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Barbara Burrell’s success story behind Sky’s Gourmet Tacos
By Michele Stueven
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THE SKY IS THE LIMIT FOR BARBARA BURRELL

Black Restaurant Week spotlight on the success story behind Sky’s Gourmet Tacos

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

The electrifying convergence of a pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement has changed the landscape of Los Angeles forever, redefining the city as we know it and leaving us in a new normal with more questions than answers. But for the dauntless spirit and success story that is Barbara Burrell – the sky is the limit.

It’s Black Restaurant Week and the owner of Sky’s Gourmet Tacos, Burrell is celebrating her 28-year-old business in Mid City that she has fought all odds – as a single African American mother of two – to not only sustain, but expand.

As she tells it, it was all of those setbacks (and healthy amount of spite) to which she credits her success and survival.

“I saw the problems sure; I saw the issues of being an African American,” Burrell tells L.A. Weekly about wanting to open up her own taco stand after growing weary of the corporate world in 1992. “I tried to get a loan at the bank. They all laughed at me, even though I had good credit. Of course I saw the differences, but I had to go on. I borrowed money from my sisters and my family and was self-funded from the first day. Right or wrong, we just opened the doors. That was the beginning of a journey that is still not complete. We’re still on that road.”

But there have been plenty of bumps along that road.

“Just as the business got going, my fiancée dropped dead of a heart attack,” says Burrell in Sky’s bricked courtyard. “He was about 42 and we had enjoyed so much together. Then I was diagnosed with late stage breast cancer. Thankfully, I had these great two boys who could hold up the business while I went through treatment. Then my youngest son was killed in a motorcycle accident. He loved the taco business. The day he was killed, my mother told me I had to go right back into the business to help keep it alive. Even though I was in the midst of my health inconvenience, the taco had become such an integral part of a bigger picture. I wasn’t in touch with big pictures at that moment – the why’s. I just wanted to survive. I had to keep pushing.”

Burrell came to L.A. from Waukegan, Illinois, in the ‘70s as a divorcée with kids in tow. It was in that small town outside of Chicago she discovered the taco. She caught on to tacos one summer when, at age 12, she begged her mother to take her to a restaurant with the picture of a taco painted on the outside.

“I wondered what that thing was. Tacos were not a staple back then, especially in a one-horse town in Illinois. We had no diversity in that area. I can’t tell you if it was good or bad, but I can tell you it was the jumpstart of the taco in my life. From then on, I started eating tacos through marriage, pregnancies, divorces. It became my staple.”

After saving every penny from various corporate jobs over the years, she continued on the taco trail, fully aware that she wasn’t the only kid on the block.

“Starting a business, I never thought ‘oh, will it work?’ I said, ‘I’m doing tacos and I’m going to do tacos the best that I can.’ I was always taught not to care what it looks like, go for it and do your best. Good, better, best. That’s what you strive for,” says Burrell. She called it Sky’s Gourmet Tacos, named after her mother’s favorite 40’s era restaurant Sky’s in Atlanta, Georgia. Her motto became “Mexican with a splash of soul.”

After a lot of struggle, better things were starting to unfold. Although she never met him, she credits an undercover Jonathan Gold review in 1998 for putting Sky’s Gourmet Tacos on the map. She soon outgrew her taco stand and moved down the road into her larger current location in 2018. She opened the Sky’s Gourmet Market Place in Marina del Rey and will be opening a downtown location for takeout and delivery on August 15, which will feature the signature items she has become famous for, like marinated lobster tacos, shitake mushroom tacos a wild rice and yam burrito as well her highly acclaimed cheesecake which comes in original, pineapple, caramel crunch, and mango flavors. Plans are also underway for a national line of sauces and seasonings, and a location within the Ram’s stadium post-COVID.

Despite a turbulent year for the restaurant
industry, the grandmother of two’s undying faith and perseverance always have her looking for the silver lining, with the intersection of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement being especially significant – she has nothing but respect and admiration for the young people leading the charge.

“Black Lives Matter and the pandemic have gotten everyone’s attention and Black Restaurant Week has never mattered more,” Burrell says. “We’re all at attention right now and there is a vehicle called Black Restaurant Week that has opened up for diverse cultures and their menus and a black woman doing tacos. That’s tremendous support and value.”

Black Restaurant Week was launched in 2016 by founder Warren Luckett in Houston in order to shine a light on minority businesses, aid them in building community awareness and celebrate the flavors of African American, African and Caribbean cuisine with a series of regional cultural events. Other participants include ComfortLA, Dulan’s, Post and Beam and Harold and Belle’s.

“I have such respect for those young people of all races who have marched together. This is their time. They are a silver lining. But there’s always a tremendous cost for change in our society and change within cultures and the cost has been tremendous and we’re still paying it. They’re saying ‘you be you and I’ll be me and we can come together.’ Wow, what a way to be, that untainted. How does it affect businesses? It’s a plus. They don’t walk in and out of a place because it’s of any certain persuasion or intimidation, they’re just ‘hey, you got some ketchup?’ Respect them. I may not embrace all of their ideology, but I don’t have to. They are here for their time and their season to take it on. There is some greatness within this movement. There are some great minds. They are here for a reason and a great space of people. Their thoughts are supposed to be different from ours. … How they are integrated – it works out. Give them their due.”

And at time when Burrell sees businesses closing around her, she feels as if her own doors were closing – which only happened once in her business history, when martial law was declared during the Rodney King riots.

“I know the sweat and tears that it takes to keep the business going, even in the good times,” she says as tears well up in her own eyes. “This is teaching every business owner something else – don’t take those good times for granted. Everything changes and there will always be a shift. It feels like it’s the end of the world, but we are adaptable creatures and it will pass. Look at darkness as a mystery. Every day is dark, but it keeps unfolding.”

Queen Burrell has felt the losses, especially the lapse of daily catering to surrounding high rise office buildings. She wisely hopped on to the delivery platforms early on in the game four years ago, saying that using their marketing tools is worth the fees. She doesn’t plan to open up for any dining-in until it’s completely safe and sanctioned and current hours are limited. She believes that restaurant owners will come back not with a weariness, but an inspired newness once the pandemic passes.

“The newness will get us through, and I believe that in my heart,” she says. “There will be new thoughts and new ideas. We’ve all had a tremendous lesson. You want to look at it from a different perspective, not just as loss and failure. Frankly, every failure is a success. You need to just settle back and be kind to yourself. We are in tremendous peril with the pressure right now. But if you can go the distance regardless of how many wolves are at the door – press on. You are going to see daylight. I’d say this to any new business owner right now – if you can, hang in there. This is going to pass.”

And with the “new normal” restrictions on travel and gatherings, like everything else it won’t be the same this year. One ray of light however is the world of gorgeous new art books that can help satisfy your love of beautiful objects and new visual culture. Here are six of our favorites, including a history of photography, a community portrait of Irish Travellers, compendium of contemporary Black artists, an album of impactful feminist artists, an illustrated guide to avant-garde DIY, and the by-popular-demand publication of the museum from home photography challenge that brought us together in the early days of quarantine.

Good Pictures, by Kim Beil
From the invention of photography in 1826 to the modern Age of Instagram, ideas about what makes a picture “good” have shifted as surely and as frequently as fashions. In a lush and lavishly researched new book, Stanford art history professor Kim Beil breaks down 50 trends that informed what society has deemed a “good picture,” with examples and thoughtful essays that explore each theme’s “original appeal, their decline, and sometimes their reuse by later generations.” Genres include portraiture, commerce, architecture, landscape, wildlife, and vernacular captures beginning from 1839 -- deployed across chapters like Props and Poses, Hand Painting, Clouds, The Rembrandt Effect, Night Photography, New Angles, Hollywood Glamour, Motion Blur, Lens Flare, Drones and of course, Selfies. As Beil notes, the rules are always changing -- and tracing their evolution is a brilliant way to research and reflect upon broader changes in our society and ourselves. sup.org/books.

Jamie Johnson, Growing Up Travelling
Photographer Jamie Johnson spent a number of years visiting and following along with communities of Irish Travellers -- the famous caravan families that have roamed in a nomadic and tradition-rich lifestyle for generations. After gaining their trust, Johnson was welcomed into a world that may seem strange and hardscrabble to outsiders, especially the precociousness of its children, but is in fact enlivened with creativity, fashion, ancestral culture and a deep sense of freedom and adventure. It is her emotional, dark, funny, beguiling, and mysterious portraits of these children chronicled in this beautifully produced volume. jamiejohnsonphotography.com.

Young, Gifted and Black: A New Generation of Artists, edited by Antwaun Sargent
With a title inspired by a Nina Simone lyric as well as the modern moment in society and art history, this landmark publication explores the
foundational and exceptional work of modern Black artists, as well as the salient role of the collectors who champion them. Drawn from the world-class collection of Bernard J. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Bocuzzi, this book considers the work of a new generation of Black artists including Mark Bradford, David Hammons, Glenn Ligon, Jerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, William Pope.L., LaToya Ruby Frazier, Henry Taylor, Mickalene Thomas, Sadie Barnette, Jordan Casteel, Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Noah Davis, Deana Lawson, Eric N. Mack, Christina Quarles, and Brenna Youngblood. Edited and with evocative text by acclaimed writer Antwaun Sargent (author of The New Black Vanguard: Photography Between Art and Fashion) and a host of stellar contributors, while this book examines one private collection, its true reach extends to every aspect of contemporary art history. artbook.com.

Truth Bomb: Inspiration from the Mouths and Minds of Women Artists by Abigail Thompson

The 22 artists included in Truth Bomb each have something powerful and indelible to say about the rewards of taking risks as a woman seeking to make her mark on the culture. From the diverse voices, eclectic styles, and canonical careers of artists from Yayoi Kusama to Miran-da July and the Guerrilla Girls, each woman tells a story of “resilience, tenacity, sacrifice, and steep determination,” throughout a colorful, animated, witty, warm, and withering critique and celebration of what it takes to make it. thamesandhudsonusa.com.

DIY Art Projects by Thomas Bärntha

In typically gorgeous Phaidon style, 50 international visual designers and artists have pulled together a proper syllabus of simple, sophisticated DIY art and design projects. With an eye towards affordability and accessibility when it comes to varying skill sets, each project claims to be easily made with “basic tools and everyday items.” Every idea comes with hand-drawn step-by-step illustrations, time and cost guides, and color photographs. It also includes more information on each designer and their work and inspiration for their idea, so you can grab a quick primer on contemporary design while you’re at it. phaidon.com.

Off the Walls: The Getty Museum Challenge Book

Remember four thousand years ago in March when everyone was still trying to make quarantine fun? One of the most rousingly successful iterations of the make-the-best-of-it ethos was the #GettyMuseumChallenge and the hundreds of others like it that flooded Twitter and Instagram with DIY recreations of art history classics. Armed with nothing but the family, pets, random wardrobes, household items from furniture to food, toys, and their own innate creative genius, by May folks had put well over 100,000 re-creations out into the world, and of course everyone just wanted to know when the book would be out. Well, it’s almost here. With 246 re-creations chosen by Getty editors, it will be available soon and Getty Publications will donate profits to Artist Relief. blogs.getty.edu.
NO LIVING FAST,
NO DIARRHEA

OC Punks the Vandals Reissue Classic Album

BRETT CALLWOOD

The Vandals

The Vandals formed in 1980, putting out the Peace Through Vandalism EP, and When in Rome Do as the Vandals Do, Slippery When III and Fear of a Punk Planet albums and rising up in the OC punk scene, but Live Fast... was undoubtedly the breakthrough. They look back on it fondly.

"In our band, [drummer] Josh Freese is the one who listens to the music the most," Escalante says. "He’s got four kids, and they drive around in the car and they get curious about it. So he’ll play our records. I don’t have kids so that never happens to me. But this one we all knew was a different record for us, because it was the first that we paid for ourselves. Most bands save up to record, make a record, put it out on their own in the punk world. But we got a deal right away with Epitaph. They folded really quick and they came back, so we were bouncing around labels, but we always had a deal. Until this period, in between the late ‘80s and early ‘90s where, for us, it looked like it had tailed off.

That was indeed a rough time for punk, which saw the Vandals and others on the scene such as TSOL, the Dickies, Adolescents and Agent Orange, performing at 21+ clubs for $1000, when previously they’d insisted on playing at all-ages venues.

"It was a dark period, and then we started making personnel changes," the bassist says. "We had Warren Fitzgerald [guitar] and Josh Freese added to the band. Live Fast Diarrhea becomes the first record we made like a punk record where we paid for it ourselves. We recorded it, pretty cheaply. Warren produced it, so it’s a self-produced record. Our very first EP has Thom Wilson producing it – he was a famous punk producer at the time. But still, we were starting over."

When Live Fast... was done, the Vandals sold it to Nitro – the record label belonging to Offspring man Dexter Holland. That was a relationship that worked out well for everyone – Holland was delighted to have the Vandals on his label, and the Vandals were delighted to take advantage of the perks that came with that arrangement, including flying on a private jet.

"1996-2006, all of a sudden the Vandals is a full-time job for us, and we thought it was done," says Escalante. "It started with Live Fast Diarrhea. You don’t play bars anymore – you go and open for Lagwagon. This is a band that represents the new punk rock where all the bands have to have great songs. When we started in the ‘80s, all you had to do was have some kind of image and aggression, and you could rise to the top of the scene. The Go-Go’s were one of the very few punk bands who said, ‘What if we had good songs?’ All of a sudden, they’re the biggest girl band in the history of the world. NOFX were awful. Then they wrote amazing songs. We thought the same thing.”

Escalante says that, much of the time, it feels impossible that 25 years has passed since they recorded the album. Other times, it feels like 50.

"It’s one of those things where the time goes by really fast," he says. "In that 25 years, there’s been a ten-year period of full-time professional rock musician-touring all over the record. It’s bizarre to me that it’s about 30 years with the same lineup, and it’s weird to me that it keeps going and there seems to be no end in sight other than these pandemics which, to us, you take a year or two out of our career and it won’t matter. I feel bad for younger bands that lose momentum. For us, we’ll take some time off.”

That busy decade climax ed with the Hollywood Potato Chip album in 2004. Since then they’ve kicked back a bit, performing at festivals in the States and Europe when they feel like it, and releasing the occasional track. This year, they put out the song “The Curse of the Unripe Pumpkin” – a quirky old Halloween tone that was in fact written by Escalante’s great uncle.

"He was a very flamboyant radio star in the 30s and 40s,” Escalante says. "I found that song when Cleopatra Records asked us to be on a Halloween compilation, and I knew that my uncle had written a Halloween song because my grandma was always singing it to me. I just thought it was a great song. I didn’t know how to find it, but I found it by searching the radio archives of his show. That’s the kind of stuff we do now. We did a Dr. Demento compilation, and I think we’re gonna do a yacht rock compilation for Cleopatra. They bought Kung-Fu Records, so we’re trying to do whatever they ask because that was very nice of them. You have a few loudmouths on social media telling you to put out new records, but it’s really important not to listen to them."

So that’s what they’ll continue to do, and the pandemic will likely impact their work very little. They’ll still put out tunes when they feel like it and then, when everything opens up again, they’ll play the occasional festival and New Year’s gig. They don’t need to live fast anymore.

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**L.A. WEEKLY’S MOVIE GUIDE**

Reviews of Black Is King, The Go-Go’s, The Fight, The Rental and More

- **Black Is King / Disney**+
  Visually stunning, sonically engaging and all around fierce in its celebration of Black culture and its roots in Africa, Beyoncé’s *Black Is King* dropped Friday on Disney+ to the expected stampede of social media commentary and accolades. Like her previous “video album” *Lemonade*, the film - and the 90 minute work should be considered as a full-bodied, if unconventional film - was created to showcase Bey’s music, but it’s so much more than that.

  Inspired by *The Lion King* themed 2019 recording *The Lion King: The Gift* (created to complement the live action/CGI-heavy remake in which she voiced Simba’s love interest, Nala) the new film takes on the task of teaching lessons from the film. Self respect, loyalty, and most significantly, connecting with one’s ancestry and culture to understand not only one’s true self but humanity as a whole are all explored in not so subtle ways.

  The timeliness of the project - in the wake of a global reckoning against racism, not to mention modern feminisms rejection of beauty standards (and how the two intertwined) will escape no one, but Bey has been addressing these issues long before they were zeitgeist.

  From its earthy, ear-mother opening sequence to the Vogue-shoot like procession of incredible looks and backdrops that follow, *Black Is King* could almost be called “Black is Queen.”

  The female form is jaw-droppingly displayed here via an array of gorgeous black and brown women, of all sizes, with all hair types - dancing, posing, swimming, being… There are men in it too (bubbly Jay-Z, world music artist Lord Afrixana and Wizkid, Kendrick Lamar, Pharrell Williams and Childish Gambino) and the narrative is centered around a male -the young African king Simba- but in a lot of ways this is about honoring the mothers and the sisters who make life possible. After all, in the jungle, it’s the females who serve as hunters, gatherers and nurturers, keeping the pride alive in more ways than one. *(Lina Lecaro)*

**The Go-Go’s / Showtime**

The chatter surrounding the release of Alison Ellwood's documentary *The Go-Go's* has been building to fever pitch for months, and one would think that the final product could in no way meet the weight of hype-driven expectation. But much like the band themselves, the movie has smashed through every glass ceiling and naysayer with gleeful abandon and no small amount of care. While it’s slightly odd that the film has landed during a global pandemic, it’s also weirdly appropriate. This is a band that didn’t do anything the easy way but as we find out, rolled with the punches until they couldn’t anymore.

So we start in the early days of the L.A. punk scene (it’s mentioned that Charlotte Caffey was in the Eyes, but the wonderful trivia-nugget that Belinda Carlisle was the original drummer in the Germs is missed out). The early live footage, when they were in their ragged punk beginnings at the Masque/Starwood/Whisky, is by itself a reason to watch the film.

What’s interesting is that, as the music gets tighter and more polished, the story gets messier. Tears are shed as we learn of the pain when former members, especially Margot Olavarria and, later, manager Ginger Canzoneri, are ousted. We share the joy as things go well, embarking on chaotic UK tours with the Specials and Madness, and reaching number one on the *Billboard* album chart. We watch them rise and, as bitterness and jealousy creeps in, we watch them fall.

The weight of that pain is tempered slightly with the knowledge that they eventually returned, although the last decade’s events seem to be rushed slightly here — particularly bassist Kathy Valentine’s second departure and return. Still, this is a wonderful documentary movie which will resonate harder with those looking to reminisce/learn about the L.A. punk scene from which the band emerged. *(Brett Callwood)*

**The Fight / VOD**

In their inspiring but painfully topical new documentary, filmmakers Elyse Steinberg, Josh Kriegman and Eli Despres (Weiner) follow five ACLU lawyers as they face-off against the Trump administration on the Muslim travel ban, the transgender military ban, a detained immigrant denied her abortion rights, and the U.S. Census citizenship question.

Jumping from case to case, the filmmakers offer an inside view of the ACLU, an organization 100 years old and always at the forefront of society’s wars. Internally, there is sometimes division, as when they defended the rights of the white supremacists who wanted to march on Charlottesville.

*The Fight* is filled with timely legal battles but it’s the reunions that get you. Parents and children, separated for months by the U.S. government are suddenly cleared to reunite in airports and law offices. The mother throws her arms wide, the child rushes in and the two collapse together, often with little sound, as if they learned long ago that in America, there’s danger in making a joyful noise. *(Chuck Wilson)*

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**SUMMONS

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