

arts/entertainment

The soul of the blues can be found in Zoo Bar

Artist-musician Larry Boehmer is the owner of the Zoo Bar at 136 N. 14th St. The Zoo is one of the longest-lived bars in town, and Boehmer talks about it in this interview.

MZ: Describe the Zoo to me.

LB: 20 by 90 feet. Hardwood floors. Hard walls—covered with faded old posters dating from about '73 to the present. Small, funky stage, a very good sound system—in other words a Honky Tonk. We've got an old juke box as well as taped music—but I'd always want a juke. It's essential.

michael zangari

MZ: What's on the juke?

LB: The juke box is full of blues... no commercial stuff—no Top 40, although a lot of the songs on there were Top 100 at one time. Most of them are dated from the '50s or early '60s. Soul... Wilson Pickett. Things that I feel are good.

(Earlier in the conversation Boehmer had mentioned that in the early days when he was still a graduate student and the Zoo had just switched management and names with a bar called the Bourbon, that business wasn't very good. Boehmer talked to the owner and said "If you let me put a row of songs (10 songs) in the juke, I'll bring all my friends in..." As it was, he was able to add more and more songs to the juke before he owned the bar.)

MZ: The juke box has been a bit of a calling card for the Zoo.

LB: Yeah. Yeah. I think so. Most bars that have juke boxes allow the juke box owner to select the songs. They try and channel the music for the bar—country for a country bar etc, but basically they pick new songs. Well, I could never stand that, we did that in the early days to a degree. The juke box man would slip in some new records and we'd be rockin' real good, then all of a sudden, John Denver would come on. I'd start screaming and run for the telephone and call the guy and say "Get down here right away, this has got to go." After about six calls he'd realize we weren't going to put up with that stuff. It's actually to their advantage now to let me do it because I buy the records. They save money. People donate records from time to time.

MZ: How about the cartoons on the wall?

LB: They just pop up. There was a time a few years ago when an awful lot of our customers were working at Hinkle and Joyce Hardware, and most of them were musicians. That whole Bozo thing (on the wall) started at Hinkle and Joyce Hardware. They had tremendous cartoons down there. Just everywhere. These guys were stock boys and things like that—a crazy bunch of guys, and they came into the Zoo. They're the Bozo artists. A number of them are still around.

Charlie Johnson is one—Doug Rosencrantz is another. Some of them are quite good.

MZ: I've spent many a night staring at the walls.

LB: Ever see "Shithouse Mouse?" I don't know if there is a current Shithouse Mouse or not. That's a Rosencrantz Bozo there. (Points to a giant spray-painted Bozo on his office wall.) It's one of those 3 a.m. Bozos.

MZ: There seems to be a great sense of community here at the Zoo. What's the common link?

LB: I don't know what the common link is really. We have well-educated bartenders. So are our patrons in one way or another. Liberals, most of them. College and working class. There is a link with the music, but not totally. I've been to people's houses for parties, and you might not find any blues in their album collections. I don't know what the link is. We seem to have a lot of writers, musicians—visual artists. The community changes constantly although we have some people who have been here for years. There is a sense of community. We've found that out when there has been trouble. The patrons engulf the trouble maker and toss them out of the bar, rather than stand back and watch in awe or push the trouble even further. There are a lot of people around ready to help out. We don't want that sort of atmosphere, and neither do they.

MZ: You feature different types of live music—country, reggae,—and also have worked yourself well into the Chicago circuit.

LB: Yes we really have. We have been running blues often enough and for long enough time that's true... You know clubs like this come and go. This place is an odd

one in that we've been around for seven years, and in the scope of music bars in the country, that is a long time. They tend to fold. It's a risky business. It's fairly easy to lose a lot of money in a very short time. So by staying in the game long enough we've gotten press in national publications like *Living Blues*. We've had notes in *Blues Unlimited*—that's the other major blues magazine out of London. We have a lot of ambassadors like Luther Allison and Eddie Clearwater—all the guys that come in here to play and really enjoy the place. It's not just a standard jive line. The crowd is warm, the place is funky, and they come in and have a really good time. They wear Zoo Bar T-shirts in France and all over Europe when they tour there. So the word spreads. We get all kinds of interesting mail from all over. I've sent T-shirts to Brussels, London, to South America—all over Europe. This is an internationally known club—known to a very small little niche—the blues world. All the blues nuts around the world know about the Zoo Bar, even if they've never been here.

MZ: Any chance of the Zoo Bar expanding or moving?

LB: I don't have anything going right now. It might happen. Might happen within the year.

MZ: Do you worry about keeping the same atmosphere?

LB: Definitely. That's probably the main reason I haven't moved.



Photo by Mitch Hrdlicka

Larry Boehmer, owner of the Zoo Bar.

Oscar winning film 'Best Boy' is a labor of love

By Jennifer Bauman

When Producer/Director Ira Wohl accepted an Academy Award last spring for *Best Boy* (Best Feature Documentary), he seemed to stand apart from the rest of the award ceremony histrionics. Wohl's words and attitude made one envision a carefully and lovingly made film. *Best Boy* verifies that assumption.

movie review

Wohl records three years in the lives of his cousin, Philly Wohl, and Philly's parents, Pearl and Max. Philly is 52 when the film begins. He has been mentally retarded since birth and, except for a couple of years in an institution when he was about 12, he has always lived with his parents.

Concerned about how Philly would deal with the loss of his parents, Ira suggested that the family begin to work on breaking

Philly's complete dependence on Max and Pearl. *Best Boy* follows the Wohl's progress in achieving this goal.

Ira Wohl is the producer of a children's television program *The Big Blue Marble*, and he used facilities and equipment from that program for this project. Additional funding came from National Endowment for the Arts and New York State Council for the Arts grants. But, above all, *Best Boy* was a labor of love.

Wohl moved a small crew into his cousin's home, filming them throughout their daily activities. Max, Pearl, and Philly accept Wohl and his camera as part of the family, so most of the sense of embarrassment potential to the situation is removed.

Best Boy has none of the feeling of voyeurism that similar efforts such as the PBS series, *An American Family*, display.

Philly and his family don't seem to feel a need to play up to the camera. Philly is clearly fascinated by the film equipment, and there is interaction between Ira behind the camera and the others in front of it. But most of the time, the camera is gentle and relatively inobtrusive.

The overall effect is reminiscent of Albert and David Maysles's 1975 documentary, *Grey Gardens*. The rapport between director and subjects is quite obvious in the final product; the Wohls accept the filmmaking activities into their lives with grace.

Watching *Best Boy*, we are given a chance to learn a great deal about the Wohl family. Pearl and Max are in their seventies, much worn for having cared for children nonstop since early adulthood. Philly has always been Pearl's "baby" and her "best boy" and, in many ways, she is as dependent upon him as he is upon her. Max is reluctant to be demonstrative in his feelings for Pearl and Philly, but he is preoccupied with his own failing health.

Philly's social skills are less seriously impaired than his intellectual ability. He can count to ten only with help when *Best Boy* begins, and even after attending school for some time, he confuses dimes and nickels.

But Philly is able to be spontaneous and playful in a way that most adults feel they cannot be. He is affectionate, likes to hold people's hands and sing with them. Dupli-

cating the sounds phonetically and the tunes naturally, he sings "As Time Goes By" and "The Anniversary Waltz". After seeing *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Winter Garden Theater, Philly meets Zero Mostel backstage, and they sing "If I Were a Rich Man" together.

Philly is frank about his feelings. He displays impatience and sadness as openly as happiness. When he is snowed-in at home one day and cannot go to school, he paces and jumps restlessly at the window.

During the course of *Best Boy*, Philly makes progress toward attaining a modest degree of self-sufficiency. He goes on his first outing with Ira to the Bronx Zoo. He begins to attend a day school, and goes to summer camp in the Catskills. It's impossible not to share Philly's pride when he goes out by himself for the first time to buy an ice cream sandwich.

By the time we see Philly deal successfully with Max's death, and when he moves away from home to a house with a group of disabled people, we know he has grown and that he will survive.

Best Boy is currently showing at the Plaza Four Theaters.