



DAILY NEWS

Boro artists & history buffs design new jazz complex

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COMING SOON: The House That Jazz Rebuilt.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the Bronx was burning and music classes were slashed from public schools, jazz siren Maxine Sullivan saved kids through rhythm and a music center called The House That Jazz Built.

Now Bronx artists and history buffs are coming together to design a new center, The Bronx Hall of Music, at a planned housing development for elderly musicians.

They want to honor the golden age of Bronx jazz and pass the music on to a new generation.

“The Bronx has been physically rebuilt, but not the moral and social fabric,” said Mark Naison, who heads the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University. “Music is the way to bring that back.”

The center, rental apartments, a high school and a rooftop farm will share 355,000 square-feet on Elton Ave. in Melrose.

Last year, the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation was tapped to build on the vacant lot there, and should break ground in 2012.

Up to 100 of the development’s 293 apartments will house elderly musicians, and the music center will include both a performance space and a music museum.

The idea for the center grew from conversations between WHEDCo President Nancy Biberman, Naison and researcher Maxine Gordon, widow of the late saxophonist Dexter Gordon.

In the 1940s and 1950s, African-Americans from Harlem “moved on up” to Bronx neighborhoods, mingled with Latino musicians and opened jazz clubs.

The scene reached its peak at the Hunts Point Palace in 1953, when Thelonious Monk, Tito Rodriguez, The Orioles and The Mighty Sparrow shared a playbill.

Researching the era, Naison and Gordon were struck by how musicians mentored each other.

“Kids learned to play in school, and the teachers were famous musicians,” said Naison.

Ray Mantilla, 76, remembers playing drums on the roof of his Bronx tenement, while African-American teens sang doowop on the street. He went on to jam with Art Blakey and Dizzy Gillespie.

Last month, stars from Bronx jazz, hip hop and Ghanaian “hip-life” formed an advisory board for the development.

In Living Color’s Will Calhoun joined Mantilla, trumpeter Jimmy Owens, bandleader Bobby Sanabria, singer Valerie Capers, hip-hoppers Rebel Diaz and others.

“Musicians in the Bronx don’t get breaks,” said Mantilla. “They get struggle and heartbreak. They need this.”