



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

MUSIC TO HIS EARS

Plans call for re-creating jazz corridor

04/04/02

By Greg Thomas

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A fried-chicken restaurant owner has acquired a ramshackle 19th century theater, saloon and store that were key in the birth of jazz.

Jerome "Popa Gee" Johnson, founder of House of Popa Gee's Mississippi Fried Chicken, said he hopes restoration of the buildings and additional development along Rampart Street could result in the \$8 million re-creation of the bustling early-1900s scene when a new musical sound from New Orleans rocked the world.

He also hopes to incorporate into the development the building at 449 S. Rampart St., a former saloon that was a hangout for musicians during the heyday of jazz. That building, at the corner of Poydras and South Rampart streets, is owned by local real estate tycoon Joe Canizaro and is for sale. Broker Hayden Wren confirmed that Johnson has approached him about acquiring the property, but Wren said no deal has been struck.

Jazz is said to be an American creation, one that traces its roots to slaves celebrating their African rhythms in Congo Square and Buddy Bolden playing his swinging clarinet in the saloons and theaters along Rampart Street.

Congo Square survives, but the buildings sit decaying and empty along the bland parking-lot dotted stretch of the 400 block of Rampart Street.

Johnson's plan, which has been endorsed by the National Park Service and the New Orleans Jazz Commission, is to restore the buildings and recapture the turn-of-the century feel of the South Rampart musical corridor, the heart of what was then called back o' town. A memorandum of understanding among the three parties sets the stage for the restoration of the historical gems.

The agreement calls for establishing "an interpretation and educational presence in the historic buildings for the purposes of the Jazz National Historic Park." It also calls on the three groups to acquire financing, grants and technical assistance for preservation of the buildings. Finally, the agreement requires the groups to work together and seek affiliate status with the Smithsonian Institute for any museum component established in the buildings.

Mayor Marc Morial has endorsed the project and awarded \$200,000 to Johnson's nonprofit group, the New Orleans Music Hall of Fame. Johnson hopes to one day build a hall of fame nearby, but that is not part of the current agreement.

Jazz historians have identified the buildings and tried several times to buy them, but only Johnson could finagle the deal. Johnson's recent acquisition of the three buildings is more than a real estate transaction: It's a dream he has chased for years. He attributes to God his ability to convince the widow of St. Bernard philanthropist, businessman and land baron Joseph Meraux to sell the buildings to him. Johnson is acquiring the properties as part of a \$1.1 million lease-buy agreement. It was a deal the New Orleans Jazz Commission and local real estate agents had tried to ink for some time.

Other than a requirement that Johnson serve the children of New Orleans, Meraux said she is leasing the buildings to him because she likes his plan.

The buildings will be a living interactive museum where jazz will be taught and celebrated, Johnson said. He envisions South Rampart street being lined with restaurants, retail and other tourism activities abutting the four buildings. All will bear the architecture style of the late 19th century.

Gayle Hazelwood, superintendent of the New Orleans Jazz National Historic Park, said there is no doubt about the historical significance of the buildings. The Smithsonian has declared the four buildings to be "of great significance to the history of jazz."

Hazelwood said a federal program to save national treasures could match donations dollar-for-dollar, and the park service and jazz commission will tap various federal and charitable programs to raise money for the project.

Ownership of the site will be a nonprofit corporation, but the structure and ownership of other aspects will be determined in a preliminary study paid with the city's \$200,000 contribution, Johnson said.

Liberty Rashad, executive director and projects administration for the New Orleans Jazz Commission, stands in awe inside the 1835 building at the corner of South Rampart and Perdido streets that was once the Eagle Saloon. "The spirit is still in these buildings," she said.

Johnson reminds a visitor that "we absorb music just like food. The soul's got to have it."

Johnson said his plans cover only one side of Rampart, while the back of the block facing Loyola Street is being considered as a retail site for an unidentified company.

Johnson and the jazz commission originally hoped to buy the whole block, but the property isn't under Johnson's control.

Morial will join guests Sunday at 4 p.m. to kick off the celebration that organizers hope will generate awareness and donations for the project. Johnson invites the public to come see the buildings and plans. The event will be organized through Johnson's restaurant and will feature live jazz and food.

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04/04/02

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