

Doc Pellegrino interview.

In the office at the Kingston Mines, 2548 N Halsted, Chicago.

September 16 1982, c. midnight.

I wanted to start with a brief history of the club.

Yeah. It was originally located at 2354 N Lincoln, just south of Fullerton, and it was organised in 1970 as two different entities, one was the Kingston Mines theatre, which was a not-for-profit organisation, and the Kingston Mines cafe, which was a coffee house, and which was a for-profit organisation, and they were sister organisations, one doing music and poetry, and the other doing theatre. Kingston Mines was named after the home town of Jack Wallace, one of the old players from the old Kingston Mines theatre group, Kingston Mines Illinois. We were there for 11 years and 11 months and 11 days. It was November 11 when the roof fell in, and the theatre by that time had been out of existence for about five years. We went from a coffee house restaurant to a folk music and poetry kind of a centre, with the folk music predominating, and we were the starting place of many of today's folk singers - and then we went into bluegrass and finally into blues itself. And we have been doing blues here approximately nine years, and we are one of the very few places in the country that concentrate on blues alone. We and the club across the road, B.L.U.E.S., are the two clubs that do nothing but blues seven nights a week.

What brought about those changes in musical emphasis?

I think I became sort of disaffected to folk. Everybody was being Bob Dylan. But the folkies are essentially a bunch of suburban kids, playing Bob Dylan, but with the values of suburban people. Very little loyalty; although I like folk music, it was not a pleasant kind of operation to run. Bluegrass, and some of the country and western we did was more of a up-beat music, and it was more fun. If folk people was workin, folk music, and somebody in the place started to laugh or tell a joke, or make noise, they'd stop and say, "Hey, you. Shut up." It's embarrassing to do that to a customer that's paid their money and their time. So, I was familiar with blues, and even at the time when we were doing folk, we had some blues with the Chicago River blues band, with Eddie Clearwater, with a white group called Blues by Five, and as we shifted more into the blues we started working more with such people as Eddie Clearwater, Chicago Slim, Lefty Dizz, Jimmy Johnson. Many of them started working on the North Side at the Kingston Mines. Many of them had never worked in front of a North Side audience, or an audience that was mostly white, and it was a matter of learning a whole new technique and a whole new type of music. So many of them went from being rhythm and blues hands to blues bands, and the conversion was done at our club. And meanwhile we were working hard to win over an audience that was essentially middle-class, upper middle-class, a large number of white people and a large number of upper middle-class black people. They are the audience where the money is, and the audience that gets college gigs for our bands, that gets gigs at weddings and barmitzvahs and other types of parties, and they are the

ones that have sway with the television and radio stations, and can get publicity for our bands. So as we developed a following, the format, the type of music, continues to change, and we became more and more popular. We concentrate mainly on up-beat, Chicago-type, or urban, blues. Club-like blues for a long time was more centred in the rural type of Delta blues, which is a softer and slower type of music. There has been more of a move in the last several years to fuse the two - the rural Delta blues has become a harder type of music, a more forceful, up-beat music, and the avant-garde type of blues, the Lefty Dizz type of blues, the Son Seals, Lonnie Brooks-type of blues has picked up kind of a softer tone, and they have sort of gone a distance to acquire a Delta sound, and the Delta people have gone a distance to acquiring a Chicago sound.

After your original place I understand you had a much more ambitious project down near the Loop, before coming here. Yeah, the original place had a roof problem for a long time, and the building owner had neglected it, and finally it collapsed - not directly on to the club, but adjacent to the club, and it damaged the building so badly that it had to be closed down. After that we rented a very nifty disco club in the Clark and Ohio Street area of Chicago, and we tried to bring blues to the downtown area of Chicago. We would have probably been successful if the cost had been more realistic. But what started out to be a fairly high-cost operation became a severely high-cost operation, and impossible to run. We started off paying approximately six thousand dollars a month rent, and ended up paying more than twelve thousand dollars a month rent, and it was impossible to cover the expenses, to meet the nut. And so even though we drew fairly large amounts of people, we just could not pay the bills, and eventually it became inevitable that we had to close down and get out of there if we were to survive. It lasted approximately six months, from about the middle of August to the middle of February. We also went through some of the bitterest cold weather in the history of Chicago, with some temperatures going to 26 below zero, and it was impossible to get people out. But even if we had got them out, it would have been impossible to survive that kind of cost structure. We folded our operation there, and came back to the Lincoln Park-Fullerton area, and talked to the owner of a club that was known then as Redford's, and he was interested in selling it to me, and I was interested in buying it, so we struck a deal, and took over the club 24 hours after we had failed at the other one, and we had it open less than three weeks after the demise of the Clark and Ohio club, and this place has been right from the go, successful, fun. It's the kind of place where people walk in and say, "Hey, this is really nice." And they enjoy themselves.

It has a good atmosphere.

Yeah, good atmosphere, good ambience.

I like a club where musicians come for a drink.

Yeah, and at night, we're the place they come to. You see James Cotton three or four nights a week here, whenever he's in the city he's here, and the other people all come in, Lefty Dizz, Jimmy Johnson, Clearwater. Any night you're here you will

see blues musicians hanging out here in large numbers. And we're also sort of the retreat for the English rock bands: when they come over here to play concerts, after the concerts they come over and stay with us, because they get a chance to unwind, they get a chance to listen to good blues, and they don't get mauled by their fans.

Yes, Rory Gallagher was in the other week.

Yeah, Rory Gallagher, the whole band was in here, right. They said when they come back they're coming to us. And what it does, when they go back to England, they talk to other bands, and say, "Hey, when you do a gig in Chicago, afterwards go over to Kingston Mines. It doesn't cost too much, it's a lot of fun, you see great blues, you can even get up on the stage if you want. They all come in here. When David Bowie did Elephant Man he was in here four or five nights a week, and even had a birthday party for his son here, and the other ones come in whenever they're in town, and it's sort of a fun thing.

What are your attitudes to 'sitting in'? Do you encourage it?

That's a difficult problem to deal with. The bands in general I have rehearsed, and are presenting a show, and are being paid for it, and they take the applause or the heat, whether the show is good or bad, and they don't want to have a bunch of musicians sitting in with them. So in general I let the bandleader decide. If he doesn't want any guests, we don't have any. If he wants to have selected guests he can pick them out. When the bandleader doesn't care particularly one way or the other, we try to hold sitting in to the last one or two sets. A lot of the customers are going home, and they've been replaced by musicians, so it's musicians listening to musicians, and then we only allow recognised, professional musicians to sit in.

Why do you allot one night a week to a band for several weeks, instead of doing what they do a cross the road, having a different band just about every night?

Because if you come in on Tuesday and you like a band, you know that next Tuesday you'll come in and that band will be back. So the band itself gets a chance to build up a following. And the following, when it gets large enough, allows us to take that band and put them in on a Friday and a Saturday, when the cover's higher and the expenses are high, and more money has to be paid to get in. So the band essentially is building itself. Other clubs are afraid that if they do the same band again and again it'll become old hat and they'll stop drawing. And there is a certain amount of validity to that fear, and it has to be done very carefully. But you have to remember that in the old days people like Guy Lavarro and his Royal Canadians played at the same hotel for thirty years. Every week for thirty years, except when they went on the road. And they drew well. We're drawing in Chicago from 14 million people - Greater Chicago, Chicago and suburbs - and if we can't draw enough people to see the same band once a week, then the band's not any good. A band that is good will pick up a following, if a band is fun people will stay, they'll stay till we close, and they'll want to come back and hear it again. If a band is just dull or mediocre, then they will.... (falls asleep).... so it's a type of format, for instance, every Monday is a Blue Monday blues jam, and musicians come from all over the area, from as far as 50, 60 miles away, because they know that they'll get up

on stage, and if they sing, sing at least one or two numbers, if they play an instrument, they'll play one or two numbers, and we try to mix them up with our own professionals, so that the experience that the audience have is good. Sundays we have the two lady blues singers doing a show, I'm shortly going to be transferring them over to Thursday, and then they'll play every Thursday, and people are going to want to see Lavelle White and Valerie Wellington, know that if they come on Thursday they will see them both, and get a chance to clap their hands and sing along, and dance, and it will be a fun night. Also, in line with that we're going to do, early in October, a programme called Lady Sing the Blues, in which all the vocalists will be women blues singers, and they'll all be professionals.

There's not enough exposure for the women blues singers, I think. It's hard to be a blues singer in general, because there aren't enough gigs to go around. It's harder to be a woman blues singer. You also have many blues musicians who have been in the business fifteen or twenty years, they want to be successful and they're not. They get feelings of jealousy, animosity, and it's something that you have to deal with. The women blues singers have to deal with the same problems as the male blues singers, plus the problem of animosity - "Why should this woman be a blues singer? Let her go home and take care of her kids and her old man, and forget about being competition to me. Why should she be successful when she's been in the business five years, when I've been in the business twenty years?" So these kind of animosities spill over, and the women do have a very hard time, and we try to offset it by having more women blues singers singing. We have at least two a week, and they sing as often as four or five times a week, and then once every seven or eight weeks we do this programme, Lady Sings the Blues, and we get five or six lady blues singers together. It's a fun kind of night. And women who are part of the women's movement, the women's liberation struggle and so on, will come, because it makes them feel good, it makes them feel proud. And if they feel good I feel good.

Have you ever consciously given a musician a chance?

I do that lots of times. Lavelle White was one. When she came at first, she came to our club, she hadn't done any professional gigs in about six or seven years. She had been in Houston Texas a star, and after she lost her child and her husband, she became a drinker, and stopped working professionally. When I first met her she was a heavy drinker, now she doesn't drink at all. And a fantastic woman with a fantastic range and a fantastic repertory, and I worked very hard with her for several years to get rid of the effects of the bad years she had in her life, and now the woman is fantastic. Valerie Wellington, a young woman who works in our club, with operatic training, she is scheduled to do an opera this fall or winter, and she's a bombastic, dynamic blues singer. And I have worked hard to get her across. Now she's working other clubs, and she's getting a lot of recognition that she didn't have before. Mark Hannon, he had quit the blues when I first heard him, and he was doing a set one night, was sitting in, and I was so turned on by his music that I talked to him, and finally talked him into going back into professional blues. And he now plays on Wednesdays at our club, he plays at Minstrels, he plays a lot of other gigs, and he is probably one of the most outstanding blues harp players, and

especially one of the most outstanding white harp players. We do a lot of work like that, I do a certain amount of experimenting, with bands that are good, but have something to be desired, and we work with them to help them solve their problems, and to help them become successful.

Tonight, with Lee Shot, you were going to back him with the house band. You seem to do that a lot with musicians. But Lee Shot, for example, has his own band, and you didn't want them.

The reason is, the All Stars have been chosen for their ability, and for the length of time they've been in the field. Bob Levis, the lead guitar, has been in the business 15 years, and is considered one of the best guitarists in the business. Bobby Anderson, formerly with Koko Taylor, has played with many of the top names in blues, has been in the business about eighteen years. Robert Covington, the drummer and vocalist, has been in the business about fifteen years. And then we fill in, for instance Ken Sajdak is the piano player with Lonnie Brooks. So we have a band that essentially is tight. It works together, it rehearses together, they're able to back up anybody, and if we have problems with the guest star they can fill the gap. Tonight there was some sort of a screw up and Lee Shot Williams did not show up, and I called his house and he said he'd sort of got things mixed up and didn't come. And ordinarily it would have just knocked us on our head and we'd have been without anything. We've got a band up there working, I called Lavelle White, the female vocalist, to come in, so I have Robert Covington singing, Lavelle White singing, Bobby Anderson singing, the music is great, the people are having a good time, and they don't voice any feeling that they have been cheated. We immediately, as soon as we found out he wasn't coming in, took the sign down and put up the all-stars sign, and we apologized to people, we did not mean to have it happen. But I have a solid group. Now with one of the bands people recently, the first week I had the person here with our band, and it was a outstanding week, the second week they were here with their band, and it was a poor week, most of the customers walked out. And it cost that person the gig. And I'm interested in turning out the best entertainment and music, blues, that you can get your hands on. And I get that out of the all Stars. I don't get that out of everybody else's band. That's not to say there are no other good bands in the business, there are good bands, and on Friday and Saturday, in general, we have the bandleader and his band. But on the Friday and Saturday we have Lady Sings The Blues, we will have the All Stars. We know it's good music, we know that it's consistent, and we know that the customers like it. I've got to listen to music seven nights a week, and I enjoy it. There's a lot to be said for good quality music. The main thing to be said against it is that you're looking at the same faces day after day after day. But as long the music doesn't bore you, as long as the music is good, you can look at the ceiling or floor, or look at the pretty girl sitting next to you.

Are there differences, problems, involved with booking all-white, all-black, or mixed bands?

There are a whole lot of differences, and a whole lot of problems, and some of them it took me a while to even become aware of. There are good black musicians, there

are good white musicians, in the blues field. The mixed bands tend to be more successful, because what happens is that the musicians are picked for the quality of their musicianship, and their showmanship, and not because they're black or they're white. And a band like that can be choosy and selective, and can put together a real fine band. With all-white bands I've had a kind of arrogance, at times a - it's a hard thing to say - sort of a feeling of resistance towards black musicians, and a sort of a feeling the black musicians also get, and a lot of the time they won't show up and patronise the show, like they will for a mixed group or an all-black group. Other kinds of wierd little stuff like the amount of drinking on the stage, you tend to get that with an all-white band, and it bothers me a whole lot, and it bothers the customers too. I respect what I'm doing here, and I respect the artists and the music form, and I respect the customers, and I think that everybody here should do that. Getting drunk on the stage, getting bottles and tipping them up while you're out in front of an audience is not really in particularly good taste, and it's the sort of thing I'm against. All-black bands? They tend to be more mellow. There is less of a tendency to have animosity - animosity's not the right word - an attitude, they tend not to have an attitude toward white musicians, that an all-white band sometimes has towards black musicians. Again, it's a very subtle kind of a thing, it's not that they'll say bad things about them, it's just I know it's there, I know the feeling, I've been around them, and - some of the all-black bands are not good, they've thrown themselves together on the basis that they're black, they've their musicians and so on, and they haven't put enough effort to have quality, to have quality of performance. It's a generalisation, and it's a hard kind of generalisation I think, it's fraught with danger; there area lot of very fine black bands.

I've been hearing about some kind of syndicates that operate blues musicians, like the mafia might run a gas station, giving them a weekly salary. And that certain bars are a part of this syndicate circuit. Have you heard anything about that?

Not really. It's possible. I know people like James Cotton pay their bands a fixed rate every week, whether they work once a week or whether they work ten times week. And a musician who works regularly will play for less money than one you emply once a week, or once every two weeks, and if they know they're getting \$350 a week or \$375 a week they will play for it, because they know they are going to for sure have money to take home. But if you're talking about some syndicate, what you're talking about would probably - and this is a guess, I have no evidence whatsoever - something like Fitzgeralds and Ryans and maybe On Broadway, that are all about the same kind of an operation, they're all about the same size, maybe one's a little bigger than another, but they're all big operations, and they might do something like that. But I have no evidnce of that, and I really haven't even heard of that.

The people who mentioned it to me were either ignorant, or unwilling to tell me more.

I had actually proposed to several blues clubs pooling our resources and so forth, so that we could bring a band in that neither one of us could afford, but if we brought them in together, we could get a reduced rate. They might play one club 1

Tuesday Wednesday and Thursday, and the other club Friday and Saturday. And because the group came in to play for five working days, they would be willing probably to play for less than if they only came in and had one working day, and had to pay for transportation and hotel and so on. So it's a possibility.

I think we've covered everything I wanted to cover, unless you have any further thoughts on what we've talked about.

I think blues is growing in popularity, I think it's ascending, more and more clubs are playing it. This area here I call blues alley, because the two clubs are less than half a block apart, and we have more live blues that probably any other place in the country, and maybe in the world. So I was talking to the owners of B.L.U.E.S who are our friends, and I said I sort of considered it blues alley, and they agreed with the term, and we will probably use that term in the future, referring to our area. We are very close to each other, we support each other, we help musicians when they need help, and they help us. This particular relationship between the Kingston Mines and the club called B.L.U.E.S is a very close and very good one. I'm hoping that more quality blues clubs come into existence. I think that Chicago could use three or four more or even five more, that were good quality, because the more good quality blues you bring to people, the more of a fan group you can develop. (Falls asleep)

What do you mean by quality? North Side?

No, I think the term quality is a pure term. I think a better quality of music is a type of music performed in a better and better manner. A group that works twice a month or three times a month, is not going to play as well as if the same group plays three or four times a week, and here and there there's a demand put on them to rehearse and so on; so it's a pressure in a direction, of striving for excellence. And we strive for it, and so does B.L.U.E.S, and other clubs are pushing in that direction also. By having blues seven nights a week - and I did this consciously - I knew that people, when they wanted to hear some blues, would say, "Hey, let's go down to the mines." They would know that seven days a week they would be able to get some blues. And it has been helpful. I think that, again - why do you do it every night? I think that every band is sort of different, and so the music you hear tonight will not be the same as the band you hear tomorroe night. And it's kind of a fun thing; you can get together, you can clap your hands, you can get up and dance, you can sing, you can yell at the performers or at your friends, and nobody's going to get mad at you get really drunk and start to become obnoxious, but just have fun kind of stuff, that's what we're here for, we have a party seven nights a week, and we want everybody to have a good time!

It must get pretty exhausting for you.

I guess it's the Italian in me that wants to have a party seven nights a week.

You mentioned just now the increasing popularity of the blues, and I was wondering how long you see this lasting.

Well, it's in its ascendancy right now. It's changing now. I told you that there was the rural blues and the urban blues, and the urban being a harder type than the rural. The rural type of blues has upgraded itself, the urban type has done some

modifying; there is a basis for the Rolling Stones and other English rock musicians in the blues. I think that there are going to be new art forms coming out of the blues that we have yet to see. We have a young blues musician called Sugar Blue, who is a fantastic harmonica - or, as it's called in the business, 'harp' - player. And he does stuff with the harp that I have never seen or heard before. He's a new experience, he's a totally new experience, he's taken blues, and he has added a dash of jazz, and a dash of pop, and a lot of high energy, and he has come up with something new. He was with the Rolling Stones for a while, and he left them because he was becoming corrupted by it, and he wanted to do something new for the blues field. I think he is outstanding, and I think he's changing the face of blues with what he's doing. For instance, the first weekend that he had here, he got the band together, and they rehearsed Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday for five to six hours a night, before he would let them go out in front of an audience, because he was trying to get a certain sound and a certain perfection, and he achieved it. He'll be back here the weekend after this one coming up, and I think the man is fabulous, absolutely fabulous. He is challenging, chastising other young blues players, and saying to them, hey - it's time to create new stuff. The words he used was, 'I wasn't born in 1940, and I don't want to play like I was.' And he is playing blues like he was born later, and he is pling outstanding stuff, and his challenge, his pressure, will cause other blues players to do the same kind of thing. I think that the blues field is exciting, and becoming more exciting by the week.