

Fire The Canon

LA's Leimert Park re-writes Crenshaw's gangsta image

Say what you will about the respective oeuvres of the Ices, Cube and T—high-minded artistry just isn't the most famous export of South LA's Crenshaw District. But take a trip down that boulevard immortalized by so many gangsta anthems, cruise past Dr. Grillz' specialty shop for gold fronts, hook a left just beyond The Liquor Bank Store, and you'll find yourself on hallowed literary ground.

A handful of city blocks amidst an urban ocean, Leimert Park has long been a stronghold for Afrocentric arts and intellectualism. In the 1940s, Ray and Ella relocated there, effectively ushering black independence into a neighborhood previously made off-limits by segregation. Today, the area is typified by a small set of independent businesses run by activists and artists, where—alongside two other overlooked Los Angeles "bests" (Phillips Bar-B-Que, and the Project Blowed open mic)—you'll find the greatest stash of black books the city has to offer.

Nearly every shop on Degnan Boulevard (L.P.'s main street) stocks a handful of empowering tomes, but there are two main sources for text. The first is an institution. Eso Won Books has been in business 20 years, and owners James Fugate and Tom Hamilton are experts in all things counterculture. Whatever your new-book needs, they've got it, from trashy ghetto pulp and local poetry to slave narratives and pro-black speeches on disc. Directly across the street is the second spot, Zambezi Bazaar, specializing in used goods. Ostensibly, this boutique sells shea butters and essential oils, but its second floor is a barely-mined mother lode of the radical and rare. Alden Kimbrough's stacks of vintage magazines and pamphlets (*Jet*, *The Liberator*, *Down Beat*, *The Black Panther Community News Service*, small-press socialist missives) should be in a museum, and his bookshelves are full of conscious gems priced to sell (alongside a few LP crates of mint-condition jazz odysseys).

But the best part of the Park is the people themselves. Zambezi's in-store selection barely scratches the surface of the Kimbrough cache. Alden and his sisters, who co-own the shop, take their collection on the road a few times a year, exhibiting at museums and schools nationwide. And they're more than happy to share whatever they have—stories, recommendations, the books themselves—with anyone who comes in.

"These are fountains of knowledge," says Alden. "Students come here all the time who may not have the bread to buy something, but they'll sit down and read for three hours. If I have time, I come up and talk with them. It's a labor of love."

Likewise, Eso Won's owners know their customers by name and continue to throw massive signing events with folks like Walter Mosley and Barack Obama, despite meager sales and the constant threat of closure.

"In the '60s and '70s, societies were smaller," says James Fugate. "People went to their neighborhood stores. Now you have Barnes & Noble, and the big-box places, and people can get their information so many different ways... but these books will never be in the chain stores."

All the more reason to make that trip to Leimert sooner than later. As Tupac once famously said, "Weekends: Crenshaw...MLK." Do we need to spell it out for you?

—Chris Martins



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—Photography by Jiro Schieder and Larry Hirshowitz