

March 23, 2008|Richard Cromelin, Times Staff Writer

## Shaking the rock 'n' roll landscape

The old Ash Grove changed rock's course.  
A 50th-anniversary celebration is planned.

"The windshield wipers don't work," Ed Pearl warned as he approached his beat-up 1982 Volvo station wagon. That made the short drive from Echo Park to Silver Lake a bit of an adventure on a recent rainy afternoon, but Pearl handled the curves and arrived intact at his destination, the home of Aiyana Elliott.

Elliott, who made an acclaimed 2000 movie about her father, folk singer Ramblin' Jack Elliott, is filming a documentary about Pearl and his storied Los Angeles music club, the Ash Grove, so her hillside house seemed like a good place to sit down and talk about that history.

Walking toward the house, the ruffled impresario took a folded piece of paper from his pocket. It was a contract for blues singer John Hammond, one of the performers at the 50th-anniversary celebration of the Ash Grove being held April 18 to 20 at UCLA. There had been a problem at the fax shop that morning, so Pearl was still stuck with a pesky detail.

It's always something, but at 70, Pearl is happy to be in the mix again. It hasn't been the same since the Ash Grove closed in 1974, but he's spent the last two years putting together the anniversary event, which includes two Royce Hall concerts, a few smaller ones and a day of workshops and panels. In addition to Elliott and Hammond, the lineup includes Taj Mahal, Ry Cooder, Mike Seeger, the Freedom Singers, Michelle Shocked, Roland White, Dave Alvin and the Watts Prophets.

"It's not fun, but I do it," Pearl said of the process. Dealing with the details has always been a necessary evil for Pearl, but the payoff -- a unique artistic and cultural experience -- is worth it.

"I'm an organizer, so I can count, and I know how to draw people in," he said. "But I'm not a good businessman because I don't have the right motives."

Pearl has a soft voice and a gentle, distracted manner, but there's a fierce purpose behind this anniversary observation. Just ask him if he thinks he's received the credit he deserves, then stand back.

"No, not at all, no, nothing, zero, nothing, nothing," he said, sitting on a couch in Elliott's living room. "It's just a reality. . . . Nobody ever tried to replicate it, nobody ever asked me to help them replicate it or to do anything, as a matter of fact. This 50th anniversary comes around once in a lifetime, obviously, and hopefully something will inspire people to want to do that."

### **Western expansion**

PEARL'S indignation might not be misplaced. More than merely a contributor to the Los Angeles musical landscape, he can be seen as an arts-world counterpart of Brooklyn Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley, who moved his team to Los Angeles the same year the Ash Grove opened.

Like O'Malley, Pearl shifted the geographical balance of an American institution, opening the West to the traditional performers based in the South and the Eastern Seaboard. The Ash Grove gave them a year-round destination in a region where their only outlet had been the annual Berkeley Folk Festival, and the game was changed forever.

"When I first heard those initial recordings that [ethnomusicologist] Harry Smith collected, there was such a ring of truth and power," Pearl said. "I knew then that there was a culture that was different than what the '50s was. . . . I always had it in mind that I would like to bring those people in. . . . And I looked for them."

Suddenly Southern Californians could see the real thing. Doc Watson, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, Bill Monroe, Skip James, Roscoe Holcombe, Mother Maybelle Carter and more all came through. Their audiences included young musicians who would soon create their own folk, blues and rock hybrids, often using the Ash Grove as their platform.

Roger McGuinn played his first professional solo show and met future Byrds bandmate David Crosby there. Cooder and Mahal announced their arrival with the incandescent rock band the Rising Sons. Country-rock guitar icon Clarence White and his brother Roland did the same with the Country Boys. Later, the Blasters' Phil and Dave Alvin hustled rides from Downey when they were teenagers to study the blues masters.

"There was no other place in my recollection that had such a commitment, kind of fearless and almost foolish at times, and ability to present some wonderful and obscure artists," said Mike Seeger, whose mountain-music trio the New Lost City Ramblers made its first Ash Grove appearance in 1960.

"There was a lot of the blues guys that only came out here because of Ed," said Dave Alvin, now a stalwart of the current folk scene.

"Some of the more idiosyncratic performers like Juke Boy Bonner, Rev. Gary Davis, these were people that only came out here because of the Ash Grove, and so it really was a place where you could see kind of mythological figures come to life."

### **'Stupid about money'**

Unlike the archcapitalist O'Malley, Pearl was an idealist with a leftist bent.

"I feel this music and culture, and I'm really stupid about money," he said. "But I'm perfectly happy living on next to nothing. I am. I'm very easily satisfied."

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he grew up with three siblings in the culturally mixed area of East Los Angeles between Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights.

He played football at Roosevelt High but was always fascinated by the arts and culture. He became a music fan when a girlfriend took him to see Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson at a Unitarian church. While a student at UCLA, he joined the school's folk and dance club, and when some members of Carmen Amaya's flamenco troupe were in town, Pearl took the plunge and presented them at the Jazz Concert Hall on Crenshaw Boulevard.

After a few more shows, club owners were asking him to book their places, but he didn't feel comfortable in the typical nightclub. So he looked for one of his own.

He got a good deal on a 4,200-square-foot furniture factory on a then-desolate stretch of Melrose Avenue near Crescent Heights, now the site of the Improv comedy club. After raising \$10,000 from family and friends, he opened the Ash Grove on July 11, 1958, with local folk singer Guy Carawan, Pearl's guitar teacher Geronimo Villarino and blues singer Brownie McGhee.

"I had to learn a lot real fast, so it was very scary," Pearl said. "But the music was great, there were tons of people."

Though Pearl got some bigger paydays producing two folk festivals at UCLA and large concerts by Joan Baez and Pete Seeger, there wasn't much profit margin at the club.

But Pearl had something more in mind than just a thriving entertainment center. He began mounting exhibits in the Ash Grove's spacious lobby of photos and other media to illustrate the culture that produced the performers' music.

Bernice Johnson Reagon's civil rights vocal group the Freedom Singers epitomized the Ash Grove mission when Pearl booked them for a six-week engagement in 1963.

"Lots of people talked to us and wanted to know more about what was going on in the South. It was a very important experience," said Reagon.

"I know that we didn't get another invitation of that scope during that time. I think it really demonstrated something about Ed's understanding of music and the kind of struggle we were involved in."

### **Anti-commercialism**

By that time, Pearl and the Ash Grove were catching the wave of art, activism and experimentation that would define the 1960s, and although he resisted commercialism, he didn't mind plugging in.

Mick Jagger was a semi-regular for the blues titans Pearl booked, and one night all of the Rolling Stones came in. Pearl was unimpressed with celebrity customers as well as the showbiz luster of the Troubadour and the burgeoning Sunset Strip clubs.

"That commercial scene where people are treated differently is the opposite of what I wanted to do."

Instead, he became increasingly political, working closely with the Peace and Freedom Party. He thinks that might have distracted him from running the club, but he figures the end was inevitable, even before the last of three arson fires closed it for good in 1974.

After that, Pearl, who has been married and divorced twice, helped the progressive Peoples College of Law get off the ground, and produced an assortment of concerts and stage productions.

He also found himself drinking heavily, a habit that persisted for a decade before he put on the brakes in 1983.

He tried for a time to open another club in Hollywood, and he did launch a second Ash Grove on the Santa Monica Pier in 1996 that lasted for a year. He was recently

involved in the internal restructuring at the Pacifica Foundation, which operates radio station KPFK-FM (90.7). When he went to the Rose Parade on New Year's Day, it was to protest the Iraq war, not to see the floats.

But the anniversary celebration has him in full gear again, and as it happens, he senses something familiar in the political winds.

"JFK started people on the road to activism through the Peace Corps, and the same thing's happening now," he said. "People do want hope, [Sen. Barack] Obama's absolutely right. . . . And he is articulating it.

"The difference between the '60s and now is that this is far vaster. . . . It's a very interesting period."

One that might be just right for a great song with the ring of truth.

"I think that's a critical thing, to have a place where people can go to physically," Pearl said, clinging to his own dream. "So yes, I'd love to do that. I'm throwing the dice with this thing. . . . If this breaks right somehow. . . ."

He paused. "It would have to be the kind of thing where people would be willing to give me very much of a free hand to do a cultural thing, not just as a moneymaker."

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### **Firsthand experience**

"The Ash Grove was something of legend that we heard about over in Tucson, and it was a big reason for wanting to move over to California. . . . The first people that I saw there were the Rising Sons, with Taj [Mahal] and Ry [Cooder], and that made a big impression on me, let me tell you -- 'Whoa, they've got some kind of guitar players over here. . . .' And I just thought this is where I have to be. . . . That was a very special place. They had really high quality artists, and it was a place of true information dissemination. I just remember the glow it had about it. . . . Those kind of things have a value that's beyond money." --

Linda Ronstadt

*The future pop star moved to L.A. in 1965. She met Kenny Edwards, a member of her first band, the Stone Poneys, when he was working at the McCabe's Guitar Shop branch at the Ash Grove.*

"Ever since that record came out, people come up to me, 'Oh, I used to go there.' And then you kind of whittle it down to where you realize you were at the same show the same night. . . . Like the night an obscure Chicago bluesman named J.B. Hutto, he had an epileptic fit on stage. And over the years I thought, 'Well, maybe I imagined that.' And then I was playing this club up in Santa Cruz, I was talking to the guy that owned it, and we were talking, 'Who'd you see?' 'J.B. Hutto.' 'Epileptic fit?' 'Yes!' "-- Dave Alvin  
*A member of the Blasters and X and has been a solo artist since 1987. His 2004 album, "Ashgrove," used memories of the club as a stage-setter for a midlife reassessment.*

"Playing the Ash Grove was an exciting thing to me. . . . I remember the first trip we did, the late Clarence Ashley . . . Fred Price, Clint Howard and I borrowed a little station wagon

from Clarence Ashley's son and drove to California and back, and I remember thinking, 'Lord, what a big old country this is.' I was a mountaineer, just a country boy, I'd never been nowhere like that before. We got along with Ed, we didn't fight with him or anything, bless his heart. He was a pretty good boy."-- Doc Watson

*The singer-guitarist from Deep Gap, N.C., continues to perform occasionally at age 85.*

"I'm looking forward to being in an environment where people are celebrating the longevity of Ed's work in that community and actually serving a kind of music culture that has meaning that's wider and deeper than just strictly being a music business organization. And I think there isn't anything that shows that more than his presenting the Freedom Singers for six weeks in 1963."-- Bernice Johnson Reagon

*A member of the Freedom Singers and later the founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock.*