

DIVERSIONS

The Queen of K.C.



Photos by Ward Williams/Diversions

By Stew Magnuson
Diversions

The first time I saw Earlene Owens, I was sitting at the far end of the Zoo Bar on a Sunday eating Ernie's famous bar-be-cued chicken and watching the World Series on TV without sound. Magic Slim and the Teardrops were laying down their hard blues sound on stage. The three best things about America were right in front of me: blues, bar-be-cue and baseball. But not one of these things were overwhelming me, they were just a perfect blend of Americana — a whole in itself.

Suddenly, a big woman dressed in a long, gold, sequined gown strolled through the door. A big, sharp-looking man wearing a black suit and a blacker mustache followed her a pace behind. Everyone at the bar forgot the Bo Sox and Mets for a second and let their eyes follow the couple as they walked to a table and sat down.

"Oh well," I thought, "some people like to dress up for Magic Slim, I guess." I went back to the game and my chicken and didn't think another thing of the two.

A short while later, Magic Slim bellowed through the microphone, "Ladies and gentlemen, from Kansas City, Miss Earlene Owens!" Then the gold, shimmering woman climbed on stage and took the mike. She asked the crowd how they were doing that night. She asked the crowd if they wanted to hear the blues. "Yeah, yeah," they all screamed. And the woman let out a soulful moan, then launched into a down and dirty tune, letting the audience not only hear but feel her blues with every note. By the end of the song, the laid-back Sunday-night crowd was alive and awed.

I forgot the game.
"Who is this?"

Her name is Earlene Owens, The Queen of the Kansas City Blues. She's the mother of five and grandmother of six, and she has four diamond studs centered across her front teeth. She's a blues singer, a real entertainer and a part-time manager for male and female strippers. And best of all, she's singing all this week with Magic Slim and the Teardrops

at the Zoo Bar.

Life story

Owens grew up in Beaumont, Texas, singing in a high-school chorus. She had no dreams of becoming an entertainer. She married at 17 and lived an ordinary life, raising five children and moving to Kansas City in 1967.

Her entrance into show business came on a bet.

"My girlfriend and I were at this talent show one time. This girl was singing and I said, 'I can do better than her!' She said, 'I don't think you can,' then we bet on it. And I joined the talent show."

Owens won five consecutive titles at talent shows; then the agents started calling, booking her as an opening act in the Kansas City area, letting her sing Aretha Franklin tunes and other rhythm and blues standards. Then they started booking her with blues artists, letting her warm up with such greats as Albert Collins, Albert King, Z.Z. Hill and her idol, Chicago guitarist Little Milton. Then she left R and B forever, finding a perfect niche in the K.C. blues scene.

About two years ago, Owens started singing regularly with the Ray Drews blues review, which brought her to Lincoln for the first time last summer. On the very first night she sang, Larry Boehmer, owner of the Zoo and bassist for the Tablerockers, asked her to record with the band. The result was the as yet unreleased "Taxi," an achingly beautiful ballad written by Jay Blackfoot that features the full range of Owens' singing ability. It's a song where she begs and pleads the taxi driver to get her to the other side of town just as fast as he can, where her baby waits.

The Battle of the Blues Queens

The next time Owens made it to Lincoln was on a stroke of genius by Boehmer. He already had booked Chicago's Zora Young for a three-night stand. Why not invite Owens up to sing with Young's band? Why not have them both sing a couple of songs in each set, then get up together for an encore at the end of the night?

It worked. The line formed early on the weekend nights as the word spread about one

of the best, most unique shows to hit the Zoo in years. Since the show last February, Young and Owens have become good friends. And Owens insists that it really wasn't a battle at all.

"We just both do to the best of our abilities . . . I wasn't trying to out-star her and she wasn't trying to out-star me. We were just trying to play what the people liked."

Back with Slim

Last Monday was just about the most fun a person could have on a Monday night in Lin-

"There is no entertainer nowhere in the United States with diamonds on their teeth. But I wanted to be different. I like to have a click of my own."

—Owens

coln. Slim and the Teardrops were cooking like never before. Owens climbed on stage and let loose. Her voice could change in an instant from as sweet as chocolate to a mean growl.

"Ladies, I want you to keep your cotton pickin' hands off my man. Because that man is mine, ladies!" Then she screamed the blues, warning every woman off, letting her diamond studs and silver-black gown shine under the orange glow of the Zoo Bar lights.

"I want to be wearing something different from somebody that's sitting in the audience . . . When you're on stage you're supposed to look different . . . You can't be wearing what you can buy in any store."

All of Owens' gowns are designed just for her. But it's her teeth that get the most attention.

"There is no entertainer nowhere in the United States with diamonds on her teeth. But I wanted to be different. I like to have a click of my own."

The four diamond studs are family heirlooms from her grandmother. They've been permanently cemented in for the past seven years. What would Grandma have thought about her diamonds being used for dental flash?

"She would have thought I was crazy! She was old-fashioned, of course."

Part-time job

"My dream was to always have four beautiful men singing and dancing in the background when I performed but that didn't work out."

Owens was at an all-male stripper show a year and a half ago when she discovered another way to get involved in show business. She struck up a conversation with the men in the show after a performance and asked them if they wanted a manager.

Soon Owens was their manager and emcee of the show. Owens said she makes sure they have beautiful costumes and plenty of towels, and tell a dirty joke or two to the audience.

"I also have my bucket of ice in case one of the men gets a little rambunctious dancing with the ladies. I just go up and drop a little ice down their g-string."

Owens' future

For now, Owens patiently awaits the release of the "Taxi" single, which she said will be a hit. Then she hopes to release it with some other material on an album. Owens will be back trading off blues standards with Zora Young June 10 to 11, and she hopes to tour Europe this summer with Magic Slim.

"If I never made it real, real big in this business, I'm satisfied . . . I did what I wanted to do and came out smelling like a rose, so that's fine. I make enough money to provide for my family, so I'll just be happy to know when my grandkids look in some family album, that their Grammy was an entertainer."