

Blue Letter

Washington State

September 2023

REMEMBERING AN ICON
ALICE STUART

**PAUL RUCKER'S 78
& SOULFUL SEATTLE**
@ 23RD & JACKSON

CD PREVIEW
**LEE OSKAR'S
SHE SAID MAHALO**

Simply an Exceptional Soul Food Lunch

"Polly was right. I found myself in a Mississippi restaurant in Seattle's Central District."

By Eric Steiner

This past April, Editor Polly O'Keary covered the grand opening of Seattle's Simply Soulful restaurant, and during the production of the last issue, Polly and I joined Bluesletter Intern Will Crockett for lunch there. Simply Soulful is at 23rd and Jackson, an historically significant intersection in Seattle's Black community.

My smoked brisket and fries reminded me of Abe's BBQ on DeSoto Avenue in Clarksdale and Alcenia's Restaurant on Front Street in Memphis. Classic Southern places.

Will had just returned from a Widespread Panic show at Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Colorado, and Polly was rehearsing for her upcoming tour down the Oregon coast. This was no ordinary lunch, though.

During lunch, I was struck by three distinct sparks that have infused this magazine with a new sense of energy and purpose.

First of all, Polly is Will's professor of communications in her work toward her Ph.D. at the University of Washington in her day job, and Will is eager to hone his skills as one of our newest volunteers.

Secondly, I found Will's energy to not only learn about our blues community, but also his skill in crafting readable and interesting stories, refreshing.

Finally, our 90-minute lunch flew by as we explored new ways to show readers about our region's diverse and accomplished blues community in a Black-owned restaurant across the street from a shuttered Starbucks that once counted Magic Johnson as one of its backers. Jazzman Ray Brown recorded *Live at Starbucks* at the former 23rd and Jackson store to honor the neighborhood's place in Seattle music history.

During the production of this issue, I also learned that the Black-owned Black Coffee Northwest plans to move from Shoreline to the former Starbucks at 23rd and Jackson in a Vulcan Real Estate-managed area that



Public Art at 23rd & Jackson: "78" by Paul Rucker
(Photo by Lara Swimmer)

was once home to many Black-owned businesses.

As I finished my smoked brisket, I thanked Polly for her article on Simply Soulful in the April issue. Polly was right. I found myself in a Mississippi restaurant in Seattle's Central District. After lunch, I revisited the menu, and think that Chef Barbara Collins, daughter, and business partner Lillian Rambus have a recipe for success. Next time, I hope to get there before Barbara's sweet potato pie sells out!

I hadn't spent time at 23rd and Jackson in a long time. Back then, Promenade 23 featured a Red Apple Market and Welch's Hardware (and old-school, family-run neighborhood shop). Neighborhood mainstay Jackson's Catfish Corner is on the corner in a relative high-rise, and East African Imports Store and Restaurant is across the street.

I looked at the sidewalk in front of Simply Soulful and noticed public art, titled 78, that featured a green tone arm and a black LP that featured concentric circles of names of notable 32 venues and 70 local musicians

who worked in Jackson Street's thriving music community in the 20th century. Installed in 2021, the tone arm serves as a bench overlooking the LP.

The tone arm and LP were designed by artist and composer Paul Rucker, who relocated to White Center in 2019 after nearly 20 years in the Central District.

For me, his name rang a bell.

Loudly.

Paul was the Washington Blues Society's grant officer from the City of Seattle in Mayor Greg Nickels' administration in the early 2000s. He helped us get a Mayoral Proclamation that I read at our annual picnic at Seattle's Magnuson Park, and provided valuable technical assistance during the blues society's earliest experience with City of Seattle grants.

His career as an artist, and an activist, has certainly blossomed since his tenure working as an arts administrator for the city.

Former *Seattle Times* music critic, and jazz scholar, Paul de Barros' book *Jackson Street*



Paul Rucker by Ryan Stevenson

After Hours: The Roots of Jazz in Seattle (Sasquatch Books, 1993) informed Rucker's installation in front of Vulcan Real Estate's Jackson Apartments.

Paul Rucker's other public art pieces include "In Light of History" in Baltimore, "Human Rights Legacy" in Tacoma, and "Banking While Black," a presentation of historically thriving Black Wall Streets in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Durham, North Carolina and Richmond, Virginia.

Currently, Paul is Assistant Professor and the Curator for Creative Collaboration for VCU-arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. Paul's honors and recognition include work as a Guggenheim Fellow, a TED Senior Fellow, a Rauschenburg Fellow,

and an iCubed Arts Research Fellow at VCU.

Paul is also developing Cary Forward, a multidisciplinary art space and learning center in Baltimore, which will tell the story of systemic racism in the US.

He's planning to open in 2024 with initial support from the Mellon Foundation and the Art for Justice Fund.

As I learn more about Paul's work with Cary Forward, I'm adding it to my travel bucket list as I expect it will tell powerful stories just like ones I've experienced at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama. To learn more about Cary Forward, please go to www.caryforward.org.

As I finished this story, I was one of 1.9M viewers of Paul's powerful 7-minute TED talk, "The Symbols of Systemic Racism -- and How to Take Away Their Power," which features a crash course on the Ku Klux Klan (home to five million members, the population of New York City at one time), the value of cotton sales in 1860 (\$5B in today's dollars), and Paul's own 75 Klan robes that he designed and sewed by hand that were made out of kente cloth, camouflage, burlap, silk and satin. Paul recalled seeing Klan rallies growing up in South Carolina and noted that "the Klan's robe factory in Georgia kept 20,000 robes on hand just to keep up with demand."

As I left Will and Polly to drive home, I thought of how that intersection at 23rd and Jackson had changed over the years and how gentrification has impacted the community. It's complicated, and more nuanced than my limited experience working in the Central District when I worked for the Seattle Indian Center learning about grants and human services for most of the 1990s.

However, I truly hope that Simply Soulful and Black Coffee Northwest can, over time with Vulcan Real Estate's assistance, profitably anchor one of the most storied intersections that was once home to a music Mecca of Seattle's Black community.

Selfishly, I thought of just one thing as I drove onto the ferry in Mukilteo bound for home on Whidbey Island.

When can I get back to 23rd and Jackson for a catfish lunch at the Simply Soulful Cafe with greens, mac and cheese, and sweet potato pie?

