

# Marcia Ball remains on a roll

## Blues pianist marks birthday with three show that also benefit HAAM and Sweet Home New Orleans.

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Marcia Ball wants a Grammy for her birthday.

Oh, sure, she knows people will talk. But deep down she knows that little golden gramophone will look just fine on the hood of her tour van.

Well, as it happens, Ball is up for a Grammy on Sunday — for Best Contemporary Blues Album — for her latest release, "Peace, Love & BBQ." And her birthday is in fact on the immediate horizon. Ball, the timeless and indefatigable piano-playing fixture on the Austin music landscape, is turning 60 on March 20. And, Grammy in hand or no, she's going to party. (She does plan to attend the ceremony Sunday.)

"I'm only doing this once," she says of this month's sold-out three-day extravaganza that she's planning to celebrate the beginning of her seventh decade.

On Valentine's Day weekend she will throw a mini-Jazzfest of her own at Antone's. Friday evening finds her sharing the stage with some of her Louisiana zydeco and Cajun amigos, including Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys, Geno Delafosse & French Rockin' Boogie and guitarist Sonny Landreth. Valentine's Day itself is a sort of Girls-Night-Out featuring Ball and Angela Strehli, Maria Muldaur, Tracy Nelson, Miss Lavelle White, Sarah Brown and Lou Ann Barton. Feb. 15 wraps up with one of Ball's celebrated brunch-time "Pianoramas," a bare-knuckles throwdown starring "Her Tallness" (as she's playfully christened) and fellow "piano professors" Floyd Domino, Johnny Nicholas, Nick Connolly and Riley Osborne.

The whole shebang is also serving as a fundraiser for the Health Alliance of Austin Musicians and Sweet Home New Orleans, an assistance organization for Crescent City musicians.

The Big Six-O, she admits, has a certain resonance. "I feel great and don't consider myself to have diminished energy," she says one day after band rehearsal at the vintage South Austin house she shares with her husband, painter Gordon Fowler.

"But I do have a sense of urgency. If I'm going to say it and going to do it, I really need to get on with it. So if I'm going to be raising money for something I believe in, if I'm going to be writing songs or learning songs, or if I'm going to become a better piano player, I better get it on.

"And yet, I'm in this grace period where I'm probably not as tired as I was when I had teenagers, so I'm in a really good place. But I don't want to waste my time."

For all of her celebrated Louisiana-style keyboard prowess, Ball did not start off in Austin as a pianist. Born just inside Texas in the town of Orange, she grew up across the Sabine River in Vinton, La., where a string of wide-open clubs and honky-tonks beckoned generations of Texas teenagers. Midway between Houston and Lafayette, Vinton lies at ground zero on a fertile patch of musical territory where blues, soul, country, swamp pop, Cajun and zydeco all flourished in wild profusion; talents as diverse as Janis Joplin, George Jones and Clifton Chenier all hailed from the region.

In classic fashion, Ball's van broke down in Austin in 1970 as she was making her way to San Francisco.

Before long, she was front and center as the "girl singer" of Freda and the Firedogs, a beloved country-rock ensemble that caught the first wave of the city's progressive country boom. The band held forth at the Split Rail, an agreeably rundown beer joint just across the river in South Austin (a condo tower stands on the site today).

"The crowd would scream," she recalls fondly. "They were just transported. And that was so weird to somebody like me, who cried all the way home with frustration from practically every gig I ever played before I was in that band. Classic country will never die in Austin. You can still play the Firedogs' set list and draw a crowd. But you still can't make more than \$300 a night!"

But the blues kept tugging at her. As a teenager in 1962, Ball had seen a very pregnant Irma Thomas bring down the house. "She blew me away," Ball said in 2008. "She caught me totally unaware." (35 years later, the two would team up with singer Tracy Nelson to record an acclaimed album, "Sing It!", which was also nominated for a Grammy).

The heir to a family piano-playing tradition, Ball fell under the spell of classic New Orleans R&B "piano professors" like Fats Domino, James Booker, Doctor John, Professor Longhair and Allen Toussaint. Her 1974 debut album, "Circuit Queen," packaged her as a country singer in the shadow of Patsy Cline. But by the early '80s she had switched her focus and began hiring rhythm and blues players to flesh out her band. She played her first gig at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in 1978 and released her first full-throated R&B effort, "Soulful Dress," in 1989.

She was what you might call hard to overlook. For one thing, in heels she tops out at about 6 feet tall. Legs up to her neck, as the saying goes. And she was, well, a she, and her corner of the musical universe was traditionally dominated by men.

"I was Austin's sweetheart in 1973, when there were about four women," she says. "There was Angela and Lou Ann (with whom she recorded another "girl group" album, "Dreams Come True")."

Then that hussy Kelly Willis came along, Ball's interviewer teases. "And Kelly and Toni Price and Lucinda Williams," she adds with a laugh. "It's always been fun to be one of the women in the Austin scene, and there're now many more than there used to be. Used to be you could count them on one hand, especially if you had six fingers. Now we're very rich with female talent. I think time has given us some parity."

It was during that era, the early '80s, that she met and married Gordon Fowler. An ex-Marine who had made a young fortune by selling his dad's Wick's Two Alarm Chili mix, Fowler's playful insouciance and down-home bonhomie matched Ball's own.

"I was driving a clunker when I started dating Marcia," he once recalled. "And I had just made a bunch of money from selling the chili company, so the day before I went to pick her up for our first date, I bought a Ferrari. It was a real white-trash thing to do, but I wanted to impress her."

"She came out the door, and I looked at her and looked at those little bucket seats and thought uh-oh. But she slid right in and said, 'Baby, don't ever think a woman can't fit into a Ferrari.'"

The car went back to the dealer but the marriage is still going strong.

So is Ball's career, to judge by the look of things: a baker's dozen albums, a full tour calendar, a handful of prestigious W.C. Handy Blues Awards. And four Grammy nominations.

"I just want to continue," she says simply. "By God, if Pinetop Perkins can do it at 95, I hope I can still do it. And I hope I can dress as snappy as he does while I'm doin' it."