best blues-rock star jazz monsters. He'd blaze in Mardi-Gras style, while spy-boy Wild Magnolias stomps rump, Sweet Home Chicago Lost Boyzz kick ass. Meet me boys on the battlefield, 'jacomoeena' going all the way.

I check out the downstairs blues club and a band called the 'C-notes' does a decent rendition of Junior Wells. But I saw Junior Wells thirty years ago at the Checkerboard lounge. There's a picture of the old Checkerboard on the inside back cover of my original Chicago Biker Bars book. The place has been torn down and relocated to Hyde Park.

So I cut out down Clark Street south through the canyonlands. There's a few clubs I could hit up north, in the neighborhood of the St. Valentine's Massacre. But I head south. I pull next to a taxi stopped for a light at Adams or Jackson. There's a couple making out in the backseat. The foreign born cabbie catches me laughing. He rolls down his window and asks, 'have you ever been Sturgis?' I shut my bike off, throw down the kickstand, and pull from my thigh pocket a copy of Milwaukee Biker Bars and thrust it through the window. The astonished lip-locked couple now freaks; a big bad biker reaches to snatch their souls, maybe just rip their hearts out. I tell the cabbie, 'I wrote the book and that's my step-daughter Christina on the cover.' The driver says thanks. I jump back on my bike and before I fire it up I hear the passengers plead with the cabbie, 'can we look at it?' The light turns green and I gun it hard.

I'd like to tell you the night ended there, but it just began. I'm going to do a whole story on what happened next.

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