

# MITCHELL FRANK

INTERVIEW BY JOSHUA LURIE ★ ILLUSTRATION BY ANTONY HARE

>> If the Eastside ever decides to nominate an honorary mayor, then Mitchell Frank is definitely the front-runner. Frank is an L.A. native who entered the music scene playing keyboards and percussion for local outfit Gutbucket and DJing his own house parties. In 1995, having grown tired of cleaning up his house and spending his hard-earned money on alcohol, Frank started Silver Lake-based rock club Spaceland, then followed that up with Echo Park's The Echo in 2001. East of Hollywood, no clubs are more influential. Frank has since started moving into the food world, partnering in on Silver Lake taqueria Malo and the Echo Park beer bar, El Prado. He also serves as president of the Echo Park Chamber of Commerce, where he's working to keep the neighborhood "clean, green and safe." Frank and I met on the patio of Intelligentsia, his go-to coffee joint.

**NA:** Growing up, who were the people that inspired you, both musically and otherwise?

**MF:** Mark Stewart from the Negro Problem — Stew. He's now got the play on Broadway, *Passing Strange*. We played music together, figured out things together, listened to early KROQ. Richard Meltzer, who used to write for *CREEM* magazine, did a show on KPDK on Saturday nights. I remember smoking a big fat one and hearing "God Save the Queen." Meltzer prefaced that by saying, "This music will change your life." Probably around '75. We were into all sorts of heavier music — Led Zeppelin and Skynyrd, more classic rock, Neil Young. At that moment, it changed our thought process on music. ... At the time, I was at Hamilton High, which was 70 percent African-American. That also had a big effect on me. We were listening to George Clinton, Sly and the Family Stone, Funkadelic. Mark was my mentor, my best friend. We had a cover band in high school, wish I could remember the name. One of the high moments was playing "Werewolves of London" for a big high school event. Mark Stewart was a guitar virtuoso.

**Where does your entrepreneurial drive come from?** I was in the art world at the '91 Whitney Biennial — Daniel Martinez, Vinzula Kara and myself. It was right when the funding got pulled from the National Endowment of the Arts. I came back to L.A. from New York penniless, and started to borrow money from friends. I was struggling to eat. That was my changing point. [I had to] figure out a way to turn art into commerce. I never wanted to be in that position again.

**How has the Echo Park/Silver Lake area changed since you've been here?** At the time [I moved here], there was another little café, where Sugar used to be, called Sunset Junction. I was with Mark Stewart and company and they were like, "This is it." Down the street was the On Club, a ska club.



Things started changing in the neighborhood. I moved to San Diego for a year and a half, then downtown, which was a disaster. I moved to Echo Park in 1985. That's when the original Onyx happened and the community really came together.

**Do you have any concerns about Echo Park development?** I don't want it to be corporate and franchised and would like it to keep its mom-and-pop character. There's a lot of space open, so we'll see what landowners do. I see it as closer to the Mission District in San Francisco — much more of an intersection of culture and art.

**Is there anything you'd like to change about the neighborhood?** Right now it's difficult to get proper entitlements. That stymies the growth. Beer and wine licenses are frowned upon for some reason, but I don't think a restaurant can open without one and make it financially. [There are] a lot of hurdles to mom-and-pop places opening. Besides jumping through the hoops of getting entitlements, they have to go through lots and lots of money. Years ago, I don't think I could have done what I've done. Now, you need a grease trap the size of a Volkswagen — figure out how to put that into your budget. ... I would have more things to make it easier to bike in the neighborhood. More bike stands, more street furniture, more trash cans.

There's so much trash in the neighborhood. Can't keep up with the trash.

**What local bands are you excited about?**

The Entrance Band. I've seen them develop and now they're a rock solid band. Also, Parsons Red Heads, Voxhall Broadcast from O.C., All of Our Future, Castledoor, Bodies of Water, Happy Hollows, Deadly Syndrome, Health, No Age, Big Business, Pity Party, Division Day, The Western States Motel, Karin Tatoyan, Henry Clay People, The Movies, Airborne Toxic Event, Dengue Fever, The Mae Shi, Everest, Submarines, Rademacher, Film School, We Barbarians, Nico Stai, lo Echo, The Weather Underground.

**Why is it important to have Monday night band residencies?** It helps develop a band. When I was in a band, I realized it gets you into a comfortable position onstage. They rehearse in a tiny little space, then go out and play a live show. They're different environments. I noticed over the years that bands chill out, are able to perfect their sets, get more comfortable, more organic as a unit. There have been hundreds of bands I've seen — they come there the first night with no depth or dimension, and after five weeks they are more well-rounded.

**How has booking changed with the advent of MySpace and the internet?** I used to have

to wait for days to get CDs and vinyl sent to me. It was about the speed of U.S. Postal or FedEx when I was dealing with a major label or agency. Now, it's instantaneous, but it's also got its limitations. I like to hear two good songs instead of just one good song. A lot of bands design their own MySpace, so you get the kit and caboodle, their likes or tastes in design, friends, crazy blogs, crazy videos, places they're playing ... You get the sense of what a band's really made of, their mettle.

**How did you become a co-owner of Malo?**

I decided awhile back I wanted to do a restaurant, I just didn't know what I wanted to do. The main thing was the location. We were going back and forth on it. I'm friends with a lot of restaurateurs and everyone was like, "You should do a Mexican restaurant." It seemed like there were too many in the neighborhood. It was Steven [Arroyo's] concept and I helped him execute it.

**What are the restaurants you frequent in the area, and what is it about them that keeps drawing you back?**

The sandwiches at the Cheese Shop are some of the best sandwiches in L.A. Café Stella is one of my favorite sit-down restaurants. Yuca's on Hillhurst for tacos. Little Dom's. Of course, Malo, Blair's, Coffee Table for sandwiches and breakfast. Cha Cha Cha for brunch and dinners, Mexico City because they've got a full bar. There's a little coffee shop in Los Feliz, Café Los Feliz. Chi Dynasty — I spent a lot of time there with friends.

**Can you imagine living someplace other than the Eastside?** I cannot imagine living anywhere but where I am today. I love this neighborhood — I love everything: the people, the community, especially coming from a place where there wasn't a community — the Westside. In this neighborhood you're forced to interact and want to interact.

[The Westside] is so homogenized, has the same look. Beverly Hills has the same look as Westwood and Santa Monica. Here, each neighborhood has a different look. The architecture is more interesting.

**How much longer can you see yourself as president of the Echo Park Chamber of Commerce?** I did half a term. This might be the end of my current term in October. I'm hoping somebody else wants to be president. If not, I'll do it again. It's a lot of work and unfortunately there's not a lot of people stepping up to the plate as much as I'd like, so it's a slow grind trying to get stuff done and I'm used to being able to make things happen pretty quickly. I'm sure I'll be involved for years. I'm trying to do a bid for a Business Improvement District, but it's tough. ... I'd use it for clean, green and safety. [NA](#)