

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

A Feb. 25 Metro article about the Howard Theatre incorrectly said that singer Mary Wilson was elected to the Detroit City Council.

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Bringing A Building, And an Era, Back to Life

Revival Plans Are In Force at 7th and T

By Elissa Silverman
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The performers at the Howard Theatre were legendary: Duke Ellington, Peg Leg Bates, Sarah Vaughan, "Moms" Mabley. On the afternoon that Lillian Gordon, then a 10th-grader at Cardozo High School, went to lunch and didn't come back, Lionel Hampton was on the stage.

"After recess, there wasn't anybody at the school," recalled Gordon with a laugh yesterday.

Gordon and scores of others who played hooky to see jazz and Motown greats perform at the Howard shared their memories yesterday at the Carnegie Library, where they were told of plans by a local developer to revive the historic theater, at 7th and T streets NW.

The Howard, built in 1910, was once the nation's premier venue for black performers, an essential stop on the "chitlin circuit" that included Baltimore's Royal, Philadelphia's Uptown, and New York's Apollo theaters.

The 1968 riots spurred a decline in the U Street corridor known as Black Broadway, and the Howard Theatre closed its doors two years later. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Comedian Redd Foxx and others attempted revivals but, for years, the building has remained vacant and crumbling.

Now that the area around the Howard has been revitalized with condominiums, restaurants, and retail shops, developer Chip Ellis wants the Howard to come back to life, too.

Yesterday Ellis, chief executive of Ellis Development Group, presented his plans to restore the Howard Theatre. The renderings show a stage for performances, and tables at which patrons can eat in a restaurant-like setting. Ellis is planning to build a \$100 million development to include the headquarters for Radio One Inc. on the same block.

He also wants the venue to house the Washington Jazz Arts Institute, which provided a quartet for yesterday's gathering. The event was pulled together by the Historical Society of Washington. Mercedes Ellington, granddaughter of the legendary D.C. jazz musician, was among the speakers. "We also want to get people involved with saving their own history," said Kathryn Smith, who is co-chair of the board.

That's just what happened yesterday as performers and residents shared their memories of the historic theater. Known mostly for its live music, the Howard also featured comedians, dancers and motion pictures.

"Or you can say in between the movies, they'd have a live performance," said Mary Wilson, one of the trio of performers known as the Supremes, who performed this weekend at Blues Alley.

One memorable night, she and her two friends, Flo and Diana, the rest of her famous singing group, were babysat by crooner Jackie Wilson. "We were saying, 'Yes! Yes!' " said Wilson, who won a seat on the

Detroit City Council in 2005.

Gordon, who once played hooky, said she was happy to see the plans for the Howard.

"I don't think it's going to the same," she said, pausing for a moment. "It might be better."

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