

## Center for the Arts Eagle Rock: A Hidden Gem among LA's Vast Landscape of World Music Venues



Story by Tom Nguyen

Covering the eclectic world music scene here in LA can be a daunting task because there are so many venues, of all sizes, spread across this sprawling region. First, there are the many summer series like [Grand Performances](#) in downtown, the Levitt Pavilions at [MacArthur Park](#) and [Pasadena](#), and [Skirball Cultural Center](#) and [Santa Monica Pier](#) on the West side, to bring world acts here for free. Then, if the artists can fill larger venues, there are many campus/cultural venues like UCLA's [Royce Hall](#), CSULA's [The Luckman](#), SMC's [The Broad Stage](#), CSUN's [VPAC](#), JACCC's [Aratani Theater](#), [Theatre Raymond Kabbaz](#), CSULB's [Carpenter](#)...that's a lot of driving I've done crisscrossing LA county to see shows! Not to mention all the venues where well established acts play ([El Rey](#), [Troubadour](#), Hollywood Forever's [Masonic Lodge](#), [The Regent](#), [Hollywood Bowl](#), [Walt Disney Concert Hall](#), etc.)

But what about emerging and lesser known acts who come to LA for the first time? This is where things drive me crazy! Artists (and their managers/bookers, if they have one) often don't know the lay of the land

here in LA, underestimate how big LA is, and often have few connections here to know the friendliest places to play. Because many bands don't have a huge fan base in LA yet, hearing about talented visiting new bands is really difficult unless you're subscribed to every possible newsletter and checking every venue's calendar every week (which is what I try to do and one of the reasons why I started **EnClave.LA** to track as many world music shows as I can).

Here's a short list of notable shows I've seen just to give an idea how scattered across the LA map and under the radar these shows can be: [Ibeyi](#) at [Hotel Cafe](#), Hollywood. [Oumar Konate](#) at [Witzend](#), Venice (now closed). [Vieux Farka Touré](#) at [Los Globos](#). [Fatoumata Diawara](#) at [Pomona College](#) (Pomona???) [Alsarah & the Nubatones](#) at [The Virgil](#). [Benyoro](#) at [The Mint](#). [Laura Mvula](#) at [The Bootleg](#). [Systema Solar](#) and [The Very Best](#) at [The Roxy](#). [Bunji Garlin](#) at [Sonos Studio](#) (now closed). [Krar Collective](#) at [Rosalind's](#) in Little Ethiopia. [Lira](#) at [Downstairs at Fifty Seven](#) (which was an amazing venue expertly curated by Jonathan Rudnick before it suddenly closed). [Omar Souleyman](#) at [Jewel's Catch One](#) (closed and recently opened as [Union](#)), [Baladino](#) at [Pico Union Project](#) (btw they return there this [Thursday](#)). Just following where [ATASH](#) will play next in LA is a guessing game: The Mint → [Ebanos Crossing](#) → [JTMF](#) → [Silverlake Lounge](#) → ???



Almost half of those small venues I mentioned aren't around any longer which testifies to LA's competitive and changing landscape of music venues. So let me add another venue to the mix that quickly won me over last week: [Center for the Arts Eagle Rock \(CFAER\)](#). If you're a fan of the community-driven [Eagle Rock Music Festival](#), you have them to thank for it. They produce the yearly event and have a sparse calendar of events that I've checked off and on the past few years. I hadn't been there since a [Dorian Wood](#) show years back but last week, I returned there to see one of my favorite artists [SK Kakraba](#) and opening band [Dhara World Music](#).



Photo Credit: Vivian Lin

The CFAER building itself is a beautiful architectural and historic landmark. Built in 1914 as a Carnegie library, it was declared a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument in 1985. The nonprofit CFAER came into being in 1997 (originally as the Eagle Rock Community Cultural Center) “to provide cultural events to the community, to serve as the hub of cultural exchange and the cornerstone of economic renewal through the development of a cultural corridor” in Eagle Rock. The high arched wood ceiling, columns, wooden floors and raised stage makes the venue a really elegant and gorgeous setting. It’s often rented out for weddings and filming locations.

As a music venue, it’s the right balance of an intimate venue with great sound and versatility. On this night, they had rows of chairs set up, leaving enough space in front of the stage, and around the sides and back to get up and dance. The atmosphere is open and casual and the show was all ages. Melinda Ann Farrell, the Executive Director, is really passionate about having a space that’s all inclusive for the community and for the entire family. I told her venues with noisy bars aren’t always the ideal place for world music bands but those are usually the only options for emerging acts, so it was refreshing to be in a venue where I could spot one family in the front row with their young children.

I arrived at the venue half-way into Dhara World Music’s set and was instantly impressed! The LA band is an instrumental ensemble consisting of xylophone, tablas, sitar, bass guitar and drum set and they blend so many influences from East and West. Together, their sound is rich, complex and infectious; separately, when they take turns soloing is when each of them really shine on their own as virtuoso players. Check out their newest video:

Ghanaian musician SK Kakraba started his set with a beautiful solo on his gyil, a traditional Ghanaian xylophone made from wood and calabash gourds. I've seen him perform many times throughout LA, where he now lives and teaches the art of making and playing gyils. The [LA Weekly](#) did not exaggerate when it dubbed him "The Greatest Xylophone Player in the World". Internationally respected musicophile [Awesome Tapes From Africa](#) released SK Kakraba's album "Songs of Paapieye" last year and this was the first time I saw SK with a band. Accompanying him with matching black and white robes and hats, the 3 members on percussion, drums and bass guitar, complemented the sounds of his gyil really nicely.

When played alone, the gyil has a hollow, buzzing sound and under SK's mastery, can have a very haunting and meditative effect. For someone like me who's accustomed to listening to West African instruments like djembe and kora, there's still something very other-worldly about the gyil. With a full band behind him, the pace of the music quickens, the gyil notes ring bright, and what was mental reflection before turns into a physical celebration on the dance floor! Here's a short clip:



What really won me over about CFAER? The polite emptiness that occupied the front of the stage throughout much of the night was filled with dancers by the end, including Melinda and her husband. You know you don't have to be self-conscious about getting out of your seat or blocking people's views when the executive director herself is out there getting down! Lots of world music, especially from Africa is participatory music and meant to be danced to, not sitting down. A major pet peeve of mine is these shows are often at seated venues where dancing is either forbidden or discouraged, but those venues are often the only ones who have the pull to bring well-known African artists here. So it's absolutely refreshing to be at a space where dancing is not only allowed but encouraged!

# CUICANI

*Now  
& Then*

*Album Release Show*



\$20 tickets  
include:  
Now & Then  
double album  
+  
art exhibit &  
installation

*Creating a World Where Many Worlds Fit*

Featuring

March  
25th

**Quetzal**  
&  
**Entre Mujeres**



**CENTER  
FOR THE  
ARTS**  
EAGLE ROCK

Coming up next at CFAER? [Cuicani](#), whose talented drummer Caitlin Moss played with SK that night, will have their [debut album release party](#) on Friday, March 25. The double album is 3 years in the making and I absolutely love this socially conscious band from LA! They've been such a huge community supporter lending their music and voices to community causes and their music is a rich mix of Afro Latin cumbia, soul, rock with 2 incredible singers: Marlene Beltran Cuauhtin and Marisa Martinez. They'll be joined by East LA's Grammy-winning [Quetzal](#) and [Entre Mujeres](#)! Also on the horizon is a show with Afro-Cuban singer [Daymé Arocena](#) (date TBA). You can find monthly [Noches de Trova](#) there too!

So, Angelenos, drive up to Colorado Blvd. for a family friendly eclectic music venue and if you're a local or new band coming to LA, you need to put CFAER on your radar and contact [Matt Himes](#), their Events Director. He's their magic man with vast experience curating and producing shows in LA's vast music scene, and you'll see him running back and forth, doing sound and technicals and making sure everything runs smoothly. Despite rapid changes in Eagle Rock (like much of LA), Melinda says the historical landmark is here to stay and safe from gentrification. Besides music events, the nonprofit also has after-school arts programs and summer art camps for youth in the community and I hope to see you at one of their upcoming events and supporting a worthy and overlooked gem in our cultural music & arts community.

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